



# The role of individual difference variables in ageism<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine the role that personality traits, empathy traits, and gratitude have on ageist attitudes and aging anxiety. Consistent with previous research, participants who exhibited greater aging anxiety were more prone to ageist attitudes. Participants with greater dispositional gratitude exhibited significantly less aging anxiety and less ageist attitudes. All of the Big Five personality traits, with the exception of extraversion, were found to be significant determinants of ageist attitudes, aging anxiety, or both. With the exception of personal distress, none of the empathy dimensions predicted either aging anxiety or ageist attitudes.

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## 1. Introduction

Almost four decades ago Butler (1975) introduced the term ageism which refers to “a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old” (p. 12). Despite the intervening time, there remains a paucity of research on ageism compared to other types of prejudice such as sexism and racism (North & Fiske, 2012).

Research indicates that the aging process is widely regarded negatively and suggests that many individuals hold ageist views of elderly adults (see Butler, 2005; Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005). Discrimination against older individuals continues to appear in domains such as the workplace (McCann & Giles, 2002; Rupp, Vodanovich, & Credé, 2006; Stuart-Hamilton & Mahoney, 2003) and in medical settings (Ferrario, Freeman, Nellett, & Scheel, 2008). The proportion of older adults in the United States and Canada is higher than ever before and is projected to rise over the coming decades (Statistics Canada, 2010; United States Census Bureau, 2009). As the population becomes increasingly older it becomes more important to understand ageism and to develop strategies to decrease ageist attitudes and behaviours. One approach that may be useful is to explore which individual differences contribute to ageism.

Demographic variables associated with individual differences in ageism have been studied. Males have consistently been found to be more ageist than females (Boswell, 2012; Boudjemad & Gana, 2009; Rupp, Vodanovich, & Credé, 2005). Research on the influence of the amount of contact with older adults on ageist beliefs yields mixed findings. In the case of university undergraduates, some researchers (Allan & Johnson, 2009; Boswell, 2012; Schwartz & Simmons, 2001) found no relationship between quantity of contact with older adults and ageist attitudes while others (Luo, Zhou, Jin, Newman, & Liang, 2013; Van Dussen & Weaver, 2009) found that more contact with older adults is related to more positive attitudes toward older adults. Sullivan (2008) found no relationship between quantity of contact and ageist attitudes, however, quality of inter-generational contact was predictive of less ageist attitudes.

Lasher and Faulkender (1993) define anxiety about aging as “combined concern and anticipation of losses centered around the aging process” (p. 247). They conceptualize aging anxiety as different from other types of anxiety but related to psychological well-being and attitudes toward aging. Anxiety about (one's own) aging seems to be linked to ageism. Harris and Dollinger (2001) found that university students with high levels of aging anxiety held more negative attitudes toward the average 70-year-old and rated themselves at 70 more negatively than did students who had lower aging anxiety. Several studies have found a significant positive correlation between aging anxiety and ageism among university students (Allan & Johnson, 2009; Boswell, 2012; Harris & Dollinger, 2001).

A unique explanation for the link between aging anxiety and ageism is terror management theory (TMT; see Martens,

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Goldenberg, & Greenberg, 2005). TMT, extending the writings of Becker (1973), is characterized by the assertion that humans are driven by an inclination for survival and yet are aware that death is inevitable. To manage the existential terror induced by an awareness of mortality, humans invest in worldviews (e.g., culture, nationality) that provide a sense of meaning and self-esteem. Furthermore, humans tend to distance themselves from and denigrate entities that threaten their self-esteem and, hence, that serve as reminders of mortality (Martens et al., 2005). Research has found that student participants were more likely to exhibit ageist attitudes following experimentally induced reminders of mortality (Martens, Greenberg, Schimel, & Landau, 2004).

Several researchers (Gao, 2009; Harris & Dollinger, 2003) found aging anxiety to be positively correlated with neuroticism and negatively correlated to agreeableness, extraversion and conscientiousness. However, when using regression analysis to control for correlations between the personality traits, Harris and Dollinger (2003) found that only neuroticism and agreeableness remained significant. These findings are theoretically consistent since neuroticism has been associated with anxiety, self-consciousness, and ineffective coping skills (Costa & McCrae, 1980). Agreeableness, on the other hand, reflects trust, warmth, and cooperation (McCrae & Costa, 1999), which one would expect to be positively linked to acceptance of others and a prosocial outlook. While the link between personality and aging anxiety has been studied, the influence of personality traits in ageism has not.

It may be useful to examine the role of other disposition-related variables such as empathy and gratitude in explaining ageism in order to determine if their role is subsumed within personality or has a unique influence. Davis (1980) views dispositional empathy as a multifaceted concept that includes two cognitive (perspective taking and fantasy) and two affective (personal distress and empathic concern) components. Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000) found that taking the perspective of an older adult resulted in increased overlap in representations of the self and the older person as well as decreased ageist stereotyping. Thus, perspective taking may enable a younger person to empathize and identify with the older adult, which in turn may facilitate respect for older adults. Also, Boudjemad and Gana (2009) found that higher levels of dispositional empathy were associated with lower levels of ageist attitudes.

McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002) describe gratitude as a disposition toward feeling and expressing a sense of thankfulness in response to others' behaviour, which results in one having positive experiences. Gratitude has been associated with an array of positive outcomes such as a sense of well-being (McCullough et al., 2002), life satisfaction (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, & Dean, 2009), and happiness (Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003). It is worth exploring the possibility that people with high levels of gratitude and, thus, a positive outlook, may be less likely to experience aging anxiety and ageist attitudes. Furthermore, gratitude shares important links both with the personality traits of agreeableness (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001) and extraversion (McCullough et al., 2002), as well as with empathy (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994). Thus, it is worth examining whether gratitude has a role in aging anxiety and/or ageism independent of its relationship with empathy and personality.

The aim of the present study was to investigate the role of individual difference variables in explaining ageism among undergraduate students. To understand ageism the role of anxiety about aging, demographic variables, personality, gratitude, and empathy will be examined. Some previous research has found a mediating role for aging anxiety on ageist attitudes (Allan & Johnson, 2009) while others have not (Bousfield & Hutchison, 2010). The model that will be estimated will test for the mediating effect of aging anxiety.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 392 students (252 females) enrolled in psychology courses at a mid-sized university in Western Canada. They were recruited through the Psychology Department's experiment management system and received course credit for participating. Most participants were between the ages of 18 to 20 ( $M = 19.36$ ;  $SD = 1.52$ ). Most participants reported ethnicity as White (71.7%). Others self-identified as Asian (15.3%), or other (11.8%), while 1.2% did not respond.

After providing consent, each participant completed a series of online questionnaires in a fixed order. The instruments took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Demographics

The demographic questionnaire included items regarding age, sex, marital status, ethnicity, and current year of study. A question about the participants' frequency of daily contact with older adults and one regarding whether they had lived with an elderly relative in the last 5 years were also included.

#### 2.2.2. Ageism

The *Fraboni Scale on Ageism* (FSA) developed by Fraboni, Saltstone, and Hughes (1990) and revised by Rupp et al. (2005) is a measure of ageist beliefs about older adults. The Rupp et al. (2005) version comprises 23 statements which can be divided into 3 factors: Stereotypes (e.g., "Old people complain more than other people do"), Separation (e.g., "I sometimes avoid eye contact with older people when I see them") and Affective Attitudes (e.g., "Old people should be encouraged to speak out politically"). Participants indicate how strongly they agree or disagree with each statement. Higher scores on the FSA indicate more ageist attitudes. The FSA has high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas of .70 to .79 (Rupp et al., 2005).

#### 2.2.3. Aging anxiety

The *Anxiety about Aging Scale* (AAS; Lasher & Faulkender, 1993) is a 20-item self-report scale assessing anxiety about aging including fear of older people, psychological concerns about aging, physical concerns about aging, and fear of losses associated with aging. Participants indicate on 5-point Likert items the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements concerning aging. Higher AAS scores indicate greater anxiety about aging. The AAS has good levels of internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .82 (Lasher & Faulkender, 1993).

#### 2.2.4. Personality

The *NEO Five Factor Inventory* (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1989) is a 60-item scale designed to assess the constellation of traits defined by the Five Factor Theory of Personality. The NEO-FFI comprises five personality traits: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. *Openness* is characterized by originality, curiosity, and ingenuity (e.g., "I am intrigued by the patterns I find in art and nature"). *Conscientiousness* refers to orderliness, responsibility, and dependability (e.g., "I work hard to accomplish my goals"). *Extraversion* denotes talkativeness, assertiveness, and energy (e.g., "I am a very active person"). *Agreeableness* relates to good-naturedness, cooperativeness, and trust (e.g., "I often feel inferior to others"). *Neuroticism* is characterized by upsetability and is the polar opposite of emotional stability (e.g., "I often feel inferior to others").

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