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College-aged ageism:

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Abstract

Ageism has become a much more prevalent issue in recent years. The biases and prejudices that

exist towards the aging only reinforce the narrative that portrays aging as a process of decline.

This study aims to discover the perceptions that current college students have towards aging, as

viewed through their discourse and manners of speaking about the aging process. In addition,

through the use of the Anxiety about Aging Scale (Lasher & Faulkender, 1993) this study

highlights the degree of anxieties this age group might have towards their own aging process as

compared against similar collegiate-aged data from 15 years ago. Findings show still a

significant, articulate level of ageist stereotyping present in current college student's discourse,

most notably in regard to its focus on appearance as central to a person's value.

College-aged ageism:

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Aging is an inevitable human experience that cannot be stopped or avoided. With aging come certain experiences, some more exciting than others. As a child, turning ten signified entering the 'double digits' and then quickly becoming a teenager at thirteen, finally gaining the right to vote at eighteen. In one's twenties arrives the highly anticipated age of 21 and its legal access to drinking alcohol in public areas. But aging is not just a process of reaching specific chronological markers. Aging in this culture is accompanied by certain cultural expectations and perceptions of a person as they age. As not only a chronological classification, age is also used as a social identifier and, as a society, it is used to "classify ourselves and others into age groups that signify a variety of meanings, all of which are socially constructed" (Allen, 2011, p. 163).

Literature Review

Aging as Decline

Aging as a process of decline is a widely accepted stereotype in society that views aging as a series of losses, including physical, mental, emotional, the loss of autonomy, and through the death of friends and loved ones. Stereotypes are commonly reinforced through mass media, with aging being associated with frailty, senility, and helplessness. As these stereotypes are reinforced, aging individuals tend to adopt these negative attitudes in their own life, which reinforces the societal view that aging is a process of decline (Nehaus & Nehaus, 1982).

Despite being a universal human experience, there seems to be pervasive negative perceptions of aging. For many, aging is equated with feelings of dread and usually comes from the underlying fears associated with the physical decline of aging (Butler, 1980). Looking forward at one's own aging process is oftentimes accompanied with feelings of anxiety, and as

Lasher and Faulkender (1993) found in their study, this anxiety towards aging manifests as ''combined concern and anticipation of losses centered around the aging process'' (p. 247). Common stereotypes around the elderly often portray individuals lacking competency, independence, and intelligence (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002). Children have been shown to hold more negative biases towards older people and their perceptions often include the older individuals as lonely, set in their ways and often becoming angry (Haught, Walls, Laney, Leavell, & Stuzen, 1999). Other studies have shown that negative stereotypes do exist towards older individuals, especially in regards to perceptions of physical attractiveness (Kite et al., 2005). Women also tend to feel more feelings of anxiety towards aging, especially in regards to the declines associated with attractiveness, ability and quality of life (Barrett & Von Rohr, 2008).

An issue associated with these stereotypes is the tendency towards an older person's internalization of the negative attributes, often leading to feelings of self-hatred (Andrews, 1999). As another study showed, the more a person fears aging, the more likely they are to hold onto ageist stereotypes since it reflects their own anxieties about reaching old age (Allan & Johnson, 2008).

Aging and Gender

Both men and women face the same aging process, yet studies have shown that women experience more negative aging stereotypes than men. Women are seen as reaching old age at a younger age than men, with McConatha et al.'s (2003) study reporting an age of 53 for men and 48 for women as the average age the participants reported they would consider themselves to be old (McConatha, Schnell, Volkwein, Riley & Leach, 2003; Barrett & Von Rohr, 2008). Jyrkinen & McKie (2012) also found that women tend to be perceived as old earlier than men and additionally are often seen as having less value than their male counterparts. The discourse

surrounding aging women even goes so far as to describe them as "difficult or cranky when growing older" (Irni, 2009, p. 679).

In addition to the physical losses perceived to be associated with aging, women in this society face the perceived loss of their femininity, which is often equated with the loss of their sexuality (Sontag, 1972; Tretheway, 2001). While aging women are perceived to lose their sexuality and, as a result, their perceived femininity (Tretheway, 2001), men of the same age maintain their masculinity, with signs of "gray hair, wrinkles, even a widening waist signify experience, wisdom, maturity, and sometimes sexiness" (Dinnerstein & Weitz, 1994, p. 18). This double standard of aging, as Susan Sontag described it, is based on the idea that a woman's value is tied up in her physical attractiveness and beauty, which deteriorate in the aging process. Men, on the other hand, do not suffer as greatly from aging because "'masculinity' is identified with competence, autonomy, self-control—qualities which the disappearance of youth does not threaten"(Sontag, 1972, p. 31). Sontag argues that this double standard of aging causes women to lose social value as they age whereas men gain value (Sontag, 1972). Yet, other studies on the age double standard have not shown an association between an increase in age and an increase in negative self-perceptions. In Wilcox (1997), differences in attitudes about body images were not shown to vary based on age, gender or gender times age (Wilcox, 1997). The author suggested that the lack of support for the double standard of aging could mean that individuals adjust their definition of attractiveness or their attitudes towards their bodies, which would account for the lack of difference based on age and gender.

In her book, *Declining to Decline,* Gullette writes that since society has morphed into a culture focused on youthfulness, for many, moving into the middle aged years can cause deep distress and anxiety towards the feelings of decline associated with aging (Gullette, 1997).

Additionally, these cultural standards affect women's self-perceptions by equating youthfulness with femininity and so cause many women to turn to cosmetic procedures or products to maintain a youthful appearance (Dinnerstein & Weitz, 1994). Youthfulness is also described by Gullette as "social capital" and so is only held by the youthful, with many others attempting to appear younger with the help of cosmetic procedures. Once these can no longer hide the effects of aging, "dominant culture soon exposes the aging to the various kinds of identity stripping that come related to the category of age" (Gullette, 2004, p. 22).

When it comes to self-perceptions of aging, women appear to be more concerned than men are with aging and its perceived related losses (McConatha et al., 2003). As women age, the narrative of decline focuses on the losses experienced with aging and suggests that "women have less to offer their organizations and their communities" (Tretheway, 2001, p. 211). One study described the peak age at which a female employee makes the turn towards old age as "a 'grey ceiling', where their careers plateau and their skills become obsolescent or outmoded, and they are assumed to be too old and inflexible to learn new skills and keep pace with the demands of the modern organization" (Thomas et al., 2014, p. 1573).

The societal focus on youthfulness is a noticeable aspect of Hollywood culture and films, seen especially through the immortalization of stars like Jean Harlow, Marilyn Monroe and others. It is an industry built on the pursuit of youthfulness and is filled with images—unattainable goals for the average citizen—of ageless men and women (Addison, 2005).

College-Age Perceptions

While many studies on the perceptions of aging tend to focus on the individuals experiencing the negative stereotypes (Irni, 2009; Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012; Thomas et. al, 2014, Tretheway, 2001) with entire scholarly journals devoted to the experiences of aging (*The*

International Journal of Aging and Human Development, The Journal of Aging and Identity), less is known about the younger generations, college students for example, and their perceptions about aging. McConatha et al. (2003) found that in a study of German and American individuals—participants reporting a median age range of 24.8 and 21.8 respectively—that this age group of women held more aging related fears than men did (McConatha et. al, 2003). In another study of college students' perceptions of aging, the participants reported feelings of anxiety towards aging, with women reporting greater anxiety than men in the categories regarding decline in attractiveness, life quality, and cognitive and physical abilities (Barrett & Von Rohr, 2008). Rupp, Vodanovich and Credé (2010) found that amongst the college-aged individuals their study analyzed, the male participants exhibited more ageism than did the female participants. In addition, this study found a negative correlation between a participant's chronological age and the ageism score, which indicates that younger people tend to be more ageist than older people (Rupp et al., 2010). Other studies have shown that college students tend to also hold negative attitudes toward the elderly and aging, with men exhibiting more ageist beliefs than women (Allan & Johnson, 2008).

Discourse and Narrative

As Michel Foucault argues, societies have major narratives, which are repeated throughout history and include specific sets of discourses that shape these narratives (Foucault, 1981). The narratives emerge from what people experience in day-to-day interactions and through the ways people's lives play out in society (Peterson & Langellier, 2006). The narratives that exist in society, especially regarding aging, are lived out and experience continuity through varying communication practices (Peterson & Langellier, 2006). In addition, because people are all immersed in social environments, and are then "coached in how to talk about (and read) our

lives, how to transform events into experiences, and how to construe our reality, whether this coaching occurs overtly or covertly, through formal discourse or informal conversation" (Randall & McKim, 2004, p. 249). Similarly, critical discourse analysis aims to understand how usage of words and phrases maintain social structures and how power and inequality are maintained through the ideology present in the discourse (Cramer, 2009).

The narratives encompassing the aging process can be difficult to combat, especially the ones that seemingly equate the aging process with words like "outdated" and "worthless" (Randall & McKim, 2004). Scholars have coined the term Narrative of Decline to represent the negative discourse that exists surrounding the aging process. Tretheway (2001) studied aging women in organizational settings, focusing on the narratives they perceive and how it impacts their role in the workplace. The two themes of decline that surfaced during her study were feelings of loss and isolation associated with aging (Tretheway, 2001). Understanding these narratives and how they are internalized or become lived out experiences is important as it could cause a person to develop negative self-perceptions as they age. Unearthing these narratives and exposing the impact it has on the aging can allow for a shift to be made towards more positive discourse.

Rationale

This study aims to add to present research regarding current college students' narratives and perceptions of the aging process. Since reaching "old age" is an inevitable and unavoidable destination, it is important to understand a younger person's perspective on aging. This is because it is the younger generations that will soon be making the policy decisions affecting the elderly and so having a better understanding of college students' perceptions will lead to a stronger solution in reducing ageism. In addition, as no person is exempt from aging, it is in a

person's best interest to recognize their biases toward the elderly so as to avoid internalizing these negative stereotypes in their own aging process. Having better knowledge of how college students perceive the aging process and what anxieties exist toward aging can also add to the existing knowledge of how to mitigate ageism and reduce negative stereotypes towards the elderly. This leads to the first and second research questions regarding the existence of anxieties towards aging as well as the ways in which college students talk and think about the aging process:

RQ1: Do college students today report significantly different levels of anxieties about aging compared to their 2003 counterparts?

RQ2: What discourse do current college students use to describe aging?

Method

Participants

Participants (*n=43*) in the study were drawn from a small, private Catholic University in the Pacific Northwest. The questionnaire was distributed online through Facebook and was posted to four University class pages and to the author's individual Facebook page, but participation was limited to responders who also attended that University at that time.

Procedures

The participants were first asked to complete a series of open-ended questions about aging, (*e.g. List some terms and phrases you hear people using to describe aging or the aging process; what words come to mind when you think of the phrase "successful aging"? In what ways has the aging process been described to you by people in your life, by mediated sources (films, shows, etc.) and through other cultural messages (for example, the phrase "you can't teach an*

old dog new tricks" etc.)? At what age would you consider yourself to have reached "old age";

At what age would you consider yourself to have reached your "Prime"?). These questions

attempted to reach the cultural narrative surrounding aging and the discourses that these college

students use. At the completion of the survey, participants were also asked to respond to a series

of demographic questions, including age, gender, ethnicity and nationality.

Measures

The second part of the questionnaire included the 20-item Anxiety About Aging Scale,

referred to as AAS (Lasher & Faulkender, 1993). This scale is sub-divided into four subscales

about aging, including Fear of Old People, Psychological Concerns about Aging, Anxiety about

Physical Appearances, and Fear of Loss Associated with Aging. Each of the four sub-categories

included fives questions.

Participants were asked to respond to each question (i.e. *I enjoy being around old people, I*

fear that when I am old all my friends will be gone) using a five-point Likert scale ranging from

(1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree. Reliability from Lasher and Faulkender (1993) for

their 20-item scale resulted in a Cronbach's Alpha of .82 for all twenty questions. Reliability

from this study for the AAS resulted in a Cronbach's Alpha of .86 for all twenty items in the

survey (Lasher & Faulkender, 1993). The first sub-category in the AAS, questions that focus on

a participant's fear of old people, had a Cronbach's Alpha of .80 and The Psychological

Concerns about Aging section resulted in a reliability of .77. Anxiety about Physical

Appearances and Fear of Loss Associated with Aging had the lowest reliabilities, with a result of

.42 and .60 respectively. The low reliability of the physical appearances section would be

improved to .68 if the question, "I have never lied about my age in order to appear younger"

were removed from its sub-scale in the survey. One potential reason for the low reliability from

this sub-scale is that this question is one that does not pertain well to college-aged students, since it is logical that few young adults would strive to appear younger than their age.

Results

Of the 43 participants, 79.1% were female (*n=34*), 16.9% were male (*n=7*) and 4.7% of the participants did not report gender (*n=2*). Ages of participants ranged from 18 to 22 with a mean age of 20.2 and a standard deviation of 1.4 and over 72% of participants were white

Research Question 1 asked whether college students today report significantly different levels of anxieties about aging compared to their 2003 counterparts. A single sample *t*-test was used to determine whether there were significant differences between the aging anxieties reported by these participants versus the college-aged participants in McConatha's (2003) study. Both studies utilized Lasher and Faulkender's (1993) Anxiety about Aging Scale. The single-sample *t*-test utilized the 2003 sample's overall anxiety mean score—in order to see if overall levels of anxiety towards aging had either increased or decreased—as the target value against which current students' mean scores could be compared. Participants here (*M*=53.8, *SD*=11.3) reported a statistically significant lower total anxiety than from McConatha's (2003) study (*M*=57.56) showing $t(41) = -2.15$, $p < .05$.

In order to test the potential variance between female and male responses and their anxieties towards aging, an independent-samples *t*-test was used (see Table 1). Comparisons were run analyzing current women and men respondents' scores on the overall scale as well as on each subscale (Fear of Old People, Psychological Concerns, Physical Appearance, and Fear of Losses). Analysis showed no significant gender differences on any of the measures, $t(39)=0.23$, $p=0.81$ for the Fear of Old People sub-scale; $t(39)=-0.08$, $p=0.94$ for the Psychological Concerns

sub-scale; $t(39)=0.02$, $p=0.98$ for the Physical Appearance sub-scale; $t(39)=-0.08$, $p=0.94$ for the

Fear of Losses sub-scale, and for the overall AAS, $t(39)=-0.35$, $p=0.76$.

Research Question 2 asked what discourse these college students used to describe the

aging process. The first open-ended question (*List some terms and phrases you hear people*

using to describe aging or the aging process) sought discourse and communication patterns

evident in college students' constructions of the aging process. Four different themes arose from

the participants' responses, including describing aging as a downward path, the negative

attributes of aging, and equating youthful appearances and being physically activity with the idea

of successful aging.

Aging as a Downward Path

A common theme that arose from the results of this question was the phrases that

portrayed aging as having some sort of path. Responses following this theme used phrases like

"over the hill" (*n=10*), it's all downhill (*n=2*) or other less frequently mentioned phrases such as

"end of the road", "nearing the end" and "death bound." Totals were based on individual

mentions and were not repeated in individual responses.

Negative Attributes

Responses to the same question also touched quite frequently on the physical attributes

associated with old age, yet the specific question only asked participants to focus on the aging

process in general. Despite this, "having wrinkles" (*n=11*), "greying or getting grey hair" (*n=7*),

sagging, creaking, and gaining weight were just a few of the physical attributions that the

participants associated with the aging process. In addition, many feelings or emotions with

negative connotations were listed in the responses, such as "terrifying", "helpless", "isolation",

"lonely", "scary". While most of the discourse in this section focused on the negatives associated

with aging, such as the feelings of terror, isolation, loneliness and anxiety about death, there were four mentions of being wise in old age or achieving wisdom; a positive byproduct of aging. Despite these few positive associations, an overwhelming majority associated the aging process with the negative attributions commonly seen in regards to very old age.

Appearances and Successful Aging

For the second open-ended question used to test RQ2, participants were asked to provide terms or phrases believed to relate to the idea of "successful aging". The most noteworthy theme that appeared from this question focused on looks and appearances. Associations of "successful aging" with images of wrinkle free faces (*n*=10) was the most common response from participants. In addition, many other responses had mentions of physical attractiveness, with words such as sexy, pretty, and beautiful being used as a potential definition of what it means to age successfully (*n*=9).

Mentions of maintain youthful appearances were also mentioned quite frequently. Phrases that touched on some aspect of youthfulness, such as "looking younger", "young for your age", "looking youthful", were mentioned quite frequently throughout the participants' responses (*n=10*). Additionally, there were a few unusual word associations, such as the mention of "Botox" (*n=2)* and "silver fox" (*n=2*). A silver fox is an informal term used to describe a "handsome grey-haired man" (2010). This was an interesting contradiction to earlier responses, as many participants listed the attribution of "greying" or being "grey-haired" alongside other phrases such as "wrinkly", "frail/fragile" "sagging" and "creaking" in order to describe the aging process. As shown in other studies, this finding relates back to the double standard of aging, in which women are perceived to lose their social value as they age. It is because in this culture a

woman's value is seemingly connected with her appearances, whereas men gain value as they age (Sontag, 1972).

Physical Activity and Successful Aging

The successful aging responses also included themes related to maintaining a certain level of physical activity. Mentions of remaining active, being fit and staying healthy were mentioned frequently throughout the responses (*n=19*). Participants also touched on images of life fulfillment, with responses including "happiness" (*n=5*), mentions of family and loved ones (*n=4*), and being independent (*n=5*).

Discussion

The main goal of this study was to first discover the existence of anxieties towards aging but to also uncover the discourse and potential biases existing in this age group towards the aging process. In order to test RQ1 and determine if the college students in this study reported anxieties towards aging, the results from McConatha's (2003) study were used as a test value against the data from this study. The results showed statistically significant lower levels of anxiety than in McConatha's (2003) study. Possible reasons for this finding could relate to the age range of the test study, which varied from 19 to 29, whereas the age range in this study was between 18 and 22. It is possible that individuals in their late teens and early twenties have not yet begun to consider their own aging process since college students have only just entered their twenties and so the anxiety that accompanies the middle age years has not been internalized (Gullette, 1997).

The results did not show significant differences in the aging anxiety levels expressed by female and male participants in this study. While other studies (McConatha et al., 2003; Barrett & Von Rohr, 2008) have shown that women tended to have more anxiety towards aging than men, the results of this study did not support those findings. It is possible that because of the

overwhelming percentage of female participants, there was not enough data to compare the difference in anxieties between the female and male responses (Lasher & Faulkender, 1993). It is also possible that in the last few years, the cultural focus and pressure to maintain one's looks and appearance have begun to effect men on a higher level (Nolan & Scott, 2009).

Despite showing less anxiety than the McConatha (2003) study, the data collected on the discourse about aging did show that there is a significant level of age stereotypes and prejudices present in this age group. The results of the study are most noteworthy in regards to the qualitative data collected from the open-ended questions. In testing RQ2, it is obvious that the students in this study possessed noteworthy negative perceptions towards aging. Importantly, these perceptions were evident in the discourse participants used to describe the aging process *in response to questions that specifically did not refer to old age or the elderly*. This result shows that aging in general continues to be seen as a process of decline, as shown through the mentions of "over the hill", which implies a downward trajectory, and the negative byproducts of aging (wrinkles, grey hair, gaining weight) used to refer to the aging process, among other findings.

In addition, many of the negative connotations associated with aging focused on appearances and how aging affects an individual's looks. This was shown in the way participants discussed what they believed is meant by the phrase successful aging. It can be seen from the data that if a person is to be considered having aged successfully, they must maintain a certain level of physical beauty, managing to avoid the physical decline that comes with, such as wrinkles and grey hair. Equating successful aging with maintaining one's looks reinforces a US societal focus on maintaining conventional physical beauty standards as central to successful living and aging, especially among women.

The language and discourse that the participants used surrounding the aging process also portrayed negative perceptions towards aging through the emotions or feelings that were also mentioned. Words, such as isolation, terrifying, lonely, frail, helpless, and sad all carry negative connotations, especially when applied to such an inevitable life experience like aging. These biases were prompted by a question that only focused on the aging process in general terms, yet participants responded with stereotypes that are usually applied to the elderly. What this implies is that people, especially the young, equate aging, a natural inevitable experience, with being old and the many perceived negative byproducts that accompany the aging process.

The theme of youthfulness was also a prevalent finding in this study and how maintaining one's youthful looks is a desirable goal. As shown in the data, college students seemingly equated aging successfully with the idea of keeping youthful features. This relates back to the culture heavily focused on youth that Gullette (2004) describes in *Aged by Culture*. In order to maintain these looks, many individuals turn to cosmetic procedures to maintain this cultural value of looking younger than one's chronological age, as also noticed by the mentioning of Botox procedures that also surfaced in the responses. The cosmetic industry feeds the desire to appear youthful, advertising anti-aging creams, hair dyes, cosmetic procedures and many other products intended to help people attempt to stop the effects of this natural process.

Limitations

The most notable limitation of this study is its relatively limited sample size (*n=43*) as well as the fact that a significant majority of participants were female. A few of the questions in the Anxiety about Aging Scale also proved to be a limitation for the age range of the participants in this study. Certain questions, such as "I have never lied about my age in order to appear younger" and "the older I become, the more I worry about my health" did not seem to pertain as

well to college-aged participants, and so those sub-components of the AAS may have underperformed in helping examine the anxiety levels these participants have towards aging. Other limitations would include the use of open-ended questions instead of individual interviews, which might have provided a more in-depth look at the discourse patterns surrounding the aging process. Another limitation is the platform that was used to distribute the survey. While social media (Facebook in this instance) can be a useful tool, it is also easy for individuals to ignore posts about requests for participation. In addition, the pages I posted to receive many similar posts from other students attempting to complete research for other classes and so students might avoid participating due to the frequency of similar requests.

Conclusion

A major repercussion of these ageist beliefs and stereotypes is that they perpetuate a culture focused too narrowly on youthfulness and impossible-to-obtain cultural conventions governing human beauty and worth. Due to the inevitability of the aging process, ageism is especially harmful because those projecting the stereotypes will one day become the group experiencing the prejudices**.** More research is necessary in order to better comprehend the perceptions that college students have towards aging. It is important to have a better understanding of how these negative perceptions towards the elderly could then become internalized prejudices as an individual ages and the effect that this would have on a person's self-perception. By only referring to the aging process in terms of the biological effects of aging (i.e. white haired and wrinkly) it limits the conversation to the physical signs to aging. This leaves individuals with feelings of fear and anxiety towards the aging process because of the lack of discourse around the positive attributes of aging, such as wisdom, maturity, and a better understanding of the important things in life. As the narrative of decline is repeated and

reproduced, it only furthers the focus on cultural standards of beauty as a measure of one's social

value, leaving people feeling diminished and of lower worth when these unreachable standards

are not met.

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Appendix

Table 1: Mean scores for the Anxiety about Aging Scales by gender

Scale	Women	Men
Fear of Old People		
1. I enjoy being around old people.	2.41	2.57
3. I like to go visit my older relatives.	2.09	2.43
10. I enjoy talking with old people.	2.12	2.14
13. I feel very comfortable when I am around an old person	2.29	2.14
19. I enjoy doing things for old people.	2.03	2.00
Psychological Concerns		
5. I fear it will be very hard for me to find contentment in old age.*	2.59	2.86
7. I will have plenty to occupy my time when I am old.	2.29	2.00
11. I expect to feel good about life when I am old.	1.94	1.86
16. I believe that I will still be able to do most things for myself when I am old.	2.24	2.14
18. I expect to feel good about myself when I am old.	2.06	2.14
Physical Appearance		
4. I have never lied about my age in order to appear younger.	2.24	1.14
9. It doesn't bother me at all to imagine myself as being old	3.26	3.57
12. I have never dreaded the day I would look in the mirror and see gray hairs.	3.09	3.71
15. I have never dreaded looking old.	3.62	3.86
20. When I look in the mirror, it bothers me to see how my looks have changed with age.*	2.62	2.57
Fear of Losses		
2. I fear that when I am old all my friends will be gone.*	3.09	3.86
6. The older I become, the more I worry about my health.*	3.71	4.29
8. I get nervous when I think about someone else making decisions for me when I am old.*	4.12	4.42
14. I worry that people will ignore me when I am old.*	3.59	3.29
17. I am afraid that there will be no meaning in life when I am old.*	2.29	2.14

Note: Higher scores indicate more fear of aging, more psychological concerns, more concerns about physical appearance, and more fear of losses. All questions were reversed so that higher scores would reflect higher levels of anxiety, except *questions, which were left the same for scoring purpose.