



## Age and subcultural differences on personal and general beliefs about memory

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined age and cultural differences on both personal and general beliefs about memory by comparing three age groups within two subcultures belonging to the same country: Milanese and Sardinian. Two innovative instruments on general and personal beliefs with graphic-rating-scale format (General Beliefs about Memory Instrument and Personal Beliefs about Memory Instrument) and a memory task (recall of 40 words) were administered to participants. Sardinians held more positive attitudes about the effects of aging on memory reporting a later onset of declining memory ability and control over memory across the life span. They were also more optimistic in rating their global memory efficacy, control, and retrospective change. The two subcultural groups differed in terms of memory performance, with Sardinian individuals outperforming the Milanese. Findings are discussed in relation to the view of aging in different subcultural contexts.

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### Introduction

Several studies have focused on age and cross cultural difference in beliefs about aging and cognition (e.g. Levy & Langer, 1994; Yoon, Hasher, Feinberg, Rahhal, & Winocur, 2000). Memory beliefs are composed of at least two different components: implicit theories about memory change and personal beliefs about memory. Implicit theories involve the possible patterns of memory change (e.g., Lineweaver, Berger, & Hertzog, 2009) and are considered part of a larger set of aging stereotypes which are related to the expectation of severe memory impairment being a dominant negative stereotype about old age (e.g., Hummert, 2011). They begin to be formed in childhood (e.g., DePallo et al., 1995) and, as people become old, they consequently become self-relevant stereotypes

(e.g., Levy, 2003). General stereotypes about aging and memory are correlated with personal beliefs about one's own memory efficacy but they are two differentiable aspects of metacognition (Lineweaver & Hertzog, 1998). Thus, it is important to maintain a distinction between implicit theories and personal beliefs when analyzing age and cultural differences.

#### *Age and cultural differences in implicit theories*

Studies in the field of stereotypes have mostly explored individual differences of beliefs about aging within cultures. However, there is a growing literature focused on cultural differences of aging perceptions. The encouraging interest for a cross-cultural approach seems to be supported by the social representations theory (Moscovici, 1984). Social representations regard the contents of everyday thinking and are systems of ideas, values and practices. They allow us to classify people and objects, to compare and interpret other behaviors and the various aspects of the world. That is, they are a network of ideas, metaphors and images that include attitudes and judgments.

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More interestingly, they are embedded in communicative practices such as dialogues, media, and scientific dialogues and operate at different levels, including large communities such as nations and small subgroups of people. According to this theory, views of aging are a form of representation, in terms of attitude and judgment about aging, shared by most of the members of a culture or a subculture. For this reason we could expect differences in perceptions of aging between countries but also within a nation if it includes several subcultures.

Research on cultural differences in aging stereotypes has principally compared Eastern (or Asian) versus Western cultures (mostly North American people). The reason of this comparison consists in the different conceptions of old people. Indeed, Asian societies, influenced by Confucian principles, emphasize notions of respect for older adults, promoting positive views of aging and high esteem for older adults (Ho, 1994; Sung, 1994, 2001, 2004). Western societies, in turn, show to be youth oriented and hold more negative views regarding the aging process (Barak, Mathur, Lee, & Zhang, 2001; Levy & Langer, 1994). As consequence, Asian cultures hold more positive beliefs toward aging compared to Western cultures (e.g., Levy & Langer, 1994; Yoon et al., 2000), but some studies have reported opposite results (e.g., Boduroglu, Yoon, Luo, & Park, 2006; Harwood et al., 1996). Harwood et al. (1996) investigated stereotypes associated with old age in several countries and found that some, but not all, Asian participants showed the most negative attitude towards aging overall.

One possible explanation for these contrasting results concerns the fact that the old traditions and values regarding the aging in East-Asian cultures have been changing as a consequence of urbanization (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). This change is supported by evidence of the co-existence of both positive and negative stereotypes about aging, as shown in Western culture. Moreover, cultural differences may vary depending on the specific aspects of beliefs investigated (Hummert, 2011). Indeed, perceptions of aging are multi-dimensional, they include healthy aging – physical abilities and cognitive performance – and socioemotional aspects and social status.

There are also discrepancies in the literature about whether age-stereotypes about memory have implications for memory performance. Levy and Langer (1994) found that the positive cultural views of aging in Eastern people may preserve memory performance among older adults. In contrast, Yoon et al. (2000) found that younger adults of both cultures always outperformed their older counterparts. This inconsistency may be related to methodological differences that interact with culture, as suggested by Park, Nisbett, and Hedden (1999). The present study compares two subcultures that share the same language, but differ in several cultural aspects. This approach may avoid some of the methodological issues that arise when comparing disparate cultures on memory beliefs and their effects on performance.

More homogenous results come from social cognitive literature that analyzes the role of stereotypes on cognitive performances and show they can have consequences for memory task performance both in laboratory and everyday life (e.g., Cavanaugh & Green, 1990; Hertzog, McGuire, & Lineweaver, 1998; West, Bagwell, & Dark-Freudeman, 2008).

## *Age and cultural differences in personal studies*

To our knowledge, only a few studies have examined cultural differences about personal beliefs about memory (Ryan, Jin, & Anas, 2009; Yun & Lachman, 2006). Yun and Lachman (2006) studied the personal level of anxiety about aging, comparing American and South Korean individuals. Interestingly, they found that Koreans portrayed higher overall levels of anxiety and greater fear of old people compared to Americans. Moreover, younger Koreans had greater fears than older Koreans, whereas older Americans had greater fears than their American counterparts. These results suggest that the higher status of older members within eastern culture may not necessarily protect against aging anxieties. Ryan et al. (2009) compared Canadian and South Korean college students on both personal and general beliefs. Participants were asked to rate either themselves or typical others at target ages 25, 45, and 65 years on: capacity, change, and locus. This design allowed an evaluation of whether cultures might differ in self-protective bias – i.e., the tendency to anticipate a more favorable aging trajectory for themselves as compared to typical others (Cavanaugh, Feldman, & Hertzog, 1998) – in Asia (Jin, Ryan, & Anas, 2001) relative to North America (Ryan & Kwong See, 1993). Ryan et al. (2009) found a widespread self-protective bias in terms of less decline anticipated for the self than for typical others in both cultures. Consistent with their hypothesis, Koreans showed a more pronounced bias effect for the capacity scale at age 65.

## *The present study*

As shown, most of the papers on perceptions of aging have focused on the comparison of two main cultures. To our knowledge, only a study has investigated the beliefs toward aging comparing two subcultures: American hearing and American deaf individuals (Levy & Langer, 1994). Levy and Langer (1994) highlighted the existence of differences in age stereotypes among the two subcultures. The deaf community in the United States manifests higher esteem for their older members than hearing individuals in the same country, confirming that an independent subculture can exist within another one. Several studies have found that American deaf people of all ages identify and interact with each other at several social events, including the Deaf Clubs (Becker, 1980; Hall, 1989), and that younger members often treat older deaf adults as role models and wise leaders. Thus, this study appears to prove that also small communities can share ideas and values, as postulated by social representations theory (Moscovici, 1984).

The aim of the present research was to examine whether other subcultures can coexist and differentiate in terms of stereotypes and self-perceptions of aging. American deaf culture showed more positive attitudes toward aging probably because of the deprivation of negative information about aging – broadly shared by American hearing individuals – and the exposure, within the community, to positive values such as respect toward older adults. We wanted to verify whether it is possible to find similar results in other subcultures in which the positive perception of aging may be based not only on spiritual values – such as respect – but also on healthy values like successful aging and longevity. We hypothesized

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