Knowledge beats stereotypes: Predictors of aging attitudes and enhancement of beliefs through education

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Introduction

Risks of ageism
- Stereotypes about aging and old age predominately negatively impact adults.
- Contribute to widespread discrimination against older adults.
- Internalization of negative stereotypes may lead to ageism.
- Related to negative health and psychological outcomes (e.g., increased hospitalization, reduced longevity, poorer memory)

Role Awareness, Internalized Knowledge
- Attitudes towards aging less negative for young adults with more inter-generational contact and social exposure
- Reliance on stereotypes in social judgments decreases with additional knowledge about social groups

Ageism may be reduced via increased awareness and education.
- Positive and negative age stereotyping groups may also be affected by level of knowledge and degree of stereotyping

Need for better understanding of ageism antecedents and effective anti-ageism interventions

Research Aims

Aim 1: Evaluate relationships between ageism, aging attitudes, aging anxiety, and contact with older persons in a sample of young adults

Aim 2: Determine whether agebeliefs are enhanced by increased aging knowledge (e.g., completion of a 15-week-long psychology course on aging, compared to a control class)

Study Design

2 time points: first week (pretest) and last week (posttest) of 15-week university semester
2 conditions: Psychology of Aging class (Aging) and Applied Behavior Analysis class (Control), in person
Surveys administered in class at pretest and posttest
Compensation was extra credit, not more than 5% of grade

Methods

Participants
- Aging: n = 48, 85% female, 75% Caucasian, GPA = 3.42
- 10% pretest only, 12% posttest only, 77% both
- 4% Freshman, 15% Sophomore, 25% Junior, 56% Senior

Control: n = 30, 73% female, 77% Caucasian, GPA = 3.29
- 13% pretest only, 13% posttest only, 73% both
- 13% Freshman, 30% Sophomore, 37% Junior, 20% Senior

Comparable mean GPA, (f)76 = -1.83, p ≥ .07

Measures

Ageism: FABs Scale of Ageism, 29 items (f)89-90, 4-points Likert scale
- Trait anxiety, distinct from promoting positive ageism interventions

Positive traits (including warmth, generosity, healthy, wise)

Negative traits (including senile, old, ill, lonely, poor sensie)

Ratings of older faces: 8 neutrally-expressive older faces (4 male, 4 female), 7 Likert scale

Example Faces

Ratings of older faces: 8 neutrally-expressive older faces (4 male, 4 female), 7 Likert scale

Warm, competent, likeable, physical health, memory ability

2 versions, counterbalanced by time point and condition

Ageing anxiety: Anxiety about Aing Scales, 20 items (f)79-82, 4-points Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 4=strongly agree)

Subscales:
- Psychological, appearance, fear, loss
- Expected?/believe that I will still be able to do most things for myself when I am old.

Contact with older men and women: Quality of interactions with older adults, weighted by frequency of contact, range: 0–30

Knowlege Beats Stereotypes: Predictors of Aing Attitudes and Enhancements of Beliefs through Education

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Aim 1: Relationships between ageism, aging attitudes, age anxiety, and contact

Correlation coefficients, means, and standard deviations at pretest

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Aim 2. The impact of knowledge: Pretest “improvements” in aging beliefs

Multivariate regression predicting ageism at posttest

Multiple regression predicting ageism at posttest

Correlation coefficients, means, and standard deviations at pretest

Analytic approach: Multivariate RM ANOVAs

2 independent variables

- Similar results using residual change scores or posttest comparisons, with pretest as covariate
- No condition differences at pretest
- Aging class decreased (a) negative traits and (b) psychological concerns about aging, whereas control class increased
- Significant_Main effect_of time for ageism (avoidance and discrimination subscales) and face ratings (warmth)
- More positive over time, both conditions

Quality of contact with older persons helped to influence for intervention

Reaching a new age standpoint: posttest “improvements” in aging attitudes for both conditions

Recommend assessment of implicit attitudes, varied control groups, and extension to “real-world” discrimination scenarios

Aging anxiety: higher aging anxiety, more negative traits (15% less positive traits, more negative ratings (including warmth), and lower quality contact, but unrelated to negative traits

High quality contact with older persons: less fear of older people and less ageism

No relationship between negative trait ratings and positive trait ratings

More positive face ratings: less ageism, less negative traits (not warmth rating)

Results

More aging anxiety: higher ageism, more negative traits

- More positive over time, both conditions
- Significant increase in positive traits, more negative ratings (including warmth, and lower quality contact, but unrelated to negative traits

- High quality contact with older persons: less fear of older people and less ageism
- No relationship between negative trait ratings and positive trait ratings

- More positive face ratings: less ageism, less negative traits (not warmth rating)

Discussion

Important to reduce negative traits, distinct from promoting positive ageism interventions

- Positive age stereotypes

- Older adults hold both negative and positive age attitudes

- Targets for intervention: aging anxiety and fear of older persons

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