AGEISM AND POSITIVE AGEING THROUGH THE EYES OF FIRST YEAR NURSING STUDENTS:

AN INTERPRETIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE QUALITATIVE STUDY OF STUDENT ASSIGNMENTS

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Abstract

The influence of institutional or systemic ageism on nursing students’ beliefs about older adult nursing is well documented in the literature. Means to address systemic ageism in nursing schools include introducing a dedicated gerontology nursing course in the curriculum, teaching from a positive aging perspective, and student nurse practicum that includes experiences with healthy older adults.

In response to increasing care needs of an aging population and healthcare literature concerns, Trinity Western University School of nursing initiated a gerontology nursing class addressing these means using a critical gerontology framework. Nursing students were given a term-long assignment titled 'Ageism Alert.' Students posted in an online forum throughout the term when they encountered systemic ageism in their world. Students also wrote about positive aging and what this ‘looks like’ in the midst of chronic disease challenges. Student work was analyzed for patterns and themes to understand how first year nursing students view systemic ageism and positive aging.

Demographic questions asked of student participants allowed for an early and tentative answer to the postulate in the nursing literature suggesting that a positive aging gerontology nursing course and positive clinical experience with older adults may reverse the trend for new nurses to exclude gerontology nursing as a career choice.
There is beauty in every stage of life. This is the message that needs to be shared in society today. Being a child is beautiful. Being a youth is beautiful. Being an adult is beautiful. Being an older adult is every bit as beautiful.

... first year nursing student study participant
Background

- Institutional, or systemic ageism has been implicated throughout the nursing literature as having a direct impact in influencing new graduates in nursing away from choosing a career in gerontology nursing.

- A postulate in the literature is that a dedicated gerontology nursing course in the nursing curriculum, taught from the perspective of positive aging, and a positive first clinical experience with older adults may reverse this trend.

- In spring term of 2012, Trinity Western University School of Nursing rolled out a newly designed Nursing 118 course, taught from a critical gerontology framework. It piloted a short community nursing experience with health older adults alongside a residential care practicum. It also included a term-long assignment: a myCourses forum 'Ageism Alert' that students posted in throughout the term.

- In spring of 2013 the second cohort of first year nursing students progressed through Nursing 118. This second cohort utilized the same critical gerontology framework but had an extended community nursing experience alongside the residential care practicum. The ‘Ageism Alert’ assignment continued throughout the term.
The Adapted for Elders Vulnerable Populations Conceptual Model (Flaskerud & Winslow, 1998)

The AVPCM proposes that the gerontological framing that directs nursing education, research, practice, or policy analysis directly impacts relative risk, resource allocation, and health status of the older adult cohort.
The ‘Ageism Alert’ Forum Assignment

• Students were asked to post a minimum of once a month in the class forum during the term (minimum of three posts).
• The first post was to read be a short essay defining systemic ageism and describing a situation that is an example of systemic ageism.
• Throughout the semester, students were asked to keep a look out for systemic ageism in media, policies, programs, products, architectural design, social services, city planning, within nursing, healthcare, education, or in any other part of life. The students were to post a minimum of once a month (two more posts) reporting on their findings, including giving a rationale for why they believed this was an example of systemic ageism.
• The Ageism Alert forum assignment was self-evaluated rather than graded by the instructor.
• In addition to the Ageism Alert forum, students posted two different short essays on positive ageing and what this looked like within chronic illness.
• Student participants were recruited after they had completed Nursing 118.
Aim and Objectives

• To methodically reflect upon student assignments, exploring first year nursing students thoughts and findings on systemic ageism and positive ageing.

• To present themes discovered and trends in tensions uncovered.

• To ascertain early implications of a dedicated gerontology nursing course with clinical experiences in residential and community care on:
  • Comfort with communicating and engaging with older adults
  • Career planning choices that include older adult nursing.
Methods

• **Participants recruited:** first year nursing students who completed the classroom and clinical course, Nursing 118 *Care of Older Adults* at Trinity Western University, in 2012 and 2013

• **Data collected:**
  1. Forum post assignments on ageism and on positive aging
  2. Demographic survey questions administered through SurveyMonkey

• **Data analysis:**
  1. Forum post assignments were coded for patterns, themes, and threads of tension using Atlas.ti software and reflexive notes.
  2. The demographic data was analyzed using simple descriptive statistics.
Demographics: Survey questions

1. Including the year you were in N118 in the TWU School of Nursing, how many years of college or university do you have?

2. Before Nursing 118, how would you have rated your ‘comfort level’ of communication with and being around older adults?

3. After Nursing 118, how would you now rate your ‘comfort level’ of communication with and being around older adults?

4. How would you describe your relationship with your grandparents?

5. Based on your experience and perceptions to date, what are the changes that you would consider choosing gerontology nursing sometime in my nursing career?
Demographics

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Nearly 75% of the participants had only 1 or 2 years of college or university.

1. Including the year you were in N118 in the TWU School of Nursing, how many years of college or university do you have?
2. & 3. **Before** and **After** Nursing 118, rate your ‘comfort level’ of communication with and being around older adults ...

Combined cohorts comfort level before and after Nursing 118

- **Before N118**
- **After N118**

- Extremely comfortable
- Comfortable
- Somewhat comfortable
- Neutral
- Somewhat uncomfortable
- Uncomfortable
- Extremely uncomfortable
4. Grandparent Relationships. Confounding factor?

Comparing ‘Comfort level after N118’ (area) with Relationship with Grandparents (bars)
Would you consider a gerontology nursing career?

5. Based on experience and perceptions to date, what are the chances that you would consider choosing gerontology nursing sometime in your nursing career?
Analyzing Ageism: Guiding questions

What does ageism look like?

What are the outcomes of ageism for society ... and for the older adult cohort?

Through what means does ageism propagate?

What is the nursing response to ageism?
Findings – Ageism themes

1. Ageism looks like:
   - Nothing (Invisible to most people)
   - Isolation
   - Fear
   - Apathy
   - Disrespect
   - Architecture, infrastructure and policy ‘built’ for younger cohorts
   - Infantilizing practice (paternalism, ‘elder speak’)
Grounding quotes ... Ageism looks like:

- Systemic Ageism, although not readily recognized, is a form of discrimination present in our society.
- The term systemic proposes that ageism transpires as a product of biases in our society, as reflected through decisions and policies.
- The media is targeting the fear people have of aging with many different types of anti-aging products. It has been said “that the media both reflect and shape our culture” (Mason, Darnell, Prifti, 2010, p. 189). If the media is portraying so many anti-aging commercials, it is due to the prevalence of the fear of aging within society that has given the media something to target.
- This past weekend I was at a family dinner with several elders in attendance. While there I listened in on the various conversations taking place. One conversation was very upsetting and ageist. One of the older adults was being talked to as if they were a young child or as if they could not understand or follow a simple conversation. The person was talking to the elder in a high pitch sing song voice and spoke in broken words as if they could not understand full sentences or communicate like an adult.
Findings – Ageism themes

2. Ageism outcomes:

• **For society:**
  - Generational divisions
  - Older adults viewed as ‘other’
  - Beauty culturally defined as youthful
  - Valuing of young over old
  - ‘Quality of life’ equated with youthful ‘perfection’

• **For older adult cohort:**
  - Functional decline and negative health outcomes
  - Disrespect, neglect and abuse
  - Loneliness and boredom
  - Loss of self-respect; apologizing for ‘being old’
  - Limitations to achievable ‘quality of life’
Grounding quotes ... Outcomes of Ageism:

• ... She often tries to bring up her concerns and explain how she is feeling, but rather than listening, he cuts her off. This client’s doctor makes assumptions about what the problem is and then she said, “He talks down to me as if I am deaf and cannot understand him”.

• The society we live in is so completely wrapped up in the potential and beauty of youthful people, that we tend to view the elderly as inferior because they don’t meet these standards.

• As prejudice against a particular people group begins it can often seem harmless and without realization can quickly change to mistreatment and abuse.

• ... the elderly are constantly fed these lies they can begin to think that they cannot do things or that they are less valuable than the young.

• The feeling of being unproductive, socially isolated and unappreciated, as identified by the [...] commercial, is linked to a decline in self-esteem.
Findings – Ageism themes

3. **Ageism is propagated through:**

   - Every day communications that perpetuate myths of ageing as stereotypes:
     - humor
     - Media (ads, magazine articles, TV, cartoons)
     - myths of aging
   - Every day societal decisions that marginalize older adults:
     - Education
     - Healthcare
     - City planning policies (buildings, sidewalks, transportation)
Grounding quotes … Ageism is propagated by:

• From early on, our western culture is subject to ageist messages that portray elderly in negative light. A search of the words ‘older person’ on YouTube generates a results list that includes videos of ridicule, messages of disapproval and disrespect (even to users’ own grandparents).

• I was taken aback at this blatant disrespectful and ageist perception of older adults. Not only did she compare the care that some older adults require to helping a young child, but she shunned them and made it seem as if they are unimportant. I replied by saying that older adults are much different than children because of their life experience, wisdom, and the place of honour and importance that they should have in our society.

• The term ‘old’ has become a generalized term for a wide range of negative qualities.

• The realization of how concealed ageism truly is has caused me to take a closer look at everyday television shows that I watch and think about what [I consider now] as harmful comedy. Moreover, it has also taught me to think about what I say and if it may be considered as ageist.
Findings – Ageism themes

• **Nursing responses to Ageism:**
  - Self-reflection on own values/beliefs about ageing the first necessary response
  - Nurses, unwittingly or not, hold power (can promote ageism passively or actively)
  - Nurse as truth teller to transform society
Grounding quotes ...nursing responses to ageism:

• Specifically notable to student nurses is promoting education about ageism in one’s own life and in the lives of others. This allows individuals to interpret messages from the media more carefully .... Another way to “get past ageism” is by participating in frequent intergenerational encounters, allowing people to judge fairly instead of accepting myths ...

• ... how can we possibly look upon aging with a positive view if our media is constantly pushing negative images of the elderly while marketing aging prevention, cures and treatment upon us? I am reminded of Ghandi’s famous quote, “Your beliefs become your thoughts, Your thoughts become your words, Your words become your actions, your actions become your habits.” Therefore, ... we first need to examine our own individual beliefs on aging.

• This opened my eyes to the fact that the ideas and thoughts that I have towards the elderly can greatly effect their health and well being. Because of this it caused me to look at how I respond to elder’s and be aware of ageism in our society.

• As nurses it is important that we search out the truth about aging and then teach healthy aging to the elderly and contradict the negative messages that are being told in society.
Analyzing Positive Ageing: Guiding questions

What does positive ageing look like?

What are the outcomes of positive ageing for society ... and for the older adult cohort?

Through what means does positive ageing propagate?

What is the nursing response to positive ageing?
Findings – Positive Ageing themes

1. Positive ageing looks like:

- **Adaptation** to ageing changes and any chronic disease/functional changes
- **Engagement** with life; accepting new challenges, including learning opportunities
- **Autonomy**, participation in healthcare, decision-making
- Intentional **intergenerational** experiences
- **Living in the present**; multidimensional wellbeing
- **Altruism**
Positive aging is something that may have a different definition depending on who you talk to, and different individuals regard different aspects of positive aging as most important. In my opinion, however, one of the most crucial aspects of successful aging is for the individual to remain engaged in life and continue lifelong learning. This view of healthy aging can be defined as remaining socially and cognitively active, and pursuing your interests and trying out new activities, in order to continue growing your knowledge and ideas and benefiting from life’s joys.

...giving to others [is part of] positive aging. As I presented my reminiscence box, I found that my resident was overcome by a deep desire to give back. She welcomed any questions I might have asked with open arms, for it gave her great joy to share her accumulated wisdom, even through the fog of advancing dementia. The act of giving and serving others also aids in maintaining social interaction and a positive attitude, which are key factors to achieving positive aging in the midst of chronic illness.

I never knew that social interaction could have such a big impact on the positive aging of an individual.

Focusing on the present is important in remaining engaged, having novel pursuits and building a positive attitude.

One senior described the acquiring of new skills and undertaking of new adventures as the process by which he “reinvented [himself] a dozen times”
2. Positive ageing outcomes:

- **For society:**
  - Bridging of the generations
  - Reduction in fear of aging
  - Acceptance of ageing as a valued life stage

- **For older adult cohort:**
  - Social connectivity and civic engagement
  - Individual's satisfaction in quality of life
  - Increased opportunities for altruism (‘giving back’)
Grounding quotes … Positive ageing outcomes:

• There is no doubt that apathy exists toward the issue of ageism in modern society. As younger, influential generations, we fear the aging process ourselves, and as such we inadvertently focus our energies on glorifying the here and now. We strive after products that preserve youth, and we aim for personal success and power, all marked by an energy that requires youthful motivation. Our fear causes us to focus on our differences … my goal is to first and foremost recognize the various forms of ageism in myself and my surroundings, and then begin the process of eliminating it, and replacing it with respect, empathy, and a sense of awe as I observe these wonderfully created individuals who have contributed a colossal amount to the world I live in today.

• A direct relationship is able to be drawn between social connectedness and one’s quality of life. Many benefits are experienced when the elder’s family, friends and community are dependably involved …

• Our society may wonder how someone who is apparently experiencing a steady loss of independence and everyday capabilities is able to have positive self-esteem. This simply emphasizes the fact that there is a lack of knowledge in our communities today regarding how independence can still be achieved with loss of physical function.

• The more we see older adults in our communities, then the less we younger persons could claim that they are a stale and tired out population. Older adults have so much to offer whether they are living independently, in assisted living, or in residential care homes, we need to reach out to them. They are a resource and an asset to our society. They are parents and grandparents and great grandparents. They are vibrant, passionate, and wise. What better way to honor and respect our elders than to ask them to speak out and listen to what they have to say.
Findings – Positive Ageing themes

3. Positive ageing is promoted through:

- **Meaning-making** (such as through sharing of stories and reminiscence, the arts, altruism and ‘giving back’)
- **Spirituality and values** (honoring of elders)
- **Encouragement**, caring (love), hope, valuing and honoring older adults
- **Providing opportunities for growth** and challenge (education, work, new experiences)
Grounding quotes ... Positive ageing promoted through:

• ... even if one is experiencing severe hardship related to aging, there is a potential to maintain positive liberty as long as one can find meaning to his or her own circumstance and actively pursue the best out of one’s life.

• ... interacting with the client to discover what brings this client meaning to their life and preserving the client’s independence in any way possible is also beneficial. From simple communication, nurses and student nurses can promote healthy ageing in the community and residential setting.

• Part of positive aging is creating an environment of support, reliability and comfort. Support systems are key for sharing, reminiscing and opening up about the struggle the elderly are facing. Knowing you are not alone is hugely important when you face new things that challenge the way you’ve always done them.

• During clinical practice in residency, I had the opportunity to care for an elderly lady who was wheel chair bound and unable to move most of her right side. She needed total assistance with most of her care needs as she struggled doing tasks on her own because of the degree of her functional decline. Despite her physiological impairment, I found that she was the most positive lady on the floor. The reason for this was because she had found a great sense of well-being through spirituality.
Findings – Positive Ageing themes

4. Nursing responses to positive ageing:

• **Ensure basic needs met** of each individual (Maslow), including a positive environment

• **Holding hope for all** (recognizing that positive ageing is possible for everyone)

• **Facilitate adjustment and adaptation** with each older adult as an individual (person-centered care)

• **Advocate for the individual’s unique needs** to meet their own interpretation of positive ageing

• **Promote independence and agency**

• **Ask questions, listen and communicate**
Nursing response to positive ageing:

- Positive aging is achievable only when their needs – mental, physical, or spiritual - are met.
- We as nurses should realize that nursing isn’t just about physically healing the patient. By following positive stereotypes, nurses can serve elders in a holistic fashion, and should view the elderly as contributors in achieving and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.
- When we assist people to achieve positive aging, client centered holistic approach is essential. Everyone has different ideas about what positive aging constitutes.
- Nurses have the opportunity to optimize well-being by assessing the individual’s values and needs; which leads to the preservation of his or her identity and overall wellness. By finding out what someone may have valued before functional decline took it away, a nurse can enhance identity by implementing activities that the individual would enjoy. As nurses, we have the opportunity to guide people we care for so that they can find their optimal sense of wellness; even during physiological decline.
- Nurses and nursing students can help older adults focusing on positive liberty that is, what they are able to do rather than what cannot be done due to the external constraint imposed by aging. As an example, I know one health care institution which is providing a philosophy conversation program, to promote positive aging among older adults. Through this very unique program, older adults are invited to engage in philosophical dialogue with other participants and volunteers to examine important issues on various topics. Many of the participants lost ability to enjoy other recreations that require physical fitness due to aging, but they are still able to find enjoyment...
Trends and threads of tension

Dilemmas in the data ...
Threads of tension

- Individual choice versus systemic constraints on decision-making: is this movement toward the blame-game? Do first year nursing students see positive aging as a simple choice?
  - The most frequent pattern grounded in the data was ‘individual; person-centered’ and ‘positive aging possible for everyone’
  - Similarly, ‘adaptation’ and ‘active social’ and ‘positive attitude’ was a frequent grounded pattern
  - First year nursing students understanding of an individual’s agency to make healthy choices may be limited by a lack of an applied understanding of the social determinants of health
Threads of tension

• When is the acknowledgement of functional decline ‘ageist’ and when is it ‘truth telling’?
  • Student nurses were split between viewing the programming at a Community Centre as ‘ageist’ and as promoting positive ageing.
  • On the one hand, students reported the programming as ‘ageist’ when there was no courses offered that took into account the needs of older adults with ageing changes.
  • On the other hand, students labeled programming as ‘ageist’ when there were courses that were designed for seniors as a separate cohort.
  • Similarly, humor that played off functional loss of seniors was seen to be stereotyping and ageist. However, students acknowledge that there is a level of truth to age-related changes. Some students expressed feelings of discomfort when older adults laughed at caricatures of age-related frailty and attributed elder’s response to internalized ageism.
Nursing Implications

• The need for increased gerontology nurses and for other nurses with increased understanding of gerontological nursing is well established.

• To encourage students to consider a career choice in gerontology nursing, four strategies are noted in the nursing literature:
  1. Rich gerontological curriculum
  2. Faculty experts and champions of gerontology nursing
  3. Positive clinical experiences in gerontological nursing that includes healthy older adults
  4. Mature students (later placement of a gerontological practicum in the program)

• This study explored student nurses’ views of ageism and positive ageing following a curriculum change in the BSN program of Trinity Western University that introduced a dedicated gerontology nursing course taught from a critical gerontology framework. Early findings of attitude changes toward gerontology nursing as a potential career choice demonstrated a shift toward the positive from the first to second cohort, possibly as a result of increased clinical time with healthy adults.
Nursing Implications

- Ageism and positive ageing are described throughout this study as antitheses.
- The top three concepts students discussed in regard to ageism were:
  1. Media as reflecting and promoting systemic ageism
  2. Myths of ageing reinforcing stereotypes of older adults
  3. Societal valuing of young over old (people, products, policies/programs)
- The top three concepts students discussed in regard to positive ageing were:
  1. The necessity for individual-to-individual communication and person-centered care
  2. The importance of meaning and purpose for positive ageing to be actualized
  3. The vital need for nurses as truth tellers and advocates and communicators to practice from an understanding that positive aging is possible for everyone
Summary

• The following quotes from nursing student participants provide an effective summary statement for this study:
  
  • As nurses, we hold an invaluable position that can be made to encourage and let [older adults] know that they are valuable. This is crucial to know and to practice, because if they are sucked into believing that what those advertisements imply are true, then their self-confidence, motivation for living, and happiness will all decrease.
  
  • The most effective way of honoring [older adults] I believe, is by getting to know them individually, using many different methods. Most importantly though, by not harbouring ageist thoughts, I will be able to see elders in a light of respect for them and the wisdom and experience they have attained throughout their lifetime.
References and Resources


Thank you!

This study is dedicated to the 2012 and 2013 Nursing 118 student participants ...

... *may you change the world.*