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Personal beliefs and reactions to age and memory threat in everyday materials

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Introduction

- Predominantly negative stereotypes about old age pose threat for older persons
- Self-held age stereotypes longitudinally predict outcomes like well-being and health
- When primed with negative age stereotypes, old (but not young), perform worse on memory tasks

Impact of stereotype effects limited or magnified by individual and environmental factors
- Older adults self-beliefs (e.g., subjective age) may moderate negative effects
- Implicitly threatening situations (e.g., subliminal presentation) may be more influential than explicitly threatening situations (e.g., news article), especially for unconscious and automatic effects
- Stereotype effects unconscious and automatic
- Ability to regulate response to obvious or blatant stereotype presentations

“Real-world” stereotype presentations?

Research Aims

Aim 1: Determine impact of everyday age and memory stereotype presentations via comparison of outcomes for stereotype condition (ST) and control condition (CTL).
- Story recall performance. Expect ST < CTL.
- Proportional subjective age. Expect ST > CTL.
- General memory evaluation. Expect ST < CTL.
- Task anxiety during story recall. Expect ST > CTL.

Aim 2: Explore impact on stereotype effects of stereotype awareness. Expect greater susceptibility to stereotype effects for adults who are not aware of the stereotype presentation.

Methods

Participants (N = 34): healthy, community-dwelling adults over age 50 (range: 50 – 88 yrs.)
- ST: n = 18, age M = 64 yrs., SD = 10 yrs., 78% female, yrs. of education M = 16, SD = 3
- CTL: n = 16, age M = 61 yrs., SD = 10 yrs., 63% female, yrs. of education M = 17, SD = 3

Measures
- Story recall performance: Verbatim recall of 1-paragraph, 8-sentences story, two structurally equivalent versions; word count
- Proportional subjective age: Percentage of one’s life that s/he feels younger/older than their chronological age, using mean of five subjective age responses (e.g., At this moment, how old do you feel?); (Subjective Age / Chronological Age) - 1 Kang & Chasteen, 2011
- General memory evaluation: Global beliefs about memory (e.g., How do you think your memory compares with most other people your age?); sum of 3 items on 7-pt. scales (range: 3 - 21); α = .67
- Task anxiety during story recall: Subjective rating of anxiety; sum of 8 ratings (e.g., Confident, Under pressure) from 1 = not at all to 7 = very much (range: 8 - 56); α = .68
- Additional measures: Assessment of perceived threat; a priori perceived mastery (general), general attitudes towards aging, and memory-related anxiety; check of stereotype awareness

Results

Aim 1: Compared story recall performance, proportional subjective age, general memory evaluation, and memory anxiety between ST and CTL conditions (ANOVAs).
- Better story recall for ST (age covaried, trend)
- Better memory beliefs for ST

Aim 2: Compared same outcomes for ST participations who were aware (n = 11) and were not aware (n = 7) of the stereotype manipulation (independent sample t-tests).
- Greater memory beliefs for stereotype aware group (trend), F(1,16) = 3.09, p = .098.
- No other differences (p > .10)

Characteristics related to stereotype awareness:
- Aware group reported more general memory-related anxiety before stereotype manipulation, F(1,16) = 5.73, p = .029
- Aware group reported higher level of general perceived threat from experimental situation (trend), F(1,16) = 3.49, p = .080

Discussion

After exposure, 1) the stereotype group had higher story recall scores, and 2) the “aware” group showed the lowest perceived memory threat and the highest general memory evaluation.

- Those who noticed the stereotypes counteracted their influence
- Effects may have operated via pathways outside of anxiety or self-stereotyping, such as self-efficacy
- Focusing on how to train stereotype awareness and response useful in future research
- Recommend replications with (1) manipulation of stereotype awareness, (2) larger, more diverse samples, and (3) identification of personal beliefs that moderate stereotype effects but may be modifiable via intervention

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