



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The fight against prejudice in older adults: perspective taking effectiveness

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Abstract

Inhibition of prejudice appears to be more problematic for older adults, hence the need to develop programs to reduce intergroup bias at later stages in life. Perspective taking was analyzed in this study, as one of various cognitive strategies that have been shown to reduce such bias. Data on a sample of 63 Spanish participants with a mean age of 64.1 years was gathered after an intervention based on mental imagery, aimed at reducing explicit prejudice. A wide array of variables was measured (personality traits, values, empathy, and attribution) which may moderate effectiveness in perspective taking. Despite no main effect was found, effects due to interaction of perspective taking found in OLS regression analysis revealed that perspective taking based intervention was effective for some older adults, particularly those who had low scores on agreeableness, empathy, and universalism, and high scores on conformity. The conclusions suggest that perspective taking might be successfully applied to some profiles of older people albeit it is not as strong and transferable strategy as it used to be thought.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Prejuicio;
Personas mayores;
Toma de perspectiva;
Cognición social

Combatiendo el prejuicio en personas mayores: efectividad de la toma de perspectiva

Resumen

La inhibición del prejuicio resulta más problemática en personas mayores, de lo que se deriva la necesidad de desarrollar programas que reduzcan el sesgo intergrupar en los estadios avanzados de la vida. En el presente estudio se analizó la toma de perspectiva como una de las estrategias capaces de reducir este tipo de sesgo. Se recogieron datos

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en una muestra de 63 participantes españoles con una edad media de 64.1 años, en la que se implementó una intervención basada en imaginación mental, dirigida a la reducción del prejuicio. Asimismo, se midieron diversas variables que podían modular la efectividad de la toma de perspectiva (personalidad, valores, empatía y atribución). Aunque no se encontró ningún efecto principal, los debidos a la interacción de la toma de perspectiva y los moduladores, hallados en el análisis de regresión por mínimos cuadrados ordinarios, revelaron que la intervención basada en la inducción de toma de perspectiva fue efectiva en determinadas personas mayores, particularmente en aquellas que puntuaron bajo en amabilidad, empatía y universalismo, y alto en conformismo. En las conclusiones se sugiere que la toma de perspectiva podría ser aplicada con éxito en determinados perfiles de adultos mayores, aunque no se trata de una estrategia tan potente y transferible como se pensaba.

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Intergroup prejudices continue to have an extensive presence in all societies (Bodenhausen & Richeson, 2010). One of the most pervasive social biases is the one held about the aging and the older adults (e.g., Bennet, & Gaines, 2010; Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005; Hummert, 2011; Nelson, 2002, 2009; Kornadt & Rothermund, 2011; Triguero, Maciel, & Bezerra, 2007; Wachelke & Contarello, 2010). At the same time, the elderly are agents of bias. Firstly, this is made evident when they incorporate the extended social prejudice about their ingroup, having a relevant influence on themselves (Bennett & Gaines, 2010; Coudin & Alexopoulos, 2010; Hummert, 2011; Koher-Gruhn & Hess, 2012; Palacios, Torres, & Mena, 2009). Secondly, citizens of an advanced age do not only self-stigmatize, but also may contribute to the spread of prejudices towards other social groups, and higher levels of bias have been detected in them more so than in other groups (e.g., Hoppel, Silver, & Lynch, 2000). However, like the rest of the population, elderly people are destined to live in an increasingly diverse society, which is why it is recommendable that they too have opportunities to move towards fairer evaluations of other citizens and groups with whom, to some extent, they must share their lives.

Responding to the interest in eradicating prejudices, socio-scientific research is increasingly concerned with evaluating the effectiveness of different types of actions aimed at the reduction of intergroup bias. 'Perspective taking' is one of the cognitive social types of techniques studied in this context. It is reviewed afresh in this article, to study its usefulness in a sample of older people, and to explore possible individual differences linked to the effectiveness of the strategy.

Prejudices in the elderly

There are numerous psychosocial and sociological survey-based investigations that show a positive relation between age and prejudice in the adult population in North America and in Europe (see Pettigrew, 2006, for a review). Likewise, stereotyping and prejudice in older people have been compared with the same phenomena in young people (Gonsalkorale, Sherman, & Klauer, 2009; Hoppel et al.,

2000; Radvansky, Copeland, & Hoppel, 2010; Stewart, Hoppel, & Radvansky, 2009). Thus, Hoppel et al. (2000) found in a sample of 36 young adults ($M = 21.2$ years) and 35 elderly adults ($M = 80.2$ years) that the latter displayed a lower conscious capacity for inhibition than the former, and that this capacity was found to be associated with levels of stereotyping and prejudice, which were higher among older adults. Stewart et al. (2009) established differences between young and elderly adults, but this time in relation to their automatic prejudice. They also confirmed that the cause was due to less automatic control (i.e., less preconscious inhibitory control) being exercised by the latter over their prejudiced associations. The work of Gonsalkorale et al. (2009) may be mentioned among other comparative studies that have arrived at a similar conclusion. These authors, who studied automatic race bias in older and younger people, analyzed data collected with the Implicit Association Test in a sample of 15,752 white individuals aged 11-94, and found that the activation of the association between "White" and "pleasant" significantly decreased with increasing age between the 21-30 and 51-60 age groups, and did not increase in older groups (61-70, and 71+). This evidence did not support the hypothesis that older adults have more biased associations than younger people. Instead, the effort to prevent automatically activated associations from influencing behavior, that was another parameter estimated (i.e., overcoming bias), decreased with age, leading to higher final IAT effects. This latter result supports the inhibitory deficits account. Radvansky et al. (2010) reached a similar conclusion in two experiments (plus a third control experiment), using a different task (i.e., stereotypic inferences drawn during the comprehension of narrative texts) and different measures (i.e., recognition and lexical decision times) that were completed by 71 young participants aged 18-25 ($M = 19.1$), and 48 older adults aged 60-88 ($M = 72.1$) in experiment 1, and 48 people in each of the two age groups in experiment 2 ($M_{\text{young}} = 19.6$, range = 19-23; $M_{\text{old}} = 71.1$, range = 60-83). Older adults drew stereotypic inferences to a greater extent than younger adults in the memory task, and this was likely due to a lesser inhibitory activity in the processing of information: older participants were faster than younger individuals to respond to stereotype-consistent probes in a

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