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ARTICLES

## The Productive Aging Concept and Social Work Students' Perceptions Toward an Older Population

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### ABSTRACT

Social work curriculum that offers an optimistic perspective on aging has the potential to help social work students go on to practice in a nondiscriminatory way with older adults. This study introduces social work students to the productive aging concept, an optimistic view to social potential in later life, in lecture format and assesses postlecture changes in their perceptions of older adults. Seventy-two students (16 BSW; 56 MSW) were recruited from a large university in the southeast United States to participate in a lecture on productive aging. A one-group pretest–posttest design was used, and a paired samples *t* test ( $n = 72$ ) was used to analyze changes in social work students' perceptions toward older adults. Negative attitudes toward older adults decreased and positive attitudes toward older adults increased among students following their participation in the lecture on productive aging. This finding suggests the productive aging concept may favorably influence student perceptions of older adults. Future research should aim to investigate ways in which these changes in perception at the college level can translate and self-sustain in social work practice for social work students postgraduation.

### KEYWORDS

Ageism; attitudes; older adults; productive aging; social work education

### Introduction

A social work curriculum focusing on an optimistic perspective of aging is a feasible approach for modifying negative attitudes toward older adults that social work students may have. Social work curriculum with a gerontological focus has the potential to increase the number of competent social work practitioners willing and capable of offering optimal care to older adults (Gutheil, Heyman, & Chernesky, 2009; Lee & Waites, 2006). Social work academicians are encouraged to infuse gerontological concepts with social work curriculum (Martin, Kosberg, Sun, & Durkin, 2012; Tompkins, Larkin, & Rosen, 2006). However, the literature lacks suggested social work curriculum that infuses positive gerontology for use among social work academicians, and this area needs further development.

Productive aging emphasizes the productivity of older adults including but not limited to all daily activities of older adults such as paid work, volunteering, caregiving, and other activities that enhance families and communities (Baker, Cahalin, Gerst, & Burr,

2005; Hinterlong, Morrow-Howell, & Rozario, 2007; Jung, Gruenewald, Seeman, & Sarkisian, 2010). However, there is no previous study about the influence of the concept on social work education. Thus, this study aims to explore the emergence and vitality of the productive aging concept in social work education by applying a one-group pretest–posttest design with a lecture on the concept in BSW and MSW courses.

### Literature Review

Older adults over the age of 65 account for 15% of the total population in the United States (Population Reference Bureau, 2016). Recent projections suggest individuals over the age of 65 will account for 20% of the total U.S. population by 2030 (McLaughlin, Connell, Heeringa, Li, & Roberts, 2009). Existing literature suggests that younger generations in the United States often have pronounced misconceptions and stereotypes about older adults and lack knowledge about the aging population (Cummings, 2008; Foos, Clark, & Terrell, 2006; Gellis, Sherman, & Lawrance, 2003; Kimuna, Knox, & Zusman, 2005). Among the younger

generations, American college students hold perceptions toward older populations that are relatively negative (Cummings, 2008; Gellis et al., 2003; Kimuna et al., 2005). Examples of misconceptions and stereotypes about older populations in the literature are that older adults are greedy, stubborn, useless, and slow in physical and mental reaction (Gellis et al., 2003). Those negative misconceptions and stereotypes can lead to younger generations developing attitudes associated with ageism (Butler, 1985; Nelson, 2005). A growing concern is that ageism among young adults may adversely affect the way in which social workers offer social services to the aging population. Furthermore, social work students may avoid working with the aging population due to the negative influence of ageism or may provide suboptimal care (Gutheil et al., 2009; Koh, 2012).

Education is crucial in terms of changing students' perceptions toward older populations (Tompkins et al., 2006). Scant studies have aging content across curricula to modify students' attitudes toward older adults (Carmel, Cwikel, & Galinsk, 1992; Lee & Waites, 2006). However, there is not much literature on educational efforts to relieve negative ageism among social work students through applying an optimistic perspective on aging (Koh, 2012).

Productive aging is a gerontological concept, largely influenced by Richard Butler (1985), that offers an optimistic and positive perspective of aging (Fernandez-Ballesteros, 2011). In contrast to negative perceptions of older adults as dependent and unproductive members of society, the concept of productive aging argues older adults are productive and make valuable contributions to society (Baker et al., 2005) and that family, community, and society all benefit from the contributions of older adults (Jung et al., 2010). Elements present in the productive aging concept have the potential to change how society regards the aging population (Johnson & Mutchler, 2014; Rudman & Molke, 2009). For example, the growing number of older adults in the overall population has raised fears about costs and social policies to support older adults—falsely perceived as societal dependents (Carr, 2009). The concept of productive aging counters the dependent perception and emphasizes the capacities of older adults to actively participate in and enhance social and economic aspects of society (Bass & Caro, 2001; Jung et al., 2010).

The purpose of this study is to (a) introduce social work students to the concept of productive aging (a more positive view than often seen), and (b) learn whether students' views of older adults are more positive after hearing a lecture on the concept. Hence, this study hypothesized introducing the productive aging concept to social work students would lead to positive change in attitudes and stereotypes toward older adults. This study uses the theoretical framework of Cuddy and Fiske (2002), which provides a basis for categorization and stereotype formation related to ageism. Their framework consists of systematic content of stereotypes of older adults that explain social and psychological underpinnings of stereotyping processes. In addition, ageism in this study includes three domains: prejudice (affective), discrimination (behavioral), and stereotyping (cognitive). Of the three domains, stereotypes and images of older adults can be divided into three subtypes: (a) *grandmotherly*, who is considered helpful, kind, serene, and trustworthy, (b) *elder statesman*, who is described as intelligent, competitive, aggressive, and intolerant, and (c) *senior citizen*, who is regarded as lonely, old-fashioned, weak, and worried (Brewer, Dull, & Lui, 1981).

## Methods

A convenience sample of four courses, and respective instructors, were recruited for participation from a School of Social Work at a large research-intensive university in the southeast United States: three MSW Social Welfare Policy courses and one BSW Service Learning in Social Work course. A total of 72 students (16 BSW students and 56 MSW students) participated in the study (Table 1). Participants were largely female MSW students. The majority had never taken a course on the aging population and three fourths had never lived with an older adult. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants provided informed signed consent. The procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The University of Georgia.

## Instrument/Materials

To determine changes in attitudes toward older adults, students completed a 14-item, 5-point Likert scale (i.e., 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) revised from a 17-item scale of Henderson, Xiao, Siegloff, Kelton, and Paterson (2008) initially designed to

**Table 1.** Demographics ( $N = 72$ ).

Selected background variable		Frequency (%)
Mean age, years ( <i>SD</i> )		25.18 (6.87)
Gender	Female	62 (86)
	Male	10 (14)
Degree currently seeking	MSW	56 (78)
	BSW	16 (22)
Experiences taking a class about an aging population	Yes	10 (14)
	No	62 (86)
Experiences in having lived with an older adult	Yes	18 (25)
	No	54 (75)
Experiences in having worked with an older adult	Yes	51 (71)
	No	21 (29)

*SD* = standard deviation.

assess students' attitudes toward older adults. The 17-item instrument specifically measures positive and negative perceptions of older adults. Items 1–8 consist of positive perceptions toward older adults, and items 9–17 consist of negative perceptions toward older adults. Students completed the instrument 10 minutes prior to participation in the lecture on productive aging (pretest) and completed the instrument again 10 minutes after the lecture (posttest). The response rate was 100%.

The 17-item scale of Henderson et al. (2008) was initially designed for use with nursing students. Before using this scale in the current study, investigators tested the instrument's psychometric properties (i.e., reliability and validity) for use with social work students using a convenience sample of 86 BSW and MSW students. Cronbach's alpha for the 17-item scale was 0.58 among social work students. To increase Cronbach's alpha, three items were deleted from the 17-item scale according to the psychometric analysis. The deletion of three items ("elderly people receive priority in care," "elderly people have care and concern for other people," and "elderly people are generally forgotten by their families") increased the Cronbach's alpha to 0.77, demonstrating good reliability for use among social work students. The final version of the scale for this study consisted of a 14-item scale with items 1–6 measuring positive perceptions toward older adults and items 7–14 measuring negative perceptions toward older adults. The final version of the scale was administered to the sample of study participants in the four classes.

In this study's sample of social work students, Cronbach's alpha for the 14-item scale was 0.83. Cronbach's alpha for the positive perception items (items 1–6) was 0.64 and Cronbach's alpha for the negative perception items (items 7–14) was 0.82.

**Table 2.** Scale items about perceptions of older adults (revised from Henderson et al., 2008.)

Items	Perceptions toward older adults	Stereotype's subtypes
	(Positive perceptions)	
1	Elderly people are respected for their wisdom.	Grandmotherly
2	Most elderly people are capable of living independently.	Elder statesman
3	Elderly people pass on valued traditions.	Grandmotherly
4	Elderly people participate in a wide variety of activities.	Elder statesman
5	Elderly people are a good source of knowledge.	Grandmotherly
6	I would be comfortable in a job working with an elderly person.	Elder statesman
	(Negative Perceptions)	
7	Elderly people are out of touch with the times.	Senior citizen
8	Elderly people are critical of young people.	Senior citizen
9	Elderly people live too much in the past.	Senior citizen
10	Elderly people are best accommodated in retirement homes/villages/communities.	Senior citizen
11	Elderly people are difficult to talk to.	Elder statesman
12	Elderly people are resistant to change.	Elder statesman
13	Elderly people are happiest only with their peers.	Senior citizen
14	Elderly people are uninteresting to associate with.	Elder statesman

Cronbach's alpha for all 14 items was 0.83. The theoretical concept of the scale consists of three stereotypes—grandmotherly, elder statesman, and senior citizen—including positive and negative stereotypes toward older adults (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002). Table 2 shows the 14-item scale and the corresponding stereotypes measured using the theoretical framework of Cuddy and Fiske (2002).

### Procedure

The intervention consisted of a 45-minute Power Point lecture on productive aging delivered October 2012 by two social work instructors familiar with the productive aging concept. The lecture covered ageism, optimistic perspectives of aging, distinct characteristics of the productive aging concept and its potential to help older adults within society, and finally critiques of the concept. Instructors were given guidelines to follow, and uniformity was maintained through the use of the same materials in all four lectures. To avoid the appearance of coercion, instructors switched their classes to prevent participants from feeling

uncomfortable during the lecture and completion of the survey.

### Data Analysis

The main analysis employed paired samples *t* test. For investigating effect sizes, the study used Cohen's *d* statistic calculated by the pooled mean divided by the standard deviation for independent samples *t* test (Macgowan & Vakharia, 2012). Statistical data were analyzed using SPSS 17.0.

## Results

### Pretest and Posttest Differences on Positive and Negative Perceptions of Older Adults

Following the lecture on productive aging, there were statistically significant differences in the students' overall perceptions of older adults comparing mean pretest and posttest perceptions ( $t = -5.094, p < .001$ ; Table 3). The students' positive perceptions increased ( $t = -3.481, p < .01$ ) and their negative perceptions decreased ( $t = -5.099, p < .001$ ) after listening to the lecture on productive aging. The estimates of Cohen's *d* effect size showed medium effects ( $0.406 < d < 0.530$ ,  $M(d) \approx 0.5$ ), and power was adequate in total perceptions considering the medium effect size of Cohen's *d* ( $d = 0.5$ ).

### Changes in Perceptions of Older Adults by Domain

A stratified analysis of Cuddy and Fiske's (2002) domains (i.e., grandmotherly, elder statesman, and senior citizen) revealed the lecture significantly influenced the students' rating on 10 of 14 items on the scale, and estimates of Cohen's *d* demonstrated a relatively small effect size ( $0.081 < d < 0.432$ ,  $M(d) \approx$

0.311; Table 4). In the grandmotherly domain, one of three perceptions (item 1) of older adults was statistically significant between pretest and posttest. There were statistically significant differences in five of six elder statesman domains (items 2, 4, 11, 12, and 14). Two of three positive perceptions of older adults in the elder statesman domain were increased (items 2 and 4), and all of the negative perceptions of older adults in the elder statesman domain were reduced (items 11, 12, and 14). Of the five perceptions related to senior citizen, there were statistically significant differences on four of five items (items 8, 9, 10, and 13).

## Discussion

This study introduced the productive aging concept in lecture format to 72 social work students and assessed changes in their perceptions of older adults. The productive aging concept was briefly incorporated into a social work course in an effort to break down attitudinal and prejudicial perceptions of older adults held by social work students. A one-group pretest–posttest design was employed; groups were compared using the paired sample *t* test; and Cohen's *d* was used to estimate the effect size.

The main finding that emerged from this study was that students' positive perceptions of older adults increased and negative perceptions of older adults decreased following the lecture on productive aging. Students likely relinquished negative attitudes of older adults as they began to reorganize their own perceptions of aging around an optimistic perspective of aging associated with the productive aging concept. This is presumable because productive aging counters stereotypical ideas of older adults as being dependent, declining, and unproductive members of society and

**Table 3.** Pretest and posttest results on perceptions about older adults ( $N = 72$ ).

Item number	Pretest <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) ( $n_1 = 72$ )	Posttest <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) ( $n_2 = 72$ )	Paired mean difference ( <i>SD</i> ) [95% CI]	<i>t</i> statistic, effect size
		(Positive perceptions)		
1–6	22.67 (3.306)	23.93 (2.865)	–1.264 (3.081) [–1.988, –.540]	$t(71) = -3.481^{**}$ $d = 0.407$
		(Negative perceptions, reverse coded)		
7–14	28.17 (4.708)	30.37 (4.243)	–2.306 (3.837) [–3.207, –1.404]	$t(71) = -5.099^{***}$ $d = 0.491$
		(All perceptions)		
1–14	50.83 (7.111)	54.40 (6.375)	–3.569 (5.945) [–4.967, –2.172]	$t(71) = -5.094^{***}$ $d = 0.529$

Note. CI = confidential interval [lower limit, upper limit]; effect size = Cohen's *d*; *SD* = standard deviation; *t* tests are two-tailed.  
\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 4.** Pretest and posttest results on the Cuddy and Fiske (2002) elderly subtypes ( $N = 72$ ).

Item number	Pretest $M$ ( $SD$ ) ( $n_1 = 72$ )	Posttest $M$ ( $SD$ ) ( $n_2 = 72$ )	Paired mean difference ( $SD$ ) [95% CI]	$t$ statistic, effect size
			(Grandmotherly)	
1	3.60 (.883)	3.92 (.765)	-.319 (.947) [-.542, -.097]	$t(71) = -2.863^{**}$ $d = 0.387$
3	3.96 (.971)	4.06 (.854)	-0.097 (0.858) [-.299, .104]	$t(71) = -0.961$ $d = 0.109$
5	4.31 (.781)	4.25 (.687)	0.056 (0.748) [-.120, .231]	$t(71) = 0.630$ $d = 0.082$
			(Elder statesman)	
2	3.49 (.839)	3.81 (.744)	-.319 (1.019) [-.559, -.080]	$t(71) = -2.661^*$ $d = 0.404$
4	3.32 (.962)	3.72 (.892)	-.403 (1.002) [-.638, -.167]	$t(71) = -3.410^{**}$ $d = 0.431$
6	4.00 (1.082)	4.24 (.765)	-.239 (1.101) [-.500, .021]	$t(71) = -1.832$ $d = 0.256$
11	3.86 (.924)	4.22 (.755)	-.361 (.997) [-.595, -.127]	$t(71) = -3.073^{**}$ $d = 0.427$
12	2.92 (2.004)	3.25 (.931)	-.333 (1.138) [-.601, -.066]	$t(71) = -2.845^*$ $d = 0.211$
14	4.31 (.664)	4.50 (.671)	-.194 (.762) [-.374, -.015]	$t(71) = -2.164^*$ $d = 0.285$
			(Senior citizen)	
7	3.21 (.934)	3.39 (.865)	-.181 (.877) [-.387, .026]	$t(71) = -1.746$ $d = 0.200$
8	2.82 (.909)	3.13 (.887)	-.306 (.929) [-.524, -.087]	$t(71) = -2.791^{**}$ $d = 0.345$
9	3.47 (.919)	3.78 (.755)	-.306 (1.057) [-.554, -.057]	$t(71) = -2.454^*$ $d = 0.369$
10	3.69 (.998)	4.11 (.779)	-.417 (.975) [-.646, -.188]	$t(71) = -3.626^{**}$ $d = 0.470$
13	3.89 (.728)	4.15 (.669)	-.268 (.910) [-.483, -.052]	$t(71) = -2.479^*$ $d = 0.372$

Note. CI = confidential interval [lower limit, upper limit]; effect size = Cohen's  $d$  (N/A means homogeneity of variance was not assumed);  $SD$  = standard deviation;  $t$  tests are two-tailed.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

reframes aging by offering insight on how older adults make contributions to the community and society even while aging (Rogers et al., 2011).

When the concept of productive aging is incorporated into social work curricula, productive aging has the potential to reverse negative attitudes toward older adults that are likely held by social work students. A focus on competencies of older adults rather than their limitations has the potential to result in newly acquired attitudes toward older adults, and these newly acquired attitudes might affect how social workers regard and interact with older adults in gerontological social work practice. Because of exposure to this optimistic concept toward aging, social workers can be free from age-based discriminatory practices and extend social work practice from focusing on frailty and dependence to promoting the social abilities of older clients (Choi & Dinse, 1998; O'Reilly & Caro, 1994).

This study had a few noteworthy strengths. Considering the scale was initially designed for use with

nursing students (Henderson et al., 2008), the investigators tested psychometric properties of the scale for use among social work students and removed items to enhance psychometric properties for use with the study sample. As such, it is likely the scale reliably measured social work students' attitudes toward older adults. The lectures were systematic and uniformly designed by the investigators and were delivered by academicians who were familiar with the productive aging concept and held graduate certificates in gerontology pedagogy.

However, there were a few study limitations that lessened generalizability of the findings. This pilot study had a relatively small sample size ( $n = 72$ ), and the sample was limited to only one study site or school of social work program in the southeastern area of the United States. The sample was predominantly female (86%) and most were MSW students (78%). In addition, this study provided only one lecture and there was no evaluation of which of the topics discussed in the lecture affected the students' perception toward

aging the most and to what degree. There were also the challenges of internal validity because of the respondents' own experiences with older adults.

The findings of this pilot study can feed into future efforts. This study examined immediate or short-term changes, whereas future studies should examine long-term or sustainable changes on student attitudes throughout the course of a semester or academic year. A mixed methods exploration would be useful in determining specific ways in which the productive aging concept changes students' perceptions and how their perceptions influence practice interactions with older clients in social work practice.

## Conclusions

There is a growing need for social work academicians to make social work students aware of their inherent stereotypical attitudes toward older adults. To that end, productive aging is an applied concept fit for use and practical application in social work curriculum. This study is significant in that the concept of productive aging was incorporated into social work education during a preparatory stage to break down attitudinal barriers toward older adults. Implications for integration of gerontological concepts, such as productive aging, are directed toward social work education and practice to encourage offering courses that enhance the positive aspects of aging to help prepare social work students to assist older clients in sustainable independence and engagement in society.

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