Short Research Note

The Effects of Negative Images on Young People's Willingness to Help Elderly People

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ABSTRACT

We examined the effect of confronting young people with an image depicting them as unhelpful on their willingness to help elderly people. As expected, helpfulness increased when this image reflected the elderly's view of young people but decreased when it reflected objective information. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: meta-stereotypes; self-stereotyping; negative image; outgroup helping; elderly helping

INTRODUCTION

The aging populations in most Western societies make proper care for the elderly an increasing source of concern. The growing pool of elderly people stresses formal care structures to their limits, but the simultaneously decreasing pool of young people makes it more difficult to alleviate these pressures through the use of young volunteers (Eyetsemitan, 2002). These difficulties are further compounded by the fact that many young people have negative stereotypic views of elderly people, which increases their anxiety in dealing with members of this particular group (Bousfield & Hutchison, 2010; Harris, Moniz, Sowards, & Krane, 1994) and reduces their willingness to help the elderly (Eyetsemitan, 2002). Research on the effects of *meta-stereotypes* (i.e. people's beliefs about how their group is perceived by others) on the willingness to help members of other social groups suggests that young people's willingness to help the elderly may be stimulated by activating impression management concerns, for example by suggesting that elderly people view young people as unhelpful (Hopkins et al., 2007; van Leeuwen & Täuber, 2012). The motivation to refute such a negative image could subsequently trigger more helpfulness among young

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people. However, negative images also run the risk of eliciting behaviour that confirms that image (a process called *self-stereotyping*, Hogg & Turner, 1987). That is, to the extent that young people believe the image of their age group as being unhelpful is an accurate reflection of reality, they may decrease their helpfulness to conform to this image. The aim of the current study was to investigate when negative images increase or decrease young people's willingness to help the elderly.

People care about how they are seen and evaluated by others, either as individuals or as part of a broader social category (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Vorauer, Hunter, Main, & Roy, 2000). Since the act of helping others is generally perceived as an act of kindness, helping can be a very effective impression management tool (van Leeuwen & Täuber, 2010). The desire to create a (more) positive impression of one's group can be activated through enhancing the salience of meta-stereotypes. Meta-stereotypes reflect people's beliefs about how their ingroup is perceived by others outside their ingroup (Vorauer et al., 2000), and, once activated, automatically trigger impression management concerns (van Leeuwen & Täuber, 2012). Meta-stereotypes are inherently subjective and therefore not necessarily accurate depictions of the ingroup. As a result, group members disagreeing with another group's negative view of their ingroup are known to engage in attempts to alter this view in a positive direction (Klein & Azzi, 2001). Meta-stereotypes depicting the ingroup as uncaring and unhelpful can thus increase the willingness to help other groups in an attempt to challenge this image. For example, Hopkins et al. (2007) found that Scottish participants who believed that the English viewed the Scots as mean were more motivated to help another group (The Welsh), and van Leeuwen and Täuber (2012) demonstrated that such increases in helping following a salient meta-stereotype were driven by concerns about the impression others have of the ingroup. Conversely, Wakefield, Hopkins, and Greenwood (2013) found that the motivation to seek help from another group decreased when group members believed the outgroup viewed their ingroup as dependent.

Being confronted with an image of one's social group as unhelpful can thus increase helpfulness in an attempt to refute this negative image. However, existing literature also suggests the possibility of an effect in the opposite direction: To the extent that the unhelpful image is believed to be true, it could reduce helpfulness rather than increase it. This process is called self-stereotyping. Self-categorisation theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) proposes that categorising oneself as a member of a particular group '…systematically biases self-perception and behaviour to render it more closely in accordance with stereotypic ingroup characteristics and norms' (Hogg & Turner, 1987, p. 326). These ideas were later captured in the SIDE model (Social Identity and Deindividuation Effects; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). The process of self-stereotyping is nicely illustrated in research by Guimond et al. (2006), who manipulated the salience of gender categories. They found that women in the high gender salience condition viewed themselves as higher in relational interdependence (a stereotypically feminine trait) than women in the low gender salience condition. When applied to the current context, we need to consider the possibility that confronting young people with an image that depicts their age group as uncaring and unhelpful will diminish, rather than increase their helpfulness.

We propose that a key factor determining whether confrontation with an image of young people as unhelpful promotes or hinders young people's willingness to help the elderly lies in the source of the information. If the information reflects the elderly's opinion of young people, its subjectivity implies that there is room for disagreement with this perception. This disagreement could subsequently drive the motivation to refute the negative image

through increased acts of helpfulness. If, however, the information is said to come from an objective and reliable source, it is more likely to be accepted as the truth. Consequently, young people could become more likely to conform to the image of their age group as unhelpful via a process of self-stereotyping, thus inhibiting their willingness to help elderly people.

In the current study, we compared young people's willingness to help elderly people in response to information describing young people as uncaring and unhelpful in the eyes of the elderly people (subjective information), or in response to the same information stemming from a reliable and objective study (objective information). These responses were compared to responses in a condition in which the described subjective or objective image was irrelevant to helpfulness, specifically a lack of intelligence and general knowledge. This comparison was included to control for possible main effects related to the source of information. That is, the belief that elderly people view young people in negative terms, be they unhelpfulness or lack of intelligence, could generally suppress the willingness to help this particular group as compared to a condition in which the same information stems a neutral, objective source (as argued in van Leeuwen & Täuber, 2012). Intelligence was chosen because it can be considered an important quality among university students (our group of participants).

We expected that, when the image was said to reflect the elderly's opinion of young people (thus subjective), the relevant image depicting young people as unhelpful would result in a greater willingness to help the elderly compared to the irrelevant image depicting them as not intelligent. However, when the information was said to stem from an objective source, the relevant image was expected to reduce helpfulness compared to the irrelevant image. We also included a measure of anxiety in dealing with elderly people in this study to account for additional variance. Prior research has shown that this type of intergroup anxiety plays an important role in predicting young people's attitudes and behavioural intentions towards the elderly (Bousfield & Hutchison, 2010).

METHOD

Fifty-four university students (30 women; $M_{age} = 21.22$, $SD = 2.49$, range 18–26 years) participated in this study in exchange for payment or course credits. Participants were randomly assigned to the cells of a 2 (Relevance: relevant vs. irrelevant image) × 2 (Information: subjective vs. objective information) between-participants experimental design.

Participants were seated in separate cubicles in the experimental laboratory. They were first asked to read an article that had ostensibly appeared in a reputable national newspaper, and which reflected on the public image of young adults (defined as between the ages of 18 and 30). In the *subjective information condition*, the article described how elderly people perceived this group of young adults, whereas the article in the *objective information condition* reflected the results of scientific research investigating the behaviour of young adults. In the *relevant condition*, the article described young adults as egotistical, unhelpful, and uncaring. In the *irrelevant condition*, young adults were described as unintelligent and unknowledgeable.

In the subsequent questionnaire, the willingness to help elderly people was assessed with 6 items (e.g. 'To what extent would you be willing to shop for groceries, on occasion, to help out an elderly person who is unable to do this him/herself?'; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much* ; α = .84). The effectiveness of the information manipulation was checked with 1

item ('To what extent do you agree with the statement that young people are unhelpful?' 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Anxiety in dealing with elderly people was measured with four items adopted from Bousfield and Hutchison (2010; e.g. 'I feel self-conscious when dealing with elderly people'; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; α = .82). At the end of the study, participants were thanked, paid, and debriefed.

RESULTS

Manipulation check

Analysis of variance of participants' belief that young people are helpful, with Information and Relevance as independent variables, only revealed a marginally significant interaction effect, $F(1, 50) = 3.34$, $p = .073$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. Tests of the simple main effect of Information within each of the conditions of Relevance showed that, as intended, participants who received objective information describing young people as unhelpful more strongly reported believing that young people actually were unhelpful ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.28$) compared to participants who received subjective information depicting the elderly's opinion of young people as unhelpful ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 0.85$), $F(1, 50) = 5.92$, $p = .019$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. No such difference was found in the irrelevant (intelligence) condition ($M_{objective} = 4.62$, $SD = 0.87$; $M_{subjective} = 4.54$, $SD = 0.97$), $F(1, 50) < 1$. Tested differently, the simple main effect of Relevance within the objective information condition was significant, $F(1, 50) = 6.26$, $p = .016$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$, but not within the subjective information condition, $F(1, 50) < 1$. This finding confirms the effectiveness of the information manipulation by showing that information stemming from an objective source effectively lowered young people's beliefs about the helpfulness of their age group compared to the same information stemming from a subjective source, or objective information irrelevant to helpfulness.

Helping

Participants' willingness to help elderly people was analysed in an analysis of variance with Information and Relevance as independent variables. Age, gender, and anxiety in dealing with elderly people were included as covariates to explain additional variance. The analysis revealed the expected interaction between Information and Relevance, $F(1, 47) = 14.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .24$.[1] The adjusted means are presented in Figure 1. Tests for the simple main effect of Relevance within each level of Information showed that, for participants in the subjective information condition, the willingness to help the elderly was higher in the relevant compared to the irrelevant condition, $F(1, 47) = 10.19$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$. In the objective information condition, the willingness to help was lower in the relevant compared to the irrelevant condition, $F(1, 47) = 5.35$, $p = .025$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$. Tested differently, the simple main effect of Information within the relevant condition was significant, $F(1, 47) = 4.28$, $p = .044$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$, as was the effect of Information within the irrelevant condition, $F(1, 47) = 11.63$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .23$.

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[1]Although the sample size was constrained due to difficulty in recruiting participants, a post hoc power analysis using *G*Power* (Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner, 1996) revealed that the obtained power was .98, which is well above the conventional threshold of .80.
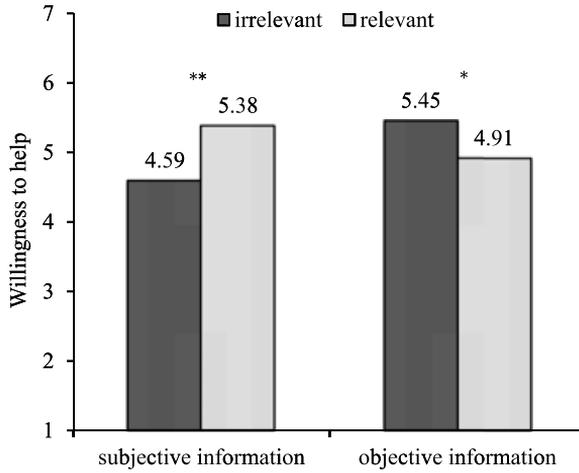
Note. $* p < .05, ** p < .01$

Figure 1.   The effect of subjective and objective information on the willingness to help elderly people.

The analysis further revealed a significant effect of gender, $F(1, 47) = 38.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .45$, indicating that women expressed more willingness to help elderly people ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 0.75$) than men ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.92$). Anxiety was also significant, $b = -.44$, $F(1, 47) = 26.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .36$, indicating that higher levels of anxiety were associated with lower levels of helpfulness.

DISCUSSION

The results provide clear support for the hypothesis. Replicating previous research (e.g. Hopkins et al., 2007), we found that the elderly's view of young people as unhelpful increased young people's helpful intentions. However, when the image of young people as unhelpful was said to come from an objective source, participants were more likely to believe the image to be true, and subsequently conformed to this image and reported lower willingness to help the elderly.

Given the rapidly growing pool of elderly people, Western societies are becoming increasingly reliant on volunteers to supplement formal care systems. However, few studies have specifically addressed young adults' motivation to help the elderly. Young people's anxiety in dealing with elderly people can provide a strong barrier against volunteering (Bousfield & Hutchison, 2010). The current findings suggest at least two routes to improve young people's willingness to help the elderly. First, they could be motivated to do so in order to improve the elderly's view of young people (cf. Hopkins et al., 2007; van Leeuwen & Täuber, 2012). Second, as the current data showed, young people sometimes conform to an image of their age group when they believe this to be accurate. Although in the current study the objective image was always negative, thereby decreasing helpfulness, these insights could be translated to the positive domain and used as a mechanism to increase helping. That is, it is possible that an objective image depicting young people as

caring and helpful promotes helpfulness via the same self-stereotyping mechanisms. Future research should investigate this notion.

Future research should also attempt to replicate the current findings using behavioural measures of helping. Expressions of the willingness to help, as used in the current study, could reflect social desirability concerns and may not always translate into actual helping. Future research could further focus on overcoming young people's anxiety when dealing with the elderly, and on investigating variables that mediate the effects of negative images on increases and decreases in young people's motivation to help the elderly.

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