

The Intergen31 Intergenerational - Theatre Project Reduces Implicit Negative Age Attitudes

Celebrating Age: Moving Memory Dance Theatre in Partnership with Gulbenkian Theatre & Kent County Council

Ian Farr, University of Kent

Abstract

Positive self-concept is intrinsic to wellbeing and engagement with health behaviours. Intergenerational contact has previously been shown to have important benefits to older and younger people's self-concept, and to reduce negative stereotypes of ageing. The aim of the Still Stomping: a project led by Moving Memory Dance Theatre and Gulbenkian, is to improve self-concept and age attitudes by celebrating age in an intergeneration dance theatre context. The research consisted of older (mean age = 65) and younger (mean age = 21) people who participated in an intergenerational dance theatre performance. Implicit and explicit measures of age attitudes were collected before practice sessions had begun, and then again after the performance. Significant effects were identified for implicit age attitudes ($F(1,16) = 5.62, p = 0.03$). In line with the hypothesis of the intervention, involvement in the workshops and performance had a counter-stereotype effect on implicit attitude test reaction times. No other effects were elicited. Results are interpreted in terms of attitude theory, and stereotype embodiment theory. Limitations of the study are discussed. In conclusion, the intergeneration dance theatre project was a successful intervention to counter negative age stereotypes and negative self-stereotypes which may serve protective functions in terms of health and health behaviours.

Introduction

Moving Memory Dance Theatre (www.movingmemorydance.com) is a company of older women which produces innovative contemporary performance, installation and participatory work. Their vision is for a society where older people live longer, healthier and more fulfilling lives because they participate in artistic, creative and physical activities. The work they produce – and the way they produce it – aims to challenge perceived notions of age and ageing, by asking audiences and participants to look beyond their assumptions and changing attitudes towards older people.

These values and objectives are steeped in established research. The World Health Organisation reports that participation in 'social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs' (WHO, 2002) has particular benefits to older adults' wellbeing, and remaining physically active in later life can have important positive effects on wellbeing and quality of life too (BMA, 2016). Specifically, positive psychological effects may in turn perform a crucial protective role against functional limitations (Matarasso, 1997; McAuley, Szabo, Gothe, & Olson, 2013). This corroborates correlations between physical and psychological health decline (Garatachea et al.,

2015), and underpins active ageing, “the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age” (WHO, 2002).

The Lancet Commission documented that social contact and physical activity contributed (2% and 3% respectively) towards a total 35% modifiable risk factor for dementia, where the remaining 65% of risk is potentially unmodifiable. Depression accounted for 4% and is identifiable as a separate risk factor in their study, although it is arguable that it exists as an early risk factor. It is therefore unsurprising that art therapies have been found to improve quality of life (Cohen, 2006), and cognition (Alders & Levine-Madori, 2010). These independent reports highlight the importance of meaningful engagement in health, both for social and clinical purposes. Age UK (2017) posit that creative and cultural participation is one of the top three most important contributors to older adults’ wellbeing. Furthermore, The Department of Health recommends participatory performance art interventions, which improve balance and falls outcomes, enhance wellbeing, and have systemic positive impacts in terms of self-concept and identity (Department of Health, 2011).

Self-concept is a crucial factor for predicting engagement with physical activity (Strachan, Brawley, Spink, & Glazebrook, 2010). Specifically, past experiences of physical activity predicted physical activity identification. Moreover, when people more highly identified with physical activity then life satisfaction was also greater. In another study, extolling the assistive role of physical activity on wellbeing, self-reports of general wellbeing and self-concept were improved following a 14-week exercise program (Stoll & Alfermann, 2002). Crucially, more favourable perceptions of the ageing process are correlated to adoption of preventative health behaviours such as eating a healthy diet, and exercise (Levy & Myers, 2004), highlighting the importance of positive self-concept in older adults psychological and physical health, and the interaction between these aspects. Importantly, older adults’ self-concept may be affected by embodiment of ageing stereotypes held at younger ages,

Poor self-concept and negative social comparison is seen to weaken people’s belief in their abilities and consequently impairs performance (Bandura et al., 1991). This holds explanatory power for understanding the effects of age-based stereotype threat on physical performance, where the presence of an unfavourable social comparison elicits a negative affective and physiological response (Levy et al., 2008), and reduces cognitive (Barber, 2017) and physical (Hausdorff, Levy, & Wei, 1999; Swift, Lamont, & Abrams, 2012) performance. However, intergenerational contact is evidenced to reduce experiences of stereotype threat in older adults, even when imagined (Abrams et al., 2008). The imagined contact mitigated older adults’ performance decrements in a maths test compared to controls, as well as reducing anxiety. Furthermore, intergenerational contact is evidenced to reduce perceptions of prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). This is in line with contact theory which asserts that intergroup conflict can be reduced through developing shared goals, cooperation, equal status and organisational support (Pettigrew, 1998). Drury (2017) asserts that intergenerational contact can reduce younger people’s anxiety and worries about growing older themselves. Additionally,

Abrams (2006) demonstrated that when older adults were most at risk of stereotype threat, then more positive intergenerational experiences reduced feelings of prejudice toward them and also reduced in-group identification. This research echoes the central tenets of reports that find that in order for active and healthy ageing to take place then age barriers and ageism need to be reduced (WHO, 2002).

In April 2018, the Moving Memory company, in partnership with Gulbenkian, Canterbury and Kent County Council, and with funding from Arts Council England and The Baring Foundation's Celebrating Age fund and Kent County Council, embarked on a two-year project called Still Stomping. This is a multi-strand project which aims to introduce more older people to creative activity that makes an impact on local communities, especially by encouraging intergenerational connections. The first phase of the project has involved workshops for active older people and young people, the production of a new performance piece (called Start Stomping, which involved an intergenerational company of 25 and was performed six times in outdoor public locations at the Gulbenkian and in Margate). The Intergen31 dance theatre project was a part of the wider Still Stomping initiative.

This method is based on evidence that using positive experiences through intergenerational cultural activities could promote positive self-concept and empowerment in older adults (Bryden, 2002), as well as positive age attitudes (Baird, 1996; Cohen, 2001, 2006). Additionally, the project may have positive effects on younger people's age attitudes (Drury & Swift, 2017), with implications for stereotype embodiment at later ages (Levy, 2003b). By bringing people of different ages together with a shared goal of a dance theatre performance, improvements in self-esteem are expected, along with reductions in implicit and explicit negative age attitudes.

Methods

Participants

Participants consisted of 21 individuals either in younger ($n = 12$; mean age=21) or older ($n = 9$; mean age= 65) age groups who had enrolled in the Intergen31 dance theatre project, culminating in a performance at the bOing! Festival. Participation in the study was not a prerequisite of taking part in the dance theatre workshop.

Procedure

Initially, paper-based and computer-based data collection was conducted before a 6-week series of dance theatre workshops had commenced, and then participants attended again for a second round of data collection two weeks following the performance.

Materials

Explicit attitudes - measured using the Intergenerational Contact Questionnaire (Drury et al, 2016):

- Current contact frequency - measured by asking participants to stipulate how often they interact with older people, on a scale ranging from 1 (very rarely) to 7 (very often).
- Contact quality – measured by three 7-point scales ranging from 1 (none) to 7 (very many).
- Intergroup anxiety - measured on three pairs of bipolar adjectives asking participants how they would feel interacting with older adults on a 7-point scale (tense–relaxed, calm–nervous, stressed–unstressed). Participants were instructed that this should be interaction with a typical older adult and not specifically someone that they interact with. Higher scored responses indicated more intergroup anxiety.
- Ageing anxiety – measured through four scales where participants responded how they felt about ageing themselves: ‘I am worried that I will lose my independence when I am old’, ‘I am relaxed about getting old’, ‘I am concerned that my mental abilities will suffer when I am old’, and ‘I do not want to get old because it means I am closer to dying’. Responses were recorded on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater anxiety about ageing.

Implicit attitudes - measured via the Implicit Age Attitudes Test (IAT; Greenwald, Mcghee, & Schwartz, 1998). The test was administered via PsychoPy software delivered via PC using old or young face images and ‘good’ (e.g. joy, happy) or ‘bad’ (e.g. hate, disgust) words as used in the Harvard IAT (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/Study?tid=-1>). The program was developed by university of Kent Psychology Support Team. Reaction time and number correct were recorded.

Self-esteem - measured using the commonly used Rosenberg’s Self Esteem ten-item questionnaire (Rosenberg, 1965). Items included statements such as “I wish I could have more respect for myself”. Participants rated agreement/ disagreement with the statements using a 4-point scale.

Statistical Analysis

Differences across time were investigated by age group using 2x2 analysis of variance (ANOVA), conducted using SPSS 23.0 (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 23.0. Armonk, NY). IAT data was compiled in Microsoft Excel before including in analysis by group in SPSS.

Results

Implicit Attitudes - A 2x2 (pre/post x stereotype inconsistent/ constituent) ANOVA revealed a significant interaction of stereotype condition and time on reaction time ($F(1,16) = 5.62, p = 0.03$). In line with the hypothesis of reductions in implicit negative age attitudes, the negative differential between stereotype inconsistent and stereotype consistent stimuli was significantly

reduced when post-performance was compared to pre-practice. The trend of stereotype consistent implicit attitudes was reversed in this study (Differential pre-practice = -3.55 seconds; post-performance = 9.8 seconds). Including age group as an interaction term did not generate any further significant findings. No significant differences were elicited for the number of correct responses in the IAT between groups, demonstrating the added power and sensitivity of analysing IAT using reaction time data.

Explicit Attitudes - Analyses of the explicit age attitudes questionnaire did not show any significant effect between the pre-practice and post-performance self-reports ($F(1,11)=0.41$, $p=0.53$).

Self-Esteem - Although there was a slight increase in reported self-esteem following the performance (mean pre-practice=20.7; Post performance = 23.3), this did not reach significance either for visit ($F(1,21)=2.44$, $p=0.13$) or for the interaction between visit and age group ($F(1,21)=0.246$, $p=0.63$).

No further significant relationships were identified in the analysis.

Conclusion

Participation in a six-week series of intergenerational dance theatre workshops culminating in a performance reduced implicit negative age attitudes. This suggests that this intervention is successful in positively influencing perceptions of aging across ages.

Importantly, stereotype embodiment theory would suggest that this may therefore have positive downstream consequences in terms of embodiment of a positive age stereotypes when the younger cohort grow older (Levy, 2009). This projection warrants further research attention in terms of dose effects of intergenerational exposure, although longitudinal quality and standardisation of such metrics may be difficult to obtain.

That no significant age differences were identified for the IAT suggest that the positive effects of the intervention were unanimous across ages. This suggests benefits to both older and younger participants, and therefore theoretically both older people's age self-concept and younger people's stereotypes of ageing may have been positively affected through the workshop and performance. This is important as self-stereotypes and stereotype embodiment can have adverse effects on all four domains of active ageing (economic, behaviour, social, personal). For example, physiological effects of negative age attitudes have been identified (Levy, Hausdorff, Hencke, & Wei, 2000). In their research Levy et al (2000) showed that when primed with negative compared to positive age stereotype primes, mean atrial pressure increased. Indeed, in other studies cardiovascular health has been predicted from negative age attitudes held earlier in life (Levy, Zonderman, Slade, & Ferrucci, 2009).

Furthermore, when negative age attitudes are held by individuals, this may increase the risk of stereotype threat. This occurs when an individual is at risk of confirming a negative stereotype about a group they may be perceived as belonging to (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Cognitive and physical effects have been found in older adults. For example, stereotype threat effects have been shown to reduce older adults' memory (Lamont, Swift, & Abrams, 2015) and strength (Swift et al., 2012) performance. When the perceived risk of stereotype threat is high, individuals may escape potential negative age-related appraisal by avoiding the situation entirely. In the case of older adults' physical health, this may include avoiding exercise or physical activity. In the case of dance theatre, the emphasis of the social engagement is on artistic and creative which are subjective, rather than purely physical which may be prone to more objective evaluations. Therefore, many of the same threatening cues are not apparent in dance theatre and so offer an ideal medium through which to bring people of different ages together. Ultimately, that negative age attitudes were reduced in this intervention suggests that risk of stereotype threat is reduced.

Meanwhile, explicit age attitudes did not appear to be changed. This is in line with stereotype theory that stereotypes operate by subtle mechanisms, often below the surface of awareness (Levy, 2003a). Stereotypes offer a heuristic for fast and efficient cognitive processing and are selectively recalled, therefore reinforcing stereotype congruency. Exemplifying this, when college students asked to make decisions about negative traits they were faster when primed with the word 'old' than with the word 'young' (Perdue & Gurtman, 1990). At a younger age, downward social comparison towards older people tends to be favourable as distinctiveness is gained from older outgroups and higher status is asserted (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, unlike other forms of prejudice, age stereotypes held in youth are embodied into self-stereotypes as those people grow older. The current research demonstrates a successful intervention to reduce negative age self-stereotypes and stereotypes of ageing and therefore challenge the embodiment of negative stereotypes of age.

It is additionally possible that explicit attitudes are only revealed when the confounding effects of social desirability are mitigated. Therefore, in the baseline explicit attitudes questionnaire it is feasible that younger participants felt obliged to report more favourably of older adults and ageing, especially so as they had already enrolled on an intergenerational dance theatre project. This would therefore reduce the strength of the change in age attitudes. This reinforces the validity of the IAT in measuring the valence and strength of stereotypes held.

It is important to note that due to extraneous practical limitations the post-performance attitudes measurement was not conducted until 10 days after the bOing! festival performance. Whilst this may have meant that some time-sensitive elevations in self-concept and self-esteem may not have been captured, that the IAT reaction time demonstrated a reduction in the negative valence of ageing is significant. This may suggest that the effects of participation are at least somewhat enduring and warrant further research attention into the permanence of the positive effects on age attitude.

Through the medium of dance theatre, older and younger people have worked together with the shared goal of a festival performance reflecting the culmination of hours of practice together. Expected effects in terms of improvements in self-esteem and explicit age attitudes were not identified, and this may have been due to combination of time-sensitivity, inflated baseline measurements, or to factors of social desirability. However, statistically significant and practically important reductions in negative age attitudes were identified, with important implications for older and younger participants. As ageing was deemed more favourably by older people suggests that self-concept of age may be improved in this cohort. As the same finding was identified for younger participants, this suggests that age stereotypes may be less negative and therefore have protective function through the life course in terms of internalisation of ageing representations (Levy, 2009) and the reduction in prejudiced attitudes towards older adults (del Carmen Requena et al., 2018). Ultimately, this research quantitatively corroborates the benefits of the Intergen31 project, and the use similar IAT methodology for future intergenerational age attitude intervention research.

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