

Concepts of respect

as an approach to

addressing ageism

Angelica Fernandez
Macquarie University
26/05/10

SOC300 Research task

Introduction

There is a general understanding that there is a lack of respect toward elderly in contemporary Australia. This lack of respect is often expressed through ageist stereotypes. The reasons behind the existence of ageism point at an intergenerational gap which needs to be overcome. Through understandings of respect and self-respect, the concept of the Circle of Respect is developed. The Circle of Respect encompasses unconditional respect and by developing this concept as an educational tool, negative attitudes towards elderly can be addressed and changed. This would also have an effect in reducing elder abuse.

A focus group was conducted to give an insight into the understandings of respect and self-respect among adolescents.

Ageism

Ageism can be understood as both causing a lack of respect towards the elderly and in itself being a lack of respect. Ageism toward the elderly is shown through stereotypical ideas of the elderly as dependent, vulnerable, declining physically and mentally and generally as burdens to society (Angus & Reeves, 2006:139). Ageism is permeated in society and occurs in language, media, politics, employment and technology (NSW MACA, 2007)

The media is often identified as a source of ageist stereotypes. Zebrowitz & Montepare (2000, as cited by Bodner, 2009:1011) found that a mere 1.5% of TV characters are elderly. When they are present, it is mainly in smaller roles, and the roles often play on negative stereotypes held about ageing. Lovell (2006:23) also identifies the media as promoting youth and showing negative stereotypes of the elderly. Pasupathi & Lockenhoff (2002:204) found in their review that no age-related impairment is found in a majority of the elderly and that the elderly differ from each other more than young adults do, meaning that age is not a reliable indicator of a person's abilities among the elderly. This strongly rejects stereotypes of the elderly.

There are two main theories trying to explain the occurrence of ageism, the Terror Management

Theory (TMT) and the Social Identity Theory (SIT). TMT concerns how people might deal with death anxiety. (Bodner, 2009:1006). Younger people might try to put up barriers against the elderly as a way to reduce death anxiety (Bodner, 2009:1007), and these barriers are expressed as ageist attitudes and lack of respect. SIT concerns how groups in a society form their own identity, which is confirmed by valuing the 'own' group more than other groups and even seeing other groups negatively (Bodner, 2009:1005; Kite & Wagner, 2002:148). This could be what occurs between young and old age groups. However, it is important to remember that age is only one part of a person's identity which can differ in importance compared to other identifiers like gender, ethnicity, and previous profession (Kite & Wagner, 2002:151).

In relation to SIT, Bodner (2009:1005) suggests that the elderly use certain defence mechanisms to protect themselves from being considered as a group of low status in society. Concentrating on the good sides of ageing is one example. Another defence mechanism entails viewing the younger in a negative light while portraying one's own older age group as better, which contributes to intergenerational conflicts. A last defence mechanism is that of disassociating oneself from other elders by not considering oneself old while holding ageist prejudices towards even older groups. This disengagement with other elderly is concerning and indicates clearly how being elderly is viewed negatively in society. These examples have support from findings in a focus group conducted by Rosic (2010). The theories show that there are intergenerational distances that need to be overcome. They also point to ageism existing among the elderly. Montepare and Zebrowitz (2002:90, as cited by Horton et al. 2007:1023) found that the elderly perceived other elderly as low in status, less likeable, dependent and unhappier.

The negative effects ageist stereotypes have on the elderly are numerous. It has been shown that the elderly unconsciously exposed to negative stereotypes perform worse on memory tasks, respond with higher cardiovascular stress responses when performing mathematical and verbal tests, and even exhibit less will-to-live (Horton et al., 2007:1026). The elderly who have positive views on ageing recover faster from acute myocardial infarct, have better functional health and even live

longer than those who have negative views on ageing (Horton et al., 2007:1031). Therefore it is essential to promote healthier and more positive attitudes toward elderly, which can be accomplished through increasing respect.

Respect changing

There are findings supporting that respect has changed from previous generations. The elderly are more used to a one-way respect where the respect should come automatically from the younger persons (McCabe et al., 2010:22). Today however young people consider respect being something that one has to earn. Another change is that a two-way respect, mutual respect, is the norm and this is especially emphasised among younger people wanting equality in relationships (McCabe et al., 2010:22). These different notions of respect can cause further discord between generations as young might not feel respected by the elderly and therefore do not respect them, while the elderly may expect to be respected automatically without having to show respect in return.

Sung (2004:228) mentions that in Korea many adults live with their elderly parents and therefore have more opportunity to show care respect. This is an interesting point as it raises the possibility that in Australia, part of the perceived lack of respect for the elderly could be due to that there is less opportunity to show respect. The generational separation could therefore decrease respect in several ways. A finding supporting this comes from focus groups conducted by McCabe et al.

(2010:14) showing that the spread of family members around Australia was seen as problematic because there is less contact with relatives, resulting in difficulties in developing respect towards the elderly family members. The use of newer communication technology to try to overcome the problem of distance was seen as an obstacle by the elderly in McCabe's et al. study.

Lack of understanding and different values between the young and the elderly have been identified from both sides (McCabe et al, 2010:15) and add to the generational gap. Young as well as old also reported that younger people are insecure in their interactions with elderly (McCabe et al., 2010:15).

The changing of respect has been connected to changing of family dynamics where both genders

work, where families are smaller with the children moving out sooner and with increased ended marriages (McCabe et al., 2010:16). Other aspects of the contemporary Australian society said to affect respect were lack of time, higher education and salaries, and individualism.

Respect

Respect is a complicated term which can mean different things. Darwell (1995, as cited by Middleton, 2006) describes two types of respect; recognition respect; a fundamental recognition of certain things or beings deserving respect, and appraisal respect; appreciation of the qualities of the thing. That all humans should be respected is recognition respect, while a person being respected for being a kind person is appraisal respect. Middleton (2006:63) adds a third type, status respect. This dimension of respect is that accorded solely based on an 'office', a position such as a teacher being respected without consideration of the qualities of said teacher.

Recognition respect is an often mentioned form of respect and is the fundamental respect which is given to all people because of the recognition of being persons. Lalljee et al. (2007:452) calls this unconditional respect and it is distinguished from other forms of respect because it is not something that has to be achieved or earned, and it cannot be lost. Lalljee et al. (2007:452) describes unconditional respect as based on equality; in recognizing everyone's worth as persons. In contrast, status and appraisal respect are hierarchical as they often can involve deference. Lalljee et al (2007:460) constructed a scale measuring unconditional respect for persons and found that those that scored high on it were more likely to treat others with respect and to seek contact with persons from other social groups.

Respect can be expressed in different ways and Sung (2004) researched forms of respect in a cross-cultural study of American and Korean young adults. Sung (2004:217) has identified 14 forms of respect which were similar to those found in previous studies. Care forms of respect were identified as being the most important ones.

Positive effects the elderly experience by receiving respect include feelings of self-worth, improved

quality of life and increased engagement with the society (McCabe et al., 2010:21). These findings are supported by findings by De Cremer's (2003) studies on respect and belonging. People want to belong to social groups as they provide them with a sense of self; a social identity and self worth (De Cremer, 2003:369). How a person is treated by a group then becomes the means to know whether one belongs, and the subjective feeling of being respected by the group leads to greater self-esteem (De Cremer, 2003:369). De Cremer (2003:370) then sees respect as informing a person's worth relational to a group and this is understood through how one is treated. De Cremer (2003:374) conducted an experiment and found that those feeling respected were more likely to act for the public good instead of out of self-interest.

Lalljee et al. (2007:461) point at the most horrendous acts of genocide and torture in the past having had a lack of recognizing people as human at its base, highlighting the importance of unconditional respect. In regards to the elderly, ageism and the societal lack of respect toward them can lead to them being dehumanised and abused.

Self-respect

Self-respect includes reflexive and evaluative aspects (Middleton, 2006:65). The reflexive self-respect concerns how a person's self-worth is influenced by receiving (or not receiving) respect from others. Middleton (2006:66) recognizes that in certain relationships the respect can be imbalanced due to unequal power relations, and can lead to feelings of less self worth.

The evaluative aspect of self-respect concerns the moral standards a person has which inform how a person behaves (Middleton (2006:66). The feeling of shame is tied to this as a person feels ashamed when not acting in accordance to held moral standards (Middleton, 2006:66), and this could lower self-respect. Having self-respect also includes demanding to be treated with respect as a person with self-respect recognizes his or her own self worth (Middleton, 2006:67).

To continually be treated with a lack of respect can damage a person's sense of self so much that it becomes internalised and lead to a lack of self-respect (Middleton, 2006:69). The connection to how

lack of respect may affect the elderly can be better understood through this notion of internalisation. Self-respect is often used when it is actually self-esteem a person is referring to (Sachs, 1981:346). Differentiating self-respect and self-esteem can be complicated, however Sachs (1981:347) considers that while it is easy to say that someone possesses too much self-esteem, saying that a person has too much self-respect is problematic.

Circle of Respect: Balanced mutual respect

The Circle of Respect concept draws from understandings of respect and self-respect and the notion of balanced respect. It embraces unconditional respect as the basis for respectful human interactions, and in doing so, it emphasizes a basic equality between persons. The Circle of Respect visualises respect within and between people. Within a person, it is the respect for the self and for the others that comprises the circle. The importance of a balance of respect for others and self respect is emphasised. When it is out of balance interactions with others becomes more problematic. If a person has too little self-respect, the person runs the risk of being used or looked down on. Having too little self-respect means that the person is unable to demand respect, and will therefore not be treated well. Instead, the person respects others more and this can lead to being trampled on. On the other hand, the person might value him or herself more than others, treating others with a lack of respect. The Circle of Respect between persons visualises a balance of respect that you pay and receive. This is dependent on the inner Circle of Respect for each individual. Conflict can arise in relationships where the respect is out of balance. When there is a balance of self-respect and respect for others, and a balance in the respect a person pays and the respect a person receives, a greater understanding of other people's differing views and opinions can be developed and prevent relationship conflicts. This balanced Circle of Respect does need further development but has great potential to function as a tool for promoting respect in personal relationships, between strangers and between generations in society.

Campaigns

While there has not been much research into elder respect, the importance of respect has been recognized in several campaigns. The Respect for Seniors Campaign (2010) is an outreach program in Sydney engaging the community in developing a culture of respect for the elderly. The campaign aims to decrease ageism and promote communities where elders are respected. The campaign acts to prevent elder abuse in its many forms. In promoting respect they use the understandings of respect presented in this report and are currently developing the Circle of Respect concept.

In the USA the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC) is starting a campaign against bullying called the Circle of Respect. This campaign's concept of Circle of Respect seems to have some similarities to the one presented in this paper; the vision statement is: "The Circle of Respect initiative will inspire us to live in ways that embody respect for ourselves, our friends, our families, and our communities in the places where we live, learn, work, and play". The campaign does not provide any clear definition further than that on what the Circle of Respect entails. However, they recognize the potential that increasing respect can have on reducing bullying, harassment, dating violence and other behaviour which can be linked to lack of respect.

"Elderly Pennsylvanians Deserve Honor and Respect" was another outreach campaign in the USA aimed at increasing respect toward the elderly to prevent elder abuse (Nerenberg, 2008:210). The campaign was based on findings from focus groups where the elderly preferred positive respect reinforcing campaigns instead of 'negative' ones directly related to elder abuse.

Increasing respect as a way to address ageism and elder abuse

Increasing respect can have great effects on how the elderly are treated in society. Increasing mutual respect and a consideration of the balance of respect through the Circle of Respect has great potential to decrease ageist views, especially as many of the forms of ageism are manifested through some sort of lack of respect. This in turn could decrease elder abuse in its many forms. The

concepts of respect and how they reinforce or in the case of too little respect undermine self-worth can greatly contribute to understanding the situation of the elderly in contemporary Australia.

Bodner (2009:1010) encourages greater contact between the old and the young to remove ageist attitudes in society. This is likely to result in greater mutual respect as well. It has been found that medical students placed in nursing home and undergoing a teaching program about the elderly had positive changes of attitudes toward the elderly (Lovell, 2006:23).

Ng (2002:306) argues that by providing attitudinal, interactional and communicative support to the elderly a reduction of the intergenerational gap would occur and this would promote mutual respect. Therefore campaigning for better attitudes toward and greater contact with the elderly is the way to go.

Butler (2009:211) points out that ageism, just like racism and sexism, has great economic costs in society as the elderly are not valued to their full potential in contributing to social and economic development. Instead they are denied the opportunity to contribute. Fostering respect towards the elderly would also develop a greater understanding of how valuable they are in society.

Method

A focus group was conducted at a boy's high school in April 2010. The participants were 9 boys aged 13-17. The recruitment of the participants occurred through convenience sampling. Parental as well as participant consent was sought. A staff member from the school was present during the session. The purpose of the focus group was to come to understand how adolescents perceive respect, as well as introduce the Circle of Respect concept. Half way through the discussion the participants were presented with a visual of the Circle of Respect (see figure 1) and asked to share their thoughts about it. The idea of introducing the concept was to see how the participants would interpret it and see whether there is an existing understanding of it already.

Figure 1: Circle of Respect



Results

The discussions in the focus group touched on many different perspectives of respect and the participants identified that it was difficult to define respect and mutual respect.

The participants interpreted the term mutual respect as something fundamental and natural, something that is just there in humans from the start. This they saw as a basic level of respect, in contrast to higher levels of respect. An example was given about having respect for someone in Africa, just based on that they were human, which was a basic level compared to a personal respect between individuals. This seems to correspond well with the notion of unconditional or recognition respect. The participant thought that higher levels of respect could be developed from that basic

level of respect. Part of the basic respect for humans, that is unconditional respect, involved helping someone out if they were injured. To not help would involve “letting yourself down”. This supports Middleton’s point about shame being the result of not following the moral standards inherent in self-respect.

A participant mentioned that a lot of people have respect for people who are rich and in positions of power. “You respect them for the things they have rather than what you know of them” This seems to be a more material sort of respect mixed with status respect.

A lack of mutual respect within relationships was seen as causing conflict. When proposed with an imbalance of respect within relationships, the participants thought this could lead to being used. An example made by one of the participants proposed that if a person respected a friend more than the friend respected him; the person could be used by his friend for borrowing money, but when the person asked to borrow money the friend would not reciprocate.

The importance of communication was often raised. “... if there is no respect in the relationship at all then you don’t really get any talking to each other, to regain that respect , so it has to be balanced within even if you haven’t got any respect, you should be communicating with each other and trying to gain respect”. This supports the idea that contact is important for creating and maintaining respect.

Self-respect was described as when you are “happy with who you are”, “let yourself be who you are” and “confident with what you are doing”. If a person feels like he has to change to meet other people’s expectations than that shows a lack of self-respect. Praise was mentioned several times as a source of self-respect. Feeling respected by others was also important, to feel that one is treated with respect and get positive feedback from them. Having responsibility and a feeling that one is doing something valuable also adds to self-respect. Helping someone was also seen as adding to self-respect because that would make a person feel good about themselves.

The lack of self-respect was discussed. As one participant said “It’s an expectation that we have respect for ourselves...”, and if someone lacks self-respect the person was seen as strange. People

who lack self-respect were described as often being on their own, walking with their head down and not having any friends. The lack of friends was attributed to the lack of self-respect, because no one respects someone who does not respect himself. The participants saw a link between lack of self-respect and bullying. In this context, promoting the circle of respect concept could help to reduce bullying as it would aim at increasing self-respect among those lacking it as well as greater understanding by those who do have sufficient self-respect.

The following quote concerns how a person might have lost self-respect:

“... maybe they have been deprived of respect for some other reason that led to them in the long-term not having self-respect, thinking there is something wrong with them, when in fact someone around them have been treating them wrongly, not providing them with respect. That would be the cause of it”. This quote shows an understanding of how lack of respect can be internalised.

In regards to gaining self-respect a participant said:

“It’s like a cycle, like if you help someone you gain respect and then you also gain self-respect out of that, then you respect them back as well. So they respect you, you respect them”

This understanding of respect was brought forward before presenting the Circle of Respect visual, showing that there is a sense among adolescents of what the Circle of Respect is trying to convey already. These two previous quotes highlight the interdependence of self-respect and received respect. This notion was also raised when presented with the Circle of Respect visual. The first reaction to what it meant was: “If you respect others, you respect yourself, and if you respect yourself, you will respect others”.

An example made by a participant concerning the Circle of Respect was that if he was dared to steal something and refused to, those that dared him would not respect him because they would consider him a coward. However, there would also be less respect towards them, as they asked him to do something they did not want to do themselves. The participants were asked how the balance of respect could be maintained when a person declines to do something. “You can decline an offer or a request or a situation and not provide an alternate solution and still keep respect”, however they

were not clear on how this could be done.

There was a debate about whether trust had a role in respect. While one participant saw trust as essential, another one did not think the concepts were linked at all:

"I respect George W. Bush but I wouldn't trust him with anything. And so like, you can respect a person for, you know, the things they do, or respect some part of what they have done, but you don't have to trust them to be able to respect them". A participant recognized this as a respect for their roles, and claimed that people then trust that they will fulfil their role, differentiating this kind of trust from trust on a personal level. One participant raised the possibility that one could respect Hitler despite not approving of what he did, but the respect would be directed at his ability to lead a country. He was contradicted by another participant saying that that was merely respecting an attribute of him, not respecting him as a person. This kind of respect seems to be Middleton's status respect.

There was a discussion about having too much self-respect, contradicting Sachs (1981). However, this was an introduced notion with a question in the focus group regarding having too much self-respect and the Circle of Respect visual. Despite it being introduced it was agreed that a person can have more self-respect than respect for others, and it was described as being 'up oneself'. Too much self-respect was seen as a person thinking he is better than others which would mean other people would not respect him. A person with too much self-respect might not be respected but his ideas should still be respected according to a participant. It is reasonable to assume that this notion of too much self-respect is actually about a person having too much self-esteem.

When asked about respect relationships with the boss at a workplace there was a strong sense of mutual respect needed. If the boss did not respect his employees that would result in them losing respect for their boss and would impact on work performance. Respect was not seen as necessary for following directions from a boss however. There was an idea present that one could lack respect towards a person but still respect their ideas. In a work setting this was exemplified by how a

person's boss might not respect the person, but he respects this person's ideas and is open for them. However if the boss has too much self-respect (or self-esteem) and no respect for the person, he might steal that idea. A participant thought that the stealing of an idea did not necessarily mean that they did not respect the person. The participant was contradicted by another saying "I think you are getting confused between perhaps acknowledging that something is good and respecting that something is good". A participant thought that accreditation was important as that would keep the employees working and even work harder. This meant that the boss could gain economically in respecting the employees.

The participants thought that in a school setting, respect from teachers was very dependent on how a student behaved in class. If the student was disruptive, which in itself was a show of lack of respect, the teacher would not respect you.

There was a temporal element to their notion of respect, they thought of short term and long term respect. This fluid concept of respect was exemplified by a participant in a scenario where a kid was denied going to a theme park by his dad. This would lead to a loss of temporary respect, but the 'overall' respect would still be intact. A discussion about whether or not respect was lost followed. A participant said that following your dad's decision was respecting that decision and paying respect to your dad, so it did not involve a loss of respect. Loss of respect would have involved ignoring his decision. They thought that it would lead to a gain of respect to comply with the dad's decision because the dad would respect that the son did that. Another example concerned the school setting. If a student was sent to the principle it was seen as necessary to respect that decision and go to the principle or the person would just get in more trouble. A participant also mentioned that one could lose self-respect if one did not go because of feeling guilty, which again links to Middleton. Something that has not been raised much in the literature was highlighted in the focus group, that of "pretend respect". This was seen as necessary to do in some cases for personal gain. Pretend respect entailed acting in a way that communicated respect without actually feeling respect for the person. This was seen as a false respect, and creating a "conflict between internal and external respect".

Inside a person could be thinking of the other person in negative terms, but outwardly he would act like he has respect for the person. This fake respect involved showing things that make up respect and acting nice. Putting on fake respect was seen as good both for self-gain reasons as well as the unconditional, fundamental respect.

An initial answer to how concepts of respect relate to seniors in the community was “Respect them, they are elders”. However, many thought that elders were not respected, except for on that basic human respect level. A participant thought that a person could lose respect towards the elderly when the elderly did not show respect for them. This participant thought there was a decline in respect toward the elderly and considered that one of the reasons for this was because the elderly thought young people today are different from how they were when they were young. He thought the elderly should learn to appreciate that change instead of questioning youth. A participant shared an experience he had when riding his skateboard on the road outside a retirement home where the residents came out and complained. This is an example of lack of understanding between generations and once again emphasises a need for greater intergenerational respect from both sides.

Conclusion

Ageism and the lack of respect towards the elderly impacts greatly on their self-perception, health and interactions with other generations. Promoting respect and self-respect in personal relationships as well as between generations can therefore have many positive effects. Respect and self-respect are complex terms and having established that respect is important there is still more research needed to understand the ways in which respect or the lack of respect informs decision making and behaviour.

Lack of respect in personal relationships has not been explored in this report. Further research into how elderly and family member’s relationships are constituted in terms of respect is needed.

The focus group contributed to a better understanding of how younger people perceive respect.

The Circle of Respect should be further developed to be used as a social education tool to reduce

ageism and promote self respect in individuals and healthy respectful relationships between persons as well as between generations.

Sources

- Angus, Jocelyn and Reeve, Patricia 2006. "Ageism: a threat to "Aging Well" in the 21st Century", in *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 137-152
- Bodner, Ehud 2009. "On the origins of ageism among older and younger adults", *International Psychogeriatrics*, Vol. 21, No. 6, pp. 1003-1014
- Butler, R. N. 2009. "Combating ageism", *International Psychogeriatrics*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 211
- Circle of Respect USA campaign, <http://www.circleofrespect.org/> (Accessed 18/4/10)
- De Cremer, D. 2003. "Noneconomic Motives Predicting Cooperation in Public Good Dilemmas: The Effect of Received Respect on Contributions", *Social Justice Research*, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 367-377
- Horton, S., Baker, J., and Deakin, J. M. 2007. "Stereotypes of Aging: Their Effects on the Health of Seniors in North American Society", *Educational Gerontology*, Vol. 33, pp. 1021-1035
- Kite, M. E. and Wagner, L. S. 2002. "Attitudes toward Older Adults", in Todd D. Nelson (ed.), *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice against Older persons*, The MIT Press: Cambridge
- Lalljee, M., Laham, S. M, and Tam, T. 2007. "Unconditional Respect for Persons: A Social Psychological Analysis", *Gruppendynamik und Organisationsberatung*, Vol. 38, No. 4, pp. 451-464
- Lovell, M. 2006. "Caring for the elderly: Changing perceptions and attitudes", in *Journal of Vascular Nursing*, Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 22-26
- McCabe, M., Mellor, D., McNamara, J., and Hill, B. 2010. "Respect in an Ageing Society", Deakin University/Benetas
<http://www.benetas.com.au/Portals/0/Respect%20in%20an%20Ageing%20Society%20ful%20report.pdf> Retrieved 19/3/2010
- Middleton, D. 2006. "Three types of self-respect", *Res Publica*, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 59-76
- Nerenberg, L. 2008. *Elder Abuse Prevention - Emerging Trends and Promising Strategies*, Springer Publishing Company: New York
- Ng, S. H. 2002. "Will families support their elders? Answers from across cultures", in Todd D. Nelson (ed.), *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice against Older persons*, The MIT Press: Cambridge
- NSW MACA 2007. "Entitled to Respect: a discussion paper on community attitudes to older people", New South Wales Ministerial Advisory Committee, pp. 1-23
- Pasupathi, M. and Lockenhoff, C. E. 2002. "Ageist Behaviour", in Todd D. Nelson (ed.), *Ageism:*

Stereotyping and Prejudice against Older persons, The MIT Press: Cambridge

Rosic, K. 2010. "Mutual Respect", unpublished

Respect for Seniors Campaign, 2010. http://www.respectforseniors.org/index_actual.php?p=
Accessed 26/05/10

Sachs, D. 1981. "How to Distinguish Self-Respect from Self-Esteem", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 346-360

Sung, K. 2004. "Elder respect among young adults: A cross-cultural study of Americans and Koreans", in *Journal of Aging Studies*, Vol. 18, pp. 215-230