Implicit Attitudes Toward Older and Younger Adults: Effects of Gender, Culture, and Age

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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

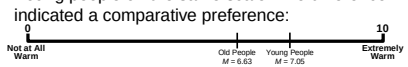
42,141 visitors to the Project Implicit demonstration website in 2004 participated (M_{age} = 27.7, *SD* = 12.1, range = 7 – 90).

Implicit Attitude Measure

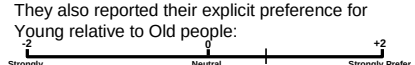
Implicit age attitudes were assessed with a Young/Old Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald et al., 1998). It measured the relative strength of participants' associations between the attributes *Good* or *Bad* and the age groups as represented by old and young White faces.

Explicit Attitude Measures

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



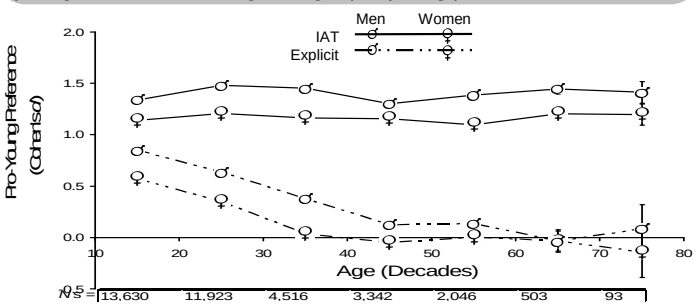
They also reported their explicit preference for Young relative to Old people:



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

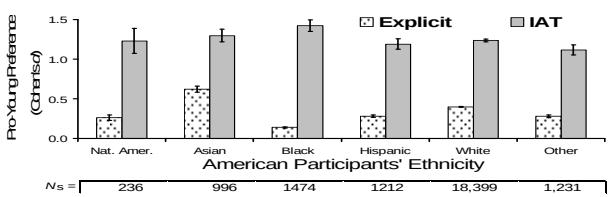


* Here and elsewhere, error bars represent 95% confidence intervals

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.

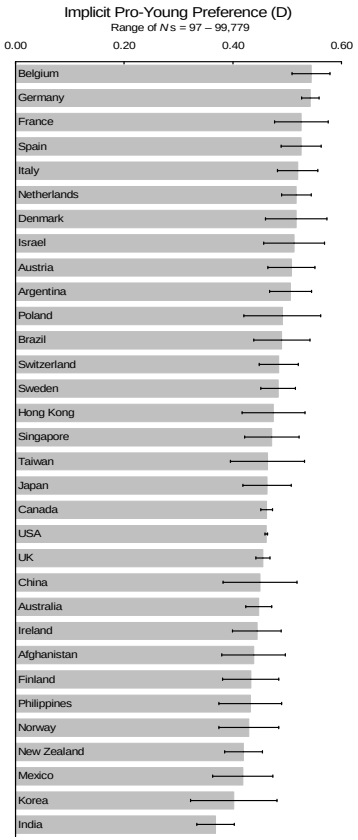
Some evidence suggests that women hold weaker biases against outgroups than men do (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002). In support of this, compared to men, women consistently showed less pro-young preference both explicitly (*d* = .25) and implicitly (*d* = .25) for all age groups.

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



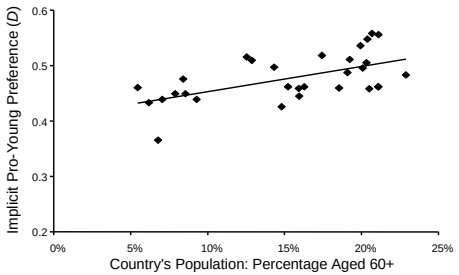
Eastern cultural norms of valuing older members of society (Kim, 2000) might predict that Asian Americans would show less negativity toward older Americans than other American ethnicities to the extent that they retain these cultural values. These data, however, did not support this hypothesis. Asians showed the strongest explicit pro-young preference (Cohen's *d* = .23) and similar implicit preferences (*d* = .06) as other groups, when compared to White Americans. Pairwise comparisons unexpectedly revealed that Black Americans showed the strongest implicit pro-young preference (*d* = .19) and the weakest explicit pro-young preference (*d*= -.26) of all the ethnic groups, compared to White Americans. There is little theory or sound speculation to understand this curious effect.

Cross-nationally, larger populations of older adults (60+) were associated with stronger implicit pro-young preferences



Cultural stereotypes would suggest that attitudes toward older adults are more positive in Eastern cultures, relative to those in Western cultures, but empirical support for this idea has been mixed (Kim, 2000). It appears that most cultures do view aging negatively (Kite & Wagner, 2002). The bar graph of countries' average implicit pro-young preference suggests that an implicit preference for young over old is universal.

We hypothesized that the proportion of a country's population over the age of 60 would be an indicator of national *age burden*. Age burden would produce national discussion of the negative costs, both economic and social, of caring for an aging population (e.g., increased expenditures in pensions and health care). These national issues of aging might evoke some empathy explicitly, but reinforce largely negative associations of aging implicitly leading to increased implicit age bias.



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

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