



## FlashReport

# Students' expectations of ageing: An evaluation of the impact of imagined intergenerational contact and the mediating role of ageing anxiety



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Imagined contact produced positive expectations of ageing in male participants.
- Imagined contact produced lower ageing anxiety in male participants.
- Ageing anxiety mediated the imagined contact-expectations of ageing relationship.
- These effects were remained over a four week period.

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## ABSTRACT

Positive attitudes towards the aged and expectations of the ageing process have been recognised as important drivers of healthy ageing. Utilising novel methods previously used to improve attitudes towards older adults, the current article reports the impact of imagined contact with an older adult on expectations of ageing and ageing anxiety compared to a control. Two hundred and one undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: (1) imagined contact with a 75 year old male, (2) imagined contact with a 75 year old female, or (3) a control. Results revealed that imagined contact with *either* an older male or female was associated with more positive expectations of ageing in male participants, both immediately after the intervention and at a four week follow-up, compared to the control. No such results were found for female participants. Among male participants, the relationship between imagined intergenerational contact and expectations of ageing was mediated by ageing anxiety, indicating that males in the imagined contact conditions experienced significantly better expectations of ageing through reduced anxiety about ageing, compared to the control. No indirect effect of ageing anxiety on the relationship between imagined intergenerational contact and expectations of ageing was found for female participants. Implications of these findings and suggestions for future research will be discussed. Overall, the findings of the current study suggest that imagined contact may be an efficacious alternative for decreasing ageing anxiety and for producing more positive expectations of ageing when the opportunity for direct contact is unavailable.

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## Introduction

Constant exposure to negative age stereotypes can have an adverse impact on an individual and their health outcomes (Bardach, Gayer, Clinkinbeard, Zanjani, & Watkins, 2010). According to Levy's stereotype embodiment theory (2009), stereotypes about older adults are internalised during childhood and, often unknowingly, produce attitudes, expectations and perceptions about the ageing process (Levy, 2009). These expectations often become self-fulfilling, and can result in detrimental effects on the health of the older individual; including

poor physical functioning, increased morbidity and mortality, and a reduced likelihood of seeking appropriate health care for age-associated health conditions (Kotter-Grühn, Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn, Gerstorf, & Smith, 2009; Sargent-Cox, Anstey, & Luszcz, 2012; Sarkisian, Hays, & Mangione, 2002). Therefore, it is important to examine methods to challenge negative stereotypes and expectations related to ageing to reduce the associated negative impact on health and wellbeing outcomes.

One of the most effective techniques for challenging stereotypes and improving attitudes towards stigmatised social groups, such as the elderly, is intergroup contact (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 2008). However, an inevitable limitation of this method is that direct physical contact must be available. To overcome this constraint, recent research has explored the effect of *imagined* contact on attitudes towards out-groups. Imagining a positive contact experience with an outgroup member

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has been shown to have numerous beneficial consequences for intergroup relations, including improved behavioural tendencies towards the outgroup (Turner & West, 2012), greater projection of positive traits to the outgroup (Stathi & Crisp, 2008) and increased confidence about successful future intergroup interactions (Stathi, Crisp, & Hogg, 2011). In addition, there is evidence that imagined contact, specifically with an older adult, is associated with improvements in both explicit (Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007) and implicit attitudes (Turner & Crisp, 2010), enhanced future contact intentions (Husnu & Crisp, 2010), reduced intergroup anxiety (Turner et al., 2007), and decreased stereotype threat effects (Abrams et al., 2008). Our research will make a significant contribution to this field by further investigating the effect of imagined contact on promoting positive age-related attitudes and extending the usefulness of this technique to attitudes towards one's own ageing.

There is considerable evidence that a key mechanism behind the association between imagined contact and attitudes is *intergroup anxiety* (Turner et al., 2007); defined as affect experienced when anticipating contact with an out-group member (Greenland & Brown, 1999). Another type of anxiety proposed to mediate the effects of intergroup contact on ageing attitudes is *ageing anxiety*; conceptualised as the concern and anticipation of adverse losses associated with ageing (Lasher & Faulkender, 1993). Ageing anxiety is thought to arise when individuals do not have factual knowledge about ageing and the ageing process (Allan & Johnson, 2009), or when there is an absence of quality interactions with older people (Lasher & Faulkender, 1993). In such circumstances, individuals who are anxious about their future ageing focus their attention on negative information, thereby accepting and relying on pervasive negative stereotypes of older adults. This produces misperceptions about ageing and increases anxiety-linked negative expectancy biases (Harris & Dollinger, 2001; Steinman, Smyth, Bucks, MacLeod, & Teachman, 2013).

Despite the encouraging findings of existing imagined contact research, these studies comprise various limitations, particularly their small sample sizes (Turner et al., 2007) and lack of analysis into long-term effects (Miles & Crisp, 2014). There is preliminary evidence suggesting that the positive effects of imagined interracial contact on behavioural intentions and implicit attitudes can be maintained until one-week post intervention (Vezzali, Capozza, Giovannini, & Stathi, 2012), however this has not been explored on age-related attitudes or over a longer follow-up period. Demonstration of the longevity of the imagined contact effects would significantly advance our understanding of the power of imagined intergroup contact. Existing imagined contact literature is also limited by failure to adequately identify the gender of the target individual, which may influence of effect of imagined intergenerational contact due to potential differing attitudes held towards older males versus older females (Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnston, 2005; Muisaiger & D'Souza, 2009). While it is a highly contested area of research, the *double standard of ageing* suggests that ageing has more adverse consequences for women than it does for men (Sontag, 1979). Thus, specifying the gender of the target older adult may serve to clarify differences in age-attitudes towards older men and women. Another factor that has been postulated to potentially influence imagined contact effects is the gender of the participant (Kite et al., 2005), though the relationship is not clear as a recent meta-analysis ( $k = 65$ ; Miles & Crisp, 2014) found participant gender did not influence the positive effect of imagined contact on intergroup attitudes, emotions, intentions and behaviour.

## The present study

The current study aims to bring a novel contribution to the literature by examining whether the benefits of imagined contact can extend beyond intergroup relations to improve attitudes towards the future self in terms of expectations regarding ageing. This study will also be the first to explore whether such an effect is persistent over time.

Other aims are to examine the mediating effect of ageing anxiety on the relationship between imagined contact and expectations of ageing, and to explore the effects of participant and target gender on this relationship. Based on past findings, it is hypothesised that individuals assigned to the imagined contact conditions will show more positive expectations regarding ageing compared to the control condition, and that this relationship will be mediated by anxiety about ageing. It is also expected that this effect will be maintained over a four-week period.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 201 students (123 female, 78 male), aged between 18 and 29 years ( $M = 21.21$ ,  $SD = 2.31$ ) were recruited from the Australian National University. Of these, 53.2% were Caucasian, 41.3% Asian, and 5.5% were other ethnicities. Incentives for participation included either 1 h of psychology course credit or \$10 cash. At the four week follow up 89% of the sample participated ( $n = 178$ ; 108 female, 70 male).

### Procedure

#### Baseline measurement (Time 1)

The study was conducted online through the web-based survey software, Qualtrics. Participants were randomly allocated into experimental conditions. Adopting similar protocol to Turner et al. (2007) while also accounting for potential differing attitudes held towards older males versus older females (Kite et al., 2005), the first condition required participants to imagine interacting with a *male* target aged 75 years, and the second condition requested participants to imagine interacting with a *female* target aged 75 years. The third condition was a typical control that requested participants imagine a pleasant outdoor scene, akin to a positive interaction but with no reference to older adults (Crisp & Turner, 2013; Miles & Crisp, 2014). After 1 min, participants automatically advanced to a new web-page to list three things they imagined as a means of reinforcing the effect of the imagery task (Turner et al., 2007). Participants then completed questions pertaining to demographic information as well as the outlined age-attitude measures.

#### Follow-up measurement (Time 2)

At four weeks participants were reminded about the follow-up via contact details provided (email/phone/message). Participants logged back into Qualtrics to complete the follow-up age-attitude scales and the Perceived Awareness of the Research Hypothesis scale. To conclude, participants were presented with a debriefing form that revealed the true nature of the study.

### Measures

*Expectations of ageing* were assessed with the 12-item Expectations Regarding Ageing scale (ERA; Sarkisian, Steers, Hays, & Mangione, 2005),  $\alpha = .81$ . The extent of *fear and anxiety about ageing* was measured using 20 items contained in the Anxiety about Ageing Scale (AAS; Lasher & Faulkender, 1993),  $\alpha = .88$ . *Demand characteristics* were evaluated using the Perceived Awareness of the Research Hypothesis scale (PARH; Rubin, Paolini, & Crisp, 2010),  $\alpha = .82$ .

### Statistical analysis

To investigate mean ERA and AAS scores of male and female participants at each time point, several repeated measures (condition  $\times$  time) ANOVAs, stratified by participant gender, were conducted. To examine the indirect mediational hypotheses the computational tool of PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) was used. PROCESS analyses were filtered by participant gender.

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