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Running head: AGE-RELATED DIFFERENCES IN PREJUDICE

Abstract

The present study revealed an age-related differences in ethnic prejudice in a heterogeneous (total $N = 1,308$) and a representative ($N = 800$) sample, using measures of blatant and subtle prejudice. The relationship between age and blatant and subtle prejudice was found to be fully mediated by right-wing social-cultural attitudes (i.e., authoritarianism and cultural conservatism).

Keywords: AUTHORITARIANISM, CONSERVATISM, AGING, PREJUDICE, OLDER PEOPLE, ELDERLY, RACISM.

Age-related differences in ethnic prejudice: evidence of the mediating effects of right-wing attitudes

1 Introduction

Cross-sectional survey data have shown that older people tend to adhere to authoritarian beliefs and endorse traditional values, social rules, and norms (e.g., Cornelis et al., 2009; Truett, 1993). It has been argued that these age-related differences may be “good for oneself”, offering older people psychological advantages such as increased self-esteem (Van Hiel & Brebels, 2011). However, age-based social-cultural conservatism might be “bad for others” as well. Indeed, older people exhibit particularly high levels of prejudice (e.g., Henry & Sears, 2009) - a finding that has most commonly been explained in terms of a reduced ability to repress implicit racial biases (Gonsalkorale, Sherman, & Klauer, 2009).

Scholars (e.g., Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995) have recognized the necessity of distinguishing between blatant, overt, old-fashioned prejudice, on the one hand, and subtle, covert, modern prejudice, on the other hand. Old-fashioned prejudice taps into bold claims (e.g., people of different races should be segregated). Conversely, more recent forms of prejudice surface in less direct ways, having a more rational outlook (see Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2005). The distinction between these expressions of prejudice is important in the context of age effects (see Henry & Sears, 2009). Indeed, older people are likely to have witnessed many instances of blatant racism as adolescents and young adults, which may have formed the racial attitudes that persist throughout their lives. Thus, older individuals might be “set in their ways”, unable to translate their attitudes in terms of contemporary expressions of prejudice.

The question of whether social-cultural attitudes can explain the age-related difference in prejudice remains an unexplored issue. We tested the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: age is positively related to ethnic prejudice, both for blatant and subtle expressions.

Hypothesis 2: age is positively related to right-wing attitudes.

Hypothesis 3: the relationship between age and prejudice is mediated by right-wing attitudes .

2 Methods

2.1 Participants

Sample 1 was acquired by aggregating data from 6 subsamples collected in the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium between 2000 and 2010. Data were available from 577 men and 644 women (87 participants failed to provide gender information), with a mean age of 43.9 years ($SD = 13.6$). Of these participants, 354 left school before the age of 18, while 729 completed higher education (225 participants failed to provide education information).

Data for sample 2 were collected from a representative sample ($N = 800$) in the Netherlands in 2010 by an organization that specializes in online surveys. This sample included 426 men and 374 women, with a mean age of 49.5 years ($SD = 15.4$). A majority of the participants ($N = 563$) left school before the age of 18, while 237 participants completed higher education.

2.2 Measures

For all of the measures, five-point response scales (anchored by *completely disagree* and *completely agree*) were used.

2.2.1 Right-Wing Social-Cultural Attitudes. All participants in sample 1 completed a measure of Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA, $M = 2.69$; $SD = .74$; α ranging from .76 to .91 in the various samples). A sample item states: “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important values children should learn”. Various versions of the RWA were administered to different subsamples. The 11-item RWA scale (Altemeyer, 1981; translated by Melen, 1991) was completed by three samples. Two other samples completed a 24-item RWA scale (Altemeyer, 1988), and one subsample was administered a 14-item RWA scale, based on Altemeyer (1996). The participants in three subsamples completed a 12-item Cultural Conservatism scale (CC, De Witte, 1990), which contained items such as, “Working hard makes you a better person” ($M = 2.56$; $SD = .73$; $\alpha = .83$). In the representative sample, participants completed six items from Altemeyer’s (1981) RWA scale ($M = 3.29$; $SD = .70$; $\alpha = .73$) as well as six CC items ($M = 3.21$; $SD = .65$; $\alpha = .64$).

2.2.2 Prejudice. The 8-item Subtle Prejudice scale (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995, adapted by Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2005; $M = 3.18$; $SD = .59$; $\alpha = .81$) was administered to four subsamples. This scale consists of four items that probe traditional values, reflecting the belief that outgroup members do not succeed in society because they do not endorse the ingroup’s traditional values. Four other items measured the Denial of Positive Emotions. A sample item states, “Sometimes I feel admiration for immigrants living here” (reversed). Nine Blatant Prejudice items (see Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2005; $M = 2.10$; $SD = .85$; $\alpha = .91$) were administered to all subsamples. A sample item states, “We have to keep our race pure and fight mixture with other races”.

The participants in the representative sample answered the same racial prejudice items. The Subtle and Blatant Prejudice scales exhibited sufficient internal

consistency ($M = 3.32$; $SD = .81$; $\alpha = .73$, and $M = 2.37$; $SD = .87$; $\alpha = .90$, respectively). Extraction of two principal components of the correlations among the prejudice items revealed that the blatant and subtle items generally loaded on separate OBLIMIN rotated dimensions.

3 Results

Table 1 reports strong positive correlations among the study variables, most notably between age and prejudice.¹ Statistically controlling for education and sex curbed the age effects on blatant and subtle prejudice in both samples, although these relationships remained significant. Hypotheses 1 and 2 are therefore corroborated by the present results.

Insert Table 1 about here

Next, we conducted mediation analyses based on the examination of the bootstrapping estimates of the indirect effects (Hayes & Preacher, 2008). Table 2 shows that the indirect effects of age on prejudice were significant for RWA and CC, respectively, while the direct effects were insignificant. Hypothesis 3 is thus corroborated.

Insert Table 2 about here

4 Discussion

Many studies have shown that older people tend to embrace social-cultural right-wing attitudes (e.g., Cornelis et al., 2009; Truett, 1993) and to be prejudiced (e.g., Henry & Sears, 2009). However, the question of whether social-cultural right-wing beliefs explain age-related differences in prejudice levels has remained

¹ The correlation between age and blatant prejudice was .22, .23, .25, -.04, .16, and .15 in subsamples 1 to 6, respectively. The correlation between age and subtle prejudice was .29, .24, -.03, and .12 in subsamples 2, 4, 5 and 6, respectively.

unexplored. The present study confirmed the positive relationship between age and ethnic prejudice for both blatant and subtle expressions (Hypothesis 1), and between age and right-wing attitudes (Hypothesis 2). In accordance with Hypothesis 3, this age-related difference in prejudice was fully mediated by social-cultural right-wing attitudes.

In the remainder of this paper, we first discuss the finding that age yields a stronger relationship with right-wing social-cultural beliefs than with prejudice. Next, we elaborate on the finding that age-related differences in prejudice emerge at similar magnitudes for blatant and subtle expressions.

4.1 Age-related differences in right-wing attitudes and prejudice

Our results show that age-related changes in right-wing attitudes are stronger than changes in prejudice. According to Onraet, Van Hiel, Cornelis, and Roets (2011), age-related differences in social-cultural right-wing attitudes can be best understood as reflections of hampered motivated cognition. More specifically, age-related changes in cognitive resources (such as processing speed) create a need for a more ‘economic’ use of available resources (for example, expressed through an increased need for closure), which increases right-wing attitudes. Given the pervasiveness of age-based cognitive changes, the strong relationship between age and right-wing attitudes is quite understandable.

As the present results show, the age effect on prejudice runs through right-wing attitudes. At the same time, however, other age-related changes might curb the relationship between age and prejudice. For instance, older people have been found to be more agreeable (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006), which might reduce their prejudice (Duckitt, 2001). Moreover, Van Hiel and Brebels (2011) have argued that the age-related increase in right-wing attitudes can be understood in terms of its ego-

integrative function, whereas the derogation of outgroup members might only indirectly affirm one's own self-worth.

4.2 Relationship between age and blatant and subtle prejudice

Our results revealed comparable age-related differences for both blatant and subtle prejudice. This result does not support the hypothesis that older people raised in less tolerant eras would adhere only to old-fashioned prejudice. These correlations of similar magnitude also speak to a recent body of studies that attributes the increased level of prejudice among older people to a hampered ability to repress implicit racial biases (Gonsalkorale et al., 2009). Our results, however, do not seem to align with the cognitive control explanation. One could argue that it is far easier to control blatant prejudice because of its sheer simplicity and high salience, yielding less of an age effect than subtle prejudice, which is more complex and less likely to be recognized as an expression of prejudice expression and thus involves more self-control. These ideas, however, await further empirical tests.

4.3 Limitations

A conclusive test of the age increase in prejudice would require a longitudinal design in which racial attitudes could be screened from early adulthood to advanced age. The use of cross-sectional data to demonstrate age effects is the most important limitation of the present study.

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Table 1

Correlations among the study variables

	RWA	CC	Subtle	Blatant
Age	.28 (.21)	.42 (.42)	.16 (.09 ^{**})	.17 (.10 ^{**})
	.31 (.27)	.26 (.23)	.10 ^{**} (.06 [†])	.13 (.09 [*])
RWA	-	.74 (.76)	.49 (.49)	.60 (.58)
		.58 (.56)	.43 (.40)	.44 (.40)
Cultural Conservatism		-	.38 (.43)	.56 (.59)
			.33 (.30)	.36 (.33)
Subtle Racism			-	.67 (.66)
				.71 (.70)

Note: The correlations corrected for education and sex are between brackets. First and second line figures refer to the heterogeneous and representative sample, respectively. All $p < .001$, except ^{**} = $p < .01$ and ^{*} = $p < .05$; [†] = ns.

Table 2

Total, direct and indirect unstandardized effects of age on racial prejudice mediated by RWA and Cultural Conservatism.

	Total effect	Direct effect	Indirect effect
<i>Heterogeneous sample</i>			
Age→RWA→Subtle	.008*** (.002)	.003 (.001)	.005*** (.001) [.004 / .007]
Age→RWA→Blatant	.010*** (.002)	-.000 (.001)	.011*** (.001) [.008 / .013]
Age→CC→Subtle	.011*** (.002)	.007 (.002)	.005*** (.001) [.003 / .007]
Age→CC→Blatant	.013*** (.003)	-.001 (.002)	.014*** (.002) [.011 / .017]
<i>Representative sample</i>			
Age→RWA→Subtle	.005** (.002)	-.002 (.002)	.006*** (.001) [.005 / .008]
Age→RWA→Blatant	.007*** (.002)	.000 (.002)	.008*** (.001) [.006 / .010]
Age→CC→Subtle	.005** (.002)	.001 (.002)	.004*** (.001) [.003 / .005]
Age→CC→Blatant	.007*** (.002)	.002 (.002)	.005*** (.001) [.004 / .007]

Note: Five thousand bootstrap samples with bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (reported in straight brackets). The standard errors (reported in parentheses) were estimated by OLS (total and direct effects) or bootstrapping (indirect effects). CC = Cultural Conservatism.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$.