

## INTRODUCTION

- Attitudes toward one's own aging, which are associated with contact with elders, have important health implications (Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002).
- Theory and research point to the value of intergenerational contact. Practitioners use intergenerational programming to foster positive attitudes towards aging and elders.
- However, evidence reveals multiple stereotypes of older adults, which may reflect youths' varied contact with elders and ambivalence about what their old age will entail.
- We used Pettigrew and Tropp's (2008) model of three mechanisms that mediate the influence of outgroup contact on prejudice (knowledge, anxiety, and empathy) to study young adults' internal ambivalence about their own aging.
- We hypothesized that anxiety, knowledge, and empathy would mediate the relationship between intergenerational contact and internal ambivalence about aging

## METHODS

### Participants

- 457 undergraduate students, ages 18-24.
- Females accounted for 74% of the sample, and 84% of participants were white.

### Procedures

We surveyed college students enrolled in a psychology course about their contact with elders, anxiety and knowledge about aging, empathy, and images of their own aging. The anonymous surveys were completed towards the end of the course.

### Measures

- **IG Contact:** The Queen's University Scale (Knox & Gekoski, 1984) addresses quantity and quality of contact with elders at respondent's different ages and in different contexts. The 62 Likert-scale items were summed so a higher score indicated greater quantity/quality of contact ( $\alpha = .96$ ).
- **Anxiety:** Lasher and Faulkender's (1993) 20-item Anxiety About Aging Scale (AAS) includes four factors, including fear of old people, psychological concerns, physical appearance, and fear of loss. A higher sum score indicates greater anxiety ( $\alpha = .85$ ).
- **Empathy:** Muncer and Ling's 15-items (2006) consist of three factors, including social skills, emotional reactivity, and cognitive empathy. A higher sum score indicates greater empathy ( $\alpha = .79$ ).
- **Knowledge about aging:** 16 true-false items captured knowledge of aging, and the number of correct answers was summed ( $\alpha = .36$ ).
- **Attitudes towards Future Older Self.** Levy's Image of Aging Scale includes 9 positive and 9 negative descriptors of elders in general. Students completed a prospective version rating images of themselves at 65 years or older. We calculated an internal ambivalence score with higher scores indicating greater internal ambivalence.

## METHODS

### Analysis

- With Mplus, we used a multiple mediator path analysis model to test the hypothesis that anxiety, knowledge, and empathy would mediate the impact of intergenerational contact on feelings of ambivalence about aging.
- Proportion of total effects was mediated was obtained by dividing the difference between the total and direct effects by the total effects (Mackinnon, 2008). We also tested the unique mediating ability of each mediator, controlling for all other model mediators.

## RESULTS

Our hypotheses were largely supported.

- The effect of intergenerational contact on anxiety ( $\beta = -0.07, p < 0.01$ ), on empathy ( $\beta = 0.02, p < 0.01$ ), and on knowledge ( $\beta = 0.01, p < 0.01$ ) was significant.
- Intergenerational contact predicted ambivalence about aging ( $\beta = -0.04, SE = 0.01, p < 0.01$ ) in the model without mediators.
- Those with higher ratings of intergenerational contact, lower aging anxiety, and higher empathy expressed less ambivalence about aging, indicating positive expectations for late life (see Figure 2).
- The multiple mediator path analysis model had an adequate fit [ $\chi^2(8) = 32.48, p < 0.01$ , Standard Root Mean Error (SRMR) = 0.03, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.95].
- Anxiety and empathy fully mediated the relationship between contact and ambivalence about future older self (knowledge did not).
- Figure 2 illustrates low ambivalence, which could equate to highly positive or highly negative views of self as elder, was associated with high positive images and low ratings on negative images of self as future elder.

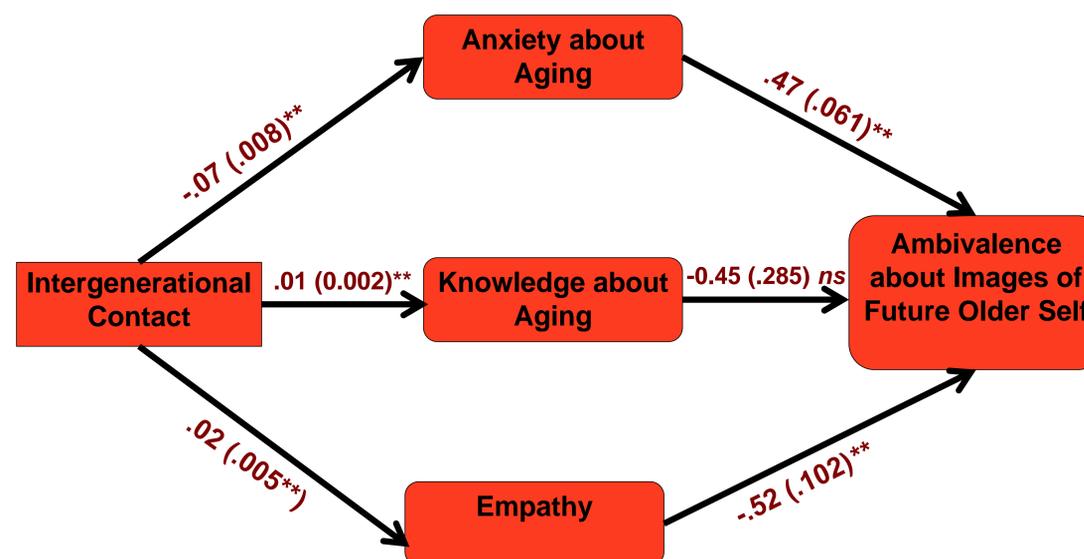


Figure 1. Mediation model of IG contact on ambivalence about self as future elder with estimates and standardized estimates.

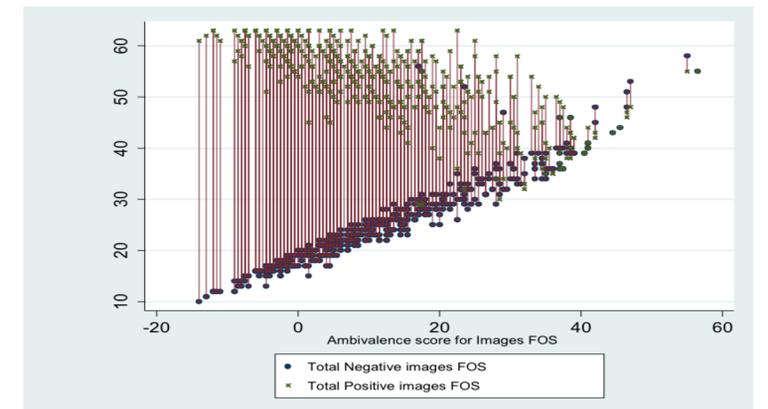


Figure 2. Plot of total scores on negative and positive images of future older selves against ambivalence scores

## CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

- We utilized contact theory to explore the unique situation of joining an outgroup to which one does not yet belong – that of older adult. Findings can inform interventions to prepare today's youth for better health in their old age.
- Our findings associate young adults' positive ratings of contact with older adults with lower levels of internal ambivalence towards joining this group via the mediating mechanisms of greater empathy and lower age-related anxiety.
- The measure of knowledge about aging demonstrated low internal consistency, which may reflect the scale's comprehensive and multidimensional nature, which results in underestimation of the reliability of this scale (Schmitt, 1996).
- Next steps to pursue include:
  - Increase sample diversity, particularly age diversity.
  - Tease out qualities of contact central to contact theory such as the elders' representativeness and salience of group membership. Other theoretical features to explore relate to participant status, goals, and cooperation, support for the IG contact from stakeholders, and opportunities for friendship.
  - Explore intergenerational interventions addressing empathy and anxiety.
  - Follow participants longitudinally as they prepare to join an elder outgroup.
- Exchange between youth and elders that fosters empathy and reduces anxiety can be facilitated to reduce ambivalence about aging. At the same time, internal ambivalence can shape development as individuals try to reduce associated negative affect by exploring late life. Our findings intimate that contact with elders early in life may positively impact health in late life as individuals recognize the diversity of old age and act to positively shape the elder within.