Background

Attitudes about age have received comparatively little empirical attention relative to other primary social categories like ethnicity and gender (Nelson, 2005). Although most people experience neither antipathy nor explicit dislike of older adults, negative attitudes and beliefs toward the group are widespread and sanctioned by society (Levy & Banaji, 2002).

Age is unique in that group status changes across the lifespan. The dynamic quality of age identity may have unique implications for the relationship between group membership and attitudes. We examined age preference implicitly and explicitly, both across the lifespan and among gender, ethnic, and national groups.

Method

Participants

42,141 visitors to the Project Implicit demonstration website in 2004 participated (M = 27.7, SD = 12.1, range = 7 – 90).

Implicit Attitude Measure

Implicit age attitudes were assessed with a Young/Old Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald et al., 1998). It measured the relative strength of participants’ associations between the attributes Good or Bad and the age groups as represented by old and young White faces.

Explicit Attitude Measures

Participants reported their warmth toward Old and Young people on the same scale. The difference indicated a comparative preference:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Warmth toward Old</th>
<th>Warmth toward Young</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Prefer Old</td>
<td>Strongly Prefer Young</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Prefer Young</td>
<td>Strongly Prefer Old</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They also reported their explicit preference for Young relative to Old people:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young Relative to Old</th>
<th>Preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Prefer Young</td>
<td>Strongly Prefer Old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Prefer Old</td>
<td>Strongly Prefer Young</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

These two scales were averaged after z-scoring and retaining the meaningful zero-point.

Results

Throughout the lifespan implicit preference remains consistently pro-young, with men showing stronger pro-young preference than women.

Compared to people in their twenties, those aged 65 or older reported less explicit preference for young relative to old people (Cohen’s d = .54), such that they reported equal liking of both groups. Implicit preference, however, was consistently pro-young across age groups (d = .02). This represents a dissociation between implicit attitudes and their explicit, endorsed attitudes.

Some evidence suggests that women hold weaker biases against outgroups than men do (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002). In support of this, compared to men, women consistently showed less pro-young preference both explicitly (d = .25) and implicitly (d = .25) for all age groups.

Compared to other ethnic groups, Black Americans showed both the strongest implicit and weakest explicit pro-young preferences.

Consistent with this, countries with a higher proportion of older adults also exhibited a higher degree of implicit pro-young preference (r = .41). However, age burden was unrelated to people’s explicit preference for young relative to old people (r = .08). This initial support for the age burden hypothesis suggests that implicit measures may be useful as indicators of a country’s healthiness with regard to social issues.

References


