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Jake Harwood ^a

^a Assistant professor in Communication Studies, University of Kansas, 3090 Wescoe Hall, Lawrence, KS, 66045-2177 E-mail: harwood@falcon.cc.ukans.edu

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Young Adults' Cognitive Representations of Intergenerational Conversations

Jake Harwood

ABSTRACT *Extensive research has focused on younger adults' stereotypes of older adults. The current paper attempts to extend this research by examining younger adults' cognitive representations of intergenerational conversations—here termed intergenerational communication schemas (ICSs). Young adult respondents were provided with a description of an older target reflecting a positive or negative stereotype, and were asked to provide an open-ended narrative describing a conversation with that older person. The narratives were analyzed and six categories emerged which were identified as homogeneous and coherent types of intergenerational conversation. For example, a helping schema emerged which featured descriptions of the older adult as dependent, the young person desiring to help the older adult, and the younger adult expecting to feel good for having helped. Some variation in the narratives is explained as a function of the nature of the older target, for instance the helping schema emerged exclusively in the negative stereotype condition. In addition, the schema descriptions are shown to be associated with other evaluations of the conversation such as general communication satisfaction. The role of these schemas in influencing intergenerational talk, and their relations to theoretical and applied issues are discussed.*

The Communication Predicament of Aging (CPA) model is the primary theoretical statement of the relationship between age stereotypes and communication, and serves as the stimulus for this paper (see Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Henwood, 1988; Harwood & Giles, 1996; Harwood, Giles, Fox, Ryan, & Williams, 1993; Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986, for various presentations and discussions of the model; see also, Cai et al., & Ryan et al., this Issue). From a CPA perspective, problems in intergenerational interactions emerge from younger

Jake Harwood (Ph.D., University of California, Santa Barbara) is assistant professor in Communication Studies, University of Kansas, Lawrence. The author expresses his appreciation to Mary Lee Hummert for her assistance with the stimulus materials and discussions associated with this paper. Thanks are also extended to Amy Leyerzapf, Chris Rohr, and Angie Williams for their assistance at various stages of data analysis, and to Howard Giles and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments. Separate analysis of some of the data in this paper are reported in Harwood and Williams (in press). Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jake Harwood, Department of Communication Studies, 3090 Wescoe Hall, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045-2177. Electronic mail may be sent to harwood@falcon.cc.ukans.edu.

people's stereotyped expectations of older people in intergenerational conversations. These stereotyped expectations are hypothesized to lead to particular styles of talk to the older person which may be dysfunctional in the situation, particularly for the older person. For instance, a younger person may have a stereotype of older adults as cognitively impaired. This stereotype leads the younger person to use a simplified, and potentially patronizing style of talk which, in turn, restricts the older adult's opportunities to engage in more complex discussion. The younger person's stereotypes will be confirmed by the relative simplicity of the older person's discourse, and the older adult will suffer from a lack of meaningful social contact. If repeated in the long term, this low level of complex social contact may actually *cause* a level of cognitive impairment. Hence, the CPA model reflects a self-fulfilling prophecy with respect to age stereotyping and intergenerational communication (see Snyder, 1984).

Younger adults' stereotyped expectations of older adults are central to the CPA model, and have been studied extensively in the social gerontology literature. Research has demonstrated that these stereotypes are more likely to be negative than positive (Kite & Johnson, 1988), although both conceptions of older adults exist (Brewer, Dull, & Lui, 1981; Hummert, 1990; Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994). Indeed, multiple, qualitatively different stereotypes of older adults appear to be shared by young and old alike, and a particular stereotype may be activated depending upon physiognomic features of the older adult, aspects of the situation, and the like (Hummert, 1994). These stereotypes include positive types (e.g., a kind, loving grandparent) and negative types (e.g., a sad, lonely, despondent elder).

In support of the CPA model, stereotypes of older adults have been shown to be related to aspects of intergenerational communication. Hummert and Shaner (1994) demonstrated that messages directed to a negative (as opposed to positive) older adult stereotype were less complex and included elements associated with patronizing speech. Similarly, Caporael (1981) showed that speech directed to nursing home residents reflected nurses' stereotypes of older adults more than it did the functional capacity of the older persons themselves. Harwood and Williams (in press) have demonstrated that the stereotype of the older adult being addressed, and younger adults' more general attitudes toward old age, predict younger people's expectations for intergenerational interactions. Research on the consequences of stereotypes for intergenerational communication has been particularly voluminous in research on patronizing speech to older adults (Giles, Fox, Harwood, & Williams, 1994; Hummert, 1994; Ryan, Hummert, & Boich, 1995). It has been shown that patronizing talk occurs in many intergenerational settings (Ryan et al., 1995), that it is generally negatively evaluated by observers (Harwood et al., 1993; Ryan, Bourhis, & Knops, 1991), and that it can lead to a victimization of the older adult (i.e., they are evaluated as less competent simply because of the demeaning speech directed toward them: Harwood, Ryan, Giles, & Tysoski, 1997; Ryan, Boich, & Klemenchuk-Politeski, 1994). In addition, it has been shown that certain contextual features, such as the patronizer having a positive intent or the patronizee being cognitively impaired, may ameliorate the negative evaluations of patronizing talk (Harwood & Giles, 1996; Hummert, Mazloff, & Henry, 1994). Particular responses by an elderly patronizee have also been shown to lessen the negative consequences of such talk in some studies (Harwood et al., 1993; Harwood et al., 1997). Finally, research has shown that younger individuals are

recipients of intergenerational patronization, as well as older people (Giles & Williams, 1994).

The current paper operates from similar assumptions to those of the CPA model, however, it seeks to broaden our understanding of the intergenerational interaction process in two primary ways. First, it aims to add diversity to the way in which age-based "stereotyped expectations" are understood in the field. Rather than understanding these primarily as the traits or characteristics which the younger person associates with the older adult, the current paper focuses on the younger person's full range of expectations for intergenerational *interaction*. These expectations include not only the characteristics of the older adult, but all aspects of what will be referred to as an intergenerational communication schema (ICS). Features such as the talk of both participants, expected emotions in the encounter, predicted topics of conversation, and the like, might all be a part of such a cognitive representation. It will be argued that activation of such a schema provides individuals entering an intergenerational interaction with a cognitive "map" of the conversation.

Second, along with broadening our notion of "stereotyped expectations," this paper also seeks to extend the focus of the communication and aging literature beyond patronizing speech to other ways of talking. It is argued that the emphasis on patronizing speech in the literature may well have distracted us from attending to other types of intergenerational communication, which may be more or less harmful (see Ryan, Meredith, MacLean, & Orange, 1995). The paper is an attempt to cast a broader net in examining the multiple ways in which young people think about their own, and their partners', experiences in an intergenerational encounter.

ICSs are hypothesized to feature elements such as topics of conversation, affective responses, who is talking, the things they are saying, the tone of the conversation, the attitude of each person toward their conversational partner, and anything else that may be notable about the encounter. It should be noted that these schemas differ from Schank and Abelson's (1977) use of the term "script." Schank and Abelson focused on temporally-organized chains of events that would take place in particular contexts. In contrast, the current notion of an ICS focuses on the process of, and affective response to, a conversation, but not particularly on the temporal ordering of a particular sequence of events.

In fact, the ICS structure comes closest to what Cantor, Mischel, and Schwartz (1982a, b) have referred to as a person-in-situation prototype. These prototypes are seen as shared, "fuzzy" representations of situations that include: (1) dispositional features describing feelings, traits, attitudes of a prototypical person in a situation; (2) behavioral features describing the person's behavior; (3) physical features describing the person's appearance; (4) situation features mentioning places in which the person is likely to be seen; and (5) social features mentioning the person's group affiliations (nationality, social class, social roles, etc.). These elements constitute a knowledge structure about a particular target person in a given situation. Such descriptions have been found to be richer and more quickly generated than representations of persons or situations alone (Cantor et al., 1982b). This paper adopts Cantor et al.'s perspective on such representations, but extends it to include perceptions of *self* in the situation. In other words, we would add to Cantor et al.'s list of features (above) such factors as (6) own behaviors, and (7) own emotions (see also Carlston, 1994). Hence, the cognitive representation is ex-

tended to one of *people-in-situation*, which incorporates dispositional and behavioral characteristics of self and other, as well as more abstract elements of the interaction (e.g., perhaps topics or “flow” of conversation). It is argued that cognitive representations of *conversations* (rather than people) may be particularly powerful in determining responses in actual interactional situations (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977).

Hence, the current research set itself the goal of uncovering younger adults’ shared cognitive representations of intergenerational interactions (intergenerational communication schemas, or ICSs). In line with the theoretical discussion above, knowing about such cognitive representations will be useful because they may play a crucial role in guiding younger individuals’ behaviors in intergenerational interaction.

Three research questions emerge from the foregoing discussion, which highlight the primary goals of this research.

- RQ1:** Will young adult respondents provide narratives of intergenerational interactions which reveal common themes or patterns? Can we access coherent, shared representations of intergenerational interactions from these respondents?
- RQ2:** How will these descriptions of intergenerational interactions differ according to the particular type of older adult target with whom young adults are imagining a conversation (i.e., a positive or negative stereotype)?
- RQ3:** Will the type of description be associated with quantitative evaluations of the intergenerational interaction (e.g., in terms of overall satisfaction)?

Examination of RQ1 will provide evidence for the schematic nature of these ICSs, since one characteristic of cognitive schemas is that they be shared and internally consistent. RQ2 will provide a point of connection between the current work and previous work on (trait-based) stereotypes, and will provide preliminary indications of when particular ICSs may be activated. Investigation of RQ3 will provide additional evidence that these schemas are coherent organized knowledge structures, and that the initial coding of them was valid.

Method

Respondents

109 respondents participated in exchange for extra-credit in an introductory Communication class. Eight respondents were dropped for reasons outlined below, resulting in a final sample of 101 (mean age = 19.7 years, SD = 1.4). The sample was 61.5% female (38.5% male) and 88% Euro-American (4.6% African American, 1.8% Latino-American, 3.7% Asian-American, and 1.9% “other” or missing).

Materials and Procedures

Respondents completed a questionnaire in which they were asked to imagine that they had a conversation with a specific older adult called Jennifer Brown. The older adult was presented in a manner consistent with one of two of Hummert et al.’s (1994) stereotypes. Half of the respondents were randomly assigned a

description of an older adult who possessed the traits associated with Hummert's *perfect grandparent* stereotype ("The picture you are looking at is of Jennifer Brown. She is a loving and kind grandparent. Her family often describe her as generous, wise and intelligent. Jennifer is 71 years old and has been retired for 8 years."). The other half received a description consistent with the *despondent* stereotype ("The picture you are looking at is of Jennifer Brown. She is a lonely and somewhat neglected grandparent. Her family often describe her as sad, afraid, and hopeless. Jennifer is 71 years old and has been retired for 8 years."). The name of the condition (*despondent; perfect grandparent*) was not mentioned. The traits mentioned as part of the description were central traits in Hummert et al.'s (1994) clusters of stereotype traits.¹ These descriptions were accompanied by a photograph. Across conditions, the photograph featured the same older woman in *identical* dress and pose. However, in the perfect grandparent condition the woman was smiling, whereas in the despondent condition she had a neutral, perhaps even sad, expression on her face. The photos were not pre-tested for their relationship with the stereotypes, however Hummert, Garstka, and Shaner (1997) have demonstrated that this variation in facial expression is associated with the stereotype manipulation being attempted in the current study. The photos used in the current study were from the same data set that Hummert et al. (1997) drew on for their study. Including the photographs was intended to strengthen the stereotype manipulation. Respondents were asked to keep the photograph visible while they completed the questionnaire, thus maintaining the influence of the manipulation.

Respondents were asked to respond to a very broad, open-ended question about the conversation ("Please write a short paragraph describing this conversation—what you might talk about, how you might feel during the conversation and after it was done, or anything else you might imagine about the conversation."). Responses to this question ranged from single sentences to longer narratives (means: number of words = 53.95 (SD = 27.05, range = 17–205), number of sentences = 3.67 (SD = 1.51, range = 1–10)). These descriptions were the core data for the analysis described below. Prior to this portion of the study, and ostensibly as part of a separate study, participants completed a questionnaire designed to tap their level of identification with being young (e.g., "I am proud to be a member of my age group") (Garstka, Branscombe, & Hummert, 1997). It was expected that such identification might influence their responses in the current study. The 10 item questionnaire was highly reliable ($\alpha = .95$).

Following their completion of the open-ended responses, respondents were asked to estimate the length of the conversation that they would have with Jennifer Brown (in minutes or hours). Respondents also evaluated the imagined conversation on a large number of quantitative items including Hecht's (1978) Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction Inventory (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$) and a modified version of Williams et al.'s (1997) Perceptions of Intergenerational Communication Scale (PICS). The latter scale measures a number of dimensions salient to the evaluation of intergenerational conversations. These were identified via factor analysis in the current study. They included communication apprehension (e.g., "I could not think clearly when I spoke," $\alpha = .87$), anxiety (e.g., "I felt nervous," $\alpha = .84$), positive affect (e.g., "I felt happy," $\alpha = .91$), young overaccommodation (e.g., "I spoke slower," $\alpha = .76$), elder attunement (e.g., "She was

attentive," $\alpha = .85$), and elder complaining (e.g., "She complained about her health," $\alpha = .77$) (see Harwood & Williams, in press, for full details of the PICS' items and their factor structure in the current data set).

Questionnaires in which no response was provided to the initial open-ended question, and those from respondents over the age of 25, were discarded for the purposes of this study. This resulted in the exclusion of 8 questionnaires, leaving a total of 101 respondents. Questionnaire completion took approximately 45 minutes and no problems were reported.

Analysis and Results

The young adult respondents' spontaneous descriptions of the conversation were carefully and repeatedly read by the author and two research assistants. All three individuals independently developed category schemes for coding the narrative responses, focusing on the younger person's image or vision of the conversation. Development of these coding schemes was influenced by a number of variables in the narratives such as the emotional tone of the conversation (e.g., did the respondent mention being tense, relaxed, bored), topics of the conversation (e.g., did they mention talking about their family, or the older person's health), procedural aspects of the conversation (e.g., did they imagine asking the older person questions, or the older person telling stories), and structural aspects of the description itself (e.g., detail, perceived involvement of the respondent in the task). However, the goal of all coders was to develop a system that accounted holistically for variation in the descriptions. The three researchers then met and compared their independently derived categories. Through discussion and comparison of the different coding schemes, a 10-category scheme emerged. The two research assistants and the author then independently sorted the 101 descriptions into these categories. Inter-coder reliability was acceptable using Krippendorff's (1980) alpha—the most appropriate measure with more than two coders ($\alpha = .76$). This indicates that agreement between coders was 76% above chance level, a result which is encouraging given the exploratory nature of this research, and given that reliability is generally more difficult to achieve when coding larger bodies of text (as these narratives sometimes were) (Weber, 1990). When coders disagreed, the final categorization was achieved through discussion and the final decision of the author.

Those categories in which descriptions were relatively detailed, yet also coherent and homogeneous, were considered initial indicators of intergenerational communication schemas (ICSs). These were also categories where age appeared to play an important role in the nature of the description. In contrast, the remaining categories were more heterogeneous, less specific to the intergenerational context and, for now, are simply labeled as "communication schemas" (CSs). The categories are described below in an order which approximately reflects the level of detail provided by the respondents, and the clarity of the category to the coders. The six categories thought to represent ICSs are discussed first. Brief extracts from typical responses, and the number of respondents providing descriptions of each type are provided.²

a) The *Helping* ICS ($N = 13$): In these conversations, the respondent was largely concerned with attempting to help the older adult. The helping was not generally in terms of specific logistical problems, but rather in terms of emotional issues

(e.g., "I might have done something to cheer her up"). The older adult was often portrayed as benefiting from the conversation, the younger person noting that the older person would "appreciate" the conversation. Such descriptions were frequently accompanied by the younger adult noting that they would feel good about themselves for having helped the older person (see examples later). Williams and Giles (1996) have also noted this latter phenomenon in the context of satisfying intergenerational encounters.

Certain features of the *helping* ICS imply that it is distinctly oriented to older adults (i.e., that helping older adults involved different communication elements than helping other individuals). For instance, respondents frequently equated their helping encounters with conversations with their grandparents, or with the target's grandparent status (e.g., "As a neglected grandparent knowing that someone is interested in sharing their lives with her should warm her up a bit"; "I would try and fill the shoes of a grandchild"). In addition, certain phrases used in the narratives indicate that age is a salient feature of the descriptions (e.g., "I would try to get her to come up with some happy memories"). Helping may also have distinct issues associated with it in the intergenerational context beyond the precise content of the interactions. In particular, the associated power relations will be different from a peer context, and it is certainly possible that at times helping may serve pernicious functions in terms of positive group differentiation (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The fact that younger people feel good after helping may imply that the disempowerment of older adults serves to boost their youth identities, although this is certainly not always the case. That said, some of the content of this ICS could apply to a target of any age. It seems likely that there is a general communication schema for helping (e.g., people with disabilities), and that the *helping* ICS represents a version of this which is "flavored" by the older target.

b) The *Learning* ICS (N = 19): These were descriptions in which the younger adult mentioned the wisdom of the older adult, learning something from the conversation, or being "inspired" by the older person. Often, the younger adult was particularly interested in learning about historical events that had taken place during the older person's life, although they were also sometimes interested in personal issues (e.g., advice on finding a husband). The learning was also, at times, concerned with more abstract issues (e.g., "I also learn about life itself"). This schema seems particularly oriented to the age of the partner, revolving as it does around issues of history and experience in the world. The only situation in which this seems likely with an age peer might be in situations of extreme differences in experience (for instance, when talking to a peer from a different country; one that has experienced a different educational process, and the like). This ICS, therefore, may be an example of an inherently "intergroup" communication schema, with the current examples reflecting the intergenerational context. Williams and Giles (1996) provide a similar example in their "older narratives" category, although it is not necessarily the case that all older narratives would be associated with a learning schema in the younger person.

c) The *Gerontophobic* ICS (N = 6): These conversations were characterized by some level of discomfort or anxiety that was explicitly attributed to the age of the conversational partner, or the age difference between the two of them. Individuals noted that they often had problems talking with older adults, and they expected this situation to be no different (e.g., "I would feel somewhat awkward during the

conversation just because of the generation gap"). Occasionally, the exact reason why the age caused discomfort was noted (e.g., "I think I fear becoming too close to them when I know they won't be around forever"). Generally, however, the difficulty of a conversation with someone significantly older was taken-for-granted. This appears to be an ICS specifically associated with older adults, given that age attributions and evaluations are central to the descriptions. Again, however, it is possible to imagine this as a particular instantiation of a broader intergroup schema (e.g., "I often have problems talking to blacks/whites/women/men/foreigners/Catholics . . ." and the like). The same is true of the next type.

d) The *Gerontophilic* ICS (N = 5): Complementary to the *gerontophobic* ICS, some younger adults described a *positive* conversation, and explicitly attributed the positivity to the age of their partner. The characteristic theme was that the younger adult liked older adults or enjoyed talking to them, and hence expected a positive experience with this particular older adult. Again, sometimes the precise characteristics associated with older adults were delineated (e.g., "I would enjoy talking to her because I enjoy elderly people they are all very loving").

e) The *Pity* ICS (N = 4): In these descriptions the respondent described feeling sorry for, sad about, or pity for the older adult (although without explicit suggestion of wanting to help the older adult). The descriptions of sympathy were, at times, in the context of a positive evaluation (e.g., "I would probably like her, but I might feel sorry for her"). This ICS appears focused on the age of the target. That said, it is possible to imagine similar schemas concerning others in need (e.g., homeless, terminally ill, or HIV positive targets), and again this might be viewed as a specific exemplar of a broader "intergroup" communication schema.

f) The *Polite* ICS (N = 5): This category was characterized by expressions of extra politeness, restraint, or paying special attention to not offending the older adult. These descriptions sometimes included mention of being "relieved" once the conversation was over (e.g., "Afterwards, I might be somewhat relieved that it was over and I could once again talk like I want and be at ease"). Age is central and explicit in some of these descriptions (e.g., "I would always be on the alert to be polite since she's my elder"; "I may monitor my responses for anything I think she, as an elderly person, might be offended by or disapprove of"). It seems probable that age is salient even in those descriptions where it is not mentioned, given their dramatic similarities to those where age is mentioned. Indeed, this issue of feeling obliged to be polite and "bite your tongue" is one that has been noted in previous work on intergenerational communication (e.g., Williams & Giles, 1996, describe some conversations of this type as "reluctant young accommodation").

g) The *Conversational Development* CS (N = 6): These descriptions were characterized by the younger adult finding the conversation uncomfortable or awkward at first, but becoming more comfortable and enjoying the conversation as it developed (e.g., "I would probably feel a little uncomfortable at first, but after a while I would feel more comfortable"). It seems unlikely that this schema is limited to older adults, hence it is referred to as a general communication schema (CS) and not an ICS (although, see Williams & Giles, 1996). The same is true for the subsequent two categories.

h) The *Positive* CS (N = 18): These descriptions included mildly or extremely positive evaluations of the conversation (e.g., comfort, enjoyment, happiness), without a specific attribution to age, or any of the other elements above. At times

the descriptions were uniformly positive, at other times they were balanced with mildly negative elements (e.g., "It would be very interesting, it would be fun"; "It would be nice, but at times I would be bored"). There is great variety among these descriptions, and it seems likely that more in-depth investigation would uncover varieties within this type.

i) The *Negative CS* (N = 9): As with the category above, this category covered quite a range of orientations to the conversation, although all of the descriptions were generally negative (e.g., "I would probably feel awkward, wouldn't really know what to say or how to react"). Anxiety and discomfort were the most frequently mentioned negative emotions. Again, no attributions to age or any other elements of the earlier categories were present, and the category probably conceals considerable variation.

j) *Other* (N = 16): This category included minimal, bland descriptions, containing little apart from mention of topics of conversation (e.g., "What her family is like and what type of hobbies she has").

The first six categories were sufficiently well-elaborated that the individuals producing the descriptions appeared to be working with very similar conceptions of the conversation. Elements that Cantor et al. (1982b) describe as being features of the person-in-situation prototype were also features of these descriptions (e.g., characteristic behaviors, traits, group affiliations), as well as the additional features described in the Introduction as being elements of the hypothesized ICSs (e.g., own emotions, own behaviors). As an indication of the similarity and richness of some of the descriptions, two responses from the *helping* category are provided below. Specifically, these examples share mention of the older adult benefiting from the conversation ("brightened her day"; "she would appreciate it"), the younger adult feeling good about themselves for helping ("I would feel great about myself"; "I would feel good about forcing myself to talk to her"), and an empathetic tone ("I would feel sad if she was sad"; "I would feel sympathy for her loneliness"; "I know she would appreciate it").

Examples of the Helping ICS [Respondent 222105] *We would talk about her hobbies and mine to see what we have in common. I would ask about her parents, siblings, ethnic background, her kids, grandkids, etc. . . . I would want her to feel comfortable and to feel like what she said was interesting. I would feel sad if she was sad. If our conversation brightened her day, at least a little, I would feel great about myself.*

[Respondent 222207] *I think I would start by asking a little personal information, i.e., do you have grandkids, if so how many. I imagine that she would ask basic questions as well, do I go to school, do I have a girlfriend, what am I studying, etc., I would probably feel sympathy for her loneliness yet I would feel good about forcing myself to talk to her. I know she would appreciate it.*

Likewise, the *learning* ICS descriptions frequently featured in-depth descriptions of the experience of the conversation. Respondents in this category mention learning, often about rather "abstract" notions like "life" or "the world", although also about more concrete, age-linked issues such as historical events. The younger person is often emotionally moved in some way by these interactions (e.g., "moved and touched," "in awe").

Examples of the Learning ICS [Respondent 221101] *In talking to Jennifer I would probably talk to her about her family, what is important to her, and some of her life experiences. In talking to the elderly, I often get a sense of pride. I love to hear what they have been through, and often realize how fortunate I am. I also learn a lot about life itself.*

[Respondent 211102] *During this conversation I felt in awe of all the experience Jennifer had to offer me. I asked her about family, history, loved ones, and how she feels about certain controversial issues. I was moved and touched by what her wisdom had to say.*

Finally, it should be noted that most of the ICSs are tied, more or less, to the age of the target. That is, they are explicitly intergenerational communication schemas (in particular, the *learning*, *gerontophobic*, *gerontophilic*, and *politeness* ICSs). Information on the *helping* and *pity* schemas is more equivocal. While the descriptions in these categories were replete with references to age, elements of the descriptions might as easily have applied to a younger target who was experiencing misfortune. Further research is required to test whether these are distinct schemas for intergenerational communication.

In contrast to these elaborate and well-defined schemas, some of the latter categories were less detailed and featured more intra-category variation. More specific questioning of individuals producing those descriptions might reveal interpretive or attributional differences for what were, on the surface, similar descriptions. The typology above is a first step toward a more comprehensive typology of ICSs. It illustrates that there is considerable variation in the ways in which younger adults may approach an intergenerational interaction, and that there are coherent, shared patterns within that variation.³ The remainder of the analyses will focus on the first six categories: those which are sufficiently elaborated and linked to some degree to the age of the target.

Distribution of ICSs Across Target Stereotypes

While the current data set is relatively small, it is nonetheless worth examining the distribution of these ICSs across the positive and negative older adult targets. As will be recalled, half of the respondents wrote a narrative for a target who was described in a fashion consistent with Hummert et al.'s (1994) *perfect grandparent* stereotype, the others for a target consistent with Hummert et al.'s *despondent* type. The ICSs produced by respondents across these two conditions were compared. The overall distribution of ICS types across target types deviated from what might be expected by chance ($\chi^2(5) = 21.51, N = 52, p < .001$; symmetrical lambda = .30). In general, the *learning*, *gerontophilic*, and *polite* ICSs were produced more frequently in the positive stereotype condition, and the *helping* and *pity* ICSs were produced more frequently in the negative stereotype condition. These differences only reached significance for the *learning* ICS, and it is notable that four of the ICS types were represented in both subtype conditions (the *helping* and *pity* ICSs were found exclusively in the negative subtype condition). Apparently, younger individuals' categorization of an older person as representative of a particular stereotype has some implications for their expectations of the conversation—the ICS which is likely to be activated. However, the ICSs also cross target types in ways which indicate that factors beyond the specific characteristics of the target are important.

Relationships with Other Variables

A number of quantitative assessments were made as part of the current process. Descriptive statistics relating to all of the comparisons are presented in Table 1. The small N's for some of the ICSs should be considered in interpreting these statistics. Effect sizes for all of the comparisons are reported in the table and these indicate that ICS type may be accounting for significant portions of the variance in these variables, even when the differences did not reach statistical significance. Hence, differences in means are tentatively discussed below, even where the differences are not statistically significant. Clearly, further research with larger samples is necessary to replicate these findings.

The number of words and number of sentences provided in each description were compared across ICS types. No significant differences emerged. However, the means indicate particularly short *gerontophobic* descriptions, and longer descriptions of *helping* and *pity* ICSs. Participants' estimates of the length of the conversation (in minutes) varied in conjunction with the type of ICS they produced ($F_{5, 46} = 3.90, p < .01$). In general, respondents producing the *learning* and *gerontophilic* schemas anticipated considerably longer conversations ($M_s = 88.50, 67.10$ minutes, respectively) than those who produced the other schemas ($M_s = 20.00-38.25$ minutes).

Participants' (pre-manipulation) levels of age identity did not differ statistically across the ICS types. However, the means suggest potential for future research. The *gerontophilic* and *gerontophobic* ICSs were produced by individuals with considerably higher levels of reported age identity, while the *polite* and *helping* ICSs were produced by individuals scoring lower on this measure. Hence it appears

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Variables Across ICS Types

ICS Type	N	Number of Sentences	Number of Words	Length of Conversation (in Minutes)***	Self-Reported Age Identity	Elder Complaining	Elder Attunement***
Helping	13	4.38 (2.14)	70.15 (28.70)	34.81 _b (17.24)	4.81 (1.65)	3.49 (.96)	5.53 _b (.60)
Learning	19	4.05 (1.31)	57.95 (22.76)	67.11 _{ac} (29.92)	5.34 (1.01)	2.77 (1.37)	5.81 _b (.53)
Gerontophobic	6	3.00 (.89)	43.33 (18.73)	31.67 _b (11.25)	5.99 (.58)	3.50 (1.62)	4.72 _a (.98)
Gerontophilic	5	4.00 (1.58)	63.20 (31.38)	88.50 _a (87.85)	6.00 (.78)	2.73 (1.36)	6.11 _b (.52)
Pity	4	4.75 (.50)	70.00 (12.54)	38.25 _{bc} (26.06)	5.12 (1.80)	3.42 (2.25)	5.31 _{ab} (1.20)
Polite	5	3.40 (.89)	63.80 (14.27)	20.00 _b (16.30)	4.34 (.74)	1.87 (.30)	4.62 _a (.59)
Effect size (eta ²)		.10	.12	.30	.16	.14	.35

ICS Type	N	Communication Apprehension	Young Over-Accommodation	Communication Satisfaction+**	Young Anxiety	Young Positive Affect*
Helping	13	2.70 (.73)	5.10 (1.05)	5.25 _b (.74)	3.08 (1.29)	5.60 _a (.88)
Learning	19	2.57 (.93)	4.48 (1.00)	5.51 _b (.72)	2.58 (1.13)	5.77 _a (.78)
Gerontophobic	6	3.18 (1.06)	5.06 (1.22)	5.01 _{ab} (1.00)	3.07 (1.09)	4.73 _b (1.25)
Gerontophilic	5	2.18 (.50)	5.20 (.22)	5.49 _b (.77)	1.88 (.59)	6.02 _a (.59)
Pity	4	2.79 (.48)	4.00 (1.47)	5.22 _b (1.08)	3.15 (.50)	5.52 _{ab} (1.14)
Polite	5	3.13 (.73)	4.97 (.43)	4.04 _a (.87)	3.40 (1.00)	5.02 _{ab} (.60)
Effect size (eta ²)		.11	.13	.24	.14	.18

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

NOTE: Means with different subscripts differ at the .05 level.

+From Hecht (1978).

that the salience of the age of the older adult may be partly driven by the younger adult's identification with their own age group (throughout this section, see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

Participants' assessments of the imagined conversations on various dimensions associated with satisfaction were also compared across ICS types (see Method section for examples of these measures, and Harwood & Williams, in press, for a comprehensive description). ICS types differed in terms of the younger person's evaluations of their communication satisfaction ($F 5, 46 = 2.83, p < .05$), the attunement of the older adult ($F 5, 46 = 5.00, p < .01$), and their positive affect (marginally significant: $F 5, 46 = 1.98, p < .10$). Differences reflected more positive expectations (higher satisfaction, more attunement of older adult, more positive affect) in the *learning*, *gerontophilic*, and *helping* ICSs, as compared to the *gerontophobic* and *polite* ICSs. As can be seen from Table 1, a number of variables (perceived level of self overaccommodation, elder complaining, anxiety, apprehension) revealed no significant differences in evaluations across ICS types. A similar pattern, however is observable in these means. The *gerontophilic* and *learning* ICSs are associated with largely positive evaluations (low apprehension, low anxiety, little elder complaining), while the remaining ICSs are associated with various negative evaluation profiles. There are more subtle patterns in the data that may also be of interest in the future. For instance, the *polite* ICS is associated with some negative evaluations (high anxiety, high overaccommodation), but also some positive evaluations (lack of elder complaining). Such patterns will require larger sample sizes to permit full investigation.

These results provide support for the validity of the ICS descriptions provided earlier, given that the quantitative evaluations reflect the affective nature of those characterizations.⁴ Even in situations where the differences did not reach statistical significance, the patterns of evaluations intuitively reflect the ICS descriptions. It should be re-emphasized that very low *N*s reduce statistical power and make the absence of significant results for some variables difficult to interpret.

Discussion

In response to the research questions, a number of important pieces of information have emerged. First, the analysis has demonstrated that it is possible to identify coherent, shared patterns in younger adults' descriptions of intergenerational conversations. The fact that younger people provide similar descriptions of intergenerational conversations argues for the psychological and social reality of those representations, and their importance in everyday interaction. Second, the activation of an ICS has been shown to be partly, but far from entirely, related to the nature of the older adult target. Trait descriptions (i.e., stereotypes) played some role in the activation of particular ICSs, but other factors also influenced this process. Third, individuals who produced particular ICSs have been shown to evaluate those conversations consistently along various quantitative dimensions. Hence, we have some initial evidence that these are valid, consensually shared representations, with consistent evaluative profiles.

This discussion will focus on five areas. First, variation in the schemas is addressed in terms of multiple factors that may influence such variation. Second, the implications of the research for the CPA model will be explored. Third, some speculations about the place of ICSs within larger cognitive structures are

proffered. Fourth, applied issues are addressed. Finally, future research possibilities are discussed.

Variation in ICSs

The current paper assumes that individuals will have a *repertoire* of ICSs available to them. Many of these schemas will be shared by large numbers of individuals, although some ICSs may be inherently idiosyncratic. The factors which lead an individual to select one schema over another when confronted with an older adult target are worthy of further attention. As indicated in the quantitative results, some amount of the variation is accounted for by the different elderly targets that were provided. Older adults with different facial characteristics (Hummert, 1994), vocal characteristics (Mulac & Giles, 1996), or in different living situations, might activate different ICSs in their partners. Relatedly, it should be noted that the idea that these are "pure" schemas may overstate the case. Without doubt, these ICSs may blend into one another, some may be subtypes of others, and firm boundaries between them will be drawn for analytical convenience, not necessarily as strict representations of the cognitive reality (see also below).

However, it is crucial to note that a good deal of the variation in the schemas is *not* accounted for by characteristics of the older person, and hence is presumably a product of individual variation in the younger adult. Younger adults' previous contact with particular older adults (Fox & Giles, 1993; Knox, Gekoski, & Johnson, 1986), their cognitive complexity (Hummert, 1994), their relationship with a grandparent (McKay & Caverly, 1995), cultural background (Williams et al., 1997), general attitudes toward aging (Braithwaite, Lynd-Stevenson, & Pigram, 1993; Harwood & Williams, in press), and identity with being "young" (Garstka et al., 1997; Harwood & Williams, in press) may be important determinants of which schemas are invoked. For instance, the current data suggest that a high level of age identity on the part of the younger adult may lead to interactions which are more age-tinged (i.e., *gerontophobic*, *gerontophilic*). Other links could easily be imagined, although extensive speculation should await the confirmation and refinement of the typology of ICSs.

Implications for the Communication Predicament of Aging Model

The notion that young people have "stereotyped expectations" of intergenerational encounters has been central to the Communication Predicament of Aging (CPA) model, and the current paper suggests that it is possible to conceive of these expectations as explicitly relating to the *communicative* experience. Understanding expectations in this broader sense seems crucial in understanding intergenerational communication and miscommunication. It is likely that specific expectations about communication will play a stronger role in influencing communication than general expectations about the traits of the older adult (Ajzen, 1982; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). In line with the CPA model, ICSs are probably activated based on contextual cues, the ICS then influences the younger interlocutor's approach to the older person, which will influence the conversation itself and hence, perhaps, the long term consequences for both parties.

For instance, a younger adult who enters a conversation with a *learning* ICS may

well ask a large number of questions of the older adult, and perhaps openly marvel at the older person's great wisdom. Such behaviors may place the older person in an uncomfortable position (e.g., as feeling obliged to appear "wise"), and may restrict their ability to joke around, seek nurturance, or talk about their own future (see Coupland, Coupland, & Giles, 1991). Naturally, such behaviors by the younger person might also have particular benefits for the older adult (e.g., reinforcing an identity as knowledgeable or experienced). Once the schema is active, it may be difficult for the older person to change it, and they may end up adopting the role defined for them by their interlocutor. Of course, it is possible that the older adult will refuse to conform to the younger person's expectations, resulting in a violation of expectations which in itself has consequences for both parties (see Burgoon, 1993).

The concept of an ICS is a useful development of the CPA model. It retains the fundamental structure as it has existed previously, but builds on the notion of stereotyped expectations by generalizing to expectations about the *conversation*, rather than merely for traits associated with the older target. This more accurately reflects the process of interaction, wherein people make predictions not merely about the traits of conversational partners, but also their behaviors, and the self's responses to those behaviors (Carlston, 1994; Ickes, Patterson, Rajcecki, & Tanford, 1982; Snyder & Swann, 1978).

Speculations about the Cognitive Organization of ICSs

The point at which a "type" of schema was designated in the current research was somewhat arbitrary. It is likely that a hierarchical cognitive organization of schemas exists. This hierarchy would involve further organization at lower levels (e.g., various types of *helping* encounters), and at higher levels (e.g., a supra-cluster of broadly positive encounters). Understanding this hierarchical organization of schemas would further our understanding of cognitive representations of intergenerational communication, and might point us to schemas which are, as yet, unidentified.

That said, as discussed earlier, some of these schemas may be particular instantiations of more general communication schemas, applied here to the intergenerational context. Hence, we should not simply be concerned with the organization of ICSs, but also with their links to other structures within a cognitive semantic network. For instance, the current study has demonstrated some links between the ICSs and Hummert et al.'s (1994) stereotypes (i.e., person schemas—Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Hence, these schemas exist at multiple levels, with individual specific schemas combining to form larger, more general, schemas. In addition, qualitatively different schemas will combine in particular contexts to generate the specific expectancy that is useful or appropriate for that context. An ICS may be a group of other schematic structures that are connected, or perhaps even assembled on the fly, in intergenerational contexts. A *helping* ICS, for instance, may be a particular combination of the person schema that Hummert et al. (1994) describe as the "despondent" elder, an affective cluster that includes sadness and pity, and a general communication schema for offering help. The term ICS is particularly useful in that it considers the links between these different representations, and their likelihood of being activated simultaneously in a

particular context (see Carlston, 1994, and Hamilton, 1981, for more in depth discussion of these principles).

Applied Issues

The analysis of ICSs presented in the current paper has substantial applied implications. As a set, these ICSs (plus, undoubtedly, others yet to be discovered) constitute a formalized repertoire for intergenerational communication. Such a repertoire might well constitute a useful tool for educational programs and interventions. It would be possible to use these descriptions (and particularly, perhaps, some of the more positive ones) to provide individuals with new ways of talking to older adults. For instance, certain individuals might use particular ICSs in a chronic fashion, adopting them with little regard to the context or the capacities of the older adult. An educational program grounded in the ICSs might be able to illustrate alternatives for such individuals. People with a strongly "reverent" attitude towards older adults (perhaps associated with a *learning* ICS) might find it difficult to appreciate mundane problems in the older adults' life, or to engage in a humorous interaction. Different ICSs might serve as models for such people, providing new ways to talk with a grandparent, a care-recipient, or a stranger.

In addition, there may be a tendency for people to "stick" with an ICS once they have defined the situation in those terms. Educational programs might be developed that encourage switching or blending of ICSs to achieve more rounded conversations. Giles and Harwood (1997) discuss the importance of "practicing" intergroup encounters intrapersonally so as to more effectively carry them through in the future. The ICS concept might be one way in which to encourage such practice. For example, exercises might be developed in which individuals are encouraged to describe a particular conversation with an older adult. At various points in their description they might be asked to change the "tone" of the description to a different ICS. Education and introspective rehearsal could then focus on how to make such transitions smoother and a more "natural" part of interaction.

On a similar theme, understanding the repertoire of ICSs will begin to enlighten us on the types of conversations which do *not* occur intergenerationally—which are not generally part of individuals' repertoires. These gaps in the array of ICSs may also be useful in terms of changing the dynamics of intergenerational contact towards patterns that are comfortable and satisfying in *intragenerational* situations, but are currently not considered in *intergenerational* settings. For example, the current data set did not include references to joking with the older adult. That might be a strategy which, sensitively adopted, would open up new dimensions of intergenerational contact to younger interlocutors. Likewise, certain topics (e.g., sports) did not appear in the current descriptions. Associating particular topic options with ICS types might provide individuals with additional conversational resources to draw upon in intergenerational interactions. Such resources are the kind of assistance that people require to maintain interactions, establish common ground, and ultimately build relationships that no longer require such assistance.

These interventions and educational programs could be equally useful when directed to members of families with aging members (including the older person),

residents and staff in nursing homes, medical students, and even high school students in life-skills classes. Informal discussions with younger adults often reveal that "not having anything to talk about" is a problem in intergenerational conversations. It is suggested here that training based on ICSs might help to ameliorate this problem by providing not just topics, but also general styles or orientations for communication.

Future Research

There is a clear need to examine *older* adults' ICSs. This would inform us regarding the ways in which young and old may approach conversations with congruent or incongruent expectations (see Burgoon, 1993). Thus, it would help us develop theoretical models which incorporate the roles of *all* participants, younger and older, in determining communication success or failure (see Coup-land et al., 1988; Harwood, Giles, & Ryan, 1995; Hummert, 1994). Despite extensive research in the area of intergenerational communication, we still know relatively little about what older adults think and feel regarding talk with younger adults (see Cai, Giles, & Noels, this Issue). Work is also needed to confirm the existence of the proposed ICSs. More extensive exploratory work should be initiated to uncover the details of these representations and uncover new ones (e.g., from in depth interviews). In addition, experimental work should be started to confirm the content of these structures (e.g., work examining memory for schema-congruent and incongruent information: see Hastie & Kumar, 1979).

The links between ICSs and schemas for other intergroup or interpersonal interactions require consideration. For instance, a helping schema may also be applied in contexts with disabled, homeless, or other targets (see DePaulo & Coleman, 1986; Fox & Giles, 1996). Particular aspects of the schema described herein might be specific to older adults, but detailed comparisons with other helping schemas would be required to know exactly what those features are. Research is also required on the nature of the relationship between cognitive representations of older adults' characteristics (i.e., trait-based stereotypes) and cognitive representations of conversations. Can we conceive of both types of representation as inhabiting a common knowledge structure, and in what ways are ICSs related to one another in cognitive space (Carlston & Smith, 1994)?

As discussed earlier, we also need to understand more about the features of the participants and the context that elicit various conversational schemata. Finally, research could usefully examine links between the current research and previous work on patronizing speech. It is possible that certain of the ICSs described in the current research may be associated with the production of patronizing speech by the younger adult (e.g., the *helping* ICS, given its emphasis on dependency in the older adult). Understanding such links will bring us closer to being able to predict the contexts under which patronizing speech will be produced.

As research provides more complex understandings of the processes and pitfalls of intergenerational communication, the current paper offers a perspective that complements the established theoretical model in the area. It has been shown that younger adults share diverse schemas for intergenerational conversations, and that those schemas are somewhat related to the nature of the older adult target. It is hoped that the current paper goes some way toward encouraging further investigation of individuals' expectations for intergenerational conversations. The expecta-

tions with which we approach interactions will be crucial in determining how those interactions progress, the satisfaction of all concerned, and the extent to which we seek or avoid future interactions. In understanding intergenerational relations, and in trying to improve such contacts, these concerns require more attention.

Endnotes

1. Clearly there is something of a paradox here: The paper is designed to uncover structures broader than trait-based stereotypes, yet the stimulus materials are grounded in such stereotypes. As a first attempt to uncover cognitive representations of the intergenerational experience it was decided that grounding the research in the previous (stereotype-based) work would provide continuity in the literature. In addition, the ICS concept is not intended to compete with stereotypes, but rather to complement them and broaden the range of cognitive structures under consideration (see Discussion). Future research will move beyond using trait-based stimuli as starting points.

2. The exact frequencies with which ICSs emerged are not viewed as particularly important in the current research. The goal of the research was to uncover schemas that were shared, hence idiosyncratic descriptions were not of interest. That said, when three or four descriptions shared specific features, this was deemed sufficient to demonstrate the possibility that others might also share this schema. Given that participants were only asked to provide one description, and that research on schemas has demonstrated that individuals generally have multiple schemas for a given situation (Lurigio & Carroll, 1985), these schemas are probably more widely-held than the current frequencies suggest.

3. This typology of ICSs differs from Ryan et al.'s (1986) typology of young-to-elderly language strategies. First, the current typology examines cognitive representations of conversations along multiple dimensions, not solely language use in the interaction. Second, the current typology focuses on participants' own conceptions of the conversation, rather than analysts' interpretations. In addition, the analysis differs from Williams and Giles' (1996) investigation as these authors were largely concerned with retrospective accounts of conversational satisfaction and dissatisfaction in actual conversations, whereas the current research is concerned with abstracted cognitive representations of conversations. The commonalities across these independent investigations are, of course, promising in terms of establishing the validity of the perceptions of intergenerational communication that are emerging.

4. The role of sex differences in ICS production was examined, and no significant differences emerged. This supports other work which suggests a minimal role of sex in affecting evaluations of older adults (e.g., Hummert et al., 1997; Kite, Deaux, & Miele, 1991). That said, larger sample sizes will be necessary to understand definitively sex differences in ICSs.

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