

**READING ATTITUDES AND PROBLEMS  
OF THE ELDERLY**

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In the United States the number of people 65 years of age or older is approximately 22 million, yet unfortunately little is known about their reading behavior (Kingston, 1973, 1979; Robinson and Maring, 1976). A phenomenon called "graying of the campus" has been noted since adult education programs have been booming recently throughout the nation. Reports from colleges during the last decade indicate a focus of attention on the educational and recreational needs of the elderly in the realm of higher education (De Carlo, 1974; Ellison, 1975; Stetar, 1974; Warner, 1974; Yarmon, 1980). It is therefore important for sponsors of these programs to have an understanding of the needs and attitudes of the elderly regarding reading.

As the majority of senior citizens have limited education and training in reading it is safe to assume that the elderly had adverse attitudes toward or difficulties in reading. This study was undertaken to identify some of the problems they indicated.

## Method

A group of 106 elderly adults (over 50 years of age) in the Chicago area participated in the study. The group consisted of 31 males and 75 females of all socio-economic levels and varying levels of education. Some were working, others retired or semi-retired. Some were homemakers with varying amounts of work experience. Included in the study were retired university faculty and staff, senior citizen group members, friends and neighbors.

Each was administered the Survey of Elderly Reading Attitudes (SERA) (Kingston, 1981). The inventory consisted of 75 items designed to elicit attitudes, recognition and comprehension problems, different reading behaviors and physical and psychological difficulties involved in reading. Each item consisted of a statement that the respondent was to either "Agree" or "Disagree" with by circling A or D. The percentage of "Agree" responses were calculated for the total group and subgroups by age, sex, and educational level.

## Results

The results were compiled for groups separated by sex, age, and years of education. In general there was evidence that females read better than males, the younger group read better and had fewer physical and psychological problems with reading than the older group. The better the educational level, the better the reading skills and attitudes. There was evidence of widespread recreational reading and survival reading skills for most adults.

Of the 106 participants in this study, 93% agreed to the statement, "I can read most advertisements without difficulty." Eighty-eight percent agreed to the statement, "When reading I get a mental picture of things about which I'm reading." These were followed by agreements of 87% for, "After reading a selection I can state the main idea in my own words"; 83% for the item, "I can read the newspaper without difficulty"; again 83% for, "I can recognize most of the words I read the instant I see them"; 82% for, "I have no trouble reading printed directions when I need to"; 81% for "I can understand the marks in the dictionary which explain how a word is pronounced"; 76% for, "After I read a passage I can recall most of the important facts and details I have read."

As indicated in Table 1, there was a disparity (61%) of responses to the statement, "Reading help me not to feel lonely," between the age group 50-59 years and the 80 and over age group, with only 27% of the former agreeing and 88% of the latter agreeing.

The next greatest difference was for the item, "I find my attention wanders when I read", with only 18% of the youngest group and 75% of the oldest group agreeing, another large difference (57%). The next item shows that as people grow older they are more likely to regard a day as wasted if they don't read for at least one hour. Although it may seem contradictory, this is followed by the item which indicates that older people read only when they have nothing else to do. Next is the response which indicated that the older people think they are above average readers for their group.

Table 1

### COMPARISON BY AGE GROUPS

Item	Percentages				Diff.
	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	
15 Reading helps during loneliness	27	62	81	88	61
4 Attention wanders while reading	18	32	24	75	57
24 Regard day wasted if they don't read for at least 1 hr.	23	29	56	5	52
13 Read only when there's nothing else to do	23	32	29	75	52
42 Recreational reading above average for age group	23	47	49	75	52
32 Frequently overlook words	14	35	32	63	49
61 Skip words they don't know	27	27	27	75	48
16 Don't like violent or sexy novels	41	71	81	88	47
8 Print blurs after 15-20 minutes	5	12	12	50	45
33 Frequently miss or reread a line	18	21	44	63	45
51 Takes above average time to locate telephone number in book	5	15	20	50	45
43 Often miss the point when reading	5	15	17	50	45
36 Can recall most facts and details	91	71	76	50	41
35 Self-conscious about reading aloud	23	35	32	63	40
68 Friends and family interested in material read	64	41	54	25	39
37 Can paraphrase the main idea	100	85	85	63	37
18 Reading has increased	27	41	73	63	36
20 Enjoy rereading stories read before	27	24	49	63	36
21 Reading stories they didn't recognize before	14	27	34	50	36
50 Have a current library card	59	50	37	25	34
47 Have difficulty concentrating while reading	5	21	32	38	33
62 Spell out words they don't know	18	29	37	50	32
71 Read Bible more frequently than when younger	18	21	44	50	32
3 Do not read as widely as before	32	47	39	63	31
1 Read more slowly than before	23	32	49	50	27
66 Read only when there's nothing better to do	23	21	42	50	27
5 Read newspaper without difficulty	100	79	81	75	25
6 Read advertisements without difficulty	100	100	88	75	25

Other differences indicate that the oldest group frequently overlook words; more often skip words they don't know; don't like violent and sexy novels as much as the younger groups. The print often blurs for them after 15-20 minutes of reading; they take more time to locate a number in the telephone book; they have difficulty recalling the facts and details; they are more self-conscious about reading aloud. Their families and friends are less interested in what they read; they are less able to paraphrase the main ideas, they read more than they did when they were younger. The oldest group is also more likely to reread stories they have read before; they are less likely to have a current library card; they have greater difficulty concentrating; they tend to spell out words they don't know; they read the Bible more frequently; they read more widely; they read more slowly; and they have more difficulty reading newspapers and advertisements.

Comparison of responses of 31 males and 75 females where there is a disparity of 10% or more revealed the following types

of data. The greatest difference (32%) is for the item, "I can understand directions for filing tax returns without seeking help", 68% of the males responded "agree" while only 36% of the females responded "agree". This can be related to the image portrayed by the media and advertisements. Other responses indicate that in general males read fewer books, read less fiction, read slower than when younger, prefer larger type in newspapers, have difficulty reading print on glossy paper, don't get family or friends involved in what they read, don't prefer violent and sexy novels, don't subscribe to many magazines, often don't believe printed materials. In contrast, females usually read more books, read more fiction, don't read slower than when younger, don't have as much difficulty reading print on glossy paper, get family and friends involved in what they read, prefer violent and sexy novels, subscribe to more magazines, more often believe printed material.

Table 2 is a comparison of responses by educational level of the participants where there is a disparity of 25% or more.

Table 2

## COMPARISON BY YEARS OF EDUCATION

Item	Percentage			Diff.
	0-11	12-15	16+	
30 Often don't know words in newspapers	55	39	8	47
50 Have a current library card	24	47	69	45
13 Read only when nothing else to do	48	37	5	43
38 Say most published material not worth reading	69	43	26	43
35 Self-conscious about reading aloud	59	24	22	37
61 Skip unfamiliar words	45	31	9	36
40 Can understand directions of tax returns	31	43	66	35
7 Can read governmental forms	31	61	65	34
32 Frequently overlook words	52	28	18	34
66 Read only when nothing better to do	41	37	8	33
64 Read all material at same rate	55	39	22	33
49 Know how to use library card catalog	59	61	92	33
27 Subscribe to daily newspaper	51	49	83	32
4 Attention wanders while reading	51	20	26	31
33 Frequently miss or reread a line	48	31	18	30
60 Can understand dictionary pronunciation key	66	84	95	29
43 Often miss the point of material	28	18	0	28
16 Don't read violent or sexy novels	79	73	52	27
36 Can recall facts and details	66	73	92	26
51 Difficulty in locating number in telephone book	31	16	5	26
62 Spell out unfamiliar words	48	26	22	26
53 Subscribe to two or more magazines	48	67	74	26
68 Friends and family are interested in their reading	35	49	61	26
21 Read stories that were not recognized at first	38	28	13	25
28 Go to public library at least once a month	14	22	39	25

The greatest difference was for the item, "I often find words in the newspapers whose meaning I don't know." This was agreed to by 55% of the less educated, those with 0-11 years of education and only 8% of the most educated group with 16 or more years of education.

### Discussion

The results of this study suggest that most of the mature adults who filled out the inventory considered themselves good readers. The statements with the highest percentage of agreement were all very positive in nature and indicated no difficulty in reading or understanding a variety of the usual types of materials such as newspapers, advertisements, and directions. When the group was divided into subgroups, however,

on the basis of age, sex, and educational levels, it was found that there were some very great differences among these older people.

When the elderly are separated into ten-year age groups, starting at fifty years of age and above, there were twenty-eight items in which the difference between the youngest and the oldest group studied were twenty-five percent or greater. These differences have important implications and offer insight for the teacher, counselor, and administrator. There were larger differences between the age groups than between the sexes or educational levels. The greatest difference between the youngest and oldest group was sixty-one percentage points for the item, "Reading helps me not to feel lonely." It may be that the younger group have more friends, activities and are more

likely to have a marriage partner.

The findings for the age groups further indicate that in general, reading skills such as understanding the main idea, remembering the important facts, skimming and scanning, general comprehension, rate and concentration, all diminish with age. Reading is also a means of overcoming loneliness, and filling idle-time, a form of recreation and relaxation. One may also conclude from these findings that vision and the cognitive processes are also declining for most elderly subjects, also that the main differential in reading habits of the elderly is age followed by educational level, then by sex.

Another finding was that there were twenty-four items with 10% or more differences between male and female responses. It was also apparent that although these differences were important, they were not as great nor as many as the differences between age or education. The greatest difference between males and females was thirty-two percentage points for the item, "I can understand directions for filing tax returns without seeking help", which may reflect an experience seeking factor.

These findings also indicate that females read more than males, especially fictional material and magazines, they appear to be more facile readers. They use the library more frequently and are more knowledgeable about the library and reference material than males. This is in keeping with the literature and may be due partly to the fact that they have spent more time in libraries and reading recreational material than males who generally spend more time in their occupations. An unexpected finding was that females preferred violent or sexy novels more than males.

A final finding was in the differences noted between respondents according to educational levels. It was found that there were twenty-five items with a difference of at least 25 percentage points between highest and lowest educational levels. The greatest difference was forty-seven percentage points, which was for the item, "I often find words in the newspaper whose meaning I don't know."

The findings corroborate what one might expect—that more education contributes to a better vocabulary, better reading habits and improved study skills. It also results in more and better skill in the use of library facilities, broader reading interests and greater reading flexibility. We may conclude that reading contributes more to the educational and recreational accomplishments of the aged who are better educated than to those with less schooling.

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