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Ageism and Perceptions of Vulnerability: Framing of Age during Covid-19 Pandemic

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Framing and Shaping/Reinforcing of Social Attitudes

Based on notion of a "central organizing idea or story" that provides meaning "to a series of unfolding events" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 145)

- Framing shapes social attitudes and perceptions

- Social events are open to misrepresentation; depending on one's perspective can cause a misunderstanding of events (Goffman, 1986)

- We use mental shortcuts in reasoning and decision making (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984)

The Impact of News Framing

Framing is a form of interpretation based on one's background, values, and philosophy

- A certain degree of "framing" is unavoidable (i.e. mental shortcuts)

- Linguistic frames influence social and political perceptions and policies (Ryan & Gamson, 2006; Shen & Edwards, 2005; Gamson, 1992; Iyengar, 1991; Kinder & Sanders, 1990; Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997)

- Public view of the COVID-19 pandemic

Framing Age

- Attitudes toward aging and older adults tend to be negative; generally associated with vulnerability and decline

- The pandemic has been viewed through an aging and ageist lens

- Age bias has shaped views of the illness and concerns about pandemic consequences (e.g. isolation, the need for closures, social distancing, over-burdened medical facilities, and so forth)

Purpose of this presentation

Based on the review of literature and the ongoing pandemic, an analysis of the ways that print media has framed age, aging, and illness vulnerability is an important area of investigation

Framing shapes social attitudes and can have lasting negative consequences on attitudes towards older adults and aging

Methods

- Analysis of print news media addressing the impact of COVID-19 on older adults

- 118 articles featured between March 1st and April 30th 2020 were selected from the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, and *Boston Globe*.

Print News Analysis

- 51% of 6552 articles from the *New York Times* containing key words 'COVID-19,' 'Coronavirus,' 'pandemic,' or 'epidemic' contained keywords related to dominant aging frame

- 51% of 5365 articles from the *Washington Post* discussed the outbreak in the context of age

- 37% of 5066 articles in the *Wall Street Journal* used the dominant aging frame

Results: Thematic Analysis

Several recurrent themes were identified based on the analysis including:

- Aging as old, sick, and vulnerable to COVID-19

- Importance of isolation of elders in a society

- Potential of inter-generational conflict over maintaining well-being for all

Thematic Results

The Old, Sick, and Vulnerable

- "You might be killing your granddad" if you don't follow social distancing measures (Bissel Brown, 2020)

- Common narrative in which older adults were described in passive terms without agency

The Old vs Young: Intergenerational Conflict

- "Boomer remover" narrative

- Allocation of resources as a zero-sum game: "Do we disrupt the lives of millions of young people — literally including their access to healthy food — or do we accelerate the spread of a disease among the old?" (Pariser, 2020).

Consequences of Framing

WHO Director General Ghebreyesus stated that some countries deemed the coronavirus threat "less worthy of the best efforts to contain it" because older people were most affected (Aronson, 2020)

- Belief that the pandemic primarily affects older adults provides "psychological protection": "It's not us" (Yuko, 2020)

- Homogenization of age cohorts; older adults have collectively been viewed as vulnerable, selfish, technologically inadequate, non-compliant with social distancing measures, and in need of protection

- "Debates over who is most at risk for coronavirus, who should receive priority for ventilators, and when to reopen the economy really all boil down to a single question: How much are our lives worth?" (Friedman, 2020)

Conclusion and Suggestions

Frame information in such a way that reduces the stigmatization and marginalization of older adults

- Statistics about different health outcomes are important but should not be the focus; increases feelings of vulnerability among older adults

- Well-being in later life should be shaped by the same social and economic policies (e.g., housing, transportation, health) that affect the wellbeing of all age cohorts

- Shift in language can change perceptions: the use of more inclusive wording (e.g. "we") could help emphasize inclusive policies and bring people together

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