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Commentary on the Impact of Teacher Appearance and Age on Student AttitudesColin G. Pennington¹**ARTICLE INFORMATION**

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ABSTRACT

Early research in the psychological and social development of students has explored the effect of a teacher's appearance on physical education students' learning and perceptions of the teacher. Initial studies of this nature suggested that teachers' appearance, clothing, and fitness influenced students' perceptions of teachers' instructional ability. A series of studies suggests that physical education students bias 'against' older appearing teachers weakens from the elementary ages to high school. The purpose of this commentary is to review and summarize the literature relative to physical educators' age and appearance to provide considerations for sport pedagogists, K-12 educators, and health professionals while teaching students about the concept of age-related stereotypes and healthy aging. Research on perceptions of age and aging in general has indicated that a bias against older individuals is evident in very young students and becomes stronger as they age and enter adolescence. Furthermore, research has also indicated that students, adults, and youth often regard older individuals negatively. It is important to further assess how the reduction of age stereotypes among students influences the attitudes and behaviors of youth. Schools can play a significant role in influencing the perceptions children have of the elderly and the aging process. They have the resources and capabilities to integrate material on healthy aging into their curricula as well as to introduce students to older individuals, thus reinforcing the view of aging as a more positive experience.

Keywords: Aging, Appearance, Ageism, Teacher Effectiveness, Physical Education**Copyright:** © 2021 (Sturdivant) This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

A limited few scholars of sport pedagogy have explored the impact of a teacher's physical look on physical education students' acquisition of knowledge and perceptions of the teacher. Foundations research along this line of study suggested that teachers' physical look and choice of clothing impacted students' perceptions of educators' teaching quality. Nevertheless, only a fairly limited amount of research has investigated the influence appearance on physical education teachers' effectiveness. Therefore, the purpose of this commentary is to review and summarize the literature relative to teachers' age and appearance – with a particular focus on physical educators – to provide considerations for sport pedagogists, K-12 educators, and health professionals while teaching students about the concept of age-related stereotypes and healthy aging.

A thorough literature review was conducted using search terms related to age, student age-related stereotypes, and students' perceptions of healthy aging. Themes related to physical preferences age and biases were further categorized and used as logical headings to frame the outline of this commentary. Articles and references were included in the commentary if they fit the criteria of being conducted in reference to specifically “student” perceptions and attitudes. For the sake of comparison, some studies have been included in this review outside of physical education and sport pedagogy, but within the realm of ‘K-12 education’.

A History of Research on Teachers' Physical Appearance

Informed by a number of studies conducted in the 1970's that teachers' physical look and choice of clothing impacted students' perceptions of educators' teaching quality (Feshbach & Feshbach, 1972; Landers & Landers, 1973; Molloy, 1975; Chaikin, Gillen, & Derlega, 1978), a small few studies in sport pedagogy have sought to determine if a physical education (PE) teacher's apparent fitness level has any effect on student learning or an effect on students' perceptions of the teacher (Melville & Maddalozzo, 1988; Thomson, 1996; Dean, Adams, & Comeau, 2005). An exemplar study was carried out by Melville and Maddalozzo in 1988. The scholars showed one of two virtually identical video recordings of a physical educator demonstrating and discussing fitness topics to two randomly assigned classes of students in high school. The single difference between the two recordings was that in one videotape the teacher appeared “physically healthy slim and fit” while in the other videotape he appeared physically unhealthy and “out of shape” because he wore a prosthetic “fat suit.” After the student's viewing of either the “fit” or “fat” recording, the scholars determined the students' perceptions of the teacher's competence and the extent to which students learned the exercise and fitness-based topics demonstrated and discussed in the recordings. Resulting from this study and other studies of similar design, it has been suggested that a PE instructor's apparent fitness level does have an effect on student perception of teacher's competence and the extent to which students learned the exercise and fitness-based topics. It has been revealed that students view a physical educator as less effective and learned less from the teacher when the teacher is “out of shape” relative to a slimmer teacher (Melville & Maddalozzo, 1988; Dean et al, 2005; Thomson, 1996).

Guided by the rationale of former studies, Bryant and Curtner-Smith (2008) sought to examine the impact of a physical educator's physical disability on students' learning and perceptions of the instructor's competence. The researchers found that elementary students were positively influenced by a physical educator using a wheelchair, both learning more and not expressing disparaging perceptions of the wheelchair-using teacher regarding competence compared to students who were taught by an able-bodied teacher (Bryant & Curtner-Smith,

2008). However, when the study was conducted in a high school, students learned less from, and had lower perceptions of teacher competence, from the wheelchair-using teacher than the able-bodied teacher.

In a quasi-replication of the Melville and Maddalozzo studies (1988) and Bryant and Curtner-Smith (2008), Pennington and colleagues (2020abc) established that students as early as nine years old possess age-related stereotypes of physical educators whereby they learned more from, and held higher perceptions of a younger teacher compared to an older appearing teacher teaching the same lesson (Pennington, Curtner-Smith, & Wind, 2020a). Interestingly, when replicated using middle school participants, Pennington and colleagues (2020b) found that the bias persisted, although appeared to weaken moderately. Perhaps this is an indication that most of the negative socialization encountered by students in which they are persuaded that sport, physical activity, and physical education teaching are for young people happens at an early age (Pennington, Curtner-Smith, & Wind, 2020b). A final extension of this study using high school participants (Pennington, Curtner-Smith, & Wind, 2020c). The singular finding with the highest level of significance within this entire series of studies was that students subjectively regarded the instructor more positively [regarding the concept of “role modeling”] when the instructor was made to appear be middle-aged than when the instructor was made to appear more youthful. Furthermore, there were no differences in learning and perceptions of likeability or competence by students who learned from either a younger or older appearing teacher.

Aesthetic Preference: Attractiveness and Age Bias

“Aesthetic preferences are known to be important in person perception and can play a significant role in everyday social decisions” (Kiiski, Cullen, Clavin & Newell, 2016, p. 1). Our subjective partiality for others compels many aspects of our life; they influence our choices from dating and relationship suitors to elected officials (Langlois, Kalakanis, Rubenstein, Larson, Hallam & Smoot, 2000; Cornwell, Smith, Boothroyd, Moore, Davis, Stirrat & Perrett, 2006; Olivola, Funk & Todorov, 2014), often when more logical and objective data is available (Todorov, Olivola, Dotsch & Mende-Siedlecki, 2015). In the case of educational and pedagogical theory, these potentially harmful biases have an effect on student learning and student perceptions of the teachers’ competence and role-modeling qualities (Pennington, et al., 2020abc). Therefore, for the sake of educational effectiveness knowledge, these preferences and biases are worthy of being explored.

Aesthetic preferences are most commonly determined by facial physical features and physical appearance (Valentine, Darling & Donnelly, 2004), and can be shaped and formed from even a brief fleeting look of a person whom we may have never met (Albright, Kenny & Malloy, 1988). Such suggests the importance of understanding how these swift impressions impact decision-making in everyday social contexts. A number of studies from social psychology, specifically linked to face perception, advocate for a greater understanding of factors relating to ageing that affect attitudes and bias. Through so doing, we may gain a deeper understanding into the perceptual foundation of social occurrences in everyday life situations (Langlois et al., 2000; Cornwell et al., 2006; Olivola et al., 2014).

‘Attractiveness’ [often strongly correlated with ‘youthfulness’] refers to the subjective quality of facial features, whereas ‘trustworthiness’ refers to the perceived [again, subjective] helpfulness (e.g. to teach or educate) and honesty (Kiiski et al., 2016). Age-related features of the face (e.g. visible coloration and texture of the skin) are deemed essential for evaluations of physical attractiveness and perceived physical health (Burt & Perrett, 1995). Previous research

has expressed an obvious preference for youthful-appearing faces by participants of many age categories (Langlois et al., 2000; Kiiski et al., 2016). Specifically, participants' ratings of attractiveness declined with the increasing age of faces (Ebner, Riediger, & Lindenberger, 2010) and, in the case of one study, participants' ratings of perceived competence and trustworthiness also declined with the increase in the age of the faces showed the study (Kiiski et al., 2016).

The “Youth Bias” and Age-related Stereotypes

One reason why a bias may exist to favor younger-appearing people may be that young people tend to have fewer age-specific facial features like wrinkles and blemishes which could impact the clarity of cues signaling socially relevant information. Therefore, data and messaging from youthful-looking faces may be quicker and easier to process (Kiiski et al., 2016). Faces of younger adults are often thought to be more symmetrical compared to older faces; symmetry being a feature indicating the subjective aesthetic quality of a face, as it suggests good health, fitness, and a strong immune system (Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999; Lie, Rhodes & Simmons, 2008; Pisanski & Feinberg, 2013).

The expanding research along this line of inquiry indicates that forming an opinion of a face is established not only on its subjective physical quality, but also other social attributes (Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2007). As there is documented research suggesting an attractiveness ‘halo effect’ (i.e. faces perceived to be attractive are also rated more positively in other social attributes, such as competency; Langlois et al., 2000), an opposite effect has concurrently been demonstrated to happen with ratings of older adults which is largely contrary to the body of evidence suggesting “younger appearing faces are considered more competent” (Zebrowitz, Franklin, Hillman, & Boc, 2013). For example, it stands to reason that having a face of apparently advanced age could, in fact, yield positive competence evaluations, potentially focusing on more advantageous aspects of aging, such as life experience and wisdom (Kiiski et al., 2016).

Children’s Perceptions of Aging

Interest has grown in studying the perceptions youth have of the elderly since the mid-sixties (Aday, Sims, McDuffie & Evans, 1996). Many students have negative attitudes about older persons (Rich, Myrick & Campbell, 1983). Couper, Donorfio, and Goyer (1995) reveal that pessimistic perception regarding growing old occur even among toddlers, and these perceptions become persist to more pessimistic as students enter preadolescence (Laney, Wimsatt, Moseley & Laney, 1999). As early as age three, young students exhibit ageist language (Burke, 1981), describing them as “tired, ugly, helpless, and ready to die” (Rich et al., 1983, p. 488). By age five, children begin to espouse negative perceptions against aging and being elderly (Fullmer, 1984). By the age of eight, most students hold relatively strongly regarded pessimistic perceptions of people of advanced age and the aging process (Corbin, Kagan & Metil-Corbin, 1987).

American youth have been described as “horrified at the idea of growing old” and often demonstrate great determination to avoid old age (Seefeldt, Jantz, Galper, & Serock, 1977). During the years of adolescence, American youth appear to stereotype and devalue individuals of advanced age a way that is comparable to adults (Carstensen, Mason & Caldwell, 1982; Kastenbaum & Durkee, 1964). Because the concepts of developing biases and stereotypes against growing old and the elderly appear to be deeply engrained, it stands to reason that implicit ageism will persist throughout an individual’s lifetime. Furthermore, it has been

indicated that deeply ingrained perceptions and values regarding age will leave meaningful impression on one's life in general. A large number of these perceptions and values are persistent into adulthood and typically impact health behavior and healthy strategies to aging along adulthood and advanced age (Bennett, 1976; McTavish, 1971). If uncontested or undisputed, the perceptions established in formative and K-12 educational settings have a tendency to leave persistent characteristics that affect people's thoughts and behaviors along the lifespan (Seefeldt et al., 1977). To that end, there is evidence to suggest that children's deeply ingrained perceptions and values regarding age [i.e. age-related stereotypes] lend themselves towards their own anticipated forecast regarding their own aging journey (Levy, 2003).

Growing Old: A Self-fulfilling Prophecy

“When individuals reach old age, the aging stereotypes internalized in childhood, then reinforced for decades, become self-stereotypes. The old is the only outgroup that inevitably becomes an ingroup for individuals who live long enough” (Snyder & Miene, 1994, p. 38). When advanced age becomes self-defining, stereotypes related to age and ageing may lend themselves towards an undesired consequence: “imposing unnecessary limitations on future generations of elderly” derived from self-fulfilling prophecies (Korthase & Trenholme, 1983). Class and Knott (1982) have proposed three primary ways in which attitudes regarding aging can be changed: (a) thorough discussions with school-mates, (b) thorough direct experience with attitude objects facilitated by trusted teachers and school officials, and (c) thorough increased information or knowledge from direct teaching/learning experiences in school health and physical education settings.

It is important for health and physical educators to further assess how the reduction of age stereotypes among youth influences the attitudes and behaviors of youth. Schools – specifically trained professionals such as health and fitness specialists and physical educators – can play an important function in impressing the views students have of individuals of advanced age and the lifecycle. Schools have the resources and capabilities to integrate material on healthy aging into their curricula as well as to introduce students to older individuals, thus reinforcing the view of advancing through the lifecycle in a healthy way as a more positive experience (Burke, 1981; Edwards & Gallagher, 1982). The National Retired Teachers Association and the National Academy for Teaching and Learning About Aging suggests that students need to learn about aging (Levy, 2003). One of the main reasons is teaching and learning about aging in the school curricula can promote healthy behaviors and lifestyle decisions. The decisions young students make affect the length and quality of their lives; thus, a life span approach to health promotion can encourage the development and maintenance of lifelong, healthy habits (Levy, 2003).

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