

Study compares traditional and modern views of aging

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Participants from traditional and modern societies were asked to point at an older (right) or younger face in response to a set of questions intended to gauge perceptions about aging. The older and younger faces were of the same person, with the younger face digitally altered to appear older.

A new study tests the idea that traditional societies see aging in a more positive light than modern societies, a presumption supported by anecdotes and personal narratives but lacking systematic cross-cultural research.

In a study designed to measure aging perceptions, published last month in the *Journals of Gerontology: Psychological Science*, the researchers found that Tsimané Amazonian forager-farmers viewed old people as having better memories than young people, while people in Poland and the United States viewed the young as having better memories.

In other variables, the researchers found more consensus across the different groups. For example, all three societies perceived [older people](#) as being more respected and generally wiser about life issues than younger people.

"There have been anecdotal reports and theoretical reasoning that people in traditional societies look at aging more favorably," said Corinna Löckenhoff, associate professor of human development in the College of Human Ecology and associate professor of gerontology in medicine at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York City. However, this is the first study of aging perceptions to gather quantitative data and to use the same questions across modern and traditional societies, Löckenhoff said.

Löckenhoff is co-author of the paper with Piotr Sorokowski, Tomasz Frackowiak and Agnieszka Sorokowska, all at the University of Wroclaw, Poland. While the Polish group did all the fieldwork and collected data, Löckenhoff provided the theoretical underpinnings and study-design considerations.

In the study, the researchers showed participants a photo of a young person and a photo of the same person that had been digitally altered to make him or her look older. Participants were then asked a series of questions to assess their attitudes toward aging. These questions tested such perceptions of aging as respect received (whose opinion is more respected?); wisdom; life satisfaction (who is more satisfied with their life?); memory (who is more forgetful?); and new learning. In response, participants were asked to point at the older or younger face.

They found that across the different societies there was consensus that older people are more respected and perceived as wiser than younger people, and that in general, participants perceived aging as more detrimental to women than men, Löckenhoff said. But Tsimane' participants differed from their industrial counterparts in perceptions of memory. While the participants from industrialized nations held negative beliefs of aging and memory, the Tsimane' people felt the elderly had better memories.

"There are reasons to think that traditional societies would have more positive beliefs about aging and memory," Löckenhoff said. Modern societies no longer rely on oral traditions where older people serve as repositories of culture and knowledge, she said, whereas traditional societies still value experience-based knowledge.

The findings are important for traditional societies to ensure their attitudes toward older adults do not suffer as they increasingly modernize, Löckenhoff said. And for modern societies, the findings shed light on how culture and context can have an influence on the way that aging is seen and that in turn can affect how people [age](#), she said.

For example, there is evidence that stereotypes about aging affect older people. This phenomenon is known as stereotype threat, where negative stereotypes about certain groups – such as the notion that the elderly have poor memories – can affect performance. "Older people could be doing better if they were not pulled down by [stereotype threat](#)," Löckenhoff noted.

Next steps in this research will be to test if older people's memories are actually working better in the Tsimané culture and if other traditional societies show similar patterns, she added.

More information: Piotr Sorokowski et al. "Aging Perceptions in Tsimane' Amazonian Forager–Farmers Compared With Two Industrialized Societies," *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* (2015). DOI: [10.1093/geronb/gbv080](https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbv080)

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