

Seniors, older people, the elderly, oldies, and old people: what language reveals about stereotypes of ageing in Australia

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Researchers in an Australian Research Council funded project titled ‘The Cultural Model of Ageing: The Australian Conceptualisation of the Third Age’ created a SurveyMonkey questionnaire for speakers of Australian English that sought to identify the characteristics of reference sets for five noun phrases commonly used to label older Australians. 654 self-selected participants were asked which one of the five noun phrases was best matched to each of 25 characteristics found frequently in the media. The results are reported in this paper, and they are interesting.

The notion of semantic stereotypes is reviewed in preparation for the discussion of such results as the following. The NP *seniors* is associated with positive personal characteristics of health and well-being such as ‘like to travel’, ‘lead an involved and active life’, ‘are vibrant and full of purpose’. The NP *older people* is also associated with positive characteristics, but somewhat less so than *seniors* and also more socially (other) oriented. *Older people* are seen to ‘benefit the workforce through their experience’, ‘have wisdom and can always be turned to for advice’, ‘play an important role in their extended family’s life’. By contrast, the characteristics of those typically referred to by the NP *the elderly* are negative in the sense that the referents are incompetent or impose a burden on society, cf. ‘are frail and fall more often’, ‘are often victims of mental and physical abuse’, ‘are unable to look after themselves and depend on others for help’. The referents of the NPs *old people* and *oldies* have no particular set of characteristics assigned to them; perhaps that is why they only figure in the one (negative) characteristic ‘are tight-fisted with money’ that itself is not strongly associated with any one of the five NPs: 28% *old people*, 23% *the elderly*, 20% *older people*, 14.5% *oldies*, 14.5% *seniors*.

These results are discussed in some detail in the light of differences among different age groupings of the participants.

Keywords: Australian English, ageing, reference sets, stereotypes

1. Overview

The Australian Research Council funded project titled ‘The Cultural Model of Ageing: The Australian Conceptualisation of the Third Age’ is investigating linguistic aspects of the way in which Australians talk about the older members of their nation. There is, of course, no precise onset age but it is appropriate to name it as around 60 years of age on the basis that 60 is the earliest eligibility for a (state/territory) government Seniors Card (<http://www.australia.gov.au/content/seniors-card>). The end point is of course the decease of the older person, and the oldest recorded Australian (Christina Cock, 25/12/1887 – 22/5/2002) died at 114.4 years; this gives a potential maximum span of around 55 years as an older Australian.

Our language of ageing project created a SurveyMonkey questionnaire (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/5X9BRGZ>) for speakers of Australian English that sought to identify the characteristics of reference sets for five noun phrases commonly used to label older Australians, namely *old people*, *older people*, *oldies*, *seniors*, and *the elderly*. 654 self-selected participants were asked which one of the five noun phrases was best matched to each of 25 characteristics found frequently in the media. These are (where the task is to replace X with one of the five noun phrases *old people*, *older people*, *oldies*, *seniors*, *the elderly*):

- X are vibrant and full of purpose.
- X prove an increasing economic burden on society.
- X are poor.
- X serve as role models and are respected members of society.
- X are more conservative in attitude and thinking.
- X are more likely to cause road accidents.
- X are wealthy and like to spend their money.
- X are reliable.
- X are more likely to suffer from depression.
- X are often victims of mental and physical abuse.
- X play an important role in their extended family’s life.
- X are tight-fisted with money.
- X are often lonely and bored.
- X like to travel.
- X are more susceptible to illnesses and disabilities.
- X benefit the workforce through their experience.
- X are conscious about their health and lead a healthy lifestyle.

X are forgetful.

X have a sense of satisfaction with their life.

X contribute economically to society.

X are unable to look after themselves and depend on others for help.

X have no sex lives.

X have wisdom and can always be turned to for advice.

X are frail and fall more often.

X lead an involved and active life.

The list of statements was randomized and the order in which the expressions appeared under each statement was varied. The SurveyMonkey results are reported in this paper, and they are interesting.

In brief overview, the NP *seniors* is associated with positive personal characteristics of health and well-being such as ‘like to travel’, ‘lead an involved and active life’, ‘are vibrant and full of purpose’. The NP *older people* is also associated with positive characteristics, but somewhat less so than *seniors* and also more socially (other) oriented. *Older people* are seen to ‘benefit the workforce through their experience’, ‘have wisdom and can always be turned to for advice’, ‘play an important role in their extended family’s life’. By contrast, the characteristics of those typically referred to by the NP *the elderly* are negative in the sense that the referents are incompetent or impose a burden on society, cf. ‘are frail and fall more often’, ‘are often victims of mental and physical abuse’, ‘are unable to look after themselves and depend on others for help’. The referents of the NPs *old people* and *oldies* have no particular set of characteristics assigned to them; perhaps that is why they only figure in the one (negative) characteristic ‘are tight-fisted with money’ that itself is not strongly associated with any particular one of the five NPs: 28% *old people*, 23% *the elderly*, 20% *older people*, 14.5% *oldies*, 14.5% *seniors*. (Percentages are normally adjusted to the nearest whole number.)

Respondents were asked to assign themselves to gender and age groups. We have not assessed the data for any gender differences, though 69% of respondents were female. But in this paper we do look at the responses of different age groups. These are ≤ 30 years (55 participants), 31–50 years (55 participants), 51–70 years (313 participants), ≥ 71 years old (231 participants). These we might call the young people, the middle-aged, the younger old, and the older old. However, it is noteworthy that what we are calling ‘the younger old’ includes people up to 9 years junior to the official onset of old age at 60.

To say that ‘the NP *seniors* is associated with positive personal characteristics of health and well-being’ whereas the NP *the elderly* is applied to people who ‘are incompetent or impose a burden on society’ suggests there are semantic stereotypes, and we wish to say something about stereotypes. We hold that:

The meaning of a language expression *e* (typically a lexeme) is not a well-defined set of properties necessarily found in every denotatum for the expression, it is rather a minimum set of stereotypical facts about the typical denotatum. (Allan 2006: 153; see also Allan 2001: 333)

(Denotation is the relation between language expression *e* and things or events in the model of the world and time spoken of; a denotatum is potentially a referent.) Like prototype semantics, stereotype semantics is an alternative to theories of meaning that postulate a checklist of properties to be satisfied for the correct use of the expression *e* (Fillmore 1975: 123). For example, the denotatum of *bird* is expected to be bipedal, have feathers, and be capable of flight. But: there are several species of flightless birds (e.g., emus, ostriches, and penguins); a downy chick and a plucked chicken are featherless but nonetheless birds; a one-legged bird and a mutant three-legged bird are also birds. So the notion of a checklist of essential properties for the denotatum of *e* is problematical. Flightlessness is a fact that should appear in the lexicon entries for *emu*, *ostrich*, and *penguin*, for example, to condition an appropriate interpretation of *the ostrich flew by* (see Allan 2011 for how this is achieved).

Prototype semantics differs from stereotype semantics in that it selects a particular denotatum or a particular sense as the most typical exemplar for a lexeme. Categories such as Rugs and Carpets (corresponding to the lexemes *rug* and *carpet*) or Cups and Mugs (corresponding to *cup* and *mug*) seem to merge gradually one into another, although prototypical exemplars of each category are clearly different (Labov 1978). For instance, a tomato is both a fruit and a vegetable, but mostly it is used like a vegetable. Its characteristics are included in the internalized (cognitive) model of the tomato and contribute to the semantic frame of *tomato*. Prototype theory has no means of capturing such facts. Even the poorest examples of a category remain within the category; the fact that an onion is a poor exemplar of a vegetable for a tested population (Battig & Montague 1969) does not change the subjects’ perception that it is a vegetable. The prototype in no way defines the category – no one believes that a vegetable is a carrot, claimed as the most prototypical vegetable in Battig & Montague 1969. Furthermore, categories are independent of related categories with respect to prototypicality. For instance, a guppy is a good exemplar of the category Pet Fish, but it is not a good exemplar of either of the categories Pet or Fish. Let us assume that a prototype is as good an example as can be found for the purpose in hand. This implies that

the prototype is selected as superior to other denotata. A stereotype is not, hence the description ‘typical denotatum’ in our definition. How is ‘a (stereo)typical denotatum of *e*’ distinguishable from ‘as-good-an-exemplar-as-can-be-found among the class of things denoted by *e*’? Presumably, the stereotype properly includes the prototype. For instance, whatever the stereotype of *vegetable* may be, it properly includes the prototype carrot and the peripheral onion (Battig & Montague 1969). The stereotypical *vehicle* includes the prototypical car and/or bus together with the peripheral horse-drawn wagon. If this is correct, then we should favour the stereotype in giving the semantics of language expressions.

In §§2–4 it will be shown that certain characteristics are assigned to the typical referent of the three NPs *seniors*, *older people* and *the elderly*. The other two NPs mentioned above will be discussed in §5. The final §6 presents conclusions.

2. *Seniors*

Overall, participants attributed to the referents of *seniors* positive personal characteristics of being outgoing, healthy, active, wealthy, and happy.

- (1) 67% of participants claim that seniors ‘like to travel’.
- (2) 66% of participants claim that seniors ‘lead an involved and active life’.
- (3) 59% of participants claim that seniors ‘are vibrant and full of purpose’.
- (4) 57% of participants claim that seniors ‘are wealthy and like to spend their money’.
- (5) 55% of participants claim that seniors ‘are conscious about their health and lead a healthy lifestyle’.
- (6) 52% of participants claim that seniors ‘contribute economically to society’.
- (7) 49% of participants claim that seniors ‘have a sense of satisfaction with their life’.

Seniors like to travel, (1), entails that seniors are willing and able to travel which in turn entails that seniors have the time, health, vitality, and economic resources to travel; furthermore, willingness to travel is purposive intentional behaviour. All these entailed traits are entirely consistent with the attributes of seniors ascribed in (2), (3), (3), and (4). These facts surely confirm that the survey results are, thus far, valid. Indeed, we shall see that our survey results all demonstrate a comparable validity.

The overall response of 67% reported in (1) is supported for each age group surveyed, but although every age group assigned the same kind of significance to seniors liking travel vs other characteristics of seniors, the results show that older people hold this belief more firmly than younger people: ≤30 years 45%; 31–50 years 63%; 51–70 years 65%; ≥71 years 75%.

What this shows is that as one ages, one is more likely to assign the attribute of liking to travel to those we call *seniors*.

Like (1), (2) identifies something that seniors like to do: *seniors lead an involved and active life*. This is obviously strongly consistent with (1), indeed it is entailed by both (1) and (2) and itself implies (3), because seniors who lead an involved and active life are very likely to be vibrant and full of purpose. Once again this attribute is more significant as we get older, though the figures are not so disparate between the age groups as for (1). It is quite likely that, if seniors lead an involved and active life, they will be healthy (see (4)) and have a sense of satisfaction with their life (see (7)). So once again there is a consistency and coherence among survey responses. *Seniors lead an involved and active life* was assessed by 52% of those 30 years and under and roughly 68% for those over 30 (more precisely, 31–50 years 67%, 51–70 years 66%, ≥ 71 years 70%).

59% of participants claimed that *seniors are vibrant and full of purpose*, (3). This was the view of 31% of respondents 30 years and under, 58% of those 31–70, and 68% of those over the age of 70. If you are vibrant and full of purpose you will probably have a sense of satisfaction with your life (see (7)) and it may well lead you to be conscious about leading a healthy lifestyle (see (4)) and also lead an involved and active life (see (2)).

57% of participants claim that *seniors are wealthy and like to spend their money*, (4). (4) certainly facilitates (1) though it is not, strictly speaking, a precondition for (1) because although it is almost impossible to travel without any money, the traveller does not need to be wealthy and nor to like spending money. (4) enables (6), but otherwise this characteristic of having wealth that one is happy to spend is independent of the other characteristics of seniors except in being a highly desirable attribute. Perhaps it is only to be expected that people beyond the age of 50 (the old) are less enthusiastic about this assessment of seniors than the other traits listed in (1) to (7): ≤ 30 years 40%; 31–50 years 51%, over 50 years, 59.5%.

55% of participants claim that *seniors are conscious about their health and lead a healthy lifestyle*. This confirms that ‘healthy ageing’ is attributed to seniors. Furthermore, healthy ageing facilitates characteristics (1), (2), (3), and (7). Only 29% of young people (≤ 30 years) hold this assessment; 60% of the middle-aged (31–50 years) and slightly fewer, 57% of those over the age of 50.

(6), *seniors contribute economically to society*, focuses on a generous, socially aware characteristic by contrast with the potentially more selfish (4), *seniors are wealthy and like to spend their money*; though as we have said, (4) (at 57%) enables (6) (at 52%). Increasing age

leads our respondents to favour this trait among seniors: ≤ 30 years 35%; 31–50 years 45%, 51–70 years 51%, ≥ 71 years 58%.

Finally, 49% of participants claim that *seniors have a sense of satisfaction with their life*, which is a manifestation of ‘successful ageing’. This can reasonably arise from all the characteristics identified in (1)–(6). It is interesting that this trait is ascribed to seniors more strongly by the middle-aged than by either the young or the old: 27% of the young (≤ 30 years), 48% of the younger old (51–70 years), 52% of the older old (≥ 71 years), but 58% of those 31–50 years.

Young people rank seniors as (a) *leading an involved and active life*, (b) *liking to travel*, (c) *being wealthy and liking to spend their money*, (d) *contributing economically to society*, (e) *being vibrant and full of purpose*, (f) *being conscious about their health and leading a healthy lifestyle* and, finally, (g) *having a sense of satisfaction with their life*.

The middle-aged rank seniors as (a) *leading an involved and active life*, (b) *liking to travel*, (c) *being conscious about their health and leading a healthy lifestyle*, (d) *being vibrant and full of purpose* and *having a sense of satisfaction with their life*, (f) *being wealthy and liking to spend their money* and, finally, (g) *contributing economically to society*.

The younger old rank seniors as (a) *leading an involved and active life*, (b) *liking to travel*, (c) *being wealthy and liking to spend their money*, (d) *being vibrant and full of purpose*, (e) *being conscious about their health and leading a healthy lifestyle*, (f) *contributing economically to society* and, finally, (g) *having a sense of satisfaction with their life*.

The older old rank seniors as (a) *liking to travel*, (b) *leading an involved and active life*, (c) *being vibrant and full of purpose*, (d) *being wealthy and liking to spend their money*, (e) *contributing economically to society*, (f) *being conscious about their health and leading a healthy lifestyle* and, finally, (g) *having a sense of satisfaction with their life*.

Across all age groups, seniors are primarily seen as *liking to travel* and *leading an involved and active life*. Young people see the next most prevalent characteristics of seniors as *being wealthy and liking to spend their money* and *contributing economically to society*. The middle-aged put these characteristics last. The younger old have them third and fifth, and the older old fourth and fifth. All groups except the middle-aged place the characteristic of *having a sense of satisfaction with their life* last. But, as we have said already, overall, participants attributed to the referents of *seniors* positive personal characteristics of being outgoing, healthy, active, wealthy, and happy.

3. Older people

The six characteristics assigned to the referents of the NP *older people* have them as socially responsible benefactors who have wisdom and experience to share, though they are also likely to be conservative in outlook.

- (8) 61% of participants claim that older people ‘benefit the workforce through their experience’.
- (9) 54% of participants claim that older people ‘have wisdom and can always be turned to for advice’.
- (10) 47% of participants claim that older people ‘play an important role in their extended family’s life’.
- (11) 47% of participants claim that older people ‘are reliable’.
- (12) 42% of participants claim that older people ‘serve as role models and are respected members of society’.
- (13) 38% of participants claim that older people ‘are more conservative in attitude and thinking’.

Older people benefit the workforce through their experience, (8), is a trait wholly consistent with characteristics (9), (10), (11), and (12). Although a positive trait, it has no direct connection with any of the characteristics assigned to seniors in (1)–(7). The same is generally true of all characteristics of older people identified in (8)–(13) revealing unambiguous community differentiation in the applicability of *seniors* and *older people*. (8) implies that older people have experience that they typically utilise to benefit the workforce, the focus is on them as do-gooders. Their experience is echoed in (9) and their benefit as role models is explicit in (12). The young (≤ 30 years) and the older old (≥ 71 years) are both 56% on this trait whereas those 31–50 are 63% and the younger old slightly higher at 64%.

(9), 54% of participants claim that *older people have wisdom and can always be turned to for advice*, is similar to (8) except that the focus is on the owning of wisdom as a resource that can be tapped (rather than its beneficial outcome). (9) is potentially a prerequisite for (10). This trait is ascribed to older people more strongly by the middle-aged, 60% than other age groups; the young only 36%, the younger old 55%, and the older old 56%.

47% of participants claim that *older people play an important role in their extended family’s life*, (10). (10) is obviously comparable with (8) and (9); it differs from (8) in focusing on the family instead of the workplace, and (9) will often be presupposed with respect to (10) – though only emotional or physical assistance might be called on in (10) if

there is no particular call on the wisdom of the older person. It is most likely that all of (8), (9), and (10) presuppose (11). For this characteristic the various age groups show a bell curve: ≤ 30 years 36%, 31–50 years 52%, 51–70 years 54%, and the older old 40% (30% of them ascribed this trait to seniors).

47% of participants claim that *older people are reliable*, (11), which is most likely presupposed by all of (8)–(10). This reliability is significant when older people are turned to for their experience and wisdom. For this trait, once again the age groups show a bell curve, but it peaks with the middle-aged instead of the younger old: ≤ 30 years 33% (also to seniors 33%), 31–50 years 58%, 51–70 years 52%, and ≥ 71 years 42% (43% to seniors).

(12), 42% of participants claim that *older people serve as role models and are respected members of society*. (8)–(11) offer some reasons for (12). Only 22% of young participants ascribed this characteristic to older people whereas 38% ascribed it to seniors and another 38% to the elderly. The middle-aged also ascribed this trait predominantly to seniors: 31–50 years 38% but 47% to seniors, and the older old (≥ 71 years) 39% to older people and 38% to seniors; only those aged 51–70 assign this trait most definitely to older people, 48%.

The final trait assigned to older people is unconnected with the other characteristics assigned to them: 38% of participants claim that *older people are more conservative in attitude and thinking*. It depends on your world view whether or not this is a positive or negative characteristic, but unlike those in (8)–(12), it is a personal not socially oriented trait – which perhaps goes some way to explaining its being only 38% overall. Even so, for all groups this trait was assigned to older people by a large margin, even if younger people (≤ 50 years) are the firmest believers: ≤ 30 years 40%, 31–50 years 47%, 51–70 years 35%, and ≥ 71 years 39%.

Young people rank older people as (a) *benefiting the workforce through their experience*, (b) *being more conservative in attitude and thinking*, (c, d) *having wisdom and can always be turned to for advice* and *playing an important role in their extended family's life*, (e) *being reliable*, and (f) *serving as role models and being respected members of society*.

The middle-aged rank older people as (a) *benefiting the workforce through their experience*, (b) *having wisdom and can always be turned to for advice*, (c) *being reliable*, (d) *playing an important role in their extended family's life*, (e) *being more conservative in attitude and thinking*, and (f) *serving as role models and being respected members of society* (47% assigned this trait to seniors).

The younger old rank older people as (a) *benefiting the workforce through their experience*, (b) *having wisdom and can always be turned to for advice*, (c) *playing an important role in their extended family's life*, (d) *being reliable*, (e) *-serving as role models and being respected members of society*, and (f) *being more conservative in attitude and thinking*.

The older old rank older people as (a, b) *benefiting the workforce through their experience*, and *having wisdom and can always be turned to for advice*, (c) *being reliable* (43% assigned this property to seniors), (d) *playing an important role in their extended family's life*, (e, f) *-serving as role models and being respected members of society* (38% assigned this property to seniors), and *being more conservative in attitude and thinking*.

With the exception of the trait *older people are more conservative in attitude and thinking* the referents of the NP *older people* are socially responsible benefactors who have wisdom and experience to share with others within and outside the family. The characteristics of reliability and serving as role models, which can be regarded as personal strengths, were sometimes significantly assigned to seniors.

4. The elderly

The characteristics of those typically referred to by the NP *the elderly* are negative in the sense that the referents are poor in health, wealth, and competence and consequently tend to impose a burden on society.

- (14) 68% of participants claim that the elderly 'are frail and fall more often'.
- (15) 68% of participants claim that the elderly 'are often victims of mental and physical abuse'.
- (16) 66% of participants claim that the elderly 'are unable to look after themselves and depend on others for help'.
- (17) 61% of participants claim that the elderly 'are more susceptible to illnesses and disabilities'.
- (18) 60% of participants claim that the elderly 'prove an increasing economic burden on society'.
- (19) 51% of participants claim that the elderly 'are more likely to suffer from depression'.
- (20) 51% of participants claim that the elderly 'are often lonely and bored'.
- (21) 45% of participants claim that the elderly 'are more likely to cause road accidents'.
- (22) 42% of participants claim that the elderly 'are poor'.

(23) 40% of participants claim that the elderly ‘have no sex lives’.

(24) 39% of participants claim that the elderly ‘are forgetful’.

68% of participants claim that *the elderly are frail and fall more often* than younger people, (14). This is entirely consistent with the generally bleak view of old age asserted of referent of the NP *the elderly* in all of (14)–(24). (14) identifies physical incompetence instead of mental weakness or poor health. But it is an important part of a comprehensive image of decrepitude. Interestingly the older old have the lowest figure on this and, unsurprisingly, the youngest group has the highest: ≤ 30 years 75%, 31–50 years 69%, 51–70 years 73%, ≥ 71 years 59%. Notably the younger old have a strongly pessimistic view.

The same overall percentage of 68% of participants claim that *the elderly are often victims of mental and physical abuse*, (15). This is a somewhat shocking indictment of the society in which the weak and disadvantaged are mistreated, or at least are believed to be mistreated. So the elderly not only suffer from their own weakness but are bullied by those stronger and more powerful than them. When we look at the responses of the different age groups we see once again that the younger old hold a strongly pessimistic view, in (15) the strongest: ≤ 30 years 60%, 31–50 years 64%, 51–70 years 73%, ≥ 71 years 58%. Once again there is a large decrease among the older old. Is this because they are responsive to their actual experience whereas the younger old are in fearful anticipation?

In (16) 66% of participants claim that *the elderly are unable to look after themselves and depend on others for help*. (16) identifies a burden that the elderly impose upon their families and society because of physical or mental incompetence. It is an outcome of (14), (17), and (18) and lays the elderly open to the kind of abuse referred to in (15). When we compare the attitudes of difference age groups, the younger ones believe in (16) far more strongly than the older old, for whom there is a massive drop-off: ≤ 30 years 75%, 31–50 years 80%, 51–70 years 71%, ≥ 71 years 52%. One gets the impression that the young and middle-aged are anticipating a burden, whereas the older old don’t believe they constitute such a burden.

61% of participants claim that *the elderly are more susceptible to illnesses and disabilities*. (17) once again goes to an aspect of the decrepitude that is (perceived to be) a concomitant of old age, an outcome of which is (16). Here the younger cohort (≤ 30 –50 years) at 69% exceeds figures for the older cohort which once again dips with the older old: 51–70 years 63%, ≥ 71 years 55%.

In (18) 60% of participants claim that *the elderly prove an increasing economic burden on society*. This is more specific than (16) by invoking the cause as (22). There is an additional

factor in that the burden imposed by the elderly is not only present but increasing – a result of the aging population as the result of human beings generally living longer than they used to. With (18) it is the middle-aged who take the most pessimistic view and yet again the older old are far less pessimistic: ≤ 30 years 60%, 31–50 years 74%, 51–70 years 65%, ≥ 71 years 51%.

51% of participants claim that *the elderly are more likely to suffer from depression*, (19). No bases are specified for the judgment rendered here, but one can reasonably presume that the decreased health, wealth, and quality of life along with risk of mental and physical abuse ascribed to the elderly would be commonly accepted causes leading to depression, cf. all of (14)–(18) and (20)–(24). Among the various age groups, the middle-aged are most pessimistic with respect to this characteristic, the young least (but they assign this trait principally to older people), and the older old less so than the younger old: ≤ 30 years 29% (but 33% to older people), 31–50 years 64%, 51–70 years 58%, ≥ 71 years 46%.

Overall 51% of participants also claim that *the elderly are often lonely and bored*, (20), giving good reason for (19). Once again the middle-aged hold this negative view of the elderly most strongly, but this time the older old (whom one might believe to know best) believe it least of all: ≤ 30 years 49%, 31–50 years 64%, 51–70 years 54%, ≥ 71 years 45%.

45% of participants claim that *the elderly are more likely to cause road accidents*. (21) presents the elderly as a physical danger to themselves and to others, with ensuing mental anguish. Although some other characteristics ascribe to the elderly certain mental, economic and physical impositions on others, this is the only one that refers to the potential to injure severely and even fatally. All age groups assess this (standard deviation is just over 2%): ≤ 30 years 42%, 31–50 years 44%, 51–70 years 47%, ≥ 71 years 43%.

In (22), 42% of participants claim that *the elderly are poor*. (22) identifies the personal circumstance, economic poverty, that potentially gives rise to (18), being an economic burden on others. (22) may evoke compassion in some participants but irritation in others. Among the various age groups, the young and the older old ascribed this property more to old people: ≤ 30 years 29% (but 35% to old people), 31–50 years 50%, 51–70 years 48%, ≥ 71 years 34% (but 39% to old people). Once again the middle-aged were most pessimistic.

40% of participants claim that *the elderly have no sex lives*, (23). Such research as there is suggests that ‘there is a raft of evidence suggesting that older people are sexually active’ (<http://theconversation.com/sex-desire-and-pleasure-in-later-life-australian-womens-experiences-35725>); however, that is not what many people believe. Among the different age

groups the middle-aged believe (23) most firmly but all groups ascribe this with almost equal strength to old people: ≤ 30 years 29% (but 40% for old people), 31–50 years 50% (and 37% for old people), 51–70 years 42% (and 36% for old people), ≥ 71 years 35% (but 37% for old people). The standard deviation for the elderly is 9% whereas that for old people is 1.7%.

In (24), 39% of participants claim that *the elderly are forgetful*, possibly marking the onset of dementia, detrimental to the individual and an imposition on those around them. As with (23), we find that this characteristic is almost equally ascribed to old people: ≤ 30 years 22% (but 44% for old people), 31–50 years 41% (and 37% for old people), 51–70 years 42% (and 36% for old people), ≥ 71 years 35% (but 37% for old people). The standard deviation for the elderly is 9.2% whereas that for old people is 3.7%.

The young rank the elderly as (a) *being frail and falling more often*, (b) *often victims of mental and physical abuse*, (c) *being more susceptible to illnesses and disabilities*, (d) *being unable to look after themselves and depending on others for help*, (e) *prove an increasing economic burden on society*, (f) *more likely to suffer from depression*, (g) *being often lonely and bored*, (h) *more likely to cause road accidents*, (i, j) *having no sex lives*, and *being forgetful*, and (k) *being poor*.

The middle-aged rank the elderly as (a) *being unable to look after themselves and depending on others for help*, (b) *prove an increasing economic burden on society*, (c, d) *being frail and falling more often*, and *being more susceptible to illnesses and disabilities*, (e, f, g) *often victims of mental and physical abuse*, and *more likely to suffer from depression*, and *being often lonely and bored*, (h, i) *being poor*, and *having no sex lives*, (j) *more likely to cause road accidents*, and (k) *being forgetful*.

The younger old rank the elderly as (a, b) *being frail and falling more often*, and *often victims of mental and physical abuse*, (c) *being unable to look after themselves and depending on others for help*, (d) *prove an increasing economic burden on society*, (e) *being more susceptible to illnesses and disabilities*, (f) *more likely to suffer from depression*, (g) *being often lonely and bored*, (h) *being poor*, (i) *more likely to cause road accidents*, (j, k) *having no sex lives*, and *being forgetful*.

The older old rank the elderly as (a, b) *being frail and falling more often*, and *being unable to look after themselves and depending on others for help*, (c) *being more susceptible to illnesses and disabilities*, (d, e) *often victims of mental and physical abuse*, and *prove an increasing economic burden on society*, (f) *being often lonely and bored*, (g) *more likely to*

cause road accidents, (h, i, j) more likely to suffer from depression, and being poor, and having no sex lives, and (k) being forgetful.

The characteristics ascribed to referents of the NP *the elderly* are negative in that the referents are purportedly poor both in health and wealth, they are weak and vulnerable to abuse, bored and depressed, forgetful and lonely, dangerous drivers, economically and physically dependent on others and, consequently, a burden on society.

5. Oldies and old people

The colloquial NP *oldies* was the least popular of the five NPs on offer on the SurveyMonkey questionnaire. The highest figure it attracted was 24% from the youngest group (≤ 30 years) for the positive attribute *oldies are vibrant and full of purpose*. The next highest score was 17% from the older old in respect of the negative attribute *oldies are tight-fisted with money*, perhaps because of attraction between colloquial *oldies* and the colloquial adjective *tight-fisted*. In fact this particular item, *X are tight-fisted with money*, favoured the following overall scores: *old people* 28%, *the elderly* 23%, *older people* 20% and both *seniors* and *oldies* 14% (with a standard deviation of 5.8% across the five NPs). This is the only attribute that favours the NP *old people* above others, albeit weakly. We might reasonably conclude that, like referents of *the elderly*, referents of *old people* are typically viewed somewhat negatively. This view is supported from some of the findings in §4, where certain age groups preferred *old people* to *the elderly* or else found them quite similarly applicable in respect of three statements:

(25) *Old people are forgetful* ≤ 30 years 44%, 31–50 years 37%, 51–70 years 36%, ≥ 71 years 37%

(26) *Old people have no sex lives* ≤ 30 years 40%, 31–50 years 37%, 51–70 years 36%, ≥ 71 years 37%.

(27) *Old people are poor* ≤ 30 years 35%, 31–50 years 22%, 51–70 years 37%, ≥ 71 years 39%.

Although we have described (25)–(27) as negative they may also express a certain sympathy for aged Australians whereas a statement like *the elderly are more likely to cause road accidents* admits no such possibility.

6. Conclusions

This part of our research under the Australian Research Council funded project titled ‘The Cultural Model of Ageing: The Australian Conceptualisation of the Third Age’ sought to identify the characteristics of reference sets for five noun phrases commonly used to label older Australians, namely *old people*, *older people*, *oldies*, *seniors*, and *the elderly*. To our surprise we discovered that a majority of speakers who completed our SurveyMonkey questionnaire assigned rather specific characteristics to the referents of *seniors*, *older people* and *the elderly*, were much less decisive about *old people*, and not at all decisive about *oldies*.

From the ≤ 30 year olds (55 participants) there was 0% agreement that *oldies are reliable*, *oldies are victims of mental and physical abuse*, *oldies benefit the workforce through their experience*, *oldies are conscious about their health and lead a healthy lifestyle*, *oldies contribute economically to society*, *oldies are unable to look after themselves and depend on others for help* (there was also 0% for *older people*). This reinforces the conclusion that referents of the NP *oldies* are not ascribed firm characteristics – a point further strengthened in the next paragraph.

From the middle-aged (55 participants) there was 0% agreement that *oldies prove an increasing burden on society*, *oldies are more likely to suffer from depression*, *oldies / old people serve as role models and are respected members of society*, *the elderly are wealthy and like to spend their money*, *oldies / older people are often victims of mental and physical abuse*, *oldies / seniors are more susceptible to illnesses and disabilities*, *oldies / the elderly benefit the workforce through their experience*, *the elderly contribute economically to society* and *the elderly lead an involved and active life*.

There was 0% agreement from younger old (313 participants) that *old people like to travel*.

The older old (231 participants) had 0% agreement on nothing.

Leaving *oldies* aside, there are the positive ascriptions to referents of *seniors* and *older people* and negative ascriptions to referents of *the elderly* and, with much less certainty, to *old people*. The referents of *seniors* were generally attributed with the positive personal characteristics of being outgoing, healthy, active, wealthy, and happy. Thus:

(28) The typical denotatum of *senior* is a person of around 60 years or more who has the personal characteristics of being outgoing, healthy, active, wealthy, and happy.

The referents of the NP *older people* were generally attributed with the positive characteristics of being socially responsible benefactors who have wisdom and experience to share with others within and outside the family. Thus:

- (29) The typical denotatum of *older person* is around 60 years or more who is a socially responsible benefactor possessing wisdom and experience to share with others within and outside the family, and who is likely to be conservative.

By contrast, referents of the NP *the elderly* are perceived negatively: they have poor physical and mental health, they are weak and vulnerable to abuse, bored and depressed, forgetful and lonely, they are a danger on the road, they are poor and therefore economically as well as physically dependent on others and, consequently, the elderly are a burden on society. Thus:

- (30) The typical denotatum of *elderly person* is around 60 years or more who is in poor physical and mental health, weak and vulnerable to abuse, bored and depressed, forgetful and lonely, a potential danger on the road, poor in wealth and therefore both economically and physically dependent on others and, consequently, a burden on society.

Referents of the NP *old people* were not strongly characterised in the manner of those of the NPs *seniors*, *older people*, and *the elderly*; but they are attributed – perhaps somewhat sympathetically – with the mildly negative characteristics of being tight-fisted, poor, forgetful, and having no sex life. Thus:

- (31) The typical denotatum of *old person* is around 60 years or more who is poor, tight-fisted, forgetful, and without a sex-life.

There, but by the grace of God go we.

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