Dual sensory loss, aging, and assistive devices: Is there a negative discourse in the Canadian media?

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1. Introduction

- More seniors being diagnosed with hearing and vision loss (Schneider et al., 2011)
- Dual sensory loss (DSL) has important implications for social interaction, cognition, independence, health and mortality (Schneider et al., 2011)
- Individuals with DSL report difficulties with communication but 1 in 3 report wanting more social activity (Crews & Campbell, 2004)
- Assistive devices can facilitate communication and functional autonomy, but abandonment rates are high (30-70%; Philips & Zhao, 1993, Mann et al., 2002)
- One reason older individuals with DSL may abandon or be reluctant to use an assistive device is the stigma associated with using or being seen with the device
- The way aging, hearing/vision loss and assistive devices are presented in the media can influence our perceptions of what is the ideal way to be later in life (see Rudman & Molke, 2009: media discourse on ‘productive aging’)

2. Objective

Investigate how the media contributes to the creation and maintenance of ageist stereotypes about dual sensory loss and assistive technology devices

3. Methodology

- Using search strings such as: aging + technology, seniors + hearing + vision + technology, seniors + disability, hearing aids, low vision aids, (etc.) we searched in the Factiva Database for articles from The Globe and Mail for the past 4 years (June 2009-2013)
- 8951 articles were found, after careful reading 171 were deemed directly/indirectly related to the research objective.
- Preliminary analyses were conducted on 133 articles (129,722 words) using a critical discourse analysis approach (Rudman & Molke, 2009).
- Articles were coded and examined for evidence of stigma relating to assistive technologies, DSL and aging.

4. Evidence supporting stigma

Aging, hearing and vision loss and assistive technologies

“Looking back over the past 20 years, my golden age has slowly turned into a Band-Aid age. This is a friendly warning for all the up-and-coming baby boomers who are about to join the seniors. The magnifying glass, besides the spectacles, became quite useful to read theater programs and directions on bottles (Band-Aid 1)…. The eyesight and the hearing diminished….The cataract was removed (No. 6). The words “excuse me” were used more frequently as hearing declined….But I had trouble following some conversations and even plays in the theatre. I said the words “excuse me” too often. So I gave myself the push and asked for Band-Aid 7, a hearing aid. I am happy to use it to hear soft-speaking friends, lectures at a conference and the odd TV show. I am thankful for all the care and patience the medical profession has had with me. Fortunately, in the past five years, government insurance and my extended health plan paid most of the major bills. People tell me I look well rested and have not changed a bit. I don’t tell friends about the Band-Aids I use, though.” 04/06/2010

Over all, the patients who proceeded with cataract surgery had 16 per cent fewer hip fractures in the first year after the procedure than those who didn’t have the operation. And in the case of patients with severe cataracts, the surgery reduced the risk of a fracture by 23 per cent… I think a lot of people, when they hit their 70s, 80s and 90s, feel like they are too old to undergo surgery,” she said. 10/08/2012

5. Dichotomy: Negative-positive discourse

- In many of the articles, older adults were presented as a “looming threat, poised to reduce our system of social welfare, including Medicare – our whole economy, in fact – to penury”
- Other articles spoke of positive change: “Using new technology, evidence- based practices and teamwork, hospitals are being restructured to accommodate the needs of seniors… to meet the needs of patients with multiple chronic conditions.”
- In workplace: some articles spoke of “disability and chronic illness can push people out of the workforce earlier than they had expected”, while others talked about making changes to accommodate aging workers “Companies, meanwhile, must meet the special needs of older staff, with flexible scheduling, ergonomic work stations and aids for those with agility, mobility, sight and hearing problems”

6. Discussion

Taken together, the discourses in the media suggest that older adults recognize the benefits of assistive technology but are reluctant to disclose the use of these devices in public. Negative discourses in the media contribute to the social stigma associated with assistive devices and are considered a barrier to help seeking behaviour and assistive technology use. Public education campaigns on ageism and assistive technology use need to broaden their scope to include the media.