"SHARP!"
Lurking Incoherence in
a Television Portrayal
of an Older Adult

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This article examined an intergenerational interaction from a popular television show in two ways. First, a detailed textual analysis illustrated (a) the salience of age in the interaction, (b) (counter-) stereotypical elements of the older adults' portrayal, (c) intergenerational connections achieved within the interaction, and (d) the use of age stereotypes in the script's humorous punch line. The punch line featured the previously alert older adult showing signs of confusion—here termed lurking incoherence*. Second, an experimental study showed that the punch line of the clip influenced specific evaluations of the older person in the show, but did not influence general attitudes towards older adults. It was also shown that individuals with more positive general attitudes towards older adults evaluated the older character particularly negatively when they were exposed to the punch line. The ways in which viewers actively process media portrayals of intergroup communication are discussed.*

According to recent theory and research, communication plays a role in how individuals learn about the aging process (Giles & Harwood, 1997), influencing the psychological and physical health of older adults (Baltes & Wahl, 1996; Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986), and developing intergenerational relationships (Cicirelli, 1993; McKay, 1993). In addition, communication may convey stereotypes and other impressions of age groups (Giles, Fox, Harwood, & Williams, 1994), while those stereotypes, in turn, may also play a role in interpreting and processing communication from and about older adults (Henwood, Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1993; Ng, Giles & Moody, 1991). It is these latter functions that are the focus of the current article. In particular, this study focuses on the ways in which a particular televised portrayal of intergenerational communication influences individuals' impressions of older adults and the ways in which attitudes towards older adults influence the processing of that message. This analysis builds from a basis in intergroup theory (Harwood, Giles, & Ryan, 1995; Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and social cognitive conceptualizations of message processing (Carver & de la Garza, 1984; Duncan, 1976).

The empirical portion of this article focuses on a specific intergenerational encounter from a popular situation comedy. It provides a detailed qualitative textual account of the exchange, as well as a quantitative experimental investigation of the effects of the exchange on viewers. This focus on a specific encounter is intended to complement more general investigations of the portrayals of age on television, which are fairly common in the literature (see Vasil & Wass, 1993, for a review). Before the textual analysis, the previous literatures on intergenerational communication and mass media portrayals of aging will be reviewed briefly. Following the textual analysis, an additional brief review of research on group-based message processing will be provided to ground the experimental analysis.

Despite an explosion of research in the area of intergenerational communication, little work currently exists examining the detailed procedures of actual intergenerational talk. Perhaps this is because such talk is actually rather infrequent (Williams & Giles, 1996) or perhaps because of the complexities involved in examining large volumes of talk (or, indeed, making generalizations from small volumes of talk). That noted, certain research programs have provided some indications of the nature of intergenerational talk in interpersonal encounters. A body of research has focused on the communication of younger individuals, largely focusing on their patronizing talk to older adults (Hummert & Shaner, 1994; Ryan, Hummert, & Boich, 1995). This research has demonstrated the prevalence of patronizing talk in intergenerational encounters (Caporael, 1981). In addition, it has shown largely negative evaluations of such talk (Ryan, Bourhis, & Knops, 1991), although not in all situations (Harwood & Giles, 1996). Theoretical work in this area has focused on the role of such talk in influencing the psychological and physical health of older adults (Ryan et al., 1986).

Other researchers have focused more on the talk of older adults. For instance, Coupland, Coupland, Giles, Henwood, and Wiemann (1988) have demonstrated the existence of painful self-disclosure by older adults in intergenerational encounters. They have focused on the discoursal structures surrounding such disclosure, its functions, and various evaluative and attributional problems caused for its younger recipients. In related research, these authors have also examined the ways in which age comes to be salient in intergenerational talk. Coupland, Coupland, and Giles (1989) have described processes surrounding the disclosure of chronological age (DCA) by older adults in intergenerational encounters. They describe the ways in which DCA is used by older adults to account for ill health or to present themselves as "doing well" in comparison to age norms. In addition, Coupland, Coupland, Giles, and Henwood (1991) have examined more subtle ways in which age is marked in intergenerational talk (e.g., by referring to the experience of historical events or an age-related role such as being a pensioner).

Researchers examining intergenerational communication in its interpersonal manifestations have provided invaluable information regarding the nature of intergenerational talk and some of its problems. In particular, they have allowed us an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the roots of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with intergenerational interactions (see also Hummert, Wiemann, & Nussbaum, 1994; Nussbaum & Coupland, 1995; Nussbaum, Hummert, Williams, & Harwood, 1996; Williams & Giles, 1996). The current research aims to complement such research by examining an intergenerational conversation in a very different context—a scripted media encounter. A large volume of work has examined portrayals of age in the media using fairly gross quantitative measures (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980; Harwood, 1997; Robinson & Skill, 1995; Vasil & Wass, 1993). This work has shown that older adults are underrepresented in the mass media, and that the quality of their portrayals varies quite widely. Some research has suggested a largely positive portrayal, particularly in soap operas (Cassata, Anderson, & Skill, 1980; Elliot, 1984) and in commercials (Roy & Harwood, 1997). Other research, however, has suggested that older adults may be portrayed quite negatively (Aronoff, 1974; Bishop & Krause, 1984; Francher, 1973).

However, very little research has examined media portrayals of age from a more dynamic, fine-grained perspective. In particular, we have very little idea of how older adults talk, or are talked to, on television. One exception is Harwood and Giles's (1992) examination of the show *The Golden Girls* (which featured four older women), in which they outlined the ways that age was made salient in the show and discussed some of the ways age was used to generate humor in the show. The authors argue that the ubiquitous use of age for humorous purposes on the show may be harmful in terms of rendering a serious discussion of aging impossible and rendering counter-stereotypical portrayals quite literally "laughable."

The first study in the current article aims to provide additional information about the dynamics of intergenerational communication in the media by examining a short intergenerational encounter in a popular show. The second study will then present experimental research that examines variation in audience members' processing and evaluations of the encounter in order to test certain hypotheses derived from the first study.

CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

This research analyzes a short segment from an episode of the NBC show *Frasier* (first broadcast on March 11th, 1997, 9 p.m. Eastern Standard Time). This episode received a Nielsen rating of 12.3, indicating that almost 12 million households viewed the show. It was the

thirteenth ranked show for that particular week. The show has been rebroadcast in network prime time and will be shown repeatedly now that *Frasier* has entered syndication. Given additional international exposure, the number of people who will be exposed to this episode is relatively large. *Frasier* features a talk-radio psychiatrist (Frasier) in the context of various family and workplace events. This year, and in 2 previous years, *Frasier* has won the Emmy award for outstanding comedy, as well as being honored with other awards. The segment that is the focus of the current analysis featured Frasier's radio show call-screener (Roz) visiting an older adult (Moira) in a nursing home. Roz was performing community service after receiving a traffic ticket. In a conversation just under 3 minutes long, Roz and Moira discuss a variety of issues, many related to the theme of growing old.

The program segment analyzed in the current paper was chosen for a number of reasons. First, it portrays an intergenerational conversation between two strangers. Such encounters have been the focus of considerable research in the area of intergenerational communication on an interpersonal level but have rarely been examined by media researchers. Second, the older adult in the encounter was not a regular character on the show. It has been suggested that peripheral characters in shows may be particularly important in understanding portrayals of social groups (Williams & Nussbaum, 1999). Such portrayals may well reflect and reinforce "status quo" notions of social groups, while lead characters are more likely to be "exceptional." Furthermore, such portrayals are more likely to be viewed by younger adults, who tend to avoid shows in which older adults play lead roles (Harwood, 1997). In addition, the interaction took place in a very popular and critically acclaimed prime time network program. This is important in terms of assessing the number of individuals that viewed the interaction. Other reasons why this particular clip was seen as interesting are more adequately expressed within the textual analysis reported below.

The textual analysis had a number of goals. First, it was deemed important to uncover the ways in which age was made salient in the discussion between the two individuals. The ways in which age is marked and made salient in interaction have been the focus of previous studies of intergenerational interaction and are important in terms of understanding the ways in which such interactions might influence attitudes towards aging. Also, the ways in which age is central to older adults' presence in media portrayals are interesting to examine in terms of understanding the range of roles which older characters are allowed to fill. If older adults are only present qua older adults, issues of tokenism and role restriction come to the fore.

Second, the analysis aimed to uncover the ways in which age was presented stereotypically and counter-stereotypically in the

encounter. Such a focus complements large-scale content analyses which tend to focus on issues of portrayal, albeit with much broader brush strokes (e.g., see Roy & Harwood, 1997). Consideration of portrayals in terms of stereotypes is important when understanding the nature of any potential attitude change driven by the program. In addition, this focus helps us understand how age is being understood and used by writers.

Third, the analysis sought to understand the ways in which the two interlocutors bonded with each other, the ways in which connections between individuals from different generations were established. If younger and older individuals are portrayed as finding common ground in spite of their apparent differences, this might enhance viewers' attitudes toward intergenerational contact. In addition, such bonding might provide positive relationship models for individuals seeking more fulfilling intergenerational interactions (see Williams & Nussbaum, 1999).

Finally, the textual analysis aimed to provide a detailed understanding of the final utterance of the encounter (the "punch line"). In this section of the dialogue, the older adult suddenly appears slightly disoriented and repeats herself, whereas up to this point she has been coherent and engaging. This incident seemed particularly important given its contrast to the rest of the encounter (and particularly its relation to stereotypical conceptions of older adults). Its significance is further heightened by being the last line of the encounter, which would make it particularly memorable to viewers (Baddeley & Hitch, 1993). Hence, the punch line was examined in some detail in the textual analysis and was the focus of the experimental study (Study 2).

Clearly, examination of a short segment from one show will not tell us a great deal about aging on television as a whole. However, it is important to understand the fine detail of portrayals of age (as contrasted with the gross impressions revealed by content analyses). If, as content analysis has shown, there are very few older adults on television, then we must look at them in detail to understand the roles that these older adults play and the ways in which their interactions support or debunk stereotypes of aging. Individual portrayals may, in fact, be more distinctive and memorable to the viewer when they are infrequent (see Hamilton & Gifford, 1976). In addition, fine-grained textual analyses provide information on societal conceptions of what intergenerational talk is, or should be, like—our stereotypical representations of intergenerational communication (e.g., see Harwood, 1998). They also provide an important insight into the ways that age is considered in the broader culture, because writers and producers are concerned with providing portrayals to which viewers can relate. Finally, a mediated intergenerational encounter has the potential of simultaneously influencing millions of viewers in a single airing. Very few everyday interpersonal encounters have such power.

STUDY 1: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF
THE INTERGENERATIONAL ENCOUNTER

The segment was transcribed. Verbal and nonverbal behaviors were attended to, as well as the audience laughter. A textual analysis was then undertaken to understand the important communicative processes within the interaction, following the goals established above. The analysis is broken down into four sections relating directly to those goals.

SALIENCE OF AGE AND AGING

Age is salient in the segment in a number of ways. Perhaps the most obvious is the DCA by the older interlocutor, Moira (see Coupland et al., 1989). Moira and Roz (the younger interlocutor) are discussing positive and negative aspects of growing old, and Moira says the following.

> Moira: Let me tell you something [*pointing at Roz*]. I'm 81 now [*pause*] and every morning I open my eyes and I see the sun streaming through the window. . . .

The build up to the DCA ("Let me tell you something") indicates that Moira is engaged in providing information to Roz, and the DCA appears to be used as a warrant for providing that information. This comment comes in the context of a discussion about how life changes with increasing age. Interestingly, there is a long pause following the DCA, which perhaps serves the purpose of emphasizing its importance.

In addition to this specific feature, the general topic of the entire segment is aging. In particular, Moira forwards the opinion that life does get worse with age and that those who are idealistic about age are obviously senile.

> Moira: Well what did you want me to say? [*mocking intonation*] "Life gets better with every passing year." [*Roz nods*] You wanna hear that? You go talk to Mrs. Adelman, you can't miss her she's the one in the TV room with the inflatable sea horse around her waist. [*audience laughter*]

In other segments of the interaction, Roz complains about being called "Ma'am" for the first time, and Moira cautions that Roz is "way too young" to be worrying about getting old.

Other elements of the conversation also make age salient. In particular, the physical and institutional contexts (the scene takes place in a nursing home which Roz is visiting as a service; Moira is in bed throughout the encounter), physical cues (Moira looks old), and physical references (e.g., to false teeth). Furthermore, at one point, Roz

describes Moira as having "had quite a life" where the use of "had" perhaps implies that the life is approaching its end, or at least that a significant portion of it has passed.

Finally, the conversation has a structure which is similar to a commonly described structure of intergenerational conversations. Recently, Harwood (1998) has described a "learning" schema for intergenerational conversations which is shared among younger adults: a representation featuring the younger adult seeking advice from an elder or attempting to learn something about the older adult, life, or the world. In conjunction with this, the older adult shares wisdom and experience, and the younger person frequently feels awed, inspired, or moved by what the older adult has to say. In the conversation that is the focus of the current analysis, there is extensive sharing of experiences and knowledge from the older adult. Moira tells Roz about the experience of growing older, describes adventures she has encountered, and provides advice on how to best cope with getting older. Roz appears to be interested in the discussion, with very immediate and engaged nonverbal behaviors (forward lean, intent eye gaze, nodding) combined with extensive verbal back channels and follow-up questions. Hence, age is made salient in another way; the general structure of the conversation is one that may be familiar to younger people as a type of conversation they associate stereotypically with older adults.

Given that the encounter is under 3 minutes in duration, the level of age reference is very high. It might be fair to describe age as chronically salient in the encounter. That said, and despite the tone of some of the comments described above, the encounter cannot be seen as presenting age in an uncomplicated negative light. Hence, next we turn to a discussion of the nature of age stereotypes in the clip.

STEREOTYPES AND COUNTER-STEREOTYPICAL PORTRAYALS

Although there is work demonstrating that there are multiple stereotypes of older adults (Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994), a negative stereotype of older adults as inactive, unhealthy, and asexual still appears to be dominant (Kite & Johnson, 1988; see Hummert, 1990, for a discussion of links between multiple stereotypes of subgroups of older adults and attitudes towards older adults as a whole). Moira, the older adult in the segment, is portrayed in a number of ways that are both stereotypical and counter-stereotypical, and these are outlined below.

First, she is presented as active, at least in the recent past. The encounter begins with Moira describing a white water rafting adventure. While a reference to losing her teeth on the trip may be seen as confirming traditional stereotypes, it does perhaps serve to reinforce that this is probably a fairly recent trip (we are not provided with an explanation for why she now appears to be confined to bed!).

Second, Moira's description of hacking into the nursing home's computer is also counter-stereotypical. Older adults are not regarded as a group that is particularly adept at dealing with modern technology (Ryan, Szechtman, & Bodkin, 1992). In addition, the term "hacking" is often reserved for a particular type of computer user: young males. It is notable that this statement is met with a burst of laughter from the audience. Before Moira has reached the end of her utterance, there is laughter that relates solely to the idea of her hacking into the computer. The fact that this is seen as funny perhaps detracts from its strength as a counter-stereotypical device. This is a point that extends to many counter-stereotypical references, and one that has been raised previously (Harwood & Giles, 1992).

Third, in that same utterance, Moira's reference to receiving her "sponge-baths from Eduardo" can also be seen as counter-stereotypical. A common stereotype of older adults is that they are asexual (Hummert, 1990). With this utterance, however, Moira is seen as highly sexual. She engages in extreme measures (computer hacking) to obtain the services of Eduardo, and, from her tone of voice, it is clear that Eduardo is desirable and she is not seeking him out merely for his sponge-bathing skills. There is also the possibility that her cigarette inhalation at the close of the utterance might be interpreted as a post-coital reference. As with the example of losing her teeth on a rafting trip, there is an interesting juxtaposition in this utterance. The counter-stereotypical reference to sexuality is balanced with a highly stereotypical reference (this is all happening in the context of a sponge-bath schedule). This is perhaps significant in terms of an unwillingness to present an unambiguously counter-stereotypical character and also in terms of the audience's obvious amusement at the apparent incongruities. Finally, the general tone of the encounter appears to violate traditional stereotypes of the older adult. Moira is vivacious, upbeat, and darkly humorous.

The above descriptions make it clear that Moira is presented in somewhat counter-stereotypical terms, albeit tempered with some traditional stereotypical elements. An important related point is that Roz appears genuinely amused by Moira and engaged in the conversation. The relationship of the two women is discussed next.

INTERGENERATIONAL BONDING

Together with the counter-stereotypical portrayal, the two women in the scene appear to share considerable rapport and show signs of developing a pleasurable relationship. Both Roz and Moira are smoking, which seems to indicate a sharing of sorts. Both enjoy a vaguely illicit, often prohibited, behavior. In addition, much of the conversation's focus on age is framed in terms of "women's" issues. Roz refers to not being able to "flirt" her way out of a traffic ticket, and both share

the experience of when they were first called "ma'am." This is reminiscent of the notion of cross-cutting categories from the intergroup social psychology literature (Deschamps & Doise, 1978; Vanbeselaere, 1991). Despite the age difference between the individuals, they find common ground in their roles as women, with the concomitant shared insecurities and concerns about aging, and perhaps a shared ingroup identity (Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, & Anastasio, 1994).

There is explicit discourse, such as the following extract, that supports the idea that the two women are positively disposed toward one another.

> Roz: [*laughs; admiring tone of voice, nodding head*] You've had quite a life.

> Moira: I suppose. [*conspiratorially, leaning towards Roz*] Never got arrested though. Oh good for you. [*audience laughter*]

The two women exchange compliments and admiration in this exchange, Roz congratulating Moira on her life and Moira praising Roz for being arrested. Moira's nonverbal behavior and conspiratorial tone of voice suggest genuine admiration and a friendly jealousy. They frequently smile at one another and maintain eye contact. In a similar exchange, Roz comments that she "wouldn't care about getting older if I thought my mind was going to be as sharp as yours is." Again, the compliment can be seen as an indication of solidarity.

The two women also bond in terms of sexuality. The reference to getting sponge baths from Eduardo seems to indicate a mutual interest in (presumably handsome) young men. The search for handsome young men is a repeated feature of Roz's character on the show. Finally, it should be noted that the counter-stereotypical elements of Moira's portrayal described above may contribute to this bonding by lessening the generational distance between the parties.

LURKING INCOHERENCE IN THE PUNCH LINE

The final utterance of the encounter is crucially important in understanding the exchange as a whole. Prior to this exchange, Moira has already recounted how she hacked into the computer to change the sponge bath schedule.

> Roz: I know, I know you're right. You know I wouldn't care about getting older if I thought my mind was going to be as sharp as yours is.

> Moira: [*almost interrupting Roz*] Sharp! [*Pause. Moira looks very briefly confused.*] I'll tell you a funny story. [*Roz nods and looks attentive*] Last Thursday I hacked into the main [*audience laughter*] computer here and changed the schedule and now I get all my sponge baths from Eduardo. [*inhales cigarette, audience laughter*]

Roz: [*stubbing out cigarette; resigned look away from Moira; audience laughter*]

Moira's comment repeats what she has already said only 35 seconds earlier. This is recognized by the audience (whose laughter very early in the utterance indicates their recognition) and also by Roz (who casts a resigned look at the audience and away from Moira).[1] After Roz's turn away from Moira, the scene switches and we see no more of Moira in the show. The comment is a clear indication that Moira is not as "sharp" as she has appeared during the rest of the encounter.

Moira's comment is ironic, and hence funny, for a number of reasons. First, it comes in response to a compliment from Roz on how "sharp" she is. Furthermore, Moira's initial response ("Sharp!") comes very quickly on the heels of Roz's compliment (almost overlapping) and is uttered in a very upbeat and alert fashion. The irony of then continuing with a comment that indicates a lack of sharpness has obvious humorous value. This irony is further enhanced by the fact that the story itself claims a level of sharpness (i.e., the cognitive skills required to hack into the computer), and, of course, the broader interaction has presented Moira as competent and alert. Substantial research on jokes indicates that this type of irony (variously termed "surprise" or "incongruity") is crucial to punch lines (Deckers & Avery, 1994; Lefort, 1992; Oring, 1989). Although the current text is not a joke in the traditional sense, the structure follows a similar pattern. Indeed, it is worth noting that the vast majority of work on punch lines has emerged from studies of traditional joke-telling. We know very little about the function of punch lines in other types of texts.

The comment is also funny because it draws upon a well-established stereotype of older adults' conversational behaviors. Lay notions of older adults' behaviors often include references to the tendency to repeat themselves, memory problems, and the like (Ryan, Kwong See, Meneer, & Trovato, 1992). In the context of a portrayal which is largely counter-stereotypical, this utterance may provide a sense of familiarity with a more traditional portrayal of an older adult. Hence, this comment may serve as a humorous relief from the "tension" of a counter-stereotypical portrayal via a return to the familiar. This is the denouement for stereotype-busting Moira, and it takes the viewer back to the familiar ground that perhaps they thought they were treading when they saw a bed-ridden older adult at the start of the encounter.[2] This point is elaborated and investigated further below.

An additional aspect of the utterance that provides some humor is Roz's facial expression. She directs a look away from Moira, which appears to indicate resignation (she almost rolls her eyes). At the same time, she is stubbing out the cigarette, which perhaps symbolizes that the conversation is over (the scene switches immediately afterwards,

which would support this interpretation). The fact that she is looking away from her interlocutor perhaps implies differentiation from Moira, and the look toward the audience perhaps indicates a bonding with others apart from Moira. As indicated above, a good deal of work in the encounter has gone into establishing a trans-generational bond between the two women. The look from Roz has a "why did I even bother" flavor to it and perhaps provides comic relief in terms of sharing with an audience which has experienced similar frustrations with older adults. It may imply that she feels she has been kidding herself all this time thinking it is possible to have a good, normal conversation with an older adult, and now Moira is reverting to type.

A final point to make here is that in addition to mocking the previously alert portrayal of Moira, the punch line concurrently mocks various connections that have been made between the two interlocutors. Many of their points of connection noted earlier are present in the very exchange which signals the gap between them (i.e., reference to sexuality, computer hacking, the older person giving advice to young, and nonverbal indications of engagement from the younger individual). The statement that deflates the positive portrayal and the positive relationship contains the essential elements that were used to build the relationship. The fact that one of these points of connection (the cigarette) is physically destroyed (Roz stubs out her cigarette while looking away from Moira) is perhaps the best physical cue that the bonds have been damaged.

The negative stereotypical nature of the exchange's punch line may be particularly powerful in influencing viewers for a few reasons. First, it is one of the funnier lines in the scene, and it is funny on a number of levels (from the slapstick humor of somebody repeating a story, to some fairly complex levels of irony). Second, this is the end of the scene, and the last we see of Moira. Basic theories of cognition suggest that last impressions are as powerful as first impressions (Baddeley & Hitch, 1993); therefore, this utterance may take on additional potency due to its location in the scene. Third, the punch line is generally what we are waiting for when we hear a joke (and, for some of us, it may be all we remember when we try to retell a particularly funny joke!). Hence, this line is functionally and structurally climactic within the scene. These factors lead us to suggest that this utterance has the power to influence viewers' attitudes toward Moira and perhaps toward older adults in general. Contentions concerning the effects of the punch line, however, are speculative at this stage. To understand the actual effects, empirical data are essential. The experimental study that follows examines the precise effects of the punch line on viewers' attitudes toward older adults in general, and the specific characters in the exchange.

STUDY 2: EXPERIMENTAL
INVESTIGATION OF THE PUNCH LINE'S EFFECTS

Before presenting the experimental study, a brief excursion into the sociopsychological literature on message processing and intergroup attitudes is important. This will provide theoretical grounding for the development of hypotheses and research questions and will provide some further links between Study 1 and Study 2.

INTERGROUP APPROACHES TO MESSAGE PROCESSING

A large body of research in social cognition is dedicated to investigating the ways in which messages are processed and interpreted in social contexts. This is relevant to the current work because Study 2 will examine ways in which audience members interpret the portrayal of the older adult in the clip. A particular focus here will be on the ways in which intergroup attitudes influence processing of the message and, relatedly, the ways in which such attitudes may be influenced by the clip.

Research has demonstrated that a target individual's category membership can influence the ways in which we evaluate messages from, or about, that target. For instance, work by Duncan (1976) and Sagar and Schofield (1980) has illustrated that a cartoon is interpreted differently based on the race of the characters in the cartoon. Similarly, Darley and Gross (1983) have demonstrated a pattern whereby information is processed and conclusions are drawn based on stereotyped expectations (see also Giles, Henwood, Coupland, Harriman, & Coupland, 1992). In addition, research has demonstrated that individual differences in attitudes may modify the ways in which such messages are processed. For instance, Devine (1989) suggested that high- and low-prejudiced individuals respond to situations differently as a result of their attempts to control prejudiced thoughts. Likewise, Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, and Williams (1995) showed that White respondents who scored high on a surreptitious measure of racist attitudes transmitted their prejudices in experimental debriefings with an African American experimenter. Children scoring higher on tests of sex-role schemata have been found to be more likely to process information in terms of sex stereotypes (Levy, 1994; List, Collins, & Westby, 1983), and adults' pro-female attitudes have been found to influence their recall of information concerning sex differences (Furnham & Duignan, 1989). The current research will examine whether individuals differing in their attitudes toward older adults also process television messages featuring older adults differently (see also Stangor, Lynch, Duan, & Glass, 1992; Stangor & Ruble, 1989). A related research question is presented further on in the article.

On a slightly different tack, substantial research and theory exists that examines the impact of contact with members of an outgroup on attitudes toward that group (see Amir, 1976; Hewstone, 1994). Hewstone and Brown (1986) theorize that contact between members of social groups will only result in attitude change toward their respective groups as a whole under intergroup contact conditions. These conditions are characterized by a high salience of the respective group memberships within the encounter and a high level of perceived "typicality" of the individuals (e.g., age is salient in a conversation, and the older person is seen to be a "typical" older person). Supportive evidence and arguments for this position are emerging in the literature (see Brewer & Miller, 1988; Fox & Giles, 1993; Hewstone, 1994, 1996; Van Oudenhoven, Groenewoud, & Hewstone, 1995; Wilder, 1984). Without the salience of the group membership and the perceived typicality of the other, a particular individual can easily be treated as an aberration or exception, and stereotypes of a group as a whole can be maintained (what Allport [1954] has referred to as "refencing"; see also Rothbart & John, 1985). Naturally, while intergroup contact is theorized to be a necessary condition for attitude change; the nature of the attitude change is dependent on the nature of the contact (Hewstone & Brown, 1986). Positive intergroup contact is theorized to result in positive attitude change; however, negative intergroup contact has the capacity for hardening, or even worsening, negative attitudes. Situations in which group memberships are salient are ones in which the stakes may be particularly high in terms of attitude change.

As was revealed in the textual analysis, Moira's age is extremely salient in the encounter under consideration. This is a context in which attitude change toward older adults as a group might be expected. To extend the inference from the textual analysis, this attitude change might be expected to be positive, as a product of the majority of the encounter (intergenerational bonding, positive conversation), but less positive as a result of the punch line.[3] This expectation appears to lend itself to experimental investigation, given the ease of manipulating whether particular viewers are exposed to the punch line. Hence, an experimental investigation is reported in which viewers were randomly assigned to view either the full version of the clip or a version with the punch line edited out. Two hypotheses and a research question emerge from the textual analysis and literature review. First, intergroup contact theory predicts that those exposed to the punch line in a context in which age is highly salient will develop negative attitudes toward older adults in general.

Hypothesis 1: Viewers who see the clip with the punch line will have more negative attitudes toward older adults in general, as compared to viewers who see the clip without the punch line.

Second, we predict that viewers exposed to the punch line will have more negative impressions of the older adult in the show, as compared to those who did not see the punch line. This can be seen as a weaker version of Hypothesis 1, predicting negative effects but not necessarily generalization to older adults as a group.

> *Hypothesis 2:* Viewers who see the clip with the punch line will have more negative attitudes regarding Moira, as compared to viewers who see the clip without the punch line.

Third, above and beyond any effects of the show on general attitudes, individuals' broadly positive or negative attitudes may shape their interpretations of the show. While a textual analysis uncovers various interpretations, it is important to understand the ways in which different viewers may mine the script for information that supports or contradicts their previously standing beliefs. As described above, considerable research exists to suggest that individuals with different attitudinal stances toward certain groups may respond very differently to messages about those groups.

> *Research Question:* How will viewers' responses to the different versions of the show be mediated by their attitudes toward older adults in general?

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 125 young adults (18 to 34 years old; older respondents were excluded from analyses, Mean age = 19.96 years) enrolled in an introductory communication studies course at a large midwestern university. The participants were 65.6% female, 34.4% male, and largely European American (78.4%; African American, 3.2%; Asian American, 12.0%; other, 6.4%). They received research credit in exchange for their participation. Completion of the study took approximately 20 minutes.

MATERIALS

The segment of *Frasier* featuring Moira and Roz was edited into two versions. One version contained the entire clip. The second version was identical except that the final utterance (the punch line) from Moira was removed. This was the utterance, previously discussed, that appeared to indicate some level of cognitive impairment. The segments were 174 seconds and 157 seconds long, respectively.

Two questionnaires were developed for use in the study. The first was a general measure of attitudes toward older adults. This was of interest both in terms of whether the clip influenced overall attitudes, and whether attitudes mediated responses to the clip. This questionnaire was developed from attitude scales developed by Braithwaite, Lynd-Stevenson, and Pigram (1993), Tuckman and Lorge (1953), and Kogan (1961). The questionnaire contained items concerning various components of attitudes toward aging, including particular issues that were salient in the clip of interest, particularly issues concerning older adults' cognitive impairments, adventurousness, and sexuality. Responses to all items were on 5-point Likert scales. The scale as a whole had good reliability (29 items, Cronbach's alpha = .84). Factor analysis identified two reliable subscales.[4] One concerned the cognitive abilities of older adults (7 items, α = .76, e.g., "With old age, people are inclined to become forgetful") and one contained a number of items expressing general positivity toward older adults' physical and/or sexual abilities and interest in talking with older adults (8 items, α = .79, e.g., "I really enjoy talking to older people").

The second questionnaire measured respondents' specific evaluations of the characters (primarily Moira) in the video clip. Respondents also received a sheet showing photographs of each character with her name to remind them which character was Roz and which was Moira. Specific questions asked about characters by name. Unless indicated otherwise, all items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire contained a short version of Hecht's (1978) communication satisfaction scale, which measured perceptions of Roz and Moira's joint satisfaction with their conversation (8 items, α = .81, e.g., "They could laugh easily together"). The questionnaire also measured respondents' desire to have a conversation with Moira or Roz (e.g., "I would look forward to having a conversation with Roz/Moira"; 3 items for Roz, α = .90; 3 items for Moira, α = .92).

In addition, the respondents evaluated Moira on 16 5-point semantic-differential trait scales (e.g., healthy-unhealthy; mentally alert-mentally impaired). These were factor analyzed (see Note 4 for procedural details) and two factors emerged. The first contained items concerned with Moira's cognitive ability (6 items, α = .74, e.g., "Not confused-Confused"). The second contained items concerned with her physical and sexual vitality (6 items, α = .67, e.g., "Sexual-Not sexual," "Physically active-Physically inactive").

Finally, the questionnaire measured respondents' perceptions on 14 items characteristic of younger adults' conceptions of satisfying and/or dissatisfying intergenerational communication (Williams & Giles, 1996). These items were derived from Williams and colleagues' (1997) perceptions of intergenerational communication scale (PICS; e.g., "Moira complained about her health"; "Moira told interesting stories").

This questionnaire was factor analyzed and two factors emerged. The first measured perceptions of complaining (3 items, $\alpha = .64$, e.g., "Moira complained about her life circumstances"). The other measured perceptions of Moira's level of attunement to the younger person's needs in the conversation (4 items, $\alpha = .64$, e.g., "Moira told interesting stories"). *Attunement* is used here as a general term to describe an individual's awareness of another person's needs in a conversation and how active that individual is in attending to those needs (Giles & Coupland, 1991). Embedded in this scale were 3 items measuring perceptions of Moira's typicality of older adults in general ($\alpha = .89$, e.g., "Moira was like other older adults").

EXPERIMENTAL MANIPULATION AND PROCEDURE

Respondents were randomly assigned in small groups to one of three conditions. Those assigned to a control condition simply completed the general attitudes measure. Of the remaining groups, one viewed the full version of the clip, complete with the ending implying some cognitive impairment of the older adult (henceforth, *impaired version*). The other group viewed the partial version of the clip (henceforth *non-impaired version*). Following viewing of their clip, both experimental groups completed both the general attitudes measure and the specific evaluations measure. The presentation of these measures was counterbalanced. Respondents were randomly assigned to receive one or the other questionnaire first.

This was a simple 2 (Video version: impaired vs. non-impaired) $\times$ 2 (order of questionnaires) factorial design, with an additional control group that merely completed the general attitudes measure. It was felt that completing the attitudes-toward-aging questionnaire prior to viewing the clip would influence processing of the clip. Hence, the respondents randomly assigned to the control group did not subsequently view the clip and did not complete the specific-evaluations questionnaire.

RESULTS

First, data for the measure of Moira's typicality of older adults in general were examined, given the importance of this variable to Hewstone and Brown's (1986) theoretical stance. These ratings were equivocal (across conditions $M = 3.17$ on a 1-5 scale) and did not display differences across experimental conditions, $t(91) = .23$, $p = .82$, $r^2 = .00$. Moira was not seen as particularly typical or atypical of older adults in general.

Hypothesis 1, which predicted that the different versions of the show would influence general attitudes toward older adults, was investigated. A one-way ANOVA was performed comparing the summated general attitude score across the two experimental groups and the control group. No significant difference emerged, and the effect size was small, $F(2, 122) = .47$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$. The same analysis was also performed on the two subscales that emerged from the factor analysis of the general attitudes measure. Again, the results were nonsignificant and effects sizes were small (cognitive abilities measure, $F(2, 122) = 1.21$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$; general positivity measure, $F(2, 122) = .41$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$). Finally, to confirm this finding, individual analyses were run across all 29 items in the general attitudes scale. Across these, only 1 item showed a significant difference—slightly fewer than what would be expected by chance alone. The average effect size across the 29 individual analyses was again very small (average $\eta^2 = .01$). Hence, no support emerged for Hypothesis 1, and fairly convincing evidence emerged that the clip had no effect on general attitudes toward aging. Statistical power in this analysis was sufficient to uncover quite small effects (power > .80 to detect $\omega^2 = .10$ at $p < .05$; power > .98 to detect $\omega^2 = .20$ at $p < .05$).

As a follow-up to this analysis, further tests were run to see whether the predicted effects on general attitudes occurred among individuals who viewed Moira as a typical older adult. As discussed earlier, Hewstone and Brown's (1986) theories suggest that attitude change toward a group will be considerably more likely when a target is perceived as typical of the group as a whole. Two groups of respondents were created by a median split of the measure of Moira's typicality. The analyses examining the effects of the video on attitudes were then repeated (using only the groups exposed to the video, because only these individuals had completed the typicality measures). Differences in evaluations across the two video groups were nonsignificant among both those who viewed Moira as typical of older adults in general and those who viewed her as atypical, $t(42) = -.90$, $p > .05$, $r^2 = .02$ and $t(47) = 1.23$, $p > .05$, $r^2 = .03$, respectively. Thus, it seems clear that the current manipulation failed to influence general attitudes toward older adults, and no support is found for Hypothesis 1. This finding is discussed later. Given the stability of the attitude measure across conditions (including the control group), the remaining analyses treat general attitudes as a mediator of responses to the clips.

To investigate the remaining hypothesis and research question, regression analyses were performed. These aimed to investigate the role of the presence of the punch line in influencing evaluations of the specific characters in the clip. The control group was no longer considered in the analyses, because these individuals did not view any version of the clip.

Seven regression analyses were performed attempting to predict desire to talk to Roz, desire to talk to Moira, perceived communication satisfaction of the two women, Moira's cognitive abilities, attunement to Roz, physical health and/or sexual vitality, and level of complaining. In a hierarchical procedure, these were predicted by (a) the order in which subjects completed the questionnaires, (b) the version of the video to which respondents were exposed (impaired vs. non-impaired) and their scores on the general attitudes scale, and (c) the interaction term composed of the latter two measures. In line with the recommendation of Aiken and West (1991; see also Segrin, 1996), the two relevant predictor variables were centered before computation of the interaction term. This procedure reduces multicollinearity among predictor variables when an interaction term is computed. The interaction term was included because the research question asked whether responses to different versions of the clip might be mediated by general attitudes.

In terms of the video version influencing evaluations of the clip, significant effects emerged on three dependent measures (see Table 1). In particular, viewers in the impaired version group rated Moira as more cognitively impaired, the couple as less satisfied with the conversation, and Moira as less attuned to Roz's needs. The effect sizes of these findings were mixed (see Table 1: sr^2 ranging from .05 to .21). Hence, support emerged for Hypothesis 2. Individuals exposed to the version of the video with the problematic punch line evaluated Moira and the interaction more negatively on a substantial subset of the dependent measures.

To answer Research Question 1, significant effects of attitude and interactions between attitude and video type were examined. As can be seen in Table 1, general attitudes were associated with three of the dependent measures. In particular, individuals with more positive general attitudes rated the couple as more satisfied with their interaction, perceived Moira as more attuned, and were more desirous of a future interaction with Moira. Hence, those with more positive attitudes displayed generally more positive attitudes toward Moira and the couple's interaction than those with more negative attitudes, independent of the version of the video to which they were exposed. The size of these effects was relatively small (sr^2 = .03-.08).

In addition to these main effects, interactions between general attitude level and video type emerged. As can be seen in Table 1, significant interactions emerged on four of the eight dependent variables, and borderline effects ($p < .10$) emerged with two others. The interaction effects were investigated by examining whether bivariate correlations between the general attitudes measure and the dependent variable were different across the two versions of the show.

In terms of perceptions of Moira's physical health and/or sexual vitality, a negative correlation ($r = -.23$) was found in the impaired

Table 1
Predictors of Character Evaluations

Outcome Variables	F (3, 89) / Adjusted R^2	Video Type		General Attitude		Video by Attitude Interaction	
		β	sr^2	β	sr^2	β	sr^2
Moira's cognitive abilities	8.94*** / .21	.46***	.21				
Moira's physical health/sexual vitality	2.50* / .04					.26**	.06
Moira and Roz's communication satisfaction	6.55*** / .15	.34***	.12	.19*	.03	.19*	.04
Desire to talk to Roz	3.64** / .08					.28***	.08
Desire to talk to Moira	4.61*** / .11			.28***	.08	.24**	.06
Extent to which Moira complained	1.40 / .01					.19*	.04
Extent to which Moira was attuned to Roz	5.42*** / .13	.23**	.05	.27***	.07	.20**	.04

Note. In all cases, the order in which participants completed the questionnaire was entered as a predictor prior to the other variables. In none of the analyses did it have a significant effect: Details are not reported to simplify presentation of results. The interaction term was entered in a separate step after entry of the main effects. The significance of the β for the interaction is equivalent to the significance of the change in R^2, hence incremental R^2 tests are omitted to simplify presentation. sr^2 is the squared semi-partial correlation coefficient.
*p < .10. **p < .05. ***p < .01. Only betas significant at p < .10 or greater are reported.

version condition. This indicates that individuals with positive attitudes toward aging in general had more negative perceptions of Moira's health. This effect was reversed in the non-impaired version condition ($r = .30$). A similar pattern emerged in evaluations of communication satisfaction ($p < .10$). No relationship between communication satisfaction and attitudes emerged in the impaired version condition ($r = −.02$); however, a significant positive relationship emerged in the non-impaired version condition ($r = .37$). In this condition, more positive general attitudes were associated with evaluating the couple as more satisfied with the conversation.

Significant interactions also emerged for the variables concerning the desire of the respondent to talk to each of the characters. In terms of the desire to talk to Roz, the interaction indicated a strong negative relationship between general attitudes and the desire for communication in the impaired version condition ($r = −.45$). Those with positive attitudes expressed less desire to talk with Roz than those with more negative attitudes. This effect disappeared in the non-impaired version condition ($r = .12$). In terms of the desire to talk to Moira, there was no relationship between desire and general attitudes in the impaired version condition ($r = .00$). However, in the non-impaired version condition, those with positive attitudes expressed a much stronger desire to talk with her than did those with negative attitudes ($r = .40$).

A borderline significant interaction emerged for the variable assessing perceptions of Moira's complaining ($p < .10$). In the impaired version condition, those with more positive attitudes perceived Moira as complaining slightly more than those who expressed more negative general attitudes ($r = .11$). Among those who viewed the non-impaired version of the video, those with more positive attitudes perceived her as complaining less ($r = −.26$).

Finally, there was virtually no relationship between perceptions of Moira's attunement to Roz and general attitudes in the impaired version condition ($r = .06$). However, in the non-impaired version condition, Moira was perceived as considerably more attuned by those with more positive attitudes, as compared to those with more negative attitudes ($r = .42$).

It should be noted that the order in which participants completed the questionnaires had a borderline significant impact on only one of the dependent variables. Individuals who completed the general attitudes questionnaire first tended to evaluate Moira's physical and/or sexual vitality higher than those who completed the specific-evaluations questionnaire first ($\beta = .18$, $p < .10$, $sr^2 = .03$). Given that order effects were removed in the regression prior to investigation of any other effects, this finding is not discussed any further.

DISCUSSION OF STUDY 2

EFFECTS ON GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARD AGING

The absence of effects of the video on general attitudes provided no support for Hypothesis 1. A number of explanations might account for this lack of effects. First, it is perhaps unlikely that such a short exposure would affect stable attitudes toward a particular group in society. Even assuming that this type of encounter has the capacity to change attitudes, repeated exposures might be necessary to achieve such effects. Indeed, Hewstone (1996) notes that evidence for generalization from a specific target to attitudes toward an entire group is "quite rare" (p. 326; see also Amir, 1976). Second, as outlined in the textual analysis, this was a broadly positive portrayal of Moira. It is feasible that even in the impaired version condition, the positive aspects of the portrayal overwhelmed any effects that the punch line might have. In this context, it is worth reiterating that the manipulation was fairly subtle: the removal of only one speaking turn (19 seconds) from an exchange containing 19 speaking turns (178 seconds). Alternatively, of course, it was noted earlier that the portrayal is not unwaveringly positive and that stereotypical themes do emerge. In addition, counter-stereotypical themes are at times linked with humor, which may lessen their impact. Third, the ratings for Moira as "typical" of older adults were equivocal. Despite the salience of age in the encounter, it is possible that many aspects of her portrayal were sufficiently atypical that a translation to changes in overall attitudes was short-circuited. If Moira was treated as atypical of older adults, or possibly subtyped as a "positive" older adult, generalizations to older adults would be unlikely. In the script, Roz makes this distinction explicit, commenting that she "wouldn't care about getting older if I thought my mind was going to be as sharp as yours is." The fact that Roz does care about getting older is a clear indication that she believes that Moira's "sharpness" is an exception to the rule. To this extent, the clip itself may facilitate perceptions of Moira as atypical of older adults as a whole and hence discourage generalization to older adults as a group. Finally, in order to minimize demand characteristics, respondents were instructed to ignore the television clip while completing the general attitudes questionnaire. It is possible that this instruction might have countered against uncovering attitude change.

The results in the current analysis were sufficiently consistent to state confidently that general attitudes were not affected by the current manipulation. However, further research will be required to examine whether repeated exposures to such clips, or similar but more dramatic manipulations, can lead to attitude change.

EFFECTS ON SPECIFIC EVALUATIONS OF CHARACTERS

Numerous effects emerged in the study concerning evaluations of the specific characters in the clip. The main effects for video type provided support for Hypothesis 2. They illustrated that the manipulation of the video resulted in sometimes large differences in perceptions of the characters. Perhaps most obviously, the older adult was perceived as more cognitively impaired in the version of the clip including the punch line. This effect was in spite of the fact that she had illustrated substantial competence for the remainder of the conversation, appearing alert and humorous. Furthermore, this evaluation extended beyond evaluations of cognitive impairment. The older adult was also perceived as complaining more in the impaired version condition, despite the fact that this did not contain any additional complaining content. In addition, the couple were perceived as less satisfied with their communication. Thus, the final utterance led to negative evaluations of Moira, and these extended beyond aspects that could be specifically attributed to the portion of the clip itself.

In addition to these main effects, a number of interaction effects emerged between video type and general attitudes, which provide information relevant to the research question. These largely consisted of more extreme evaluations of the older adult among respondents with more positive general attitudes toward older adults, as compared to those with more negative attitudes. For instance, individuals with more positive attitudes saw Moira as more cognitively alert in the non-impaired version video condition than those with more negative attitudes, but, ironically, as more cognitively impaired in the impaired version condition. These findings are consistent with previous research that has demonstrated an association between attitudinal positions and message processing (e.g., Duncan, 1976; Stangor et al., 1992).

The particular nature of these findings demonstrate that we need to be more aware of the negative consequences of positive attitudes. The idea that positive orientations toward older adults may have negative outcomes has been made before in the literature. Harwood (1998) has noted that younger adults' apparently positive communication strategies may actually restrict older adults' options in an interaction (see also Roy & Harwood, 1997). This paper demonstrates an additional problem. Individuals with generally positive attitudes may be quicker to denounce older adults who display incompetence, perhaps in an effort to leave their positive attitudes "unsullied" or because this older adult violates their expectations (see Burgoon, 1993). The role of general attitudes is complex in terms of influencing judgments of particular individuals.[5]

The pattern of findings in the current study bears some similarity to that described by Linville (1982). Her complexity-extremity effect sug-

gests that those with less complex representations of a group will make more extreme evaluations of members of that group than those with more complex representations. The current results would be interpretable within her framework if we had evidence that those with more positive attitudes also had less complex representations of older adults. There is no direct evidence for that in the data. Given the realities of growing older, however, unqualified positivity might be seen as a somewhat simplistic representation of the experience. This may be a profitable track for future research. This is not to suggest abandoning the productive research that exists on negative attitudes toward older adults or understating the harmful nature of such attitudes (e.g., see Palmore, 1990). However, the extent of focus on negative attitudes in the literature has, perhaps, led to an implicit assumption that positive attitudes are good. The current research suggests that this assumption should be questioned.

In this context, it may be worth noting that other dimensions of individual differences have been examined with regard to interpreting television messages. For example, Mares and Cantor (1992) have examined differences between lonely and non-lonely older adults in their processing of lonely and non-lonely media portrayals of older adults. On an applied note, this finding might have implications for programs aimed at improving attitudes toward older adults. Directors of such programs may want to work on developing portrayals that avoid backlash effects from individuals with overly positive expectations (see Fox & Giles, 1993, for a review of such programs).

The current research may be criticized for a lack of external validity. Subjects watched a very short segment of a television comedy in an unusual setting and were asked to evaluate the characters more formally than would ever occur in normal television viewing. Some of these problems could be overcome. For instance, implicit measures of attitudes might provide more productive measures of change than the explicit measures used in the current study (e.g., Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Observations of subjects viewing the show in their own homes might provide more naturalistic reactions. Similarly, analysis of spontaneous comments in response to the show might reveal common reactions to the portrayals. Finally, similar examinations in the future might utilize continuous audience response measures within autoregressive repeated measures designs. Such designs might reveal more about the viewing experience as a dynamic process than was achieved by the current work (West & Biocca, 1996). Naturally, all such refinements would require substantially more resources than were available for the present study. It is hoped that the current study stimulates research that moves toward such ideals.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

First, both the textual analysis and the experimental study suggest that it is possible for a broadly positive portrayal to be counteracted by a single negative implication, particularly when that comes at a focal point in the portrayal. In the particular context examined, a large portion of the encounter is devoted to a positive portrayal of a coherent, world-wise, and engaged older adult. The younger adult displays a clear enjoyment of the encounter and a genuine fascination with her older partner. The humor of the scene is then created by a sudden return to the familiar stereotype and by the younger person's disenchantment. From the data presented herein, such a return certainly harms the positive portrayal of the older individual, and the possibility remains that repeated portrayals of this kind might damage general attitudes. Future research needs to examine the frequency of this pattern of interaction in older adult portrayals. If similar portrayals are found to be widespread, then work examining repeated exposures to such a pattern should be undertaken to discover whether such exposure impacts general attitudes toward aging. Zillmann and Bryant (1991) note that much comedy consists of situations in which certain people or groups "triumph over others, and in which these others are debased, demeaned, disparaged. . . ." (p. 270). The lurking incoherence displayed by Moira in the current exchange appears to display this type of pattern, both in terms of the specific disparagement of Moira and (given the salience of age in the encounter) the negative implications about aging.

Second, this work provides some support for sociopsychological perspectives on the difficulty of stereotype disconfirmation (Hamilton, Gibbons, Stroessner, & Sherman, 1992; Maass & Arcuri, 1996; Rothbart & Park, 1986) and indicates that the media may play a collaborative role in establishing such beliefs. The final line of the portrayal sends a clear message that incoherence may be "lurking" behind even the most alert and socially competent older adult. It is possible that such portrayals are more harmful than simple negative portrayals. A simple portrayal of an incoherent older adult leaves open the possibility that there are other older adults who are competent. However, a portrayal in which a competent older adult reveals a lurking deficit does not leave such options as readily available. The way in which the current script achieves this effect relates well to other research demonstrating how messages are sometimes constructed so as to render stereotypes un-disconfirmable. For instance, Maass, Ceccarelli, and Rudin (1996) have shown that negative attributes of outgroup members are often described using verbs that are abstract (and therefore difficult to disconfirm with any specific instance of behavior; see Maass &

Arcuri, 1996, for a detailed review of research in this area). The notion of lurking incoherence in an older adult may be similar to this, in that it does not allow for any behavior to easily disconfirm the possibility that senility may be "just around the corner."

Perhaps it is worth briefly presenting options that were available to the writers in this context, other than the punch line they produced. An equally humorous close to the scene might have been achieved through both women getting into trouble for smoking, or collaborating to lure Eduardo back to the room, or working together to play a trick on the nursing staff. Such portrayals would have permitted the audience their fair share of merriment and allowed Moira to escape the scene unscathed. Naturally, the goal of the current research is not to force age-sensitive political correctness on comedy writers. However, age does not have to be "the joke" just because an older character is present in a particular scene.

Third, although the current work did not provide quantitative support for Hewstone and Brown's (1986) intergroup contact theory, that theory may still be seen as a useful framework for future considerations of media effects. In many circumstances, contact with members of particular groups may be more frequent in mediated settings than in direct personal communication. This may be particularly relevant in the case of older adults, because research has shown that contact between older and younger adults who are not family members is relatively rare (Williams & Giles, 1996) and because the age of older adults can sometimes be a particularly salient aspect of their television portrayals (Harwood & Giles, 1992; see also earlier discussion of age salience). Rarely do shows feature an older adult who is a part of the plot or narrative without serving some function explicitly linked to their age. Older adults tend to play the part of older adults, not just in age, but in narrative function. This salience of age is a mixed blessing. Intuitively, it would be nice to have older characters who are not playing a role that is determined by their age. Clearly, there are many other aspects to the lives of older individuals than those which are tied to their age (they have relationships, crises, hobbies, jobs, and the like). That said, Hewstone and Brown (1986) would claim that a lasting generalization of a positive portrayal is only likely when age is salient. With this in mind, we need to find ways to suggest to writers and producers that they can include older adults in shows in ways that emphasize the breadth of their lives, but that also maintain an awareness in viewers that these individuals are older. Potential positive impacts of positive portrayals should not be lost simply because the older adult is no longer perceived as an older adult. As noted earlier, Roz's explicit dissociation of Moira from typical older adults may be one instance of the script facilitating the "refencing" of stereotypes, lessening the chances of positive attitude change.

Finally, it is hoped that this work has demonstrated the importance of combining detailed analyses of particular media messages with more controlled experimental investigations. The detailed textual analysis hopefully illuminated the meanings that viewers might have derived from different points in the conversation, and the complex ways in which the age difference between the characters was negotiated and exploited by the writers. In combination the experimental effects study examined the impact of a particularly important line in the script, the punch line, on viewers' attitudes toward the characters and older adults in general. This research supported some predictions emerging from the textual analysis. It simultaneously showed that what may seem intuitive from the examination of a text need not play itself out in controlled experimental evaluations. Obviously, the need remains for work studying broader patterns of messages. Large-scale content analyses are important in understanding the extent to which particular types of messages are widespread and the broad brush strokes of portrayals. For instance, the current investigation might stimulate a broader analysis of the frequency of lurking incoherence in portrayals of older adults. However, it is important that such work not be isolated from, or antagonistic to, more detailed analyses of specific messages. When messages are public and viewed by large audiences, then it is important to pay very careful attention to the detail of those messages and to investigate empirically the impact of such messages on viewers. This is, perhaps, particularly the case with portrayals of older adults, who continue to be massively underrepresented on television. Those older adults who *are* portrayed may be playing a particularly strong role in influencing younger individuals' attitudes concerning their elders and older individuals' expectations for themselves (Mares & Cantor, 1992).

NOTES

1. Of course, the fact that the audience members find this funny relies on their understanding of memory loss in old age. The reality of such memory loss is a complicated topic that requires more lengthy presentation than is appropriate here (e.g., see Light, 1991; Smith, 1996). However, the perception that memory loss is associated with aging is clearly established (Hertzog, Dixon, & Hultsch, 1990), and recent work suggests that such a perception in and of itself may cause declines in memory performance in old age (Levy, 1996).

2. Classical theories of humor support such an interpretation. Indeed, some go as far as to state that humor is a response to relief from an unpleasant state (e.g., Kant, 1922; Spencer, 1888). From such perspectives, Moira's general competence for the majority of the interaction would be interpreted as an incongruous and difficult stimulus to process, and her ultimate lapse provides relief from that strain (see Zillmann & Bryant, 1991).

3. Hewstone and Brown (1986) have not applied their model to mediated contact. However, there is not anything inherent in the model that makes it inapplicable to that context. The biggest barrier may be the extent to which mediated contact may be less personally-involving than immediate interpersonal contact.

4. All factor analyses were performed using a principal components extraction and a varimax rotation. Solutions with various numbers of factors were examined. The solution was accepted on which (a) all factors had eigenvalues greater than 1.0, (b) all items had primary loadings greater than .5 and all secondary loadings at least .2 smaller than the primary loading, and (c) where the resulting scale had a Cronbach's alpha of at least .6. In addition, given the need for parsimony in undertaking the current analyses, preference was given to solutions that produced a smaller number of factors if multiple solutions were equal on the criteria previously noted. Items that displayed double loadings, or insufficient loadings, were dropped; hence, the number of items on subscales will not sum to the original number of items in the original questionnaire.

5. Of course, it should be reiterated that the ratings of general attitudes were made following viewing of the video. Despite the lack of effects of the video on attitudes, we cannot rule out the possibility that these interactions are the result of some complex joint effect of video viewing on specific evaluations and general attitudes in combination. Perhaps viewing the video led (jointly) to either positive evaluations of older adults in general combined with extreme evaluations of the target or negative evaluations of older adults in general combined with more moderate evaluations of the target. This is a considerably less parsimonious explanation for the findings than that advanced in the text.

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