

## **Age as a Category to Identify People**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this paper is to analyze the importance of age in identifying and classifying people, in comparison to other categories like gender, psychological features and social characteristics. The research conducted for these ends had two stages. In the first stage, participants (104 students of an Argentine university) had to briefly describe the content of six photos. Four of said photos displayed individuals of different ages (a little girl, a young boy, an adult man and an old woman), and two of them displayed a situation where people were gathered in a group (a big and a small group of people of different ages and gender). The second stage consisted in classifying a set of eight pictures of individuals of different age, gender, expressive psychological traits (smiling or not-smiling) and social characteristics (clothing and social appearance) into two groups, according to a personal criterion. Up to four classifications were permitted, regardless of the amount of people included in each group. The order of the classifying criterion played an essential role in the analysis. Half of the participants (52) had to work with a photo set including four photos of young people and four photos of adults, while the other half (52 students) had to work with a photo set including four photos of young people and four photos of old people. Naturally, the age of people varied in each set, but the other categories considered (gender,

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psychological traits and social characteristics) were the same in both sets. Results showed that age was an important reference to categorize and classify people, at least for young people, and especially when the chronological distance was greater. Gender and, to a lesser degree, sociological and psychological features were also important.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Personal identity is a key concept in psychology. It refers to the recognition of one's own individuality and to being the subject (agent) of one's own behavior. In this sense, Nuttin (1968) distinguished between an active ego and a reflexive ego; the latter implies the real self-conscience, that is, the conscience of "myself". However, this conscience or personal identity is far from being an intraindividual substantial entity aimed to ensure psychological permanence across time and situations (Spini & Jopp, 2014). The "self" is not independent of social contexts and interactions. The emergence of the individual ego supposes a differentiation process from the others or, in other words, from the others-self. This was clearly pointed out by Freud (1921/1997) in his theory of the identification, where he distinguished three stages in the sequence of ego construction: primary identification, affective object relation, and secondary identification (object introjection). This assumes that the construction of the personal identity is not developed by itself, as a product of an individual deployment. As Freud himself said, the ego results from the introjected identification with the parental figures and other significant ones (it is the summation of the affective object relations). From another theoretical perspective, the one regarding symbolic interactionism, Mead (1934/1982) highlights a concurrent vision: the self emerges from, and due to, social interaction. The assumption of social roles is what enables the self-emerging. As Doise notices (1978), Mead differentiates between a self-social dimension (the "Me", as the result of the internalization of the generalized-other) and a personal and reactive dimension (the "I"). This two-dimensional aspect of the identity has inspired several researches. Gordon (1968), for example, requested 156 students to answer the question: "Who am I?" The

more frequent answers refer to age (82%) and to gender (74%), although other answers refer to personal characteristics. Moreover, Roselli (1993) required university students to complete the phrase: “I am...” five different times. In this case, the higher frequencies referred to individual characteristics, especially psychological ones (71%), followed by those referring to social or group references: gender, familiar bond, age, nationality, and student role. Nevertheless, even more important than the categories used to identify “myself” is the social categorization of others, a fact that has been widely studied in social psychology. In other words, the way I describe myself is as important as the way I describe or perceive others. In this sense, Tajfel (1981), states that the self-identity (what I am) is built up from the categorization I make of others (what I am not). In addition, this author explains that the construction of the personal identity depends on attributions and designations that others make of us; that is to say, on the way we are perceived by others. In this sense, the categorization of others (both in active and passive way) contributes to build psychological identity. Therefore, personal identities are based on a complex game of reciprocal categorization, which is not exempt from conflict and dissent. This happens because social categories do not have a single meaning; they are social representations. In a recent study, Roselli (2015) has proved the reciprocal differences of social representations between young people and elder people; each of these age-groups showed a more realistic view of their own category, and a non-realistic perception of the opposite age-group.

Traditionally, the social categorization phenomenon has been addressed in social psychology within the social cognition and social perception theory, notwithstanding the social representation theory. Along the lines of Leyens & Codol (1990), this paper defends the close relationship between the two theories, acknowledging the cognitive nature of the phenomena they refer to, their social origin and their collective features. Furthermore, the process of social categorization will be the first step or the basis of more extensive and complex representational systems, in the Moscovician sense. Thus, the perception of social reality through numerous (socially shared) categorizations would be the descriptive precursor of hermeneutic processes held by groups and societies.

Among the different categorizations that people make about others, age is, without a doubt, a very frequent and significant one. Categorization based on age involves much more than a mere descriptive designation; it implies a framework of social representations of different ages across

the lifespan as well as a role allocation (what is expected of each age) that goes beyond a simple descriptive category. Additionally, different ages can define membership to and positions in social groups.

Both Moscovici and Doise made it clear that social representations are group-representations about other groups and, therefore, it can be established that intergroup relations are settled in a more or less conflictive game of reciprocal representations. This aspect has not been widely explored in the social representation theory. When we talk about intergroup relations it is clear that we are referring to real groups (i.e., strong interaction, shared cultural elements and psychological identity membership) and not to mere nominal groups. For Doise, following the four explicative levels of social psychology (intraindividual, interindividual, extra-situational social position, and representational-ideological), intergroup relations constitute the articulated connection between individual subjectivity and the social representations or shared meanings. The key to intergroup relations are the categorization processes, which allow classifying and ordering reality, identifying groups and building psychosocial identities.

The application of these concepts to the relation between the different age groups is a least mentioned and least considered question in research. Actually, it is not a usual practice to refer to age as a social group. It is possible, however, to sustain that different ages can be considered as social groups because they define intra and intergroup relation systems, representations, categorizations and identities (“ours” and them of the others). Age groups are defined by a distinctive feature: the transitory membership, due to the natural evolution of the subject, which marks the importance of chronological limits.

The fact that social representations from each group (both our own group and others’ group) are the basis of intergroup relations is of vital importance for investigating the social building process of age representation and its use as a category for classifying and ordering reality. The first aspect has been addressed by different studies (Roselli, 2015; Guichard, E., Concha, V., Henríquez, G., Cavalli, S., y Lalive, d’Epinay, C., 2013; Wachelke, J., y Contarello, A., 2010). This study deals, on the other hand, with the second aspect.

To what extent is age used to categorize and identify people? What is the importance of age in interpersonal categorization in comparison with other identifying categories, such as gender, psychological features and social references? According to the foregoing premises, when

referring to age as an identifying category, reference is not made to an individual characteristic but to age groups and to intergroup relations.

Age and gender are highly objective categories and they necessarily concern everyone. The purpose of this research is to compare the importance of these categories in defining and ordering reality. Additionally, the importance of an eminently psychological category (humor or mood, according to facial expressions) and of a basically sociological one (social level or role, according to clothing) are also tested. This choice, which excludes other possible categories, is grounded on the fact that these four categories are perceptually salient and significant (at least in the people with which the study was carried out) at the time of identifying people. This theoretical assumption, however, is subject to the conclusions of the research, especially of the first stage, where participants are completely free to categorize photos of individuals.

Specifically, the confirmation of the following basic hypothesis is sought: 1) regarding the categorization of individuals (in static conditions), age and gender are the most frequent categories for identifying people, well above other categories; 2) age is the most frequent category with extreme age groups (childhood and old age), while gender is the most frequent one with average age groups (youth and adulthood); 3) regarding the classification or differentiation of people, age prevails over gender when the chronological distance between the individuals is high, but gender is the main differentiating criterion when the chronological distance drops.

The previous questions define the subject-matter of the research, especially from the point of view of young university students. This is for a practical reason (the facility to access to population). Therefore, it is obvious that the conclusions apply basically to such age group.

## **METHOD**

The sample consisted of 104 participants, all of which were university students (58 female, 46 male, between 18-22 years old) from an Argentine university. The data, which was provided individually, voluntarily and anonymously, was requested during a master class. The study had two stages.

In the first stage, the participants had write a description of the content of six pictures, four of which were from individuals of different ages (child, young, adult, old), gender (male, female), psychological expressions (smiling, not-smiling) and sociological features (formal or informal clothing). There were also two photos of groups of people (of different age and gender). The purpose was to analyze the use of the possible identifying categories: age, gender, psychological or expressive mood, and social role or social reference, among others.

The second stage consisted in classifying a set of eight photos of individuals of different age, gender, expressive psychological characteristics (smiling or not-smiling) and social characteristics (clothing and social appearance) into two groups, according to a personal classifying criterion. Up to four classifications were permitted, regardless of the amount of people included in each group. The order of the classifying criterion played an essential role in the analysis. It must be noted that the photo sets were not the same among all participants. Half of them (52) had to work with a photo set including four photos of young people and four photos of adults, while the other half (52 students) had to work with a photo set including four photos of young people and four photos of old people. Naturally, the age of people varied in each set, but the other categories considered (gender, psychological traits and social characteristics) were the same in both sets.

Material and instructions of the two stages are included in the appendix. In order to verify the representation of each age group (childhood, youth, adulthood and old age) in the photos, a previous consensus testing was performed with an additional equivalent sample.

## **RESULTS**

### **First Stage: People's Descriptive Categories**

Table 1 presents the statistic frequencies of the categories used by the 104 students to describe the four photos of the individuals, whose age, gender, psychological and sociological references were different.

**Table 1 here**

It is important to highlight that, in Spanish, gender is not usually used as an autonomous category when identifying a person (male-female); generally, mixed gender-age categories are used: little girl (“nena”), little boy (“nene”), young girl (“chica”), young boy (“muchacho”, “chico”), Mr. (“señor”) and Mrs. (“señora”). Instead, age can be used as a category itself when it refers to the lifespan; that is the case, for instance, of the use of affective words to categorize old people (“granny”, “grandpa”) and “millennial” or “teenager” to categorize young people.

It is clear that gender-age, age and psychological features are the most frequently used categories for identifying the individuals that appeared in the photos. Age is especially important in the cases concerning childhood, youth and old age. (The latter includes explicit references to the lifespan). This is less significant when the adult is characterized. An important number of social references (social role, clothing) are made when young and adult individuals are described; however, these are not present when children and old people are categorized. This is not surprising in the case of children, but it is very suggestive in case of the elderly. (Does this mean that they considered themselves socially excluded?)

Table 2 presents the frequencies for both photos that showed groups. The initial aim of these photos was to camouflage the interest in the issue of age. However, the comparison with the photos of individuals showed an interesting phenomenon.

### **Table 2 here**

In group situations (both “small” and “big” groups), the gender-age, the age and the psychological references, which were categories very used in photos of individuals, are not significant. Instead, the sociological references concerning the sociological identification of groups (family and community group) and the different social situations (such as a birthday party or camping), become important. Evidently, when trying to identify people, group situations are different from the ones in which individuals are on their own.

## **Second Stage: People’s Classifying Criteria**

As it has already been mentioned, after performing the precedent task, subjects had to classify the eight pictures into two groups according to a logical criterion. Half of the photo set consisted of four photos of young people and four of adults; the other half consisted of four photos of young people (the same as the ones of the precedent set) and four of old people. The purpose was to analyze the importance of age as a classifying criterion in relation to other possible criteria: gender, psychological and sociological references, among others.

Table 3 shows the criterion adopted by students in the four possible classifications. The order in which the criteria were used was very important.

### **Table 3 here**

It is clear that age and gender are the most significant differential criteria. However, it is surprising that while gender is the predominant criterion in the classification of the photo sets of young and adult people, age is a priority in the photo sets of children and old people. In other words, age plays an important role when differentiating children and old people, while gender is a determining category in the case of young and adult people. This is shown not only in the first classification, but also in the total frequencies of the whole classifications.

Sociological references (including clothing, social status and other social references) are also important in both photo sets (especially in the second and third classifications). The psychological condition (smiling-joy vs not-smiling-worried) is also a frequently used classification criterion, especially in the set of young-adult people.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Evidently, age is an important trait when it comes to categorizing and classifying people (at least for young people), especially in the two poles of the lifespan. Gender is also important (especially in the middle stages of life) and, to a lesser degree, sociological and psychological references are also employed. However, it must be considered that the experimental design was based on an observation of static people and not on social actions or behaviors. Many authors (Leyens & Codol, 1990; Rodríguez & Betancor, 2007) agree that social cognition implies, rather than the

simple categorization of people, explicit and implicit theories which explain and interpret social actions, i.e., social behavior. In this sense, the perception of people outside the context of a specific social action undoubtedly represents a limitation to this research, but does not affect the validity of the experimental design of the research. The restricted sample of population (university students) can also be considered a limitation. In a future study, a mixed consideration (samples of different ages) in the categorization process will lead to important conclusions about the interactive aspect of the categorization, especially between old people and young people. In this sense, it should be noted that the analysis of the interactive categorization of age leads to the consideration of intergroup relations, assuming that age is not a simple descriptive label, but a social group and the definition of identity. In a more complete replication of this study, it would also be interesting to explore the correlation between the use of age for classifying and categorizing people and the use of age as an identifying category for oneself. Therefore, it would only be necessary to ask the same subjects of this replication about their own personal identifying categories. The tool for that could be completing phrases, such as: 'I am.....' The relation between the categorization of others and the personal categorization of oneself has a deep theoretical implication, as Tajfel & Turner (1989) said. Do people that use age to categorize other people (instead of gender, nationality, social position, psychological features, and so on) also use this category for their own characterization?

On the whole, the most important conclusions of this study were the following:

1) Stage I of the research showed that age and gender are the most important identifying categories, followed by the psychological and sociological references, in accordance with the hypothesis. The other categories were less frequently employed.

2) As it was expected, stage I also showed that age is especially important for identifying children and old people (but also young people), while gender is important for identifying adults. Sociological references are especially significant in the case of young and adult people, but not in the case of children and old people. This finding would show that children and old people are outside the social action and the social context.

3) When analyzing group pictures, age and gender-age are not significant categories for identifying people. Instead, social references and the description of the situation are very important. Evidently, the meaning attributed to a group scene is well differentiated from the one

attributed to a scene of an individual. It could be said that the former connotes a more dynamic and construable point of view, while the latter implies a more static description. Therefore, age is a category that defines an individual feature. Even if this unexpected conclusion has not been included in the hypothesis, it has a significant theoretical value.

4) When it comes to understanding the criteria used to classify individuals (stage II), age and gender are the most frequently used categories. The former, in the cases where the photo shows young and old persons; the latter, when the differentiation must be performed between photos of young and adult people. The sociological and psychological references, in this order, are also significant classificatory categories. It is clear that age is more relevant than gender when age disparity is wider. Whenever age disparity is closer, gender is the most significant category for differentiating people. These conclusions are consistent with the third of the hypothesis that were outlined at the beginning of this paper.

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His research has ranged from a more sociological Social Psychology (surveys on opinions, attitudes and behavior) to experimental microsocial studies which analyze social interaction. For the last 20 years, his main research field has been socio-cognitive interactions in learning environments, although his wide range of papers include topics such as social representations. At present, he is Principal Researcher at the National Council of Scientific Research and Head of the Psychological Research Center of Catholic Argentine University.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Set of Pictures Used in the First Stage**

We ask for your collaboration for a study from the Research Center of UCA (Argentine Catholic University) about picture's perception. It is very simple and anonymous.

Date:

Code:

Career:

Gender:

Age:

Bellow you will find several pictures. Describe, in a few words, the content of each one.



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**Set of Pictures Used in the Second Stage (Set “N”)**

Have a look at the following eight pictures of several people. The task consists of grouping them into two different groups according to what they have in common. Actually, there are different ways to classify the pictures. Groups don't need to have exactly the same number of pictures.

When answering, there is room to make four classifications, but it is not necessary to complete them all if you don't find any other classifying criteria.



**Set of Pictures Used in the Second Stage (Set “R”)**

Have a look at the following eight pictures of several people. The task consists of grouping them into two different groups according to what they have in common. Actually, there are different ways to classify the pictures. Groups don't need to have exactly the same number of pictures.

When answering, there is room to make four classifications, but it is not necessary to complete them all if you don't find any other classifying criteria.



Table 1

Frequencies of the used categories to define the photo content of the individual people.

	Little girl	Young boy	Adult man	Old woman	TOTAL
<b>Individual</b>			1	1	
<b>Gender-age</b>	96 ( 36,92%)	54 (20,76%)	67 (25,76%)	43 (16,53%)	260
<b>Age</b>	26 (15,75%)	41 (24,84%)	16 (9,69%) *	82 (46,69%)	165
<b>Psychological References</b>	107 (29,31%)	46 (12,60%)	107 (29,31%)	105 (28,76%)	365
<b>Sociological References</b>	3 (2,65%)	54 (47,78%)	47 (41,59%)	9 (7,96%)	113
<b>Action</b>	19 (30,15%)	22 (34,92%)	15 (23,80%)	7 (11,11%)	63
<b>Situation</b>	20 (25,64%)	12 (15,38%)	19 (24,35%)	27 (34,61%)	78
<b>TOTAL</b>	271	229	272	274	

Examples:

Individual: “person”

Gender-age: “little girl”, “young boy”, “adult man”, “Mister”, “Mrs”, “old woman”.

Age: “teenager”, “millennial”, “granny”, “grandpa”.

Psychological References: “smiling”, “serious”, “worried”.

Sociological References: “actor”, “singer”, “lawyer”, “with glasses”, “elegant”, “student”.

Action: “thinking”, “studying”, “playing”.

Situation: “camping”, “party”, “celebration”.

$\chi^2$  Gender / Age x Adult / Old \*:  $p < 0.05$

Table 2

Frequencies of the categories used to define the content of collective situation photos.

	Small Group	Big Group	TOTAL
People or group in general	19 (36,53%)	33 (63,46%)	52
Gender – Age	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	2
Age	11 (40,74%)	16 (59,25%)	27
Psychological References	43 (53,08%)	38 (46,91%)	81
Sociological References	99 (55%)	81 (45%)	180
Action	4 (33,33%)	8 (66,66%)	12
Situation	55 (50,92%)	53 (49,07%)	108
Other (numerous)	15 (100%)	0	15
TOTAL	247	230	

Table 3

Criteria used to classify photo sets.

CRITERIA	1 <sup>ST</sup> CLASSIFICAT.		2 <sup>ND</sup> CLASSIFICAT.		3 <sup>RD</sup> CLASSIFICAT.		4 <sup>TH</sup> CLASSIFICAT.		TOTAL	
	Y-AD	Y-O	Y-AD	Y-O	Y-AD	Y-O	Y-AD	Y-O	Y-AD	Y-O
Gender	27	11	7	11	3	4	1	1	38	27
Age	3	* 28	12	11	6	1	5	3	26	** 43
Sociological References	11	9	18	19	11	24	5	10	45	62
Psychological References	17	3	8	3	13	5	5	4	33	15
Fisical features	1	0	2	2	1	4	1	1	5	7
Age+gender	2	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	3	3
Age+clothing	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Age+social reference	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Other	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	2	2	3
TOTAL	52	52	48	47	34	40	19	22	154	160

References: J= Young ; AD= Adult; O= Old.

$\chi^2$  First Classification \*:  $p < 0.05$

$\chi^2$  Total Classification \*\*:  $p < 0.05$