

Age Excuses: Conversational Management of Memory Failures in Older Adults

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The social consequences of appealing to age to excuse memory failure were examined in 2 vignette-based studies. In Study 1, 75 older ($M = 72$ years) and 78 young ($M = 22$ years) adults evaluated forgetful older targets in their 70s who used their age, lack of ability, lack of effort, or the situation to explain forgetting. In Study 2, 105 older ($M = 72$ years) and 105 young participants ($M = 19$ years) evaluated forgetful targets with no specific age given in 4 excuse conditions (age, ability, situation, and no excuse). In support of the prediction of positive consequences, age excuses were rated as more believable than situation in both studies and more believable and socially fluent than effort in Study 1. In support of predictions of negative consequences, both groups in Study 2 rated target persons who used an age excuse to be much older than their peers and, along with ability excuse users, as eliciting more worry and frustration than the others. Moreover, young adults showed additional sensitivity to the negative aspects of age excuses in terms of worry and frustration in Study 1 and anticipated repeat forgetting in Study 2. These results suggest that although age excuses may relieve socially awkward situations, this strategy reinforces negative age stereotyping of the older forgetter.

IN his personal account of coping with everyday conversational memory failures in old age, the late, eminent psychologist B. F. Skinner recommended the use of age excuses:

We are, as we say, afraid we are going to forget. Some help may come from making such situations as free from aversive consequences as possible. Graceful ways of explaining your failure may help. Appeal to your age. (Skinner, 1983, p. 240)

The purpose of this article is to explore the implications of appealing to one's age in accounting for a memory failure. Do perceivers of a social interaction consider age excuses as graceful and effective in reducing aversive consequences as Skinner believed? Whereas age excuses may have merit in terms of immediate conversational management, we are concerned that such conversational behavior may also deliberately elicit negative stereotypes and increase negative reactions toward the forgetter.

Our initial pilot work suggested that age-excuse behavior most commonly occurs in situations in which negative stereotypes prevail (e.g., inactivity and poor memory; Ryan, Boich, & Wiemann, 1993). We have focused this investigation on situations where age excuses are used to justify everyday memory failures. Although there are many positive stereotypes about old age (e.g., wisdom, benevolence; see Erber, Szuchman, & Etheart, 1993; Harwood et al., 1996; Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994; Knox, Gekoski, & Kelly, 1995; Ryan & Laurie, 1990), expectations for decline in cognitive ability, especially for memory, are overwhelmingly negative (see Kite & Johnson, 1988). The mem-

ory of older people is less likely to be trusted (Kwong See, Hoffman, & Wood, 2001), older people are expected to experience more frequent memory failures in everyday life, and their memory failures are deemed more serious and less controllable (Bieman-Copland & Ryan, 1998; Cavanaugh, Feldman, & Hertzog, 1998; Cavanaugh & Green, 1990; Erber, Szuchman, & Rothberg, 1990; Heckhausen, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989; Lineweaver & Hertzog, 1998; Parr & Siegert, 1993; Ryan, 1992). Moreover, perceivers tend to attribute failures more to age and other internal causes for older than for young adults (Banziger & Drenstedt, 1982; Cavanaugh & Green, 1990; Reno, 1979; Ryan, Szechtman, & Bodkin, 1992). Overall, stereotypes or implicit theories about memory decline with age tend to exceed that which actually occurs in terms of severity, pervasiveness, and controllability (e.g., McFarland, Ross, & Giltrow, 1992).

Why are age excuses used by older adults as a conversational management strategy? On the basis of social cognitive theory (see Fiske & Taylor, 1991), stereotypes operate as schemas that influence person perception and bias one's expectations of the capabilities of unfamiliar others. The communication predicament model of aging (Coupland, Coupland, & Giles, 1991; Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986; Ryan, Hummert, & Boich, 1995) describes a dynamic process whereby stereotype schemas alter communication patterns in ways that lead older adults, in turn, to behave in ways that confirm age stereotypes. For example, negative age beliefs lead to modification of communication patterns in line with reduced expectations (e.g., patronizing speech, limited range of conversational topics). Given such conversational constraints, it is difficult for older adults to display and experience their own competence (Hummert,

1999; Kemper, Vandeputte, Rice, Cheung, & Gubarchuk, 1995; Ryan, Hummert, et al., 1995); and they subsequently exhibit such age-stereotyped behaviors as dependency (Baltes, Neumann, & Zank, 1994). Similarly, even positive age stereotypes (e.g., benevolence) can restrict the options open to older conversationalists by pressuring them to engage in expected behaviors. We argue that the use of age excuses by older adults constitutes one of these age-stereotyped behaviors shaped by the constraints of this negative feedback loop.

When making judgments related to success or failure, stigmatized individuals often use stereotypes of their own group in a self-handicapping manner to account for their failures (Goffman, 1963; Jones, 1979). In addition, Forsyth and Gramling (1987) and Hastorf and Wildfogel (1979) suggested that acknowledgment of a stigma such as a physical handicap is useful as a socially adept tactic to relieve the discomfort and uncertainty of conversational partners. This would certainly seem to extend to mentioning age when an apparently age-based social faux pas (e.g., forgetting in conversation) has been made or might be made. Indeed, Copland and colleagues (1991) discussed the frequent occurrence of age telling in older adults' conversations with new acquaintances as a type of self-handicapping. By volunteering information about age early in a conversation, older adults activate stereotyped schemas about age and thereby reduce performance expectations. This is a form of downward social comparison. The benefits of this type of social cognition for positive adaptation in elderly adults have been documented (Heidrich & Ryff, 1993). We believe, however, that such stereotype-based behavior in conversation leads directly to the perception of the person as a member of the stigmatized group, especially for a group with indefinite boundaries such as "old."

From the point of view of the literature on excuses, age excuses may offer some clear benefits. These benefits fit into two categories, namely, self-protection and impression management (Snyder, Higgins, & Stucky, 1983). With respect to self-protection, Snyder and Weiner (Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Weiner, Figueroa-Munoz, & Kakihara, 1991) have suggested that a good, healthy excuse is one that shifts causal attributions for personal failures to sources that are more external, unstable, and/or situation specific. The goal is to distance a bad outcome from one's core sense of self. This self-protective function was demonstrated in an experiment by McFarland and Ross (1982). They found that participants who were induced to attribute failure externally to the task showed higher subsequent self-esteem ratings than their peers. Ability is the quintessential stable internal causal attribution. An age attribution is basically stable and internal as well. However, there is some evidence that older adults consider age to be a more peripheral aspect of the aging self than the core features of the self such as lifelong ability (see Harwood, Giles, & Ryan, 1995; Markus & Herzog, 1991). Thus, in the eyes of older adults, age excuses may serve to preserve feelings of self-esteem or self-efficacy compared with excuses involving more core self-attributions (e.g., an ability excuse). It is likely that young adults would not make such a fine distinction among internal causal attributions leading to age and ability excuses being perceived similarly.

With respect to the impression-management function, Snyder, Weiner, and their colleagues also suggested that a good excuse is one that others perceive as believable and one that reduces the emotional responses of the receiver to a misbehavior, therefore allowing for smooth-flowing conversation (Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Weiner et al., 1991). Within the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987), a memory failure poses a threat to the face of both conversational partners by interrupting the flow of conversation and raising an implicit question about the reason for this interruption. An excuse provides expected redress. For example, Erber and Prager (2000) showed that a situational excuse offered after forgetting yielded higher ratings of an older person's capability than no excuse. Relatedly, Gentry and Herrmann (1990) showed that excuses for forgetting served two social goals: self-protection and politeness. Whether an excuse works depends on its credibility (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992; Snyder et al., 1983). Because age excuses invoke widely accepted views of aging, one would expect age excuses to minimize the severity of the conversational slip in the eye of the conversational partner and to seem believable and socially skillful.

We began the exploration of age-excuse effects in a pilot study (Ryan et al., 1993), in which young participants evaluated targets who gave an age excuse, situation excuse, or no excuse for being slow in a supermarket check-out line. The results confirmed our beliefs about the "double-edged" nature of age excuses. Satisfying the impression-management function, the age excuse was considered to be most polite and the cashier was perceived to feel most satisfied with an older customer when an age excuse was used. On the other hand, age excuses elicited lower evaluations of competence for the older person, thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes about decline.

Additional pilot work (Bieman-Copland & Ryan, 1996) showed that young respondents tended to report more negative reactions to age excuses than did older respondents, suggesting a possible source of intergenerational difference in perspective. Age excuses could therefore be viewed more favorably within a conversation between older people than between young and old conversational partners. Age is inevitably more salient in an intergenerational situation, and reference to a stigma has different meanings when used within the group. Especially in in-group conversations, older adults may use age excuses in a humorous way (Datan, 1986; Lefcourt & Martin, 1986, p. 126; Palmore, 1986).

In the two present studies, we examined the relative impact of age excuses compared with three other excuse conditions with a repeated measures design. Young and older participants evaluated four conversational scenarios, each portraying an interaction between two female friends in which one experienced a minor everyday memory failure. The forgetters in the four excuse conditions were evaluated in terms of positive and negative social consequences. In the first study, ages were assigned to the targets, whereas no specific ages were given in the second study.

The first study presented the target persons with memory failure as being in their 70s. Evaluations included impression management (evaluation of the excuse, concern about the forgetting episode), age-based stereotypes (competence

and benevolence traits), and self-esteem (attributed self-perceptions of the forgetter after the conversation). The excuse manipulation contrasted age excuse with lifelong ability, effort, and situation excuses. Excuses based on these latter traditional attributional causes (Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Weiner et al., 1991) allowed for specific contrasts with the age excuse. The fourth main attributional cause (bad luck) would be a weak, unlikely excuse, and not sufficiently different from situation. Situation (external, uncontrollable) would seem to be the excuse most likely to reduce blame and negative personal attributions for the memory failure. However, it would be less likely to be believed for precisely that reason. Because effort is controllable, it would be expected to be viewed as especially inappropriate. The age and ability excuses, both uncontrollable and relatively internal, were expected to be socially adroit in accepting the blame for an unintended lapse, but were also expected to attract negative ratings on competence and self-esteem. The age excuse was expected to elicit more favorable ratings than the ability excuse at least from the older participants, as it distances the still internal cause somewhat from the lifelong core self.

We predicted that the age excuse would create positive impressions in terms of social skills (polite, believable, humorous) and, like the ability excuse, would be considered more polite and believable than situation or effort excuses. The age excuse was also expected to be the most humorous, seen as self-deprecatory humor (Datan, 1986; Thorson & Powell, 1993). Benevolence ratings of the age-excuse user should be higher because of the elicitation of positive age stereotypes.

On the other hand, negative social consequences of using the age excuse were also expected. Age excuses should elicit feelings of concern about the forgetting by explicitly referring to age-related loss, thereby implying further loss (see Bieman-Copland & Ryan, 1998; Erber et al., 1990). We expected that appealing to one's age should elicit negative age stereotypes. These stereotypes are particularly unfavorable to older adults in the domains of cognitive performance, independence, and health. Hence the age excuse, and also the ability excuse (the other stable internal excuse), should elicit the lowest evaluations of competence. Finally, attributions regarding self-perceptions of the forgetter after the conversation should be more negative in the age- and ability-excuse conditions than the effort and situation conditions because of the deliberate association of self with poor performance.

Compared with the older participants, the young participants were predicted to exhibit relatively more negative reactions to the age excuse because negative old-age stereotypes are stronger among the young (see Hummert et al., 1994; Kite & Johnson, 1988) and older participants would be more likely to see the humorous or coping aspect of the age excuse (Bieman-Copland & Ryan, 1996). Older adults consider age to be a peripheral aspect of their internal, core self, but the young might well consider age to be just as internal as ability. Older adults may also be aiming to elicit the compassionate stereotype of old age (Coupland et al., 1991; Palmore, 1999; Revenson, 1989). Thus, we might expect older, rather than younger, adults to distinguish more positive features for an age excuse.

An additional between-participants factor was incorporated into this first study. Generational context was manipulated in terms of whether the conversation was between individuals of the same age (intragenerational) or between individuals of different ages (intergenerational). We predicted that differences between the age excuse and other types of excuse would be stronger in intergenerational compared with intragenerational conversations. Age stereotypes should be elicited by the contrast in ages between the older forgetter and the younger conversational partner (see Harwood et al., 1995). We expected that the age excuse would be taken as especially humorous within the intragenerational conversations and hence would have less negative impact on competence and self-perception evaluations.

Study 1

METHODS

Participants

The participants in this study were 75 older ($M = 71.6$ years, $SD = 5.65$; 71% women) and 78 young ($M = 21.6$ years, $SD = 2.62$; 67% women) adults. The older adults were active, community-dwelling members of a seniors' volunteer research pool. They completed the questionnaire at home and returned it in a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The return rate was 75%. The young sample was 1st-year psychology students who participated for course credit. The questionnaire was administered to them in large classroom-size groups.

Materials

Four different written scenarios were developed, pre-tested, and modified for use in the present study. Each description introduced two conversational partners revealing their names, ages and roles in one of four different forgetting situations. Each situation presented an older woman (aged 71, 72, 74, or 75 years) who forgot either a friend's cousin's name, a daughter's phone number, a technical word, or the location of a file folder when speaking with either an age peer (a 70 year old—intragenerational context) or a younger adult (a 25 year old—intergenerational context). For each item, the older woman who forgot then offered one of four excuses for having forgotten: an age excuse (e.g., "Getting old does that to your memory, you know"), an ability excuse (e.g., "I've never been able to remember [phone numbers]"), an effort excuse (e.g., "I've never been one to bother with remembering [phone numbers]"), or a situational excuse (e.g., "There is so much going on in this small room, it's impossible to remember anything"). This resulted in 16 different descriptions.

The average number of words in the name, telephone-number, technical-word, and file-folder scenarios across all four excuse conditions was 141.5, 160, 140, and 155.3 words, respectively. The length and tone of the conversations were kept as consistent as possible across scenario content with the only difference being the excuse offered. The order in which each woman spoke was always the same. Each character had two conversational turns, always ending with the older forgetter acknowledging the forgotten information.

Past investigation has shown that age-related stereotypes may not be applied if the individual is seen as an exception to the norm for his or her particular age group (Crockett & Hummert, 1987). Thus, the target ages chosen for the conversational partners were 70 years for the older adults and 25 years for the young adults.

Similarly, the names of the women in the conversations were chosen to be typical for older and younger women. "Old-fashioned" names (e.g., Bea and Ruth) were assigned to the older women forgetters, whereas names that could be classified as "traditional" or "timeless" (e.g., Ann and Laura), were given to the young and older conversational partners.

Booklets were made up so that each contained all four excuse conditions, each of which was paired with a different content. The order was counterbalanced using a Latin square design so that each excuse would be paired with each scenario content an equal number of times across participants. This was done for each of the generational contexts.

Every scenario in the booklet was followed by four questions. The first was designed to examine perceptions of the forgetter. It asked, "Based on this conversation, how much do you think each of these adjectives applies to [Bea], the woman who forgot [the cousin's name]?" Six adjectives were listed: competent, capable, intelligent, neighborly, considerate, and polite. The next two questions evaluated impression management. Question 2 was worded as follows: "How do you think [Ann] felt when [Bea] forgot [the cousin's name]?" The adjectives were worried, dismissed it, indifferent, and concerned. The other question evaluating impression management asked, "How would [Ann] describe the way [Bea] reacted to forgetting [the cousin's name]?" The dimensions listed were valid, farfetched, believable, true, courteous, ill-mannered, humorous, and funny. The fourth question asked, "How do you think [Bea] felt immediately after the conversation?" This was to examine attributed self-perceptions of the forgetter after the conversation. The adjectives listed here were confident, capable, frustrated, depressed, disappointed, old, and scatterbrained. Each of the adjectives listed with each question were accompanied by the numbers 1 to 7, for which 1 represented "not at all" and 7 represented "extremely." Two of the 153 participants failed to answer any items for Questions 3 and 4. Therefore analyses of the data from these questions are based on 151 participants.

All booklets included an instructional cover page explaining how to use the Likert scale to indicate responses. Each participant randomly received one of the eight counterbalanced orders of excuse type across forgetting scenario, containing conversations between either age peers or young and old adults for all four scenarios. The final page of the booklet contained a number of demographic questions.

Procedure

The older participants received the package by mail. They were instructed to complete the questionnaire alone, in one sitting, and to return it within 3 weeks. As members of an ongoing research-volunteer group, those who completed the questionnaire were later debriefed in the form of the next newsletter. The young participants were given the questionnaire in large groups and instructed to work individually.

When they had finished, they were given a debriefing sheet. They took approximately 20 min to complete the booklet.

Analysis

The study had a 2 (participant age: young vs. old) \times 2 (generational context: intra- vs. intergenerational) \times 4 (excuse: age, ability, effort, or situation) mixed design. Excuse was the within-participants factor.

The main analyses were conducted using scores determined by the factor structure that emerged from a factor analysis (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991) of the dependent measures from the age-excuse condition, the focus of the study. The same factor structure was used as the basis for computing the scores for the other excuse conditions after Cronbach's alpha coefficients confirmed that their interitem reliability was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .7$ or greater). These scores were then used as the dependent measures in multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) procedures with participant age, generational context, and excuse as the independent variables. The criterion for significance was set at $\alpha \leq .05$. Post hoc comparisons were carried out using Tukey tests.

RESULTS

The results of the factor analysis are reported first, followed by the results of the analyses examining the effects of the independent variables.

Factor Analysis

An SPSS principal component factor analysis of the items in the age-excuse condition was carried out. The most interpretable solution involved four factors. The loadings of the items following a varimax rotation are reported in Table 1 along with the percentage of variance accounted for and the eigenvalues. Only items that loaded uniquely on one factor with a value greater than 0.5 were included. An item was considered to have a unique loading if its value was at least 0.15 greater than its value on another factor.

The items loading on the first factor were considerate, capable, neighborly, intelligent, competent, and polite from Question 1, which asked about age-based stereotypes of the forgetter, and confident and capable from Question 4, which asked about the self-perceptions of the forgetter. This unanticipated combination of benevolence and competence ratings was labeled *Social Fluency*. The items loading on the second factor, labeled *Worry/Frustration* were worried and concerned from Question 2, asking about the partner's reaction to the forgetting, and frustrated, old, depressed, scatterbrained, and disappointed from Question 4. The third factor, which was labeled *Believability*, contained the items valid, farfetched (negative loading), believable, and true from Question 3, which asked about how the conversational partner would describe the excuse given by the forgetter. Two items, humorous and funny, loaded on the fourth factor, labeled *Humor*. Interitem reliability was acceptable for items within each of the four factors for all excuse conditions with alpha coefficients ranging from .69 to .92 (see Table 2). The four factors accounted for 55.8% of the total variance. Social Fluency, Worry/Frustration, Believability, and Humor composite scores for each participant were computed by

Table 1. Loadings of Items on Each Factor Following Varimax Rotation (Study 1)

Items	Factor Labels			
	Social Fluency	Worry/Frustration	Believability	Humor
Considerate (Q1)	.69	.17	.31	.01
Capable (Q1)	.80	-.17	.00	.02
Neighborhoodly (Q1)	.74	.03	.37	-.05
Intelligent (Q1)	.78	-.17	.19	-.05
Competent (Q1)	.76	-.25	.07	.12
Polite (Q1)	.68	.08	.29	.09
Confident (Q4)	.70	-.29	-.13	.15
Capable (Q4)	.69	-.29	-.03	.12
Worried (Q2)	-.05	.66	-.39	.10
Concerned (Q2)	-.05	.57	-.34	-.06
Frustrated (Q4)	-.10	.78	.16	-.08
Old (Q4)	-.08	.83	.12	-.06
Depressed (Q4)	-.15	.74	-.10	.11
Scatterbrained (Q4)	-.05	.70	.01	.14
Disappointed (Q4)	.25	.66	.18	.16
Valid (Q3)	.24	.02	.67	.16
Farfetched (Q3)	-.07	.25	-.52	.31
Believable (Q3)	.26	.08	.76	-.01
True (Q3)	.05	-.02	.70	.07
Humorous (Q3)	.06	.05	.00	.88
Funny (Q3)	.06	-.02	-.03	.89
Eigenvalues	6.24	3.63	2.43	1.64
% Variance	24.95	14.54	9.72	6.58

Note: Q = Question.

averaging their ratings of the items loading on the respective factors.

MANOVA

This analysis was conducted with the four composite dependent measures. There was a main effect of participant age, Wilks' $\Lambda = .93$, $F(4,144) = 2.78$, $p < .05$, with Worry/Frustration contributing to the effect, $F(1,147) = 7.79$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .05$. The young gave higher ratings ($M = 3.21$) than did the older participants ($M = 2.76$). There was also a main effect of excuse, Wilks' $\Lambda = .65$, $F(12,136) = 6.21$, $p < .001$. The dependent measures contributing to the effect were Social Fluency, $F(3,441) = 5.66$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .04$, Worry/Frustration, $F(3,441) = 7.60$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$, and Believability, $F(2.8,414.9) = 7.64$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .05$. The age and ability excuses received higher ratings on Social Fluency than did the effort excuse, with the ability excuse being rated more highly than the situation excuse. Numerically, age and ability were very similar ($M = 4.44$ vs. 4.46, re-

spectively) as were effort and situation ($M = 4.21$ vs. 4.25). Participants gave higher ratings of Worry/Frustration to the age excuse ($M = 3.24$) than to the effort ($M = 2.81$) or ability ($M = 2.88$) excuses but not to the situation excuse ($M = 3.01$). This main effect was qualified by a significant multivariate interaction between participant age and excuse, Wilks' $\Lambda = .78$, $F(12,136) = 3.21$, $p < .001$, for which Worry/Frustration was a contributing variable, $F(3,441) = 5.42$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .04$. As shown in Figure 1, the older participants saw no differences among the excuses, but the young participants gave higher ratings to the age excuse than to any of the other three. They also gave higher ratings to both the situation and ability excuses than to the effort excuse. In addition, the young participants gave higher ratings of Worry/Frustration to the age, ability, and situation excuses than did the older participants.

The age and ability excuses were equally believable, with both being rated as more believable than either the effort or situation excuses, ($M_{\text{age}} = 5.50$, $M_{\text{ability}} = 5.48$, $M_{\text{effort}} = 5.19$, $M_{\text{situation}} = 5.11$). The excuses did not differ in ratings of humor. There was no effect of generational context.

Study 2

The findings from Study 1 partially confirmed our predictions of both benefits and difficulties associated with an age excuse. Age and ability excuses were more believable than situation and effort excuses. Age and ability were evaluated more positively than effort on Social Fluency, which includes politeness. However, for young participants only, the age excuse was viewed more negatively than all other excuses in terms of Worry/Frustration. This factor combines the concern about the forgetter and negative self-perceptions. The main surprise was in the loading of both benevolence and competence ratings on the same factor. This precluded a clear look at the effect of age excuses on perceptions of competence.

We designed a second study to look further for predicted detrimental aspects of the age excuse. We made several modifications. First, as in Bieman-Copland and Ryan (2001), target ages were not specified. Rather, targets were presented as residents of an active living community for people aged 55 and older. Estimated age of the excuse giver was set as one of two primary dependent variables. We predicted that the age excuse would lead to increased age estimates of the targets because they would be viewed as older. Second, a very specific item about the likelihood of forgetting in the future was added. This measure was more closely linked to the memory-failure episode than were the more general competence trait ratings, which were more associated with social competence given the correlations with the benevolence items. We predicted that both age and ability excuses would lead to greater expectations of forgetting. Third, we introduced a no-excuse condition to control for the possibility that the communication predicament leads older adults to use age excuses in situations in which no excuse at all is required. In such situations, an age excuse might elicit more concern and perceived loss of self-esteem than would a conversation without an excuse. To keep the

Table 2. Cronbach Alpha Coefficients for Each Factor and Each Excuse Type (Study 1)

Factor	Age	Ability	Effort	Situation
Social Fluency	.89	.86	.85	.88
Worry/Frustration	.85	.85	.85	.87
Believability	.75	.69	.81	.82
Humor	.86	.88	.92	.90

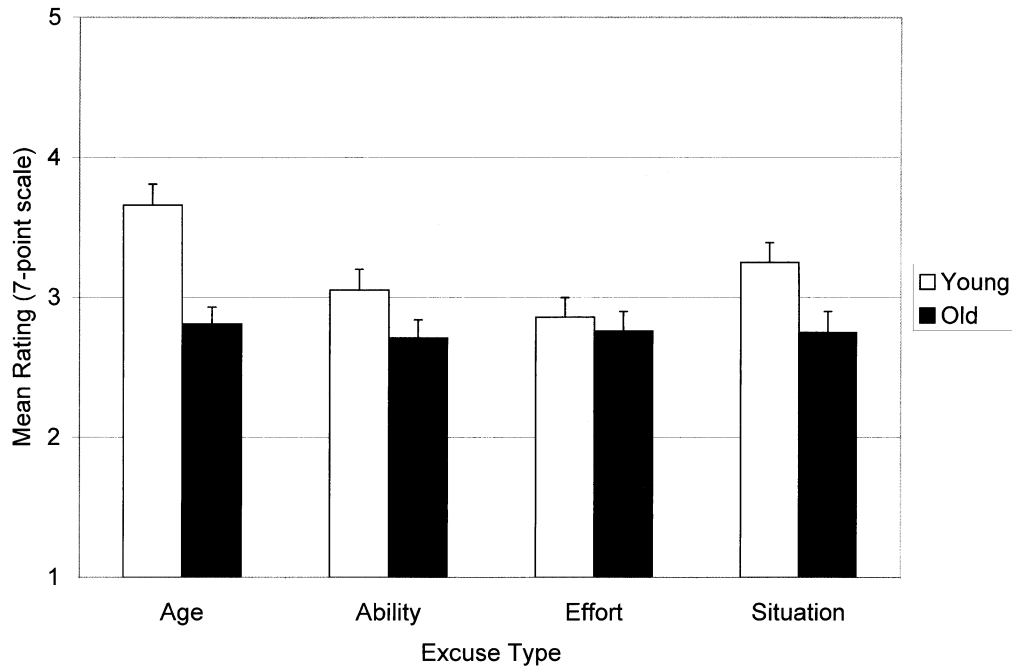


Figure 1. Mean ratings and standard errors of Worried/Frustration as a function of excuse and participant age (Study 1).

design to four excuse conditions, we dropped the effort excuse and retained the ability (like age, being internal, stable, and uncontrollable) and situation (external) excuses as critical comparisons. Compared with age and ability excuses, we predicted that the no-excuse condition would elicit lower age estimates, lower ratings for forgetting and Social Fluency, and higher ratings for Worry/Frustration. Predictions about believability, humor, and the effect of participant age were the same as for Study 1. Finally, we eliminated the generational manipulation, as it yielded no effects in the first study.

METHODS

The participants were 105 older (M age = 72.5 years, SD = 7.8; 60% women) and 105 young (M age = 19.0 years, SD = 1.2; 64% women) adults. The older participants were members of a volunteer research group recruited from the community. The young group was psychology students who participated to fulfill a course requirement.

Several modifications were made to the questionnaire used in Study 1. First, target ages were not provided in the scenarios. Instead, participants were given the following description of an active living community on the cover page of the questionnaire:

GRAYTON COMMUNITY is an Active Living Community for people aged 55 years and older. The people who live here are quite diverse; some are married, while many are single or widowed; some move in at age 55, late in their careers or after they take early retirement; some move in at age 65, 75, or 80. The eldest members are over 90. Because there is such diversity, the activities offered are also varied. There are social clubs, arts and crafts programs, sports

and fitness facilities, bridge and book clubs. In addition, there are many services within the community, including a health-care complex, a multi-denominational church, a recreation centre and meeting place as well as a small grocery store. Housing ranges from apartments to single dwelling bungalow units and subsidies are available based on income. The community is located just outside a city and there is regular bus service.

The first questions following each excuse scenario required participants to estimate the age of the forgetter and the conversational partner. In addition, participants were asked to indicate the likelihood that the forgetter would forget in the future by circling a percentage on a scale from 0 to 100 with 20-point increments. The effort excuse was dropped and replaced with a conversation in which no excuse was given for the forgetting episode (e.g., “Oh, I’ve forgotten the number”). Because we eliminated the manipulation of the age of the partner, the names of the forgetters were changed to be more age neutral (e.g., Mary). For clarification, the situation excuse wording was altered to “With all [the activity . . .] I can’t remember . . . now” to give a more temporary, unstable tone. Question 3 was reworded for simplicity from “How would [Ann] describe the response of [Mary], the [74] year old woman, to forgetting [the phone number]?” to “How would [Ann] describe the way [Mary] reacted to forgetting [the phone number]?”

The study had a 2 (participant age: young vs. old) \times 4 (excuse: age, ability, situation, and no excuse) mixed design with excuse as the within-participants factor.

As in Study 1, analyses were conducted using scores determined by the factor structure that emerged from a factor

analysis of the dependent measures from the age-excuse condition. However, a four factor structure was not as easily interpretable here, in that *dismissed it* and *indifferent* loaded on the same (fourth) factor as the humor items. When five factors were requested, these items loaded uniquely on their own separate factor with the other four factors maintaining a very similar structure to that in Study 1. Because of this similarity, and because interitem reliability was low for the fifth factor, it was dropped, and the first four factors were used to compute the scores for all excuse conditions. Cronbach alpha coefficients confirmed that their interitem reliability was acceptable. These composite scores were used as the dependent measures in a MANOVA with participant age and excuse as the independent variables. The criterion for significance was set at $\alpha \leq .05$. Post hoc comparisons were carried out using Tukey tests.

RESULTS

The analyses of the age estimates and the likelihood of forgetting again are reported first. The results of the factor analysis are reported next, followed by the MANOVA for the identified factors.

Estimated Ages

A MANOVA with the age of the forgetter and the age of the conversational partner as dependent variables revealed a main effect of excuse, Wilks' $\Lambda = .83$, $F(6,203) = 7.04$, $p < .001$, with both dependent measures contributing significantly to the effect: age of forgetter, $F(3,624) = 12.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$; age of partner, $F(3,624) = 5.25$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Figure 2 shows that all participants made higher age estimates for the targets who gave an age excuse than for targets who gave any other excuse. In addition, the conversa-

tional partner of the target using an age excuse was viewed as older than the partner of the target using no excuse.

Likelihood of Forgetting Again

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a main effect of excuse, $F(3,624) = 6.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$. This was qualified by an interaction with participant age, $F(3,624) = 3.35$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Figure 3 shows that the older participants did not expect any differences in the likelihood of the target forgetting in the future as a function of the excuse given. The young participants, however, expected that the targets using an age or an ability excuse would be equally likely to forget again and more likely to forget again than a target using no excuse.

Factor Analysis

An SPSS principal component factor analysis of the items in the age-excuse condition was carried out. As in Study 1, only items that loaded uniquely on one factor were included. The loadings on each factor are shown in Table 3, along with the percentage of variance accounted for and the eigenvalues.

Resembling Study 1, the items that loaded on the first factor, labeled *Social Fluency*, were considerate, capable, neighborly, intelligent, competent, and polite from Question 1 and confident and capable from Question 4. The items loading on the second factor, Worry/Frustration, in Study 1 also loaded on the same factor here. They were worried and concerned from Question 2 and frustrated, old, depressed, scatterbrained, and disappointed from Question 4. The third factor, labeled *Believability*, contained the items valid, believable, and true as in Study 1, and courteous, also from Question 3. Farfetched, however, did not load uniquely within

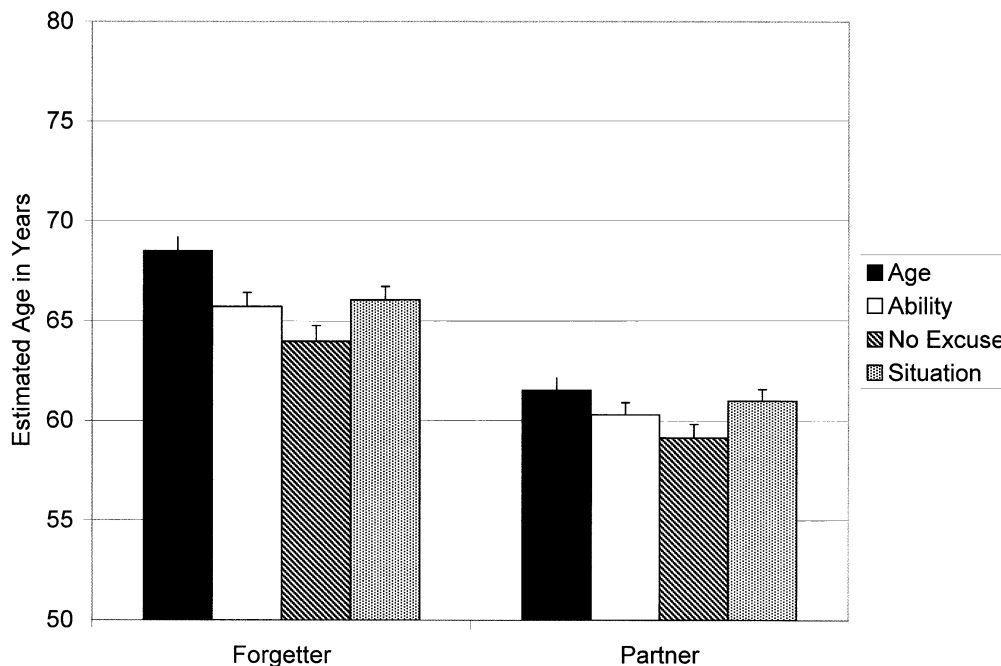


Figure 2. Estimated age and standard errors of forgetter and partner as a function of excuse (Study 2).

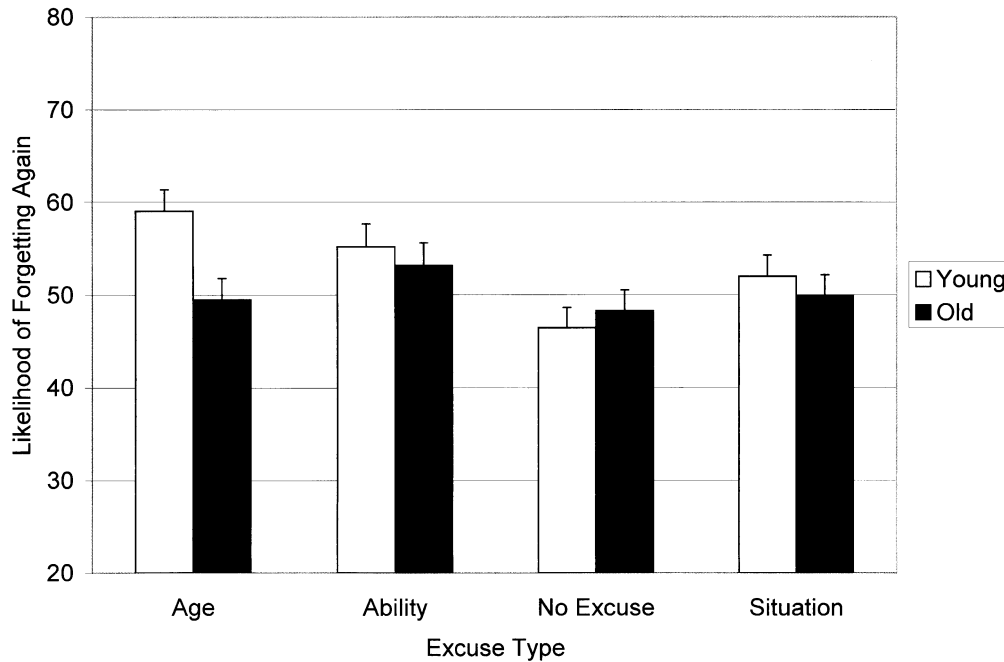


Figure 3. Likelihood of forgetting again and standard errors as a function of excuse and participant age (Study 2).

this structure and was dropped. The fourth factor, Humor, again had unique loadings from humorous and funny from Question 3. Interitem reliability was acceptable for items within each of the first four factors for all excuse conditions with coefficients ranging from .75 to .88 (see Table 4). The four factors accounted for 53% of the total variance.

Four composite scores for each participant were computed by averaging their ratings of the items loading on the respective factors.

MANOVA

This analysis was conducted with the four composite measures as the dependent variables. There was a main effect of participant age, Wilks' $\Lambda = .92$, $F(5,205) = 4.54$, $p < .01$. The variables contributing to the effect were Social Fluency, $F(1,208) = 3.95$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$, and Worry/Frustration, $F(1,208) = 7.37$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$. The older participants gave higher Social Fluency ratings ($M_{old} = 4.67$ vs. $M_{young} = 4.47$), and lower Worry/Frustration ratings ($M_{old} = 2.70$ vs. $M_{young} = 3.04$) than did the young group.

There was also a main effect of Excuse, Wilks' $\Lambda = .75$, $F(12,197) = 5.53$, $p < .001$, with all of the dependent variables contributing to the effect: for Social Fluency, $F(2,9,599) = 3.61$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$; for Worry/Frustration, $F(3,624) = 7.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$; for Believability, $F(3,624) = 4.41$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$; and for Humor, $F(2,6,536) = 9.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$. For Social Fluency, using no excuse received significantly higher ratings ($M = 4.67$) than the situation excuse ($M = 4.47$), with no other differences among the excuses. There was no difference between the age ($M = 3.06$) and ability ($M = 2.91$) excuses for Worry/Frustration, but each was rated more negatively than no excuse ($M = 2.66$). The situation excuse ($M =$

2.86) did not differ from any of the other excuses on this dimension. Age excuse ($M = 5.03$), ability excuse ($M = 5.00$), and no excuse ($M = 5.10$) were viewed as equally believable, with age excuse and no excuse being more believable than the situation excuse ($M = 4.80$). The age excuse was rated as the most humorous ($M = 2.36$), with no differences among the other three ($M_{ability} = 2.09$, $M_{no\ excuse} = 1.94$, $M_{situation} = 1.87$). There was no interaction between participant age and excuse.

General Discussion

These two studies were intended to demonstrate that in spite of some positive consequences in terms of impression management, age excuses have significant negative consequences. Across both studies, age and ability excuses were more believable than situation excuses. In Study 1, age and ability were also more believable than the effort excuse. Politeness was part of the Social Fluency factor. In Study 1, age and ability were rated significantly more positively on this measure than effort, whereas the age excuse was rated as highly as any other excuse condition in Study 2. Thus, in terms offered by Snyder and Higgins (1988) and Weiner and colleagues (1991), an age excuse was considered a relatively good excuse for these aspects of impression management.

The predicted humor of age excuses was confirmed in Study 2, in which the age excuse was significantly more humorous than all other excuse conditions. In contrast to the lack of the humor effect in Study 1, this effect might be due to no specific age being given in Study 2 (closer to real-life situations) and to the estimated ages being about 10 years younger. That the humorous age excuse is not considered more believable than others gives some support to the

Table 3. Loadings of Items on Each Factor Following Varimax Rotation (Study 2)

Item	Social Fluency	Worry/Frustration	Believability	Humor
Considerate (Q1)	.59	.03	.42	.12
Capable (Q1)	.76	-.22	.04	-.07
Neighborly (Q1)	.63	.05	.39	-.22
Intelligent (Q1)	.82	-.04	.18	-.16
Competent (Q1)	.82	-.13	.02	-.06
Polite (Q1)	.64	.02	.45	.06
Confident (Q4)	.54	-.26	.01	.11
Capable (Q4)	.63	-.35	-.07	.09
Worried (Q2)	-.05	.55	-.23	.18
Concerned (Q2)	-.15	.60	-.20	.11
Frustrated (Q4)	-.06	.77	.13	-.02
Old (Q4)	-.22	.74	.19	.00
Depressed (Q4)	-.13	.74	-.10	.02
Scatterbrained (Q4)	-.15	.69	.13	.03
Disappointed (Q4)	.17	.70	.01	-.06
Valid (Q3)	.07	.11	.71	.00
Believable (Q3)	.17	.02	.81	.05
Courteous (Q3) ^a	.33	-.09	.58	.17
Farfetched (Q3) ^a	-.08	.40	-.40	.30
True (Q3)	.02	.03	.81	.05
Humorous (Q3)	.07	-.01	.11	.88
Funny (Q3)	.01	.08	.07	.90
Eigenvalues	5.83	3.79	2.01	1.85
% Variance	23.33	15.14	8.03	7.40

Note: Q = Question.

^aCourteous was included in the Believability Factor; Farfetched was not.

notion that people begin to use age excuses before they and others believe them, as a technique to manage impressions through humor (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986).

As research by Erber and colleagues highlights, there can be positive features of the stereotype of forgetful aging (see Erber & Prager, 1999). Sympathy for the old is elicited by forgetfulness under some conditions (Erber, Szuchman, & Prager, 1997), and forgetfulness itself can be used by older adults as an excuse to minimize blame and punishment for misbehavior (Erber, Prager, & Guo, 1999). Moreover, even though they expect more forgetfulness from older target persons than from the young, evaluators would rather rely on older neighbors than younger ones to remember to carry out requests for help (Erber et al., 1993). Intuitions about the multiple meanings of age-related forgetfulness may nudge older adults into relying on age excuses, as recommended by Skinner (1983).

A main goal of Study 2 was to identify potentially negative consequences of age excuses more clearly than in Study

1 by adding two stereotype-relevant dependent variables. Age estimates significantly differentiated the age-excuse users from their peers in this no-age study. Both participant groups gave older ages for the target person who used the age excuse than for any other excuse condition. The impact of age excuses on age perceptions even influenced the estimated age of the conversational partner, who was seen as significantly older than the partner in the no-excuse condition. For the second new dependent measure, young adults rated targets using age and ability excuses as more likely to forget in the future than targets who did not use an excuse. This finding of lower expectation for future performance clearly exhibits the traditional negative impact of global, stable attributions (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

The Worry/Frustration factor elicited negative evaluations of the age excuse in both studies. In Study 1, more worry and frustration were elicited from young participants by the age excuse than any other excuse. In Study 2, both young and older participants rated age and ability excuses more negatively than the no-excuse condition. These data, as well as the age estimation and likelihood of repeated forgetting, reveal that younger adults are predictably more negative about age excuses than are older adults (Hummert et al., 1994; Kite & Johnson, 1988). Age estimates and Worry/Frustration from Study 2 provide evidence that older adults also recognize some negative consequences of age excuses.

Contrary to the prediction based on Markus and Herzog (1991) and Snyder and Higgins (1988), the age excuse did not serve to protect the self as compared with the theoretically more central, internal attribution of ability. Both age and ability excuses were equivalently socially fluent and believable. The age excuse elicited even more negative perceptions than the ability excuse in terms of age estimates and the young respondents' views of Worry/Frustration in Study 1. Thus, the age excuse did not succeed in distancing the excuse user from the negative consequences anticipated for ability on any dimension by either respondent group.

The negative feedback loop of the communication predicament model of aging (Ryan, Hummert, & Boich, 1995; Ryan, Meredith, MacLean, & Orange, 1995) predicts that social reactions to age-stereotypical behaviors of older adults, such as forgetting, eventually lead to the shaping of further age stereotypical behaviors like age excuses. The data here reveal that age excuses do fit with the positive benevolence stereotypes of old age. Moreover, the data reveal that age excuses are clearly associated with negative consequences such as older age estimates, anticipated forgetting, worry about decline, and frustrated feelings, especially from the point of view of the young. Thus, age excuses could in turn lead to an exacerbation of the communication predicaments experienced by older adults especially in intergenerational encounters. The fact that older respondents, too, evaluate the age excuse user negatively in Study 2 highlights both the accessibility of negative own-group stereotypes and also the likelihood of positive downward comparison with other members of the in-group (Harwood et al., 1995; Levy, 1996). The data concerning older age estimates for the conversational partner in the age-excuse condition suggest a generalization of the communication predicament model;

Table 4. Cronbach Alpha Coefficients for Each Factor and Each Excuse Type (Study 2)

Factor	Age	Ability	No Excuse	Situation
Social Fluency	.86	.88	.87	.86
Worry/Frustration	.83	.85	.84	.86
Believability	.81	.75	.79	.79
Humor	.88	.81	.86	.85

activation of age stereotypes by an age excuse in a conversation can generalize to both older people in a conversation.

Age excuses may also undermine the self-perceptions of the old. The excuse may work to some extent if the older person does not believe it, but it could threaten self-esteem if the older person does believe the excuse. This ambivalence is illustrated by an older informant from Bieman-Copland and Ryan (1996): "I have used age as an excuse because it is a believable excuse. I don't anymore because I was beginning to believe it." The older adult may use an age excuse to elicit the compassionate stereotype of aging (see Revenson, 1989) or to be humorous (e.g., "I'm having a senior moment"), but the risks are high. A related aspect of the social shaping of low self-esteem and poorer cognitive and physical performance is clearly portrayed in Levy's studies of the impact of positive and negative priming of age stereotypes (Hausdorff, Levy, & Wei, 1999; Levy, 1996). Additionally, studies of the effects of repetition on the credibility of facts (e.g., Begg, Anas, & Farinacci, 1992) and on attitude polarization (e.g., Brauer, Judd, & Gliner, 1995), suggest that the more an age excuse is used, the greater the probability that the user will begin to believe it. Thus, age excuses may become maladaptive if used extensively, because this technique to manage others' impressions may eventually penetrate one's self-image (see Snyder et al., 1983).

Limitations

Consistent interpretable factors across the two studies allowed us to test for both positive and negative implications of age excuses. However, we were not able to test some specific hypotheses because of the factor structure. Positive predictions with regards to benevolence could not be assessed separately from the negative predictions about competence because a single factor (Social Fluency) emerged. A social, rather than intellectual, interpretation of competence is supported in Study 2 by the humor ratings and the likelihood of forgetting measure. In addition, predictions about self-esteem could not be assessed directly, as it did not emerge as a separate factor.

The age excuse results are specific to a vignette methodology using female targets. The results are also specific to the excuses contrasted in each study. Also, the evaluations for Study 2 were in the context of older adults participating in an active living community. This provided a lower limit on the age estimates (age 55) and presented the targets in a generally positive light. Finally, the difference in testing procedure for young and older respondents must be acknowledged. Although unlikely, the more social setting of the young adults completing questionnaires in groups could possibly have contributed to their greater negative evaluations of age excuses.

Future Research

It would be useful to explore the meanings of age excuses with other methodologies. Observational studies could record instances of age excuses in real life or in the media (e.g., comic strips, situation comedies; see Hanlon, Farnsworth, & Murray, 1997; Harwood & Giles, 1992). Another possibility would be a diary study of forgetting episodes in which participants would rate various causes of the failures

(see Cavanaugh, Grady, & Perlmutter, 1983) and record any accounts offered for them in conversation. One could also examine the excuse of age as a spontaneous causal attribution after experimentally manipulated memory failures (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

We deliberately began this line of research with minor everyday forgetting episodes not actually requiring an excuse. The no-excuse data confirmed that the memory failures were minor. The need for an excuse depends on the seriousness of the memory failure, the status of the conversational partner, and the situation (see Snyder et al., 1983). Future research needs to explore the impact of excuses with more serious forgetting such as one's own address or name of a longtime friend (see Erber et al., 1990) or forgetting to turn off the stove. Alternatively, the forgetting situations could have important consequences for the conversational partner, such as forgetting an appointment with the partner.

Study 2 brings out another important issue about age excuses. They are humorous when the speaker's age is not specified. Age excuses do not begin in late life, but rather are used facetiously by middle-aged adults about forgetting. Age excuses in middle age may be somewhat believable given stereotypes of a decline from young adulthood (see Hertzog, Lineweaver, & McGuire, 1999; Ryan, 1992; Ryan & Kwong See, 1993). Future research could examine age excuses in a context in which middle age is specified. We would predict that age excuses given by middle-aged adults would be considered more humorous and less believable and would have fewer negative consequences than those offered by older adults. Compared with older respondents, young respondents might see less humor in age excuses offered by the middle aged.

Importantly, young and old respondents differed in their assessment of Worry/Frustration in Study 1 and in their estimation of repeated forgetting in Study 2. Future intergenerational research should further explore the conditions under which young and old agree or disagree on whether the age-excuse user is evaluated negatively.

Surprisingly, the manipulation in Study 1 comparing same-age conversational partners to young conversational partners did not yield any interactions with excuse type. The predicted differences in evaluations of the age excuse might be more likely to occur in situations where the participants are strangers rather than friends. Common age may be a bond in a conversation between strangers, but age is less salient in conversations between friends (Williams & Giles, 1996).

Further demonstrations of negative meanings of the age excuse may prove feasible with additional situational dependent measures, similar to the repeated-forgetting item introduced in Study 2. For example, one might ask how well the excuse user would remember this conversation a few days later or make a critical decision. Moreover, differentiating age from ability excuses might be possible by invoking social comparison processes directly with items referring to age peers (see Heidrich & Ryff, 1993).

From an applied research perspective, it may be useful to alert older adults to the ways in which age excuses perpetuate the communication predicament feedback loop. Training in appropriate assertiveness could enable older adults to

develop alternative strategies to deal with the everyday instances of forgetfulness that are inherent in the human condition (see Doty, 1987; Ryan, Meredith, et al., 1995).

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