Age Schemas and Their Contribution to Age Identity in The Elderly

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Abstract

This research studied the content of age schemas and different ways schematic and aschematic individuals identify with age group and themselves. It was documented, that age-schematic individuals believe, that the age influences their physical health, plans for the future and overall attitude to life. Age-schematic individuals experience themselves to be older and less satisfied by the age, than aschematic ones. Comparing the way schematic and aschematic respondents characterize age-group and themselves, it was revealed that the former consider the age group less attractive, identify themselves with a role «the Elderly person» more strongly and characterize themselves using old age negative stereotypes, the latter, on the contrary, demonstrate positive attitude to their age group and themselves.

1. Introduction

Theoretical and empirical research on schema is one of the most active areas in contemporary psychology. It has been the focus of considerable studies during the second half of the XX-th century (Brewer & Nakamura, 1984; Mandler, 1984; Pace, 1998; Pennington, 2000; Rumelhart, 1980). Brewer and Nakamura (1984) explained schemas as "the unconscious mental structures and processes that underlie the molar aspects of human knowledge and skill" (p. 42). The previous studies prove that schemas represented the previous experience and store it in memory (Rumelhart, 1980). Schemas guide the proseccing information about concepts, people, events and the self and reflect cultural, individual and situational differences in their understanding (Mandler, 1984). They include norms,

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hypothesis and expectations about people or events and form the image of future. Schemas function as interpretive frameworks and thereby influence evaluations, judgments and inferences on the social world and serve for the adaptation (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Schemas are the basis of self-defining, social behavior, understanding people and self and solving problems. Schema theory is widely used in psychotherapy thanks to schemas ability to contain information problems and destructions (Pace, 1998). Schemas are determined by sociocultural factors and display on the individual level constructing link between culture and person. Schemas containing knowledge about self are termed self-schemas. Markus (1977) defined self-schemas as "cognitive generalizations about the self, derived from past experience, that organize and guide the processing of self-related information contained in the individual's social experience" (p. 64). Self-schemas reflect self-concept and include the attributes that are important and self-defining for the personality himself. Self-schemas provide implicit personality theories that can be used to understand one's own or others' behaviors. They are the patterns for self-defining and identifying themselves (Rodin, Schooler & Schaie, 1990). The existing researches on self-schemas investigate personal attributes: weight, sexuality, independence, depression, among them age. Age-schemas has been investigated since the middle of the 1990-th. Mueller, Wonderlich and Dugan (1986), were among those who awoke interest to this problem. Analyzing self-descriptions of respondents from different age-groups, they revealed that the respondents used the age-related traits. It was found out that the older the respondent was the more age-related traits he used in his self-description. The authors defined this phenomenon as age schemas. Among the researchers focused on the investigating age schemas is Montepare who defined them as personal constructions containing the age-related information about the self (Montepare, 1996; 2001). The results of her studied documented that age schemas operate like other schemas and guide the processing of information about the self. The main goal of this study is to investigate age schemas and their contribution to age identity. We wanted to investigate the content of age schemas and their relation with age awareness. We wanted to find out the difference in the ways schematic and aschematic individuals identify with age group and themselves.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample was formed by 60 elder persons (older people), among of them 21 men and 39 women, aged between 55 and 69 years (*M =58.3 sd = 3.4).* All participants are independent, reside in big industry city, Russian. Most of them live in their flats with family or alone and have relatives. Most of them work or have part-time employment.

2.2. Procedure

The study is conducted in two separate phases separated by two weeks. In the first phase the participants responded the questions demonstrating the influence of age on different aspects of their life and themselves including self-esteem, appearance, physical condition, professional activity, communication with colleagues, friends and relatives, relations with sex partners, plans for the future and overall attitude to life. They were also asked about age they felt themselves and the extended of satisfaction with their age. In addition the participants were asked to name the important typical traits characterizing elder individuals and the important typical traits of person. On the base of the respondents answers the list was formed that included both age-related traits and not. In the second phase this list was suggested to participants. They were asked to evaluate the degree the traits mentioned in the list corresponded to the typical elder person and to themselves.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1 Age Schematicity and Subjective Age Measure

10 age schema scales were used to measure the content of age schemas and the level of age schematicity. The scales were used in existing researches () and were supplemented and designed for the present study. They measured the influence of age on different life aspects including self-esteem, appearance, physical condition, professional