

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE ELDERLY: AN INTERGENERATIONAL EXAMINATION

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Abstract:

The relationship between children's attitudes toward older people and older people's perception of children's attitudes toward them were examined using the Attitude Perception Questionnaire. Results were analyzed for 52 fifth- and sixth-grade children and 52 older adults, and comparisons made on the basis of age, sex and amount of intergenerational contact. Older adults' perceptions of children's attitudes toward them were more negative than the children's actual attitudes. Implications for persons involved in planning and implementing intergenerational programs are discussed.

Article:

INTRODUCTION

Research has demonstrated that attitudes toward older people generally are negative and stereotypic (Bengtson, 1971; Bradt-Ryan, 1979; Peters, 1971; Rosencranz & McNevin, 1969). Our society has an anti-old, pro-young bias, and this bias is reflected in many areas of our culture (Cameron & Cromer, 1974). Males and females, young as well as old, have been indoctrinated with negative views of aging and the aged, and these views prevail. We do not yet completely understand the ramifications such negative views have on older people or indeed on society as a whole (Peters, 1971).

Children are not immune to the negative attitudes and discriminatory practices toward older people that exist in our culture at large. Children base their views of aging and the aged mainly on the exposure they encounter. If a child's exposure to older people is based on negatively biased literature, media, and family influences, stereotypic and negative views of older people will likely become incorporated into his or her frame of reference (Seefeldt, Galpor, Serock, & Jantz, 1977; 1978). Studies of children's attitudes toward aging and old people have demonstrated that most children have negative attitudes and very limited knowledge of and contact with older people (Chappell, 1977; Page, Olivan, Driver, & Driver, 1981).

Attitude theorists postulate that attitudes are formed early in life and that, once formed, these attitudes have enduring qualities that influence people's thought and behavior throughout life (Seefeldt et al., 1977). Attitudes toward aging and aged persons thus influence our own development toward old age (Comfort, 1978).

Similarly, the attitudes that older people have toward persons of other ages will influence their interactions with people of these age groups. Seefeldt, Jantz, Serock, & Bredekamp (1982) found the attitudes of older people toward children to be basically positive. Whether these positive attitudes are affected by the negative perceptions of older people held by children has not been determined.

To date, little attention has been devoted to the study of attitude perception; however, the way in which the attitudes of one generation toward another are perceived is potentially significant and ultimately may affect individual attitudes. If misconceptions and misrepresentations exist, communication and compatibility between persons of different generations may be hampered. "intergenerational encounters between representatives of the

old and young may be negative, unless the attitudes of both groups are known and taken into consideration" (Seefeldt et al., 1982, p. 505).

The present study was undertaken to examine the attitudes of children toward old people and to compare them to the ways older people think they are perceived by children. Knowledge of children's attitudes and how these attitudes are perceived is important in planning intergenerational programs and may help foster compatibility between the participants of such programs.

METHODOLOGY

An Attitude Perception Questionnaire and a demographic data profile were administered to 52 fifth- and sixth-grade children and 52 older adults. The instrumentation, subjects, and procedures are described in this section.

Instrumentation

A variety of instruments have been developed to assess attitudes toward older people (see Kogan, 1961; McTavish, 1971; Palmore, 1977). Because each of these is suitable primarily for either adult or child populations it is difficult to make direct intergeneration comparisons of attitudes. Since the purpose of this study was to both assess and compare intergenerational attitudes, a dual purpose instrument was needed; i.e., an instrument having adequate versatility for use with both populations.

Based on a review of the available instrumentation, and the lack of an instrument suited to the specific purposes of this study, a dual purpose questionnaire was designed and psychometrically tested. The purpose of the Attitude Perception Questionnaire was twofold: first, to assess the attitudes of children toward older people, and second, to assess older people's perception of children's attitudes toward them. The individual items and response scales were the same for both groups; however, the instructions for responding differed. Children were asked to respond based on their feelings, whereas older subjects were asked to answer the questions as they thought children were likely to answer.

The format for the Attitude Perception Questionnaire is similar to that used in the Guidance Clinic Surveys (Larkin, 1980), and also is based to some extent on concepts used in Rosencranz and McNevin's (1969) Aging Semantic Differential. The concept of the simplified yes/no response format and minimal number of questions ($N = 18$) was chosen in an effort to avoid test fatigue in either age group. The instrument was designed to address factors such as the emotions, physical attributes, and utility of older people.

The Attitude Perception Questionnaire was administered to 20 graduate students in counselor education who rated each item as either positive or negative, indicating whether the item expressed a positive or negative attitude toward older people regardless of their own feelings or attitudes. The purpose of this procedure was to obtain normative ratings of positive and negative valence, to establish face validity, and to derive a scoring formula which would yield a single score for use in data analyses. The highest possible score was 54, the midpoint of the score range of the attitude scale being 27.

Internal consistency was determined for both children and older persons separately by use of a Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient to compute the correlation between each item and the total score. Any item which was unreliable for either group was removed from the item pool for both groups.

The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient also was used to assess the test-retest reliability for both subject populations over a two week time interval. The test-retest correlation for children was $r = .92$ ($p < .05$, $N = 42$). The test-retest correlation for the older adult subjects was $r = .73$ ($p < .05$, $N = 27$).

In addition to the Attitude Perception Questionnaire, each subject completed a brief demographic data profile. The information requested included the subject's age, sex, and amount of intergenerational contact between the two age groups being studied.

The child and older adult samples were selected independently. The original subject pool for the former group was 98 children, including 52 girls and 46 boys, drawn from a heterogeneous group of school children attending two public elementary schools in south-eastern Ohio. In both of the schools involved, children in one fifth-and one sixth-grade class participated. The children ranged in age from 10 to 12 years. In order to obtain subject groups of equal size for children and adults, and to obtain equal numbers of male and female subjects, 46 subjects were randomly eliminated according to sex from the child population.

Adult subjects were selected from heterogeneous groups residing in the community in two adjacent cities in southeastern Ohio. The original subject pool consisted of 71 older adults. However 12 were eliminated due to incomplete questionnaires, reducing the subject pool to 59. As was the case with the child subjects, some older adult subjects (seven females) were randomly eliminated from the subject pool in order to obtain equal representation of males and females. The net result was an older adult sample of 52 subjects with a minimum age of 60 years and a mean age of 70 years 2 months.

Procedure

Both older adult and child subjects were administered the questionnaires on a group basis. All participants were given similar verbal instructions. Care was taken in answering questions to assure that the examiner's response would not influence the subject's response in any way. The total time required for administration of both the attitude assessment and demographic data questionnaires was approximately 24 minutes for the children's groups and 30 minutes for the older subjects. All persons participated voluntarily.

RESULTS

Mean scores for both groups of subjects were computed. The mean score for the children was 31.7 ($SD = 3.5$), while that for the older persons was 29.2 ($SD = 4.3$). Both mean scores were above the midpoint of the score interval (i.e., a score of 27). Thus, although these scores indicated generally positive attitudes and perceived attitudes, the older adults did predict that children's attitudes would be somewhat more negative than they actually were.

A one way analysis of variance using total score as the dependent variable was computed to determine whether the scores produced by the subject groups were significantly different. The achieved value of $F = 11.70$ ($df = 1, 102$) indicates that the two age groups were significantly different in their total scores at the .05 level.

A Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was completed to assess the relationship between the attitudes toward older adults as indicated by children and as predicted by the older adult subjects. The Pearson's r was computed for mean scores per item for the older population as compared to the mean scores per item for the child subjects. The resulting r of $-.03$ was not significant.

A one way ANOVA was completed for each group of subjects based on amount of intergenerational contact with relatives. The possible response categories and number of responses per category for children and older persons, respectively, were: no family members of that generation (0, 10), never/almost never (0, 3), a couple of times a year (7, 9), a couple of times a month (11, 14), and a couple of times a week (17, 16). Neither the ANOVA for the children ($F = 0.28$, $df = 4, 49$) nor that for the older persons ($F = 1.98$, $df = 4, 47$) was significant at the .05 level.

Intergenerational contacts for children were analyzed separately based on the amount of contact with unrelated older persons ($F = 2.42$, $df = 3, 48$) and with grandparents ($F = 0.28$, $df = 4, 49$). The ANOVA's in both instances yielded no significant effects.

Similar results were found with the older adult subjects. One way analyses of variance were computed to determine the effect of the amount of contact with children other than grandchildren and with grandchildren on older people's perceived attitudes. The analyses yielded nonsignificant ANOVA's of $F = 2.14$, $df = 3, 48$) and $F = 1.98$, $df = 4, 47$), respectively.

A Point Biserial Correlation Coefficient was computed to determine the relationship between sex and total score for both *age* groups. The correlation of $r = .14$ for the child subjects was not significant at the .05 level. The correlation of $r = -.05$ for the older adult subjects also was not significant.

DISCUSSION

In interpreting the results of this study, some potential limitations should be considered. First, the geographic distribution of the sample (i.e., all from semirural southeastern Ohio) may limit the generalizability of the results in unknown ways. Given the pilot nature of the research, however, this is not considered to be a severe limitation.

Similarly, the sample size is adequate for the purposes of the study.

The voluntary nature of participation introduces a possible source of error, as those who volunteered to participate may differ in unknown ways from those who did not. Moreover, it is difficult for many persons to answer a questionnaire as they perceive someone else would do, and the older persons in this study were asked to do just that. The care given to providing instructions to older subjects was intended to avoid error variance in this regard.

In the following discussion, several major questions addressed by this research are considered. Possible explanations for each finding are proposed. Some possible implications of the results are considered following the review of research questions.

1. Are children's attitudes toward aging and older people negative?

The fact that the children's attitude scores were significantly higher than the mean scale score is indicative of overall positive attitudes toward older persons. There are several possible explanations for this outcome, one being that the results are due to a social desirability effect. Although the children were assured that their responses were anonymous and confidential, there is still the possibility that at least some of the children responded in a way they thought would be more acceptable to the examiners.

Another factor which may have contributed to these results is the high incidence of contact between the child subjects and their grandparents. The frequency of such contact was fairly high for this subject population, which may be a result of the extended family, small community ties which exist in southeastern Ohio. Approximately 76 percent of the child subjects indicated that they had contact with their grandparents several times a week or more.

2. Would older adults predict that children's attitudes toward them are negative?

The answer to this question was unequivocally no. Although previous research, discussed earlier, indicated that children tend to have negative and stereotypic attitudes toward older people, it appears possible that the older people in this study may have encountered more positive attitudes. One possible contributing factor, again, may be the relatively high incidence of inter-generational contact. Of the 52 older adult subjects in this study, 30 indicated that they had contact with grandchildren several times a month or more.

Another factor which may account for the results of this question is that some of the(older people in this study may have projected what they would like to believe children think of older people. In this sense, these results may reflect a certain social desirability effect, a risk taken in any study of attitudes.

3. Is there a correlation between children's attitudes toward older people and older people's perception of children's attitudes toward them?

The results of this study did not indicate the existence of a positive correlation. The older adults predicted that the children's attitudes would be more negative than they actually were. One possible explanation for these results is that the older people have projected their own feelings of lack of self-worth onto their predictions of children's attitudes toward them. Research has shown that old people themselves have negative attitudes toward

old age (Collette, 1975; Comfort, 1978). It also has been demonstrated that life satisfaction tends to decline between middle and old age and that this decline may be due to one's self-perception as "old" (Adams, 1971). In view of the fact that older people may devalue old age, it may be possible that the older adult subjects in this study projected their own negative feelings onto their perceptions of children's attitudes toward them.

The fact that increased intergenerational contact did not lead to a corresponding increase in positive attitudes and perceived attitudes is consistent with some earlier research (Chappell, 1977). Perhaps increased intergenerational contact has a curvilinear effect. That is, it is possible that an increase in intergenerational contact up to a certain optimum level may tend to improve attitudes (and perceived attitudes) toward the target population. Beyond that optimum level, however, an increase in intergenerational contact may tend to decrease the positiveness of attitudes toward the target population.

Another possible explanation for these results among the child subjects is that the contact scores were positively skewed. Had the distribution been normal, a stronger relationship between increased contact and an increase in positiveness in attitudes toward older people may have resulted.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study pose some interesting questions and suggest some avenues for future research in regard to attitudes and intergenerational contact. Additionally the data suggest certain recommendations in regard to intergenerational programming.

The subjects in the present study were divided into two age groups, young (elementary school age) and old (60 years and older). The older age group spanned some 30 years, a large block of time. Further dividing this age group into young-old (60-74) and old-old (75 and older) may answer questions such as, "Do perceived attitudes become more negative as age increases in the older adult sample?"

Another factor which could be addressed in future research is the health of the older adults. Health was not assessed or determined in the present study but may influence the results as measured by the Attitude Perception Questionnaire. A question to be answered by future research is "Do the less healthy older adults predict more negative attitudes than the healthy older adults?" A similar issue could be addressed by sampling a group of older adults living in the community and another group residing in institutions such as nursing homes. Given that this research resulted in children demonstrating generally positive attitudes toward older people, and that older persons predicted that children would have fairly positive attitudes toward them, this study supports the implementation of inter-generational programs.

However, the success of such programs may depend in part upon the generations involved both understanding and accepting one another. Seefeldt et al. (1982) pointed out that there is an educational component involved in attitudes, and it may be important for program developers to consider educating each generation about the other. In the present study, the question "Do older people and younger people have the same feelings?" was answered "no" by a majority of the child subjects, suggesting a lack of knowledge among children about the emotions of older people.

The implementation of intergenerational programs, both within and outside the school setting, may serve to facilitate educating young persons, may provide needed companionship for older people, may provide emotional and psychological support for both generations, and may help teach children that growing old need not be a frightening or hopeless experience.

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