Book Review

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Communication for Successful Aging: Empowering Individuals Across the Lifespan by Howard Giles, Jessica Gasiorek, Shardé M. Davis, and Jane Giles is characteristic of the field *Anthropology & Aging* seeks to cover. The authors are primarily communication scholars, and the volume, a newly revised version published in November 2021, seeks to map the communicative context within which people age and how that context shapes the possibilities for successful aging. Amidst a backdrop of aging demography and a brief history of theoretical approaches to aging, the authors here present how communication, as a discipline, complements biological/physiological, psychological, and sociocultural approaches to understanding aging. As they set out in the introductory chapter (Chapter 1), the authors propose a communication-centric approach that analyzes aging as an interactive process that is both influenced by and influences communication.

The first body chapter (Chapter 2) turns the reader's attention to ageism and age stereotypes in communication, outlining a discursive foundation to approach topics in subsequent chapters. Ageism—the attribution of differences in age as meaningful and enactment upon that attribution—is here described across scale, from sayings such as "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" to clinical decision making influenced by a patient's age or diminished professional opportunities as one ages. The authors walk through the research on the ways that ageist ascriptions can consolidate into stereotypes that may affect communication, social relationships, and personal identity. Stereotypes, as they describe them drawing from psychological theories, are used to evaluate people, especially unknown persons, along two dimensions: warmth, or a person's temperament, and competence. These dimensions map onto two questions that people are looking to answer about people: What are this person's intentions, and what is this person capable of doing? Particular to communication, the authors detail the consequences of stereotyping on perceptions of a person's communicative abilities and interpretation of their communication. Across these discussions, the authors are careful to remind the reader that ageism and age stereotypes happen across the life span. In one example, for instance, of an automobile accident, the authors contrast questions for a 22-year-old, focused on speeding or drinking, with those for a 72-year-old, focused on cognitive competence. Finally, while the majority of the discussion centers on the negative and the deleterious effects of ageism and age stereotypes, the authors also look to present both as value neutral, discussing, for example, financial incentives that are triggered at a certain age.

Building on insights from the previous chapter to focus on the ways that a person's self is shaped by their age and how they and others perceive that age, Chapter 3 introduces the concept of an age identity, or an identity based upon a person's understanding of themselves as part of a social group defined by

age. The discussion draws upon social identity theory to describe how people feel a part of a group in contrast to other groups and that they seek to maintain a positive conceptualization of the groups with which they feel affinity. In communicative interactions, participants often draw upon their understandings of social groups to make inferences about their interlocutor rather than the person's individual characteristics, a tendency here described as a "communicative predicament model of aging" (46). The authors stress that people have multiple intersecting identities that influence each other and that become salient in different ways at different points. Race, class, and gender, to name but a few social identities, impact the way a person experiences their movement through the life course and the identity they take on as a result of those experiences. Those who have been systematically disadvantaged often bear the greatest negative impact of age identification. Of note, the authors also point to one's age identity as often different from many other possible identities because people move through different—and differently understood—age groups across their life course. The discussion brings to mind the large body of sociological and anthropological work on generations, age cohorts and mates, and different conceptualizations of the life course and how one progresses through it (e.g., Bledsoe 2002, Kaufman 1986, Lamb 2000, Mannheim 1952, Neugarten 1996). A communication-centric approach directs attention to how such identities become salient and their meanings negotiated through conversation and other communications, such as birthday cards (and, by extension, the birthday industry writ large) with tropes of Over the Hill and the like. The authors acknowledge that such messaging is often offered in jest but is based upon ageist imagery and that the impact on identification of this messaging is pervasive and accumulates.

Chapter 4 tightens the lens around age identities to center on "The Ingredients of Intergenerational Communication." It begins from the understanding that many Western societies are age-segregated and that segregation shapes the way that people understand and communicate across generations. The authors draw upon communication accommodation theory—the notion that people adjust their communication in different social contexts—to account for potential mismatches in communication, and herein acknowledge both over- and underaccommodation While noting overaccommodation occurs in both directions across generations, they describe younger people overaccommodating when speaking to older adults—think of people talking with exaggerated volume or slowness to older adults—and identify elderspeak as an especially damaging form of overaccommodation. They find underaccommodation primarily in instances where older adults overshare, focusing on what they term "painful self disclosures" of highly personal information often around health, loss, and isolation (63). The authors argue that in the face of these disclosures, the younger person can tend to understand the older person in particularly negative ways, harking back to the discussion of agist stereotyping in Chapter 2. After detailing these differences in communication tendencies, the authors discuss similarities across generations and reinforce the importance of listening with care.

In Chapter 5, "The Media, Agism, and Anti-Aging," the authors once again widen the lens to consider how broader discourses around aging impact people across the life course. They draw on one study examining colocations in a large online corpus that identified the words "infirmed," "handicapped," "disabled," "sick," and "poor" as those most often occurring with "elderly." Elsewhere in the chapter, they discuss the rise of marketing life course niches (e.g., tweens); and the lack of media representations of older adults, especially older persons of color. When older adults *are* represented in the media, these representations most often are negative: ageist jokes toward characters, self-deprecating older adults, the burden of the "silver tsunami," and anti-aging marketing. The few positive representations disproportionally account for the exceptional—the marathon-running super ager, for example, often reinscribing the very tropes they ostensibly look to subvert. In the final section of the chapter, the authors look to complicate our understanding of media's effect on older adults, discussing research that situates older adults' media consumption in their broader social contexts. How does the quality of older

adults' social circles impact what kinds of representations resonate with them? What about people for whom the predominantly white, middle to upper class, cisgender, heterosexual presentations are not representative? How do they experience media coverage of 'aging'?

Turning the lens back to interpersonal interactions, Chapter 6 examines the topic of end-of-life communication, notably among family members. The chapter begins from the notion that, in the US especially, people often are uncomfortable with death and this discomfort limits meaningful discussion of death and dying. While people encounter a great volume of fictional death in the media, those deaths are often devoid of context or emotional depth, and real conversations on dying are rare. Briefly acknowledging less uncomfortable engagements with death in other geographic regions, the authors advocate for "communication *about* and *at* the end of life, which is an important element in successful aging" (92). They mention communication research with cancer patients, who were found to want qualitative and not quantitative information from medical providers about their prognosis. They also discuss the unwillingness of family members to discuss a person's illness and death. The authors embed people's discomfort in a communicative tendency to not discuss negative matters more broadly and argue that effective communicative strategies to discussing death are not avoidance or false positivity, but rather realistic hope and assurance. They also offer some guidelines, grounded in communication research, for having these conversations, but are quick to note that these strategies are not prescriptive and, once again, that listening is perhaps the most key communicative action a person can take.

In the final two chapters, the authors turn from a descriptive survey of multiple topics across communication and aging studies to focus on successful aging, centering what they view as critical for moving forward. Successful aging is here conceptualized as a communicatively engaged "embracing [of] one's age, taking advantage of opportunities, and building healthy relationships with friends and other loved ones in a way that fosters contentment with a person's current stage of life" (109). They stress that successful aging is subjective: it's about how one feels about aging rather than about a particular physical trajectory or set of checked boxes. To that end, they offer three age ideologies: motivated acceptance (to not just accept but strive to relish), studenthood (to never stop learning), and appreciation of the life course as an "interculturing process" (113), wherein people move through and across age cultures. Building on these ideologies, they detail communication strategies for striving to embrace and enact the ideologies they proffer. In the conclusion, they discuss what they feel is the importance of resilience, hope, and empowerment to successfully navigating and fully embodying the aging process.

The Giles et al. volume offers a solid introduction to several topics on aging (e.g., successful aging, ageism, life course and lifespan), and the focus on communication across multiple scales is a welcome one. The authors deftly situate a person and the process of aging within a matrix of different relationships that can influence or are influenced by communicative interactions. They illustrate the cumulative nature of communicative events, big or small, on people's understanding of aging and their own life course. While there is some attention given to non-US perspectives on aging, the volume is primarily focused on the US (and to some extent other Western nations) and, as such, offers a textual artifact of aging discourses within the US. It would be useful in an undergraduate class, especially if paired with other work such as Sarah Lamb's (2017) edited volume, *Successful Aging as a Contemporary Obsession.* Its inclusion of practical strategies also gears it to a popular audience, where it offers a necessary counterpoint to the very media images and conversations it details.

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