

# FILM REVIEW

## **Nebraska: Oscar® Winning Representations of Aging and Older People**

**Reviewed by:**

**Mariah Malone BA**

**MA Candidate in Health Promotion**

**School of Health & Human Performance**

**Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada**

**&**

**Brad A. Meisner PhD**

**Director, Research & Education on Aging & Community Health Unit (REACH-U)**

**Assistant Professor, Division of Health Promotion**

**School of Health & Human Performance**

**Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada**

The greatest triumph of director Alexander Payne's *Nebraska* (2013) lies not in its multiple Oscar nominations or critical acclaims, but in its ability to generate a much-needed discourse on aging. In a raw portrayal of the treatment of an older protagonist, the film showcases how age stereotypes and ageist behaviours manifest in our society and how ageism can adversely impact older individuals' health and well-being. Through the personification of many injustices often encountered by older people, *Nebraska* urges us to reconceptualise our own attitudes, prejudices, and actions toward aging and older people. This review offers a brief discussion of the current perceptions of aging in popular culture, underscoring some of the effects of ageism in contemporary society. It then provides a critical analysis of *Nebraska*, examining its portrayal of aging, age stereotypes, and older adults' experiences of prejudice and discrimination. Ultimately, this analysis culminates in a commentary on the way the film challenges viewers to dismiss negative perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours related to aging, and discusses the implications of this dismissal for older people off-screen.

### **Aging through the Ages**

The North American population is currently undergoing an unprecedented age demographic shift (Statistics Canada, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Despite this pressing reality, ageism has only recently been identified as a source of concern among researchers and it is of even less concern among the general public. Nelson (2005) has described age prejudice as "one of the most socially-condoned and institutionalized prejudices" (p. 208).

While aging is presently considered a source of discrimination in many North American cultures, it has not always been this way. For centuries, older people were revered in their communities and treated with respect, valued for their knowledge and years of experience (Nelson, 2005). While pre-modern times should not be indiscriminately understood as a 'golden age' for older adults, it must be noted that the Industrial Revolution prompted a notable shift in the expected roles of later life (Stearns, 1986). For example, the inception of mass media and newfound record-keeping technologies essentially supplanted the role of individuals who had formerly preserved the memories and traditions of their respective communities and cultures (Branco & Williamson, 1982; Nelson, 2005). Furthermore, the Industrial Era's prioritization of strength and stamina over intellectualism and experience resulted in the re-representation of older people as a burden rather than a blessing (Branco & Williamson, 1982; Nelson, 2005). This ageist notion has persisted and often presents itself in subtle but insidious ways. One only needs to flip through a magazine featuring countless 'age-reversing' tips and products, or to glance through an aisle of birthday cards ridiculing those who are 'over-the-hill' to confirm that we, as a culture, value youthfulness and disparage old age.

### **Lights, Camera, (Ageism in) Action**

Given that the media often acts as a reflection of social realities and pervasive stigmas, it is not surprising that mainstream television and movies are heavily laden with ageism. Not only are older people vastly underrepresented on television, but where they are present, their characters conform to a rigid, largely negative set of age stereotypes. One study found that "exposure to television

is a significant predictor of more negative stereotypes of aging” among older viewers (Donlon, Ashman & Levy, 2005, p. 314). These findings are significant as they demonstrate the impact of TV-viewing on older people’s perception of their *own* age group. Similar results were obtained in an American study of top-grossing films over five decades (i.e., 1940-80s) such that older people in these movies were rated as “less friendly, having less romantic activity, and as enjoying fewer positive outcomes than younger characters” (Bazzini, McIntosh, Smith, Cook & Harris, 1997, p. 541). Historically then, the entertainment industry has largely failed to produce films that create positive—or at least more realistic—representations of aging and older people. *Nebraska* presents a promising break from this tradition through its subtle critique of a number of age stereotypes, ultimately portraying a more diversified, balanced view of aging and older people.

### **Nebraska: Ageism Personified**

*Nebraska* depicts the experiences of protagonist Woody Grant and his adult son David as they set out on a road trip to claim a fictitious million-dollar lottery prize that Woody insists he has won. The movie is filmed in black and white and set against the backdrop of a rural, Midwestern American town, evoking traces of nostalgia for a humble past that is neither romanticized nor glorified. While the majority of our commentary will focus on Woody’s character as he comes up against the products of a largely ageist society, it will also touch on the representation of other characters within a cast that is notably more age-diverse than the standard Hollywood film. An examination of Woody’s treatment by other characters in the movie provides an excellent starting point to elucidate the types of ageist behaviours that are condoned in North American popular culture.

#### **Verbal and emotional abuse**

One of the most frequent manifestations of ageism in the film can be found in the unrelenting verbal and emotional abuse that Woody sustains. Tragically, yet realistically, the vast majority of this abuse is not committed by strangers, but by family members and other close acquaintances. The most glaring example of abuse is demonstrated by Kate Grant, Woody’s wife. Her first line in the film is spoken with exasperation upon Woody’s return from the police station: “You dumb cluck.” The abuse intensifies throughout the film with insults ranging from “son-of-a-bitch” to “stubborn as a mule!” Many of her comments allude specifically to Woody’s age or mental state. For instance, she proclaims that “he’s useless,” infers that he has “lost [his] marbles,” and repeatedly threatens to “put him in a home.” All the while, Woody sits silently and appears either indifferent or too defeated to defend himself. Through these verbal and emotional assaults, it becomes apparent that elder abuse is not solely committed by the young. Indeed, it has been established that older adults are just as likely as their younger counterparts to harbour negative implicit attitudes about old age (Nosek Banaji & Greenwald, 2002).

It should be noted that Kate is not represented as a malicious character. Instead, her angry outbursts and uncharacteristic crudeness are intended to be humorous to an audience more accustomed to seeing well-mannered ‘little old ladies.’ Furthermore,

we are invited to sympathize with her, as her words are likely motivated in part by the stress of being a primary caregiver for her husband. Many of her criticisms may even be prompted by her own anxieties about aging and her desire to distinguish or separate herself from the aging cohort. The endearing aspects of Kate’s character, combined with her harsh treatment of Woody, creates a complex representation of what must nevertheless be classified as verbal abuse.

#### **Loss of autonomy**

More evidence of ageism is seen through the film’s treatment of the loss of autonomy that can come with aging. Driving becomes a prominent symbol to represent Woody’s loss of autonomy and his desire to regain his sense of control over his life. The value of driving in small-town masculine American culture is established repeatedly, particularly with Woody’s nephews’ persistent questions about vehicle brands and speeds. Woody clearly shares this value given that, when asked about what he will buy with his lottery winnings, his unwavering response is “a new truck.” When they begin their road trip, he tells David: “When you get tired, let me know, and I’ll drive” and insists that he can drive better than others on the road, in spite of his son’s objections. At the end of the film, Woody’s brief stint back in the driver’s seat symbolizes a fleeting and somewhat false moment of regained autonomy—David offers him the chance to drive, to which he responds: “You said I couldn’t.” The mix of uncertainty and hope in Woody’s eyes implies that he had internalized others’ beliefs about his own abilities.

Another prominent trope in the film is infantilization of older people. The treatment of older adults as ‘childlike’ is classified as a form of elder mistreatment and can result in some very serious consequences for older individuals’ behaviour and well-being (Salari, 2005). Among these consequences is the creation of “a self-fulfilling prophecy in that older people come to accept and believe that they are no longer independent, contributing adults” (Arluke & Levin, 1984, as cited in Nelson, 2005, p. 210). In this way, older individuals who experience a loss of control stop believing in their abilities, and often resign themselves to dependent living, a process known as learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975; Murphy, 1982; Faulkner, 2001). In the opening scene of the film, we witness this type of infantilizing behaviour in the way that the police officer speaks to Woody when he finds him walking along the highway: “Hey there partner... How ya doin’ there bud?” While the officer’s intent is not malicious, his word choice and condescending tone of voice reveal his assumptions about Woody’s abilities based on his age and appearance. These assumptions and behaviours are guided by negative age stereotypes that all older people experience cognitive deficits that render them to a childlike state (Kite & Johnson, 1988; Levy, 2003; Nelson, 2005).

Infantilization is not only reflected by the protagonist’s treatment by others, but also in the way his character is represented. There are many instances in which Woody is presented in a very childlike manner. For example, he wakes David up one morning, eyes alight with excitement, with the question: “Are we going to Lincoln today?” This scene could easily have played out in another film with an inquisitive child leaning over his father’s bed. In a later scene, Woody is seated at a table, sipping buttermilk, upset that his sweepstakes letter has accidentally gone missing. Acting almost more like the father than as the son, David seems exasperated with

Woody's inability to let go of his preoccupation with the letter, which David considers to be obviously fraudulent. Much like a child would, Woody pouts until David surrenders to his wishes to search for the letter, at which point his eyes light up and his entire demeanour changes—it is almost as if Woody required his son's permission to act. This portrayal clearly aligns Woody with childlike qualities, illustrating the self-fulfilling prophecies of learned helplessness.

Finally, Woody's loss of autonomy is reinforced by the other characters' chronic tendency to speak about him in the third person or on his behalf in his own presence. There are countless scenes in which Woody is either in the foreground or the background, while two or more other characters talk about him with no effort to lower their voice or to include him in the conversation. For instance, when David and Woody meet Kate at the bus stop, Woody stands between them, slightly removed, while David asks: "How much longer is he going to be around—at least semi-coherently?" In other instances, characters disregard Woody entirely, even when discussing matters that directly pertain to him. For example, at the restaurant while ordering, Woody states that he would like the fried chicken breast and Kate immediately overrules him, telling the waitress, "He'll have the flame-broiled." The waitress nods, dismisses Woody's opinion, and listens to Kate. A similar scene plays out at the hospital after Woody falls and requires medical attention. The physician chooses to address David and ignores Woody. To deny an individual participation in such mundane matters as his choice of supper, or such important matters as his medical treatment, is yet another product of ageist stereotypes that can result in the loss of autonomy.

### ***Institutional discrimination***

In addition to interpersonal ageism, the film also demonstrates how age stereotypes influence older adults at the societal level. The central premise for the film revolves around financial fraud, a recognized form of elder abuse. Woody is not alone in his susceptibility to scams and schemes. One study estimated that older Americans suffer a loss of roughly \$2.9 billion per year due to fraudulent activities (MetLife Inc., 2011), with "notification of fake prizes" comprising twenty percent of all financial fraud cases in Canada (Cohen, 2006, p. 138). In this way, the film is based on the true and tragic story of institutional discrimination that purposefully targets older adults. The reasons for older people's increased susceptibility to these schemes have not been firmly established, but research has posited that older people are generally more vulnerable to these scams because of their willingness to trust and believe in others (Cohen, 2006; James, Boyle & Bennett, 2014; Reiboldt & Vogel, 2003). This resonates almost word-for-word with David's dejected response to the receptionist at the prize-collection agency:

RECEPTIONIST: [This happens] every once in a while. Usually older people like your father. Does he have Alzheimer's or some other dementia?

DAVID: He just believes stuff that people tell him.

It is important to note that the receptionist, much like the police officer in the opening scene and the physician in the emergency room, makes snap judgements about Woody's cognitive capacity based on his age. What David is quick to point out is that this behaviour has less to do with his father's age or mental state, and

more to do with a simple character trait—a tireless faith in the honesty of others—which traces through his life story, particularly as a much younger person.

## ***Nebraska: Challenging Ageism***

### ***Rejecting common stereotypes***

Not only does *Nebraska* elicit a commentary on the consequences of ageist stereotypes, but it also actively challenges many of the myths and misconceptions that are shown to be damaging to the health and well-being of older people (Meisner, 2012). The physical body is a target of many age-related essentialist stereotypes, such as "gray or white hair," "death or dying," "ill or infirm," "frail," and "decrepit" (Levy, 1996, p. 1102-1103). Upon first glance at Woody's physical characterization, one might conclude that *Nebraska* actually conforms to and perpetuates these rigid stereotypes of aging. Indeed, the opening scene portrays Woody as a decrepit man with a pronounced limp and a hunched back as he shuffles, seemingly lost, along the side of a highway. The film emphasizes his white, fly-away hair and disheveled appearance, and one scene highlights Woody's trembling hand as he reaches out to reclaim the sweepstakes letter he had lost. In many ways, Woody's representation is not unlike the prototype-senior that we have seen in countless other films. However, what distinguishes *Nebraska* from other films is the fact that Woody is not the *only* representative of the older population. Although some age stereotypes are represented, they are not generalized to all characters. Instead, there are a diversity of other individuals in varying degrees of frailness and strength, illness and health.

Another commonly held belief about older people is that they are asexual beings (Marshall, 2012). While there are undoubtedly physical and emotional sex-related changes that arise with growing older (Bartlik & Zucker Goldstein, 2001; Zeiss & Kasl-Godley, 2001), these changes are not experienced homogeneously and should not negate one's history of sexuality nor current sexual desires. The treatment of sexuality among older characters is falsely represented in most films (Bildtgård, 2000). However, *Nebraska* provides a refreshing glimpse into the sex lives of its central characters. Woody, a man of few words, uncharacteristically opens up to David's questions about why he and Kate got married and had children. Woody's response is simple, disrupting the silence surrounding older people's sexual histories: "I wanted to screw and your mother's a Catholic, so you figure it out." Moreover, Kate is portrayed as an overtly sexual character. From one character's offhand revelation about Kate's willingness to "let [Woody] round the bases" while they were dating, to her playful remarks upon 'flashing' a past love interest's grave (i.e., "See what you could've had, Keith"), it quickly becomes apparent that Kate is not one to shy away from expressing herself sexually. While her sexuality sometimes elicits laughter from the audience, it is nevertheless significant because it forces viewers to imagine Kate, not as an old woman with a so-called unnatural affinity for sex, but as a woman with a personal, sexual history who just happens to have grown older.

Another common misconception is the notion that mental decline is an inescapable outcome of aging. While it is true that dementia

is more prevalent among older populations, it is also true that, among those over 70 in the United States, the prevalence rate for dementia is estimated at just below 14 percent (Plassman, Langa, Fisher, Heeringa, Weir, Ofstedal & Wallace, 2007). Although this is still a significant proportion of older adults, these findings imply that the vast majority are not negatively influenced by severe cognitive impairments and should not be stereotyped as such. Cognitive decline and dementia-related stereotypes are explored and challenged in this film through Woody's character development. Considering his insistence on collecting his lottery winnings despite repeated efforts to convince him otherwise, it seems plausible that Woody might have an illness that impairs his cognition. However, at no point does the film disclose any formal diagnosis. Instead, we learn from Woody's teenage sweetheart that "he was always a little confused" and from Kate that "he couldn't say no to anyone, and it ruined him." These gradual glimpses of a younger Woody suggest that his apparent confusion as an older adult is not necessarily a product of his aging, but are simply consistent with the person he has always been.

### ***Understanding social determinants of aging through storytelling and film***

Above all, the film asserts that people are a result of their circumstances, and not a mere product of their chronological age. Woody, like each of the other older characters in the film, has had a lifetime of experiences that have been shaped by larger social contexts. This reality becomes most evident in the scene at the old homestead where Woody was born and raised. While there, Woody looks upon the empty rooms and broken cradles of his youth, allowing the audience to get a glimpse of some of the hardships he faced while growing up. Moreover, the signs of poverty in the rural setting allow viewers to contemplate how socioeconomic factors have impacted the lives of the individuals and families living there. This is illustrated by Woody's sister-in-law, Martha, who tries to put on a happy face despite the fact that "[t]his economy has just tore up [the town]" and by the Grant family's humble neighbours, the Westendorfs, who "[a]lmost went broke, but they worked hard and saved the farm." The more that is unveiled about the characters and their contexts, the easier it is to conceptualize them as individuals who have been impacted by a series of circumstances, rather than as a group of individuals caught up in an inescapable aging process.

The importance of listening to older people's life stories underpins the entire film. For David, the road trip becomes less about appeasing Woody's million-dollar whims, and more about uncovering facets of Woody's life as a means of sharing meaningful moments with his father. Through discussions with Woody, Kate and a host of other characters, David is able to piece together his father's personal history. This developmental storyline is significant in the film, but it also has increasing value in aging research and clinical practice. The "life review" or "biographical approach" (Lubarsky, 1997; Clarke, Hanson, & Ross, 2003) involves the compilation of older people's stories and photographs to provide health care professionals with a more holistic, humanizing, and individualizing perspective of their patients. This approach has been identified as both cathartic for the older person as well as effective at reducing ageist stereotypes among care providers (Clarke, Hanson, & Ross, 2003). Even though David's 'research' is much less formalized, it nevertheless demonstrates the value of

hearing older people's personal stories to deconstruct pre-existing and persisting ageist beliefs and behaviours. At the end of the trip, after David has gained a more complete and empathetic story of his dad's life, he is able to hand over the steering wheel to put Woody back in the driver's seat, even if only for a moment.

### **Conclusion**

Historically, Hollywood has produced films that have reinforced ageist notions born in the Industrial Age and perpetuating a social system that discriminates against older people. *Nebraska* provides a subtle but poignant resistance to this system, urging viewers to re-evaluate their stereotypes, prejudices, and actions toward aging and older adults. The film provides a bleak but realistic portrayal of the injustices faced by older adults, including verbal and emotional abuse, loss of autonomy, and institutional discrimination. Additionally, it actively challenges negative stereotypes by emphasizing a balanced diversity of older adults and their personal attributes (e.g. physically, sexually, and cognitively). This heterogeneous representation of aging and older adults allows viewers to see that decline and decrepitude are not inevitable consequences of aging. Ultimately, *Nebraska* is a testament to the power of storytelling as a means of challenging damaging and dehumanizing stereotypes. While it is primarily Woody's story that plays out on-screen, the film provides a useful starting point for creating more positive narratives of later life in the real world.

### **References**

- Bartlik, B., & Zucker Goldstein, M. (2001). Men's sexual health after midlife. *Psychiatric Services*, 52(3), 291-293.
- Bazzini, D. G., McIntosh, W. D., Smith, S. M., Cook, S., & Harris, C. (1997). The aging woman in popular film: Underrepresented, unattractive, unfriendly, and unintelligent. *Sex Roles*, 36(7/8), 531-543.
- Berger, A., & Yerxa, R. (Producers), & Payne, A. (Director). (2013). *Nebraska* [Motion Picture]. United States: Paramount Vantage.
- Bildtgård, T. (2000). The sexuality of elderly people on film-Visual limitations. *Journal of Aging and Identity*, 5(3), 169-183.
- Branco, K. J., & Williamson, J. B. (1982). Stereotyping and the life cycle: Views of aging and the aged. In A. G. Miller (Ed.), *In the eye of the beholder: Contemporary issues in stereotyping* (pp. 364-410). New York: Praeger.
- Canadian Study of Health and Aging: Study methods and prevalence of dementia. (1994). *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 150(6), 899-913.
- Clarke, A., Hanson, E. J., & Ross, H. (2003). Seeing the person behind the patient: Enhancing the care of older people using a biographical approach. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 12(5), 697-706. doi:10.1046/j.1365-2702.2003.00784.x
- Cohen, C. A. (2006). Consumer fraud and the elderly: A review of Canadian challenges and initiatives. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 46(3/4), 137-144. doi:10.1300/J083v46n03\_08
- Donlon, M. M., Ashman, O., & Levy, B. R. (2005). Re-vision of older television characters: A stereotype-awareness intervention. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61(2), 307-319. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00407.x

- Faulkner, M. (2001). The onset and alleviation of learned helplessness in older hospitalized people. *Aging & Mental Health*, 5(4), 379-386. doi:10.1080/13607860120080341
- James, B. D., Boyle, P. A., & Bennett, D. A. (2014). Correlates of susceptibility to scams in older adults without dementia. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, 26(2), 107-122. doi:10.1080/08946566.2013.821809
- Kite, M. E., & Johnson, B. T. (1988). Attitudes toward older and younger adults: A meta-analysis. *Psychology and Aging*, 3(3), 233-244.
- Levy, B. (1996). Improving memory in old age through implicit self-stereotyping. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71(6), 1092-1107.
- Levy, B. R. (2003). Mind matters: Cognitive and physical effects of aging self-stereotypes. *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*, 58B(4), 203-211.
- Lubarsky, N. (1997). Rememberers and remembrances: Fostering connections with intergenerational interviewing. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 28(1/2), 141-149. doi:10.1300/J083v28n01\_16
- Marshall, B. L. (2012). Medicalization and the refashioning of age-related limits on sexuality. *Journal of Sex Research*, 49(4), 337-343. doi:10.1080/00224499.2011.644597
- Meisner, B. A. (2012). A meta-analysis of positive and negative age stereotype priming effects on behavior among older adults. *Journal of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences*, 67(1), 13-17. doi: 10.1093/geronb/gbr062
- MetLife Inc. (2011). Elder financial abuse: Crimes of occasion, desperation, and predation against America's elders. In *MetLife*. Retrieved from <https://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/mmi/publications/studies/2011/mmi-elder-financial-abuse.pdf>
- Murphy, S. A. (1982). Learned helplessness: From concept to comprehension. *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, 20(1), 27-32. doi:10.1111/j.1744-6163.1982.tb00147.x
- Nelson, T. D. (2005). Ageism: Prejudice against our feared future self. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61(2), 207-221.
- Nosek, B. A., Banaji, M. R., & Greenwald, A. G. (2002). Harvesting implicit group attitudes and beliefs from a demonstration web site. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 6(1), 101-115. doi:10.1037//1089-2699.6.1.101
- Plassman, B. L., Langa, K. M., Fisher, G. G., Heeringa, S. G., Weir, D. R., Ofstedal, M. B., Burke, J. R., Hurd, M. D., Potter, G. G., Rodgers, W. L., Steffens, D. C., Willis, R. J., & Wallace, R.B. (2007). Prevalence of dementia in the United States: The aging, demographics, and memory study. *Neuroepidemiology*, 29(1-2), 125-132. doi:10.1159/000109998
- Reiboldt, W., & Vogel, R. E. (2003). A critical analysis of telemarketing fraud in a gated senior community. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, 13(4), 21-38. doi:10.1300/J084v13n04\_02
- Salari, S. M. (2005). Infantilization as elder mistreatment: Evidence from five adult day centers. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, 17(4), 53-91. doi:10.1300/J084v17n04\_04
- Seligman, M. E. P. (1975). *Helplessness: On depression, development, and death*. San Francisco, CA: Freeman.
- Statistics Canada. (2010). Population projections for Canada, provinces and territories. In *Statistics Canada*. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-520-x/91-520-x2010001-eng.pdf>
- Stearns, P. N. (1986). Old age family conflict: The perspective of the past. In K. A. Pillemer & R. S. Wolf (Eds.), *Elder abuse: Conflict in the family* (pp. 3-24). Dover, MA: Auburn House Publishing.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). *The next four decades: The older population in the United States: 2010 to 2050*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/p25-1138.pdf>
- Zeiss, A. M., & Kasl-Godley, J. (2001). Sexuality in older adults' relationships. *Generations*, 25(2), 18-25.

---

**Acknowledgements:** none

**Competing interests:** none

**Address for correspondence:**

mariah.malone@dal.ca  
brad.meisner@dal.ca

**Date of Publication:** April 2, 2015