The theory of stereotype embodiment proposes that the lifetime exposure to cultural messages of ageism leads to an internalization of the ageist construct (Levy, 2009). Once internalized, the construct becomes part of an implicit, subconscious set of beliefs about old age and older people. When the individual ages to the point where the internalized stereotypes are self-relevant, they become part of the self-perception that triggers behaviors and physiological responses that fulfill the self-concept of being “old.”

The theory states that people are more susceptible to the inculcation of the ageist paradigm because, unlike other discriminatory constructs like racism and sexism, the individual is indoctrinated to the belief system at a time when it is not self-relevant (Levy, 2003). Children as young as six years old have been shown to hold ageist attitudes (Isaacs & Bearison, 1986). Because people are exposed to the ageist paradigm before it relates to their own experience, it is more likely that ageist concepts will be internalized as part of the codified expectation of normal human development throughout the lifespan. For example, the first time a child receives the message that all old people are hard of hearing, it is a concept. The thousandth time the child receives this message, it is a belief. By the time the child is an older adult, rather than being understood as part of a disease process, elevated hearing loss is an accepted fact of aging.

Stereotype embodiment theory differs from the stereotype threat theory in that it proposes the presence of a consistent, internal process that operates in all conditions (Levy, 2009). Stereotype threat has been shown to exist under specific circumstances, such as when the individual is aware that evaluators expect stereotype fulfillment. Thus, issues of stereotype threat can be resolved by altering the circumstances where it is likely to occur. Stereotype embodiment theory proposes that a much more fundamental and less mutable process occurs when ageism is internalized. In addition, stereotype embodiment is triggered by implicit messages that operate outside of conscious awareness (aka, implicit ageism). Thus, the person experiencing embodied ageism has no awareness of, or defense against, its presence.

Further Reading

Stereotype Threat

Implicit Ageism

Embodied Ageism

Embodiment Theory, Nancy Krieger

Works Cited

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