The Effect of Context on Older Adult Stereotypes

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Abstract

This study investigated whether context and interactive affected younger adults’ perceptions of older adult stereotypes. Younger adult participants (N = 180), aged 18-32 years old, rated six video recordings of two confederates, one male and one female, who were filmed in three contexts. Results revealed a significant difference in younger adults’ perceptions of attitudes associated with older adults. Older adults in an interactive context were rated more positively than older adults in noninteractive and neutral contexts; also, older adults in noninteractive contexts were rated more positively than older adults in a neutral context. Further, a significant difference was found between younger adults’ perceptions of attitudes associated with female older adults and male older adults; females were rated more positively than males. Finally, a significant difference was discovered in how younger adults perceive older adult language abilities across contexts; older adults in an interactive context were evaluated as having better language abilities than older adults in a neutral context.

*Keywords:* older adults, aging, stereotypes, context, ecological theory
The Effects of Context on Older Adult Stereotypes

Adults aged 65 years and older constitute over 40 million people or about 13% of the United States population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This considerable segment of the population is categorized and stereotyped by their chronological age (Jelenec & Steffans, 2002). Although stereotypes of older adults are prevalent across all stages of the life span (e.g., Burke, 1982; Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1995; Rose-Colley & Eddy, 1988), older adults are not a homogeneous group (Jelenec & Steffens, 2002; Hummert, 1990; Brewer & Lui, 1984). These attitudes and stereotypes associated with older adults are social cognitions that are both positive and negative in nature (e.g., Hummert, 1994a; Schmidt & Boland, 1986).

Stereotypes of older adults influence not only the perceptions about older adults, but also influence how individuals communicate with older adults (Hummert, Shaner, & Garstka, 1995; Nussbaum, Hummert, Williams, & Harwood, 1996; Ryan, See, Meneer, & Trovato, 1992). Beliefs about an older adult’s language abilities provide a means of assessing perceived communicative competence (Giles, Coupland, & Wiemann, 1992; Hummert, 1994a; Ryan & Cole, 1990; Ryan et al., 1992).

Social science researchers have produced a number of studies that investigate attitudes and stereotypes associated with older adults (e.g., Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981; Brewer, Dull & Lui, 1981; Crockett & Hummert, 1987; Hamilton & Troiler, 1986; Hummert, 1990a,b; Schmidt & Borland, 1986), and several theories, such as communication accommodation theory (Giles et al., 1987) and cognitive perspective of stereotyping (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981), are used to provide a theoretical foundation to guide older adult stereotype research. To date, very little older adult stereotype research has investigated the effects of context on older adult stereotypes. I will
be applying the ecological perspective, which is a multidisciplinary approach to the study the reciprocity of living systems and their environment, to better understand the effects of context and sex on older adult stereotypes. The purpose of this project is twofold. First, the study will help to determine whether the ecological perspective, which considers environmental context and cues, can provide a theoretical basis for older adult attitudinal and stereotype research. Second, because of the ecological perspective and its consideration of environmental factors (i.e., context), older adult stereotypes across contexts will be investigated in conjunction with attitudes associated with and language beliefs about older adults.

Hummert and her colleagues, who adopt the cognitive framework of stereotypes, state that stereotypes can be viewed at two different levels. The first level of stereotypes includes the basic individual traits that comprise the schemata associated with older adults. The second level of stereotypes involves the way in which these traits are organized into subcategories of typical representations of older adults; in other words, the schemata that individuals associate with older adults. These levels represent both the specific traits and generalizations of older adult stereotypes.

The first level of research on older adult stereotypes is concerned with content of these stereotypes, in other words, the perceived traits of older adults that can be described as personality characteristics (Hamilton & Trolier, 1986; Hummert, 1994a; Hummert et al., 1994). Traits associated with older adults report both positive and negative traits, illustrating the complexity of traits associated with other adults (e.g., Hummert, 1990; Labouvie-Vief & Baltes, 1976; Mueller, Wonderlich & Dugan, 1986; Schmidt & Borland, 1986).

Brewer, Dull, and Lui (1981) examined the multiple conceptions of older adult
stereotypes. The researchers selected three stereotypes of older adults: (a) Grandmother, a nurturing, family-oriented female; (b) Elder Statesman, a distinguished older man; and (c) Senior Citizen, an isolated, inactive older adult of either sex. The researchers chose photographs and traits that represented the three older adult stereotypes and asked young adult participants to sort the photographs and traits into similar groupings. Results of these groupings corresponded to the original stereotypes of the Grandmother, Elder Statesman, and Senior Citizen.

One study conducted by Downs and Waltz (1981) investigated young adults’ perceptions and attitudes toward older adults and the effect that intergenerational contact has on these attitudes. Seventy-nine undergraduates who maintained frequent contact with at least one grandparent were asked to complete the Older Persons Rating Scale. Results indicate that intergenerational contact on a regular, familial basis enhances positive views of older adults; thus, young adults who have regular contact with a grandparent hold a more positive image of older adults.

Burke (1982) assessed young children’s (aged four to seven years old) perceptions and attitudes of older adults. She had the participants view photographs that included both young adults (aged 25-35 years) and older adults (aged 65 years and older) and asked a series of questions concerned with age discrimination tasks and sociometric questions. Results indicate that children as young as six years old can discriminate between young and older adults. Further, children more readily associate photographs of older adults with words such as sad, lonely, and not busy whereas young adults are connected with busy, knowledgeable, and happy. Burke (1982) also reported that 66% of the children preferred not to grow old.

Hummert (1990) investigated young adults’ perceptions of older adult stereotypes. She
asked college-aged participants to sort 84 traits selected from the Schmidt and Borland (1986) study into similar categories. Hummert’s (1990) findings include three positive older adult stereotypes (John Wayne Conservative, Liberal Matriarch/Patriarch, and Perfect Grandparent) and seven negative stereotypes (Severely Impaired, Shrew/Curmudgeon, Recluse, Despondent, and Vulnerable). Among these ten stereotypes generated by Hummert’s (1990) research, eight match Schmidt and Borland’s (1986) stereotypes. Of these eight stereotypes, three positive stereotypes (John Wayne Conservative, Liberal Matriarch/Patriarch, and Perfect Grandparent) and five negative stereotypes (Severely Impaired, Shrew/Curmudgeon, Recluse, Despondent, and Vulnerable) are found in both Hummert’s (1990) and Schmidt and Borland’s (1986) studies.

In summary, research regarding older adult traits, schemata, and stereotypes illustrate a dual nature in the cognitive framework of stereotyping, which is represented by individuals having both positive and negative stereotypes associated with older adults (e.g., Brewer et al., 1981; Brewer & Lui, 1984; Hummert, 1990; Schmidt & Borland, 1986). Further, stereotypes of older adults are perceived across the life span, from young children (e.g., Burke, 1982) to middle-aged (e.g., Downs & Waltz, 1981; Schmidt & Borland, 1986) and into older adulthood (e.g., Brewer & Lui, 1984). Hummert et al. (1994) state that stereotypes reflect beliefs of a particular society, but only exist within the intangible cognitions of members of that society (see also Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981).

**NEED TRANSITION FROM OA STEROTYPE TO LANGUAGE BELIEFS**

Another area of older adult research investigates the language beliefs associated with older adults and patronizing talk (i.e., elderspeak). Previous studies have found that younger adults report fewer problems with language performance than older adults, and that younger
adults are perceived as having fewer problems with language performance than older adults (Ryan, et al., 1992). Additionally, older adults reported having more language problems than younger and middle-aged adults (Hummert et al., 1994), and different older adult stereotypes elicited different language performance beliefs from respondents (Hummert et al., 1995).

The application of the ecological perspective to older adult research provides a theoretical approach to this line of research. Current research utilizes a cognitive conceptual framework (Hummert et al., 1994), assuming that stereotypes are organized knowledge structures that facilitate the interpretation of new information (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). The ecological perspective does not deny this cognitive view of the functions that stereotypes perform; rather, this perspective provides a broader, more complete examination of what constitutes and triggers older adult stereotypes by focusing on the individual as well as the environment (Gibson, 1966, 1979).

**Rationale**

Recent older adult stereotype research utilizes the cognitive perspective, which allows for the presence of a dual nature in the stereotyping of older adults (e.g., Brewer et al., 1981; Hummert, 1990; Schmidt & Borland, 1986). Across the life span, individuals associate both positive and negative traits with older adults, and hold positive and negative stereotypes of older adults (e.g., Brewer & Lui, 1984; Burke, 1982; Downs & Waltz, 1981). The duality of current older adult stereotype research supports employing the cognitive perspective, but one facet of the cognitive perspective’s definition of stereotyping has been overlooked. This perspective states that stereotyping occurs in “the social situation;” therefore, when researching older adult stereotypes, the situation needs to be considered.
The ecological perspective does not negate the cognitive perspective; rather, the ecological perspective provides a better, more specific theoretical basis for examining the effects of the social situation or environmental context on older adult stereotypes. Further, the ecological perspective can convey the importance of dynamic events in older adult stereotype research. To date, research has not considered how stimuli change during the course of interaction. Instead, research has assumed that stereotypes are static and remain constant across contexts. The ecological perspective adds depth to this rather linear view by considering structural and transformational invariants present in events when stereotyping of older adults occurs. Therefore, individuals who are involved in stereotyping older adults can change or alter their stereotypes of specific older people as contexts change.

Finally, the ecological perspective narrows the focus of research by concentrating on only “useful” information that individuals process during events that formulate and enact older adult stereotypes. By focusing on the cues that individuals perceive to be important, not all possible information in a situation is considered—thus limiting the realm of possible variables to investigate. Currently, older adult stereotype research is still in its infancy and no variables can be ruled out. Individuals have the choice of what information to process; some information has more relevance to some situations, which promotes the view that context should be considered when examining communication phenomena.

**Current Study**

In this study, context is manipulated by varying the situation where an individual performs an act or behavior within a physical setting. One context includes the individual interacting with another person (e.g., two people talking with each other) as well as the
individual performing an act with no interaction with others (e.g., a person typing at a computer).

In this study, three different contexts will be investigated: (a) an interactive context in which an older adult is performing an act while interacting with another person; (b) a neutral context in which an older adult is not performing an act and not interacting with another person; and (c) a noninteractive context in which an older adult is performing an act with no interaction with another person. To assess whether different contexts affect older adult stereotypes, the following hypothesis is offered to guide this study:

**H1:** Younger adults’ perceptions of attitudes associated with older adults differ as a function of context. In other words, younger adults will rate attitudes associated with older adults differently in the interactive, neutral, and noninteractive contexts.

Very little prior research has considered the variable of older adult sex in the formation and recollection of older adult stereotypes (see Hummert, 1994a for an exception) study that investigated the effects of physiognomic cues on older adult stereotypes, finding that age and sex may affect stereotyping. From her results, Hummert concluded that if her results are confirmed by other research studies, sex of the older adult “must be included as a physical stereotype cue” (p. 17). In order to facilitate the knowledge of whether sex is a significant variable in the formation and recollection of older adult stereotypes, the following subhypothesis is offered:

**H1a:** Younger adults will rate attitudes associated with female older adults differently than male older adults.

Attitudes and stereotypes about individuals can influence linguistic and paralinguistic choices in conversation (Nussbaum et al., 1996). Numerous studies have examined the
phenomenon of elderspeak and the use of patronizing speech toward older adults (e.g., Cohen & Faulkner, 1986; Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986) while other studies report that beliefs about older adults’ language skills vary with the characteristics associated with those adults, not simply because those adults are elderly (Hummert et al., 1995; Ryan et al., 1992). Ryan et al. (1992) and Hummert et al. (1995) have examined language beliefs associated with older adults, but these prior studies have not considered the possible effects of older adult sex (for an exception, see Hummert, Shaner, Garstkska, & Henry, 1998). In order to extend this line of research, the following hypothesis and subhypothesis guide this inquiry:

H2: Younger adults’ beliefs about older adult language abilities will differ as a function of context. In other words, younger adults will rate older adults’ language performance differently in the interactive, neutral, and noninteractive contexts.

H2a: Younger adults will rate female older adult language performance differently than male older adult language performance.

Method

Stimulus Material

Six older adults, aged 65 years and older, were recruited as confederates for the creation of older adult video recordings (i.e., stimulus material) from a Senior Citizen Recreation Center. In order to prevent confounding variables from entering into this study, all six confederates (three males and three females) were European American and their ages ranged from 63-80 years old with a mean of 66 years. Each confederate was recorded in the same neutral backdrop, which consisted of a table, chair, and a white wall with a small bulletin board in the background.

Twenty participants viewed the six video recordings and two confederates were selected
to continue in the study. Each target was recorded in three different contexts, which consisted of interaction, neutral, and noninteractive contexts. The interactive context had the older adult conversing with a younger adult in her mid-thirties. The neutral context video consisted of a still shot of head and shoulders. The noninteractive context contained the target performing an individual activity; specifically, the older adult was reading a book. Thus, six different video recordings (two interactive context, two neutral context, and two noninteractive context) were created for each target (male and female).

Participants

One hundred and eighty participants, 96 males and 84 females, were randomly assigned to watch one of the six videos. The participants’ ages ranged from 18-32 years and the mean age was 20.26 years (SD = 1.99). Almost 73 percent (n = 131) of the participants reported their ethnicity as European American, 9.4% (n = 17) reported themselves as African American, 8.3% (n = 15) were Asian or Asian American, 7.2% (n = 13) were Native American, and the rest of the participants were Hispanic, Puerto Rican, or Filipino (n = 4). The majority of the participants were single (n = 170), and had not lived with a person over the age of 65 years (n = 146).

Participants reported in groups of 30 to a classroom and were informed that they would watch a one minute video recording. After watching the video, participants were asked to complete the questionnaire while the recording would be continuously played until every participant completed the questionnaire. This procedure allowed participants to access the image of the older adult while answering the questionnaire.

Measures

The Age Group Evaluation and Description (AGED) Inventory (Knox et al., 1995) allows
assessment of both age stereotypes and attitudes associated with age-specified targets. The AGED Inventory consists of a list of 28 bipolar adjective pairs (e.g., independent–dependent, timid–assertive) that are rated using in seven point Likert scale format. The Descriptive subscale (14 descriptive items measuring stereotypes) assesses the vitality and maturity dimensions of the target while the Evaluative subscale (14 evaluative items measuring attitudes) rates goodness and positiveness dimensions associated with the target. The AGED Inventory has produced a test-retest reliability for each subscale of the AGED Inventory; these reliabilities are: Descriptive (r = .74) and Evaluative (r = .645). The overall reliability of the AGED Inventory is .6925.

The second dependent measure, Language in Adulthood (LIA) Scale (Ryan et al., 1992), assesses beliefs about language performance of adults. This scale consists of 19 items and two subscales, receptive and expressive subscales. The Receptive subscale is comprised of ten items pertaining to receptive language skills (e.g., frustration when you cannot hear, remembering topics being discussed, and losing track of the conversational topic) while the Expressive subscale contains nine items refer to expressive language skills (e.g., storytelling abilities, use of difficult words, losing track of story). The LIA items are rated on a seven-point, Likert scale from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (7). The reliability for LIA scale is high with a Cronbach’s alpha ranging from .84 to .89 (Hummert et al., 1995; Ryan et al., 1992). Regarding the subscales in the LIA, the receptive subscale has an acceptable reliability with Cronbach’s alpha ranging from .80 to .81; however, the expressive subscale of the LIA exhibits moderate reliability, with Cronbach’s alpha varying from .60 to .61 (Hummert et al., 1995; Ryan et al., 1992).

**Results**

Before hypothesis testing occurred, the reliability of the AGED Inventory and the LIA
Scale was examined. The reliability of the AGED Inventory, using Cronbach’s coefficient alpha, was .90; the descriptive and evaluative subscales of the AGED Inventory were .90 and .90 respectively. Cronbach’s coefficient alpha revealed a reliability of .86 for the LIA Scale; the reliability of the receptive subscale is .86 and reliability of the expressive subscale is .87. A series of 3 X 2 ANOVAS were conducted to test the hypotheses.

**Hypothesis One**

The first hypothesis states that younger adults’ perceptions of attitudes associated with older adults would differ across interaction, neutral, and noninteractive contexts. To address this question, participants’ responses to AGED Inventory were analyzed utilizing a 3 (interactive, neutral, or noninteractive context) X 2 (male or female) ANOVA. Results of this ANOVA reveal significant main effects and interaction. The main effect of gender, $F(1, 174) = 8.67, p = .0037, ES = .18$, was significant; the male older adult was rated more positively than the female older adult. Additionally, the main effect of context, $F(2, 174) = 25.59, p = .0001, ES = .32$, was significant. Results reveal a significant difference in AGED Inventory score cell means among the interactive context and the neutral context for both male and female older adult targets. Older adult targets in the interactive context were rated more positively by participants than the older adult targets in the neutral context. Also, the interaction effect between gender and context was significant, $F(2, 174) = 3.98, p = .0222, ES = .14$. A significant difference in AGED Inventory mean scores was found between the noninteractive context and neutral context for the female older adult target. Also, the female older adult target in the noninteractive contexts were rated more positively by younger adults than the female older adult target in the neutral contexts.

These findings indicate that participants’ perceptions of older adults’ traits changed or differed as
a function of context. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

*Descriptive Subscale of AGED Inventory*

Several analyses were performed on the two subscales of the AGED Inventory (see Table 3 for results). For the male older adult target, there was a significant difference between the interactive and neutral contexts. For the female older adult target, there were significant differences in descriptive subscale means between the interactive and noninteractive contexts, and between the interactive and neutral contexts. Again, both male and female older adult targets who were engaged in communication were rated more positively than older adult targets shown in a still headshot.

*Evaluative Subscale of the AGED Inventory*

The second analysis examined if there was a difference regarding the evaluative subscale mean scores of the AGED Inventory for older adult targets across context types (see Table 2 for results). For the older adult male, there was a significant difference on the evaluative subscale cell means between the interactive and neutral contexts, and between noninteractive and neutral contexts. In addition, there were significant differences between interactive and neutral contexts, and noninteractive and neutral contexts for the female older adult target.

The subhypothesis of Hypothesis One predicted that younger adults would associate different attitudes with the female older adult target than the male older adult target. The F-statistic for gender from the earlier two-way ANOVA using older adult gender to predict attitudes associated with the target revealed significance, $F (1, 174) = 8.67, \ p = .0037$. Therefore, the subhypothesis is supported as the female older adult target received different attitudes from younger adults than the male older adult target.
Hypothesis Two

The second hypothesis states that younger adults’ beliefs about the older adult targets’ language abilities differ as a function of context. A 3 (interaction, neutral, or noninteractive context) X 2 (male or female) ANOVA produced a significant main effect and interaction (see Table 3). The main effect of context, $F(2, 174) = 11.72, p = .0001, ES = .33$, was significant. Specifically, there was a significant difference between all three context types for the female older adult target. The female older adult target in the interactive context was perceived to have better language abilities than the female older adult target in the noninteractive context; also, the female older adult target in the noninteractive context was perceived to have better language abilities than the female older adult target in the neural context. However, there were no differences in the LIA Scale mean scores between context types for the male older adult target. Additionally, the interaction effect between gender and context were significant, $F(2, 174) = 6.81, p = .0014, ES = .23$. Thus, younger adults’ perceptions of older adults’ language abilities changed as a function of context and Hypothesis 2 is supported. But because of the nonsignificant main effect of gender, the subhypothesis of Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Receptive Subscale of the LIA Scale

In regards to the receptive subscale mean scores of the LIA Scale for the female older adult target, significant differences were revealed between the interactive and noninteractive contexts and the interactive and neutral contexts for the older adult female (see Table 4 for complete results). No differences were found for the male older adult target across the context types.

Expressive Subscale of the LIA Scale
Results indicate no differences in expressive subscale means for the male older adult target, but two significant differences were detected for the female older adult target. Specifically, the female older adult target in the interactive and noninteractive contexts were rated higher on expressive language abilities than the female older adult target in the neutral context.

**Discussion**

Younger adults’ perceptions of attitudes associated with older adults change as a function of context and biological sex. Older adults who are communicating are perceived more positively than older adults engaged in individual activities or shown in a neutral context. Specifically, older female adults were rated most positively while engaged in conversation than while reading a book, and reading a book was rated more positively than when the female target was presented in neutral context. Also, male older adults in interactive context were rated more positively than male older adults in the neutral contexts. These findings demonstrate that as the context changes, younger adults’ attitudes associated with older adults change.

Differences between the contexts regarding the evaluative and descriptive subscales of the AGED Inventory were also found. Specifically, younger adults’ perceptions of descriptive attitudes associated with older adults changed as context changed. Older adults who are communicating have more positive descriptive attitudes associated with them than older adults in the neutral contexts. Further, younger adults’ perceptions of evaluative attitudes associated with older adults revealed that older adults engaged in conversation or an individual activity were rated more positively on evaluative attitudes than when based on still shots of older adults in a neutral context. Older adults who are communicating and interacting with another person are
seen more favorably than other older adults who are not communicating or interacting, and these results have several important implications.

The first implication centers on what has been used as stimulus material in prior older adult stereotype research. Past research examining older adult stereotypes has utilized either written trait descriptions or photographs of older adults as stimulus material, and these studies illustrate that written traits or characteristics can be grouped into categories that represent common older adult stereotypes (see Hummert, 1990a; Schmidt & Borland, 1986). Another line of older adult stereotype research has used photographs of older adults as stimulus material to elicit responses from participants; these photographs were chosen by researchers to represent typical views or prototypes of older adults (Brewer et al. 1981; Brewer & Lui; 1984; Hummert, 1990a, b).

These studies not only provided a foundation of older adult stereotype research, but also advanced this line of research by changing the stimulus material. These studies moved from written traits to actual photographs of older adults as stimulus material. The use of older adult photographs may indicate that researchers wanted to represent older adults in a more vivid sense. Many of these researchers have put forth a call for future research to mirror more realistic circumstances. For instance, Schmidt and Borland (1986) urged researchers to “discover the circumstances under which different stereotypes and attitudes are activated” (p. 259). Hummert (1994a) and her colleagues (1995; 1994) argue that the impact of physical characteristics and situational (i.e., contextual) cues on the activation of positive versus negative older adult stereotypes should be examined.

In an attempt to address some of these concerns, this study manipulated the context in
which older adults were performing an activity or behavior. This manipulation of context occurred in order to discover whether different older adult stereotypes were activated by various contexts or situations. Results from this dissertation indicate that context plays an important role in the formation and recollection of older adult stereotypes. Context changes the attitudes and traits that younger adults associate with older adults.

A second implication of these findings indicates that communication plays a significant role in younger adults’ perceptions of attitudes associated with older adults. In the interactive context, older adults were shown in contact and communicating with a younger adult. Past research has examined the effects of contact on younger adults’ perceptions of older adults. Specifically, younger adults who maintained frequent, regular contact with older adults consistently rate older adults more positively than those younger adults that do not have regular contact with older adults (Aday, Sims, & Evans, 1991; Downs & Walz, 1981; Rose-Colley & Eddy, 1988). These prior research findings (when paired with this study’s results of younger adults associating more positive attitudes toward older adults in the interactive context than in other contexts) suggest that contact or communication between younger and older adults is an important factor when considering the effects of context on younger adults’ perceptions of older adults.

While older adult target sex has not been a major focus in older adult stereotype research, two prior studies have investigated this variable and produced equivocal results. Kite, Deaux, and Miele (1991) indicate that age of a target has more salience on an individual’s perception of an older adult than a target’s sex. Hummert (1994a) study reports that an older adult target’s age and sex may interact and affect a person’s perceptions of an older adult target, and states that future
older adult stereotype research should include older adult sex as a variable. In the current study, sex is a significant variable in younger adults’ perceptions of attitudes associated with older adults; the female older adult has more positive attitudes associated with her than the male older adult. These results demonstrate that younger adults’ perceptions of evaluative attitudes associated with the female older adult were more positive than the evaluative attitudes associated with the male older adult, but there was no difference between younger adults’ ratings of the female versus the male older adult in regards to descriptive attitudes. Therefore, sex of older adults is a significant variable in how younger adults regard evaluative attitudes connected with older adults.

These older adult sex differences can be attributed to two possible factors. First, individuals see and encounter more older adult women than older adult men simply because women tend to live longer than men (Coleman & Bond, 1990). The impact of older adult sex could be attributed to the greater frequency of observing and interacting with older adult women than older adult men. A second possible factor is the grandparent/grandchild relationship. Prior research has found that grandchildren report feeling emotionally closest to their maternal grandmother (e.g., Eisenburg, 1988; Hodgson, 1992; Kennedy, 1992). These findings may give some indication as to why younger adults, in general, perceive older adult women more favorably than older adult men.

The second hypothesis investigates whether younger adults’ perceptions of older adults’ language abilities change as a function of context. Results demonstrate that female older adults engaged in a conversation were judged to have better receptive and expressive language skills than female older adults engaged in an individual activity, and female older adults engaged in an
individual activity were rated higher in receptive and expressive language abilities than female older adults shown in a still headshot.

There are two implications of these results. First, these findings support the supposition that female older adults who are involved in a conversation are seen by participants as having better language abilities than older adults who are not involved in a conversation. Thus, context is an important variable in younger adults’ views of older adults’ language abilities and performances. A second implication of context playing an important role in perceptions of older adults’ language abilities relates to the similar finding of context and attitudes associated with older adults. Again, because of the appearance of both the communication act and the presence of another person in the interactive context, these findings cannot accurately detect which was the deciding factor. Regardless of whether it was the act of communicating or the appearance of another person in the interactive context, the research findings suggest that context does make a significant difference in formulating and recollecting older adult stereotypes.

**Theoretical Implications**

While the cognitive conceptual framework allows for the duality of stereotypes, it does not explain the effect of context on older adult stereotypes. By employing the ecological perspective as a theoretical basis, past research and theories (e.g., the cognitive framework and communication accommodation theory) are not negated. Rather, the ecological perspective is offered in addition to these theories in hopes of contributing a better explanation of how context affects older adult stereotypes. Because this perspective emphasizes a dynamic exchange between how an individual perceives and interacts within and with the environment, a more complete understanding of context may occur.
The first implication of utilizing the ecological perspective to explain older adult stereotypes centers on the adaptive function that perception performs; in other words, an individual’s perception serves an adaptive function and facilitates goal attainment (McArthur & Baron, 1983). This adaptive function changes the focus of older adults research from how processing occurs (e.g., examination of schemata for older adult stereotypes) to what information is being processed (e.g., physiognomic cues of the older adult and environmental cues). Because this study found context to be an important variable in younger adults’ perceiving and processing of older adult stereotypes, the ecological perspective can offer a better understanding of how stereotypes are formed and enacted during interaction.

A second theoretical implication of this study is concerned with how a communication encounter or physical event is described. The ecological perspective’s definition of physical events is that they are dynamic in nature and can be both environmental and social. In keeping with this definition of physical events, this study used video recordings, which are more dynamic and present changing stimulus material. Also, the use of these video recordings more accurately mirrored “real world” interactive and behavior.

Finally, employing the ecological perspective may better be equipped to identify what information is being perceived. In other words, through additional studies, researchers can target which variables are relevant to the formulation and recollection of older adult stereotypes. Findings from this study indicate that context and older adult gender are cues that impact younger adults’ perceptions of older adults.

**Future Directions and Limitations**

This study has several limitations that need to be addressed. One limitation may be the
example used for the noninteractive context; this context contained an older adult who was performing the individual activity of reading a book. Although this example of a noninteractive context fits the parameters of the definition, there are some assumptions that are bound to the activity of reading a book, such as the person has enough education or intelligence to read. This limitation may explain why the noninteractive context received higher scores than the neutral context. A future study might employ an active but not literacy-based activity (e.g., watching television). Another limitation of this study is the definition of the interactive context in which the older adult participated in a conversation with a younger adult. This example of an interactive encapsulated two different variables: first, there is the element of communication, but there is also the element of another person being present in the context. Because of both variables, presence of another person and communication occurring between the older and younger adult, if cannot be discerned which variable was critical. Future research studies might use activities such as co-watching television, talking on the telephone, or writing a letter.

Future research should make a concerted effort to provide participants with the most realistic situations in which older adults interact. The use of stimulus materials, such as video recordings, should be encouraged for future research because it allows participants to observe older adults performing actions or interacting with others. Another future direction for this line of research concerns the breadth of older adults used as targets in research studies. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, the older adult targets were limited to active, healthy, European American older adults to control for other confounding variables; however, future research should strive to incorporate older adults that represent other ethnic groups. Finally, a multi-method approach to this social phenomenon should be considered; this type of methodological
approach, which could include a more qualitative approach utilizing open-ended questions, one-on-one interviews and focus groups, may better explain how individuals process context and interaction.

The large number of baby boomers may make this line of research increasingly important in the next several decades. As the number of older adults in our society increases, a greater understanding of these social phenomena is needed. This study explores the effects of context and older adult gender on older adult stereotypes. While both context and gender were found to be significant factors in perception of older adults, future research should continue to advance the knowledge of understanding how perceptions ultimately impact the quality of life.
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Table 1

Mean Ratings of AGED Inventory Scores Associated with Older Adult Targets as a Function of Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>139.367&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>138.633&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noninteractive</td>
<td>130.500&lt;sub&gt;a,b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>125.467&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>123.900&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>104.733&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 30 participants per cell. Higher numbers denote younger adults’ perceptions of more positive attitudes associated with older adult targets. Within each gender, means with the same letter subscript are not significantly different as indicated by Cicchetti’s (1972) multiple comparison at the p < .05 level.
Table 2

Mean Ratings of the Descriptive and Evaluative Subscale Score of the AGED Inventory Associated with Older Adult Targets as a Function of Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTEXT</th>
<th>DESCRIPTIVE SUBSCALE</th>
<th>EVALUATIVE SUBSCALE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>65.867&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>65.767&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noninteractive</td>
<td>60.400&lt;sup&gt;a,b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>58.967&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>58.933&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>54.167&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 30 participants per cell. Higher numbers denote younger adults’ perceptions of more positive descriptive attitudes associated with older adult targets. Within each gender, means with same letter subscript are not significant difference as indicated by Cichetti’s (1972) multiple comparison procedures at the p < .05 level.
Table 3

Mean Ratings of the LIA Scale Scores Associated with Older Adult Targets as a Function of Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>interactive</td>
<td>89.100&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>94.633&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noninteractive</td>
<td>84.400&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>83.667&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>86.400&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>74.167&lt;sub&gt;c&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 30 participants per cell. Higher numbers denote younger adults’ perceptions of more positive language abilities associated with older adult targets. Within each gender, means with same letter subscript are not significant difference as indicated by Cicchetti’s (1972) multiple comparison procedures at the p < .05 level.
### Table 4

Mean Ratings of the Receptive and Expressive Subscale Scores of the LIA Scale Associated with Older Adult Targets as a Function of Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTEXT</th>
<th>RECEPTIVE SUBSCALE</th>
<th>EXPRESSIVE SUBSCALE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>46.133&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>51.733&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noninteractive</td>
<td>43.633&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>43.767&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>42.833&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>38.533&lt;sub&gt;c&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 30 participants per cell. Higher numbers denote younger adults’ perceptions of more positive receptive language abilities associated with older adult targets. Within each gender, means with same letter subscript are not significant difference as indicated by Cicchetti’s multiple comparison procedures at the p < .05 level.