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Revising the Kogan Scale: A Test of Local Television News Producers' Attitudes Toward Older Adults

By Michael L. Hilt and Jeremy H. Lipschultz

Abstract: The Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People Scale (1961) was revised and used to measure local television news producer attitudes toward elderly people. The importance of local television news in the lives of older people makes the study of producers' attitudes relevant. A national mail survey of producers found that, whereas there were few older news producers, as a group they had positive attitudes toward older people. The study successfully reduced the Kogan scale from 34 to 22 items without altering the overall response pattern.

Use of the Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People Scale (1961) has increased in recent gerontological research. The Kogan scale has been used in studies of the attitudes toward aged persons held by college students (Kogan, 1961; Thorson, 1975; Auerback & Levenson, 1977; Thorson & Perkins, 1980–1981; Murphy-Russell, Die, & Walker, 1986; Kremer, 1988; Powell, Thorson, Kara, & Uhl, 1990), nurses in nursing homes (Bagshaw & Adams, 1985–1986; Chandler, Rachel, & Kazelskis, 1986), and practicing physicians (Hellbusch, 1994), among others. A symposium at the 1993 meeting of the Gerontological Society in New Orleans featured current research using the scale. Those papers included research into conversational management (Ryan, Boich, & Wiemann, 1993), studies of medical students (Merrill, Laux, Lorimor, Thornby, & Vallbona, 1993), and mental health professionals (Rose, Coen, & Gatz, 1993). Other research investigated the effect of expectations on helping behavior of partners toward elderly people (Reichert & Baltes, 1993) and examined the attitude, age, and typicality judgments of stereotypes of elderly people (Hummert, Garstka, Bonnesen, & Strahm, 1993).

Criticism of the scale, however, has also increased. A recent study of television general managers and news directors (Hilt, 1997b) found limitations to the usefulness of the Kogan scale. Respondents complained about the length of the scale (34 statements) and the transparency of the items. Some respondents wrote that the statements were stereotypes, and by answering the survey they would be verifying those stereotypes. It is interesting to note that this criticism echoes one voiced 30 years earlier (Shaw & Wright, 1967). Further, there is a limited connection between the scale items and the more abstract theory of social disengagement (Cumming & Henry, 1961). The disengagement theory suggests that older adults withdraw from society, and society from older adults, to ensure the optimal functioning of society (Barrow, 1996). Based on this, the broadcast managers should have had higher Kogan scores, which would mean a less positive attitude toward elderly people. In fact, the broadcasters had a more tolerant attitude toward them than undergraduate students at Boston University and Northeastern University (Kogan, 1961), and graduates and undergraduates at the University of Georgia (Thorson, 1975). The broadcast managers had a less, tolerant attitude toward elderly people than medical students (Powell et al., 1990) and practicing physicians (Hellbusch, 1994). Finally, it is difficult to compare directly sets of Kogan scores given potential changes in the nearly 40 years in how society views elderly

people. Some of the lowest Kogan scores and the more positive attitudes toward elderly people have come during the 1990s. Because those lower scores were achieved using a scale developed around 1960, it may be that those respondents were able to see through the “transparent and stereotypical” statements (Hilt, 1997a, p. 80) and selected responses that made them appear to hold a positive attitude.

The language used in the Kogan scale reflects how society viewed elderly people almost 40 years ago. The purpose of this study is to test a revised and shortened Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People Scale. Additionally, this study is a comparison of three key occupational groups in local television news—general managers, news directors, and producers—of their attitudes, and how these views may affect news coverage of older adults. Further, it is proposed that among the Kogan statements there are important items that require closer examination.

Review of the Literature

The older population in the United States is increasing dramatically, and it has been referred to as the “graying of America” (Barrow, 1996, p. 6). Census projections show that by the year 2040, the nation could have more people over age 65 than under age 21, and more than one in four Americans will be 65 or older (Usdansky, 1992). In the 1990 census figures adults 65 and over accounted for one out of eight Americans, compared to 1 in 25 at the beginning of this century. At the same time, scholarly interest is rapidly increasing in the area of mass media and older adults (Roy & Harwood, 1997).

Television News and Older Adults

Local television is rapidly becoming a prime source of news (Peale & Harmon, 1991). The people responsible for the news decisions that transform everyday events into the sights and sounds of the evening newscast also are held responsible for building the public agenda of issues and events.

In a study of television’s effect on adults, Gans (1968) found that one third of the respondents felt that television helped them understand their personal problems and make decisions, particularly when they could identify the situation being presented. Gans’ findings suggested that examining television programming to identify messages about human life in general is appropriate, and can be applied to specific categories of individuals, such as older adults.

Television News Content

Content analyses of network and local television newscasts show an absence of stories relating to social issues that might be of importance to elderly people (Stempel, 1988). Adams (1978) conducted an analysis of 10 Pennsylvania television stations and found an emphasis on local politics, not on sensational and human interest stories. Nonpolitical community and organization activity received less than one and a half minutes of coverage, or about 9% of total news time. Pollack (1989) argued that the media have done an incomplete job of educating themselves about social policy questions that affect the elderly. He says too many editors see the problems of elderly people as too boring or depressing for regular coverage.

The present research sees the editorial process at television stations as influenced by broadcast managers. At local television stations across the country, general managers and news directors set policy affecting news coverage of older people (Goedkoop, 1988). Although the general managers and news directors set policy, it is the producers who make the final decisions about what goes into or is left out of the individual newscasts. As a group, these three players ultimately have strong influence on what viewers see in their nightly local television newscasts.

Methodology

The present study revised the Kogan (1961) Attitudes Toward Old People Scale in gathering data from local news producers at U.S. commercial television stations. A national mail survey of local television news producers was conducted in Summer 1997. The research focused on a group of individuals responsible for the writing and editing of local late-night television newscasts.

Definition of Terms

Any research dealing with elderly people is not without a methodological problem: defining what is meant by “elderly people.” For purposes of this study the socially-defined chronological age of 65 will be used (U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, 1987).

Description of the Instrument

The original Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People Scale (OP) consisted of 17 statements, each of which is phrased positively and then negatively. Half of the statement scores were reversed. Statement responses were scored using a Likert (agree/disagree) format numbered 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Blank statements are assigned a score of 4. Using this method, the lower a respondent's total or mean score, the more positive are that person's attitudes toward elderly people. In this revised version of the Kogan scale, the number of statements was reduced to 22. Seventeen statement scores were reversed. The television news producers also were asked to respond to a series of statements about news coverage. Finally respondents answered various demographic questions. An open-ended question provided respondents the opportunity to identify survey problems.

Population and the Sampling

Producers at U.S. commercial television stations were selected in a probability sample. Market size was utilized in a stratified random sample (Babbie, 1992) using the 1997 Broadcasting & Cable Yearbook. The yearbook is more comprehensive than other directories in that it lists by station rather than by membership of individuals, and it is commonly used in mass media research (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). At the time of the survey there were 211 television markets in the United States. All of the markets were selected, and then one station was randomly selected from each market.

Data Collection Procedures

The selected stations were called to identify the name of the latenight news producer. A total of 211 television news producers were identified for the survey mailing list. The survey was self-administered. The Total Design Method for mail surveys was used (Dillman, 1979). Those producers were mailed a copy of the survey (Hilt & Lipschultz, 1996). A second mailing of the survey was sent 10 days after the initial wave.

Analysis of the Data

Television news producers were compared with previous data collected from television general managers and news directors. In that 1996 study, there were 76 general managers and 81 news directors who were asked the original 34 Kogan statements. The three occupation groups were compared on the 22 revised Kogan statements. Index scores for the occupation groups were computed.

Results

Demographics of the Sample

A total of 87 of 211 television news producers responded from across the country. This represented a response rate of 41.2%. The respondents came from the largest to the smallest television markets, and everything in between. The typical producer of the late-night television newscast in 1997 was a 29-year-old White (96.5%) female (59.3%) who had completed college (89.6%) with a journalism or mass communication degree (59.3%), and considered herself to be politically independent (39.5%) and middle-of-the-road (65.5%). She was as likely to be married (46.5%) as never having been married (44.2%).

Of 86 usable respondents on this question, only 6 (7.1%) local television news producers were age 50 or older. In the previous study, there were 34 television general managers (44.7%) and 11 news directors (13.6%) in the 50-plus age category.

Revised Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People Scale Index

Reducing the original Kogan scale from 34 items to 22 items had a measurable impact on the score. For example, the score for television general managers in the 1994 study went from 105.01 to 95.87, and the score for news directors went from 102.07 to 93.75. Using the 22-item scores as guideposts, the television news producers in the present study were substantially lower, and thus more positive in their attitudes toward the elderly.

Revised Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People Statements

The strongest agreement on the revised Kogan scale was with statements that were either neutral about older people, or positive. There were no statements in which the news producers agreed with a negative statement about the elderly. By contrast, the five strongest statements of disagreement were all negative attitudes about older people.

Most Active Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People Statements

In the 1994 study, six statements yielded statistically significant differences between television general managers and news directors. The producers in the present study responded in a similar fashion. Overall, whereas the statements yield slight differences between groups, the pattern of responses is positive toward older people. A series of statements yielded statistically significant and strong relationships. These correlations were a mix of positive and negative statements about older people.

Views about News Coverage

Local television news producers responded to 10 statements concerning their views about news coverage. Like the general managers and news directors in the earlier study, the statement with the highest overall mean was “Exciting video helps a story” (6.38). Again, as with the earlier study of general managers and news directors, the statement with the lowest overall mean for producers was “Issues about or of concern to older people are hard to explain on TV” (2.84).

Discussion

A criticism of the Kogan scale has been its length and transparency of the wording of the items (Hilt, 1997a). This study successfully reduced the number of items from 34 to 22. This is important because respondents are normally asked many questions besides demographic information in the course of a

survey. Even if a study focuses on Kogan items, there is a greater risk of nonresponse in a mail survey due to the length and complexity of the instrument (Babbie, 1992). Put another way,

Questionnaire length is an important concern in any survey because it is directly related to completion rate. Long questionnaires cause fatigue, respondent mortality, and low completion rates. Shorter questionnaires guarantee higher completion rates. (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997, p. 150)

It could be argued that what the Kogan scale attempts to measure is not just the respondents' attitudes toward older people, but it is also a function of positive and negative stereotypes of aging (Barrow, 1996). The responses of local television news producers in the present study featured positive, possibly reverse, stereotypes about older people rather than strictly neutral responses.

There were limitations to the present study. Producers should have been given all 34-items from the original Kogan scale. Then the 22- items targeted for the revised scale could have been selected out. This would allow for a comparison with previous studies, while still beginning the process of reducing the overall length of the scale. In addition, the transparency issue in the wording of the items was not dealt with in this study.

Future research should begin the task of updating the wording in what is now a nearly 40-year-old scale. The results of the present study also indicate a need to conduct a factor analysis of the correlated items. It is possible that a larger response pattern could be identified—one that would produce groups of items.

More work also needs to be done on how such attitudes by mass media employees affect the portrayal of older people in our society. Consistent with the previous study, news producers said that they needed "exciting video" in order to tell stories about older people. This professional bias may help explain why more stories about the elderly do not find their way onto the air, regardless of the attitudes of those who make the decisions. In other words, it is not enough for producers to be positive about older people to lead to news coverage. Local TV news' preoccupation with crime stories and its exciting video means we are more likely to see older people portrayed as the victims of crime or scams than we are to see them as prominent news makers. It is no wonder that some view the mass media as contributing to the disengagement of older people from society.

TABLE 1 Comparison of Revised Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People Scores

Occupational groups	<i>N</i>	Score	<i>SD</i>
Current study (1997)			
Television news producers	76	68.09	12.78
Previous study (1994)			
Television general managers	76	95.87	7.84
Television news directors	81	93.75	9.79

Note. The scores represent summed means for the Revised 22-statement Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People Scale. The reliability coefficients for the groups were: producers, $\alpha = .79$; general managers, $\alpha = .46$; news directors, $\alpha = .65$. The overall standardized α for the 1994 groups was .58 for the 22 statements, compared with .81 for the full Kogan list.

TABLE 2 Local TV News Producers' Ranked Means

Revised Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People statements	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
The elderly have the same faults as anybody else	83	5.90	1.12
The elderlys' accounts of their past experiences are interesting	83	5.70	1.24
Most elderly keep a clean home	83	5.24	1.21
Most elderly seem to be quite clean in their personal appearance	83	5.18	1.41
Most elderly would work as long as possible rather than be dependent	85	5.13	1.35
People grow wiser with the coming of old age	82	5.11	1.44
Most elderly are very different from one another	82	5.05	1.42
Most elderly are cheerful, agreeable, and good humored	83	4.88	1.34
Most elderly respect the privacy of others	83	4.87	1.29
Most elderly are very relaxing to be with	81	4.86	1.29
A nice residential neighborhood has a number of elderly living in it	85	4.66	1.45
Most elderly are as easy to understand as younger people	83	4.60	1.50
Most elderly can adjust when the situation demands it	83	4.36	1.61
The elderly have too little power in business and politics	84	3.57	1.57
Most elderly need no more love and reassurance than anyone else	83	3.42	1.63
It would be better if most elderly lived in residential units that also housed younger people	84	3.25	1.41
The elderly seldom complain about the behavior of younger people	83	3.10	1.34
It is foolish to claim that wisdom comes with old age	85	2.82	1.70
Most elderly bore others by talking about the "good old days"	83	2.45	1.34
Most elderly spend too much time prying into the affairs of others	83	2.37	1.11
Most elderly let their homes become shabby and unattractive	84	2.25	1.18
If the elderly expect to be liked, they should eliminate their irritating faults	83	2.01	1.29

TABLE 3 Means of Occupational Groups on Six Key Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People Statements

Statements	Producers (1997)	GMs (1994)	NDs (1994)
People grow wiser with the coming of old age	5.11	4.28	4.73
It is foolish to claim that wisdom comes with old age	2.82	3.79	3.22
If the elderly expect to be liked, they should eliminate their irritating faults	2.01	2.79	2.36
Most elderly bore others by talking about the "good old days"	2.45	2.61	2.20
Most elderly spend too much time prying into the affairs of others	2.37	2.43	2.10
Most elderly let their homes become shabby and unattractive	2.25	2.14	1.91

Note. Overall, the six statements had statistically significant *t* values in the 1994 study. For each statement, the scale is as follows: 1 = *strongly disagree*; 2 = *disagree*; 3 = *slightly disagree*; 4 = *no response/neutral*; 5 = *slightly agree*; 6 = *agree*; 7 = *strongly agree*.

TABLE 4 Strongest Correlation Coefficients for Revised Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People Statements

Statements	<i>r</i>
Most elderly bore others by talking about the "good old days"	
Most elderly spend too much time prying into the affairs of others	.64
Most elderly keep a clean home	
Most elderly seem to be quite clean in their personal appearance	.58
People grow wiser with the coming of old age	
Most elderly are very relaxing to be with	.58
People grow wiser with the coming of old age	
It is foolish to claim that wisdom comes with old age	— .54
If the elderly expect to be liked, they should eliminate their irritating faults	
Most elderly spend too much time prying into the affairs of others	.53
Most elderly are cheerful, agreeable, and good humored	
A nice residential neighborhood has a number of elderly living in it	.53

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