



I'm not old: Accounting for persistent pro-young preferences across the age span



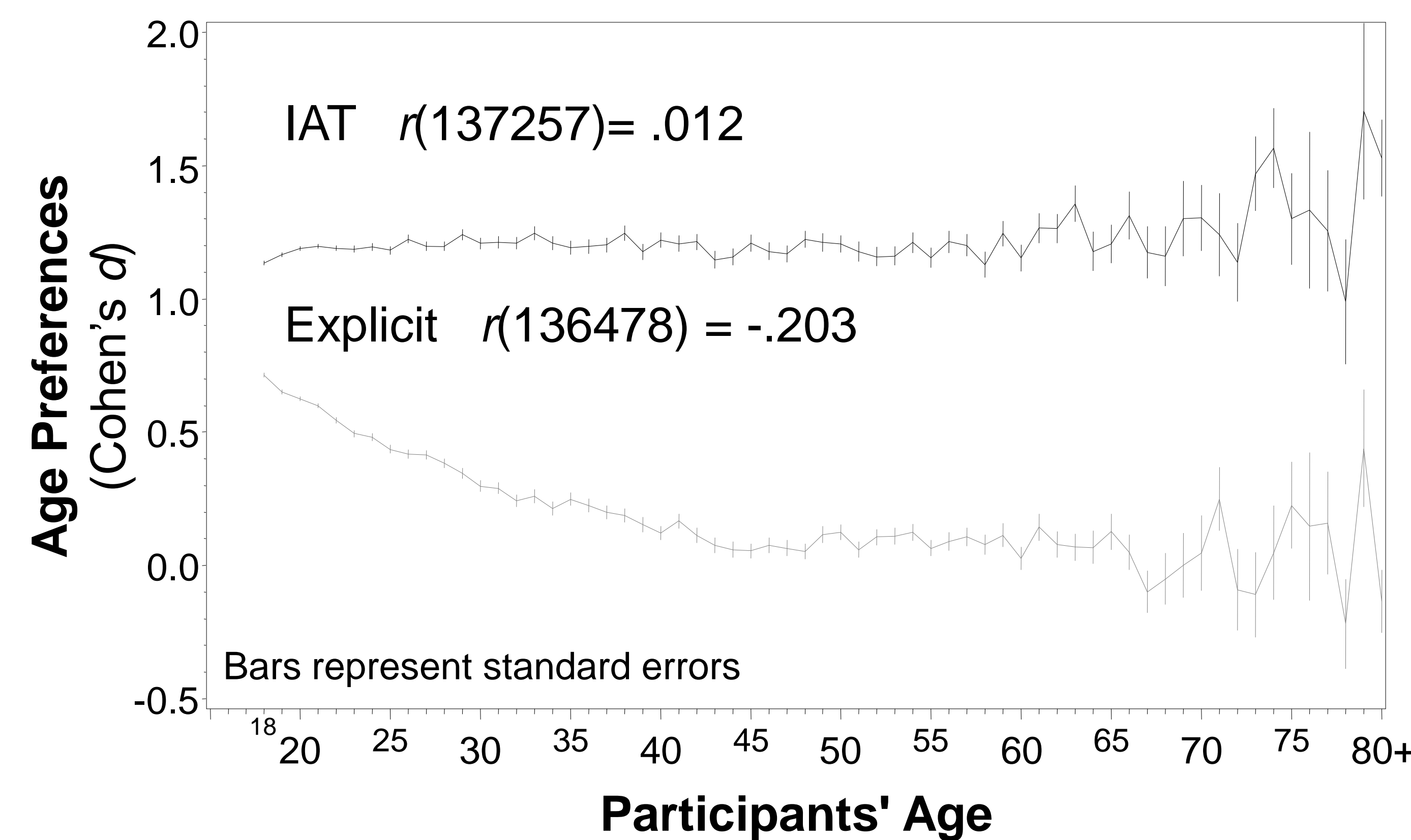
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BACKGROUND & METHOD

Social identity theories anticipate that individuals derive self-esteem from identifying with their groups, even low-status groups, and prefer their own ingroup to other groups. Contrary to these expectations, age preferences are remarkably resistant to ingroup preferences among older adults (Hummert et al., 2002; Nosek et al., 2007), particularly implicitly—adults over 60 have similarly strong implicit pro-young biases as adults under 25 (see Figure). Implicit age biases are also remarkably *strong*, with 80% of all adults preferring *young to old*, and age preferences showing the stronger preference for the dominant group of 9 social preference IATs (Nosek et al., 2007).

We use existing data from the Project Implicit age task (age range = 18-89; <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/>) to evaluate several explanations for why adults of all ages prefer the young so strongly. We describe both changes across the sample's age span (see Figure below) and these explanations' ability to predict individual differences in older adults' (aged 50-89) implicit age biases.

Finding: Implicit pro-young biases persist across the age span



REFERENCES

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RESULTS

Explanation 1: Older adults may not feel old. Their **subjective age**, as the age that they feel, and its distance from their actual age may account for attitudes toward old compared to young.

Age Span Effects: College-aged adults (aged 18-25) reported feeling slightly older than their actual age ($M_{diff} = 1.1$ yrs), while older adults (aged 50-89) reported feeling much younger than their actual age ($M_{diff} = -12.3$ yrs, $SD = 10.6$ yrs; 84% reported *feeling* younger than and 14% as *feeling* the same as their *actual* age). That is, subjective age was distinct from actual age and shifted across the age span, which could help to explain why age's persistent pro-young bias fails to reflect typical social identity effects.

Predicting Individual Differences in Implicit Age Biases ($N = 6,405$): However, among older adults, subjective age and its interaction with actual age did not **substantively** ($R^2 = .0022$; see below) predict individual differences in pro-young bias.

$R^2 = .0022$ Implicit age biases among adults aged 50-89	β	p
IV ₁ – Actual age	.029	.0353
IV ₂ – Subjective age as “How old do you feel?” (scale: 1-115 years)	-.061	.0019
IV ₃ – Subjective X Actual age interaction	.058	.0021

Explanation 2: The mirror to “feeling young” is to redefine what it means to be old. Perhaps older adults perceive the category “old” to begin at a later age than do younger adults so that they can avoid self-identifying as old.

Age Span Effects: Older adults did define the boundary of old age as significantly older, such that those aged 50-89 ($N = 6748$) judged the transition between middle age and old age as beginning later ($M = 69.4$ yrs) than those aged 18-25 ($N = 39675$; $M = 61.3$ yrs).

Predicting Individual Differences in Implicit Age Biases ($N = 6,256$): However, we did not find substantive evidence ($R^2 = .0025$, see below) that older adults' definition of “old age” and its interaction with their own age accounted for individual differences in implicit age bias.

$R^2 = .0025$ Implicit age biases among adults aged 50-89	β	P
IV ₁ – Actual age	.042	.0009
IV ₂ – Old age's boundary as “At what age do you believe that a person moves from middle aged to old age?” (scale: 1-115 years)	-.030	.0174

*no significant interaction

Explanation 3: Individuals' internal and external motivations to respond without age prejudice could counteract or enhance individuals' implicit age bias.

Age Span Effects: Overall, individuals reported being motivated to respond without age prejudice more for internal reasons ($M = 1.83$, on a 7-pt agree-disagree scale centered on 0) than for external reasons ($M = -0.16$). Across the age span ($N = 286,605$), internal motivations increased ($r = .126$), and external motivations decreased ($r = -.091$).

Predicting Individual Differences in Implicit Age Biases ($N = 27,986$): We found statistically significant but non-substantive evidence ($R^2 = .0082$, see below) that internal and external motivations to respond without prejudice and their interaction predicted implicit pro-young biases, as predicted by research on motivations to respond without racial prejudice (Devine et al., 2002). Follow-up analysis of the interaction indicated that implicit pro-young biases differed among older adults with high-internal/low-external (weaker bias) and low-internal/high-external (higher bias). This suggests that internal and external motivations to avoid negativity toward old people serve as a slight counterweight to other sources of persistent negativity toward the elderly and aging.

$R^2 = .0082$ Implicit age biases among adults aged 50-89	β	p
IV ₁ – Actual age	.027	<.0001
IV ₂ – Internal Motivations (personal beliefs & values)	-.068	<.0001
IV ₃ – External Motivations (others' or society's disapproval)	.126	<.0001
IV ₄ – Internal X External Motivations interaction	-.064	<.0001

*no other significant interactions

CONCLUSION

The results suggest that three factors—subjective age, the redefinition of when “being old” begins, and motivations to respond without negativity toward old people—could account for some of the persistent implicit negativity toward old compared to young. However, an important qualifier is that individual differences in these variables among people age 50 and older did not account for any meaningful variation in their age biases.