How young adults view older people: exploring the pathways of constructing a group image after participation in an intergenerational programme

Verhage, M.; Schuurman, B.; Lindenberg, J.

How young adults view older people: Exploring the pathways of constructing a group image after participation in an intergenerational programme

Miriam Verhage [a,*], Belia Schuurman [a,b], Jolanda Lindenberg [a,b]

[a] Leyden Academy on Vitality and Ageing, The Netherlands
[b] Department Public Health and Primary Care, Leiden University Medical Center, The Netherlands

A B S T R A C T

In recent years, a multitude of intergenerational contact programmes and interventions has emerged to counteract ageism among young adults. Research on these programmes and its supposed effect on ageism often start from the assumption that intergenerational contact follows a largely linear process in which a high level of encounters, in the right setting, decreases ageism and negative stereotyping. The purpose of this article is to critically examine this assumption by focussing on the underlying process of intergenerational contact, rather than examining the positive or negative outcome. Using in-depth interviews with 35 young adults, we found that although conditions and mediating factors during the contact do play a role in the outcome of intergroup contact, the process of contact is rather varied and does not follow a linear path. The results reveal that whether or not a positive contact experience translates into a changed group image of older people is related to the positioning of such experience within the young adults' personal frame of reference. We found that this has to do with the young adults having diverse and both positive and negative previous experiences, their grandparent-grandchild relationship, stories from others and personal characteristics. With this study, we point to the complexity of intergenerational contact and highlight potential pathways leading to varying group images of 'the old'.

Introduction

With the rapidly ageing population, national policies have focussed on creating a suitable environment for healthy and active ageing. This attention for vital ageing, has as (unintended) consequence that older individuals have been pictured as either exceptionally fit or as vulnerable and a challenging and costly burden on society. Whether or not as a consequence of this binary thinking, both in the public discourse and among older individuals themselves, ageist attitudes and negatively valued stereotypes about older people seem to have the upper hand with concepts such as incompetence, cognitive deficient and vulnerability (Alcock, Camic, Barker, Haridi, & Raven, 2011; Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018; Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005; Requena et al., 2018). Ageism is a complex and multifaceted concept that can be directed towards one-self (self-ageism), but also towards an out-group which results in negative stereotypes, attitudes, behaviour or prejudice against older adults (Levy, 2016). Out-group ageism can cause a barrier for intergenerational solidarity and age-friendly environments, and can limit personal

relationships between young adults and senior citizens (Drury, Hutchinson, & Abrams, 2016; Kornadt & Rothermund, 2015; Sun et al., 2019). At the same time, in light of the ageing population and growing demand for health care workers, youngsters are needed more than ever (Penick, Fallshore, & Spencer, 2014). To attract younger individuals to care and support intergenerational solidarity, effective processes and strategies must counteract ageism and tackle the persistent negative stereotypes and negative group images of older people among younger generations.

A recent review of research on ageism confirms that positive representations and intergenerational contact are the most important determinants of reducing ageism (Marques et al., 2020). Notwithstanding the complexity of out-group ageism, intergroup contact has become the basis for many negative attitude reduction strategies such as intergenerational programmes that facilitate direct high-quality contact between people from two age groups (Christian, Turner, Holt, Larkin, & Cotler, 2014). To understand and examine ways to reduce negative stereotypes between generations, researchers across disciplines have built on intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954), which posits that contact with

---

an out-group member can, under certain conditions, lead to a positive change in attitude. Scholars have established five desirable conditions that should be adhered to during intergroup contact in order to foster positive and mutually beneficial outcomes: (1) one-to-one contact, (2) equal status during the interaction, (3) cooperation or working together towards a common goal, (4) involve sharing of personal information, and (5) taking place within a formal and regulated setting (e.g. a school or long term care facility) (Abrams, Eller, & Bryant, 2006; Bousfield & Hutchinson, 2010; Harwood, Hewstone, Paolini, & Voci, 2005; Levy, 2016; Schwartz & Simmons, 2001; Sun et al., 2019; Tam, Hewstone, Harwood, Voci, & Kenworthy, 2006).

Beyond these conditions, extensive research in the field of the intergroup contact theory has shown that several underlying processes and mediators between contact and ageist stereotypes should be taken into account (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). These include demographic background factors (such as gender), but also factors in the process of contact. For example, Drury et al. (2016) demonstrate that the outcome of intergenerational contact can be mediated by intergroup anxiety, which refers to the experience of ambiguous feelings or anxiety during or in anticipation of intergroup contact. Another known mediating factor is self-disclosure; the level of personal and intimate information shared during the actual encounter (Harwood et al., 2005; Miller, 2002). These mediators underscore that contact with an out-group member should focus on quality, trust and disclosure rather than quantity (Levy, 2016). Given these conditions and mediators, grandparent-grandchild relationships are often portrayed as desirable intergroup contact as these relationships are often qualitative, lengthy, personal and open family encounters (Flamion, Missotten, Marquet, & Adam, 2017, Luo, Zhou, Jin, Newman, & Liang, 2013,).

Intergroup contact, however, is not universally positive and despite the knowledge on conditions (Hannon & Gueldner, 2008) and mediating factors (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), empirical studies have shown mixed effects of intergenerational programmes on ageism and negative stereotyping, especially when it concerns short-term interventions (Christian et al., 2014). This is often argued to be related to the nature and setting of the contact, yet some also find that even in quite similar set-ups individual young adults' ageism can be differently impacted. In a previous study (Kusumastuti et al., 2016) for instance, we found that previous contact with a grandparent had little impact on the negative or positive evaluation of older people in a long term care facility. Part of the reason for these divergent findings may lie in a regression to the mean. It may however also be that the disparate effects of intergenerational contact actually represent differential impact on an individual, not so much due to measurements or characteristics of intergenerational contact and outcomes thereof, but as a result of a diversified, and less linear than often assumed, personal process towards changing stereotypes.

That is, in understanding the various outcomes of intergenerational contact, the process of the actual intergenerational encounter may differentially impact young adults depending not just on the setting or mediating mechanisms, but also on their previous *frame of references* and various forms of extended contact (Harwood, 2018, Schultz et al., 1973, Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). It may well be that the process towards changing a group image may include multiple pathways. In this article we move beyond measuring the effect of an intergenerational programme and instead focus on the underlying process to understand the (tacit) implications of such programmes. We report on the short-term intergenerational programme – *Zomervisite*– and its participants' self-reported experiences with older adults and the stereotypes on which they build their group image of older people. Although there are some qualitative studies which have explored the contact process (e. g. Luo et al., 2013; Teater, 2018), these mainly focus on the effect and do not look further than the actual contact during the programme. We will use a qualitative design to explore the intergenerational contact process in its broader frame of references and study its relation to personal expressions of ageism by examining the (disclosed) pathways among the participants.

Materials and methods

The programme

Zomervisite is a short-term intergenerational programme of 25 hours, taking place during July and August, in which young individuals have personal contact with a senior in a long term care facility. The programme aims to facilitate personal interactions between young adults and seniors living in long term care facilities, in the hope of changing young adults' perceptions of older adults and long term care facilities in general. The contact was supposed to be informal, meaning that the involved care facilities were instructed that participants were not to be regarded as additional staff during the summer months. Rather, the participants were to spend 25 hours, one-on-one with the residents of the care facility without participating in any care tasks for the seniors. In advance, participants were given examples of eligible activities, such as walking together (some in a wheelchair), going out for ice-cream/drinks, participating in leisure activities (shopping, fairs, markets) or playing (board)games. In practice, not all participants were able to spend all their hours one-on-one due to miscommunication with the long term care facility staff about the programme or limited time of the participants due to the start of the new school year. Around half of the participants spent some of their hours in a day care group, mainly playing games or having a chat. Six participants spent all of their hours in a day care group and had no private one-on-one contact with a senior. These particular participants spent most of their time walking with older people, playing games or having a chat. Upon completion of 25 hours, participants received a reimbursement of 187,50 euro per person.

Procedure

Recruitment for *Zomervisite* started in June 2018. Participants included in the study were 31 female and 4 male participants (Table 1). The study was conducted with young adults between the ages of 15 and 24, off which the vast majority (roughly 75%) were 'emerging adults' with an age between 15 and 18 at the time of the programme. Participants were mainly recruited through social media and the network of the participating long term care facilities – often mothers or friends of the participants. Planning and frequency of the contact was up to the participants and seniors themselves. In total, 70 young adults registered for the programme, 40 participants eventually started in July and August 2018 (57%), of whom 32 fulfilled the expected 25 hours (42.7%). In the end, we ended up interviewing 35 from the 40 participants who started the programme, 3 of the interviewees did not fulfil the

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the young adults before *Zomervisite*.

Demographic Characteristics	$N = 35$	%
Age (years)	<16	37.1
	17	20
	18	17.1
	19	2.9
	20	5.7
	21	8.6
	>22	8.6
Gender	Female	88.6
Education level	Pre-vocational	22.8
	Pre-university	37.2
	Vocational	14.3
	Applied sciences	17.2
	University	8.5
Age category when thinking of older persons	60	20
	65	31.4
	70	20
	75	22.9
	80	5.7

expected 25 hours due to time shortage or other obligations.

Study design

This study aimed to uncover the process of intergenerational contact. We are not interested in the effect of *Zomervisite,* but rather wish to detail how intergenerational contact, facilitated through the programme, influences personal experiences and expressions of ageism. A qualitative study, using in-depth semi-structured interviews, was conducted with 35 participants, to analyse the processes of intergenerational contact. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, participants were able to express their experiences and feelings freely. Furthermore, both the participants and the interviewer were able to divert from the main questions when necessary, allowing for new ideas and topics to be brought up during the interviews.

Data collection

The data for this paper is primarily based on 35 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author between June and August 2018. The main topics of the interview guide used during the interviews were: the participants' experiences during *Zomervisite* as well as their conceptualisation of and interaction with older persons, communication and exchange of personal information, and images of older people. Additionally, at the start of each interview questions were asked about demographic characteristics of the interviewees; these are shown in Table 1. The interviews took place in the long term care facility - where the participants followed the programme - in a private room and lasted around one hour each. All participants were informed of the purpose of the interview. Before the start of the interview, informed consent was asked and given by the participants. The interviews took place in the period August to October 2018. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim by an external transcription service.

Data analysis

Analysis was done with the use of qualitative software programme MAXQDA. The process of analysis started with detailed examination of the interview transcripts. All interviews were read and reread by two researchers (MV and BS*)* separately and coded individually. Relevant themes and quotes were highlighted and coded through open coding. After this first step, all three authors discussed and agreed upon a set of codes and started axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), in which we shifted our focus from descriptive to conceptual, generating sub-categories and themes. In the last stage of data analysis, which consisted of selective coding, we developed core categories to relate all other categories to. Continuous discussions between the researchers and use of the memos made during the interviews and coding, helped us to structure our analyses.

Ethical considerations

After application, all participants received a letter which informed them about the purpose of the study, that all information gathered during the research would be treated with the strictest confidentiality, and that participation would not have an impact on their involvement in *Zomervisite* or their reimbursement. Furthermore, participants were informed that participation was completely voluntary and that they could decline at any time. Written consent was asked in person right before the one-to-one interview. Every participant was given a unique two-digit code at the start of the programme which is linked to the interview with that particular participant. All codes were randomly generated and assigned, which means that there is no link to initials or date of birth.

Results

We discovered three overarching themes relating to the experience of the participants and their conceptualisation of older people: *personal frame of reference* (relating one's image to stories of others and previous experiences), *experiencing intergenerational contact* (personal encounters and building an intergenerational relationship) and *creating a group image* (different pathways to group image).

Personal frame of reference

Despite their different experiences during *Zomervisite*, almost all of the young adults interviewed had one thing in common that greatly influenced both their motivation to participate as well as their conceptualisation of older people: their personal frame of reference. This frame of reference relied on previous experiences, stories from others (Wright et al., 1997) and other relevant structures (Schultz et al., 1973). In fact, while describing senior citizens, most of the participants did not base their definition solely on their experiences during *Zomervisite,* but also related their image to previous experiences and stories they had heard:

> I think that my image [of older people] is mainly based on stories. Stories told by my mother, even unconsciously maybe. And stories from the internet, things you read online, or a friend who says something (female, 20-year-old).

Within this notion of a personal frame of reference, the interviewees revealed three important relevantstructures; relatives working in health care, the grandparent-grandchild relationship and stories from television programmes. The first structure is that of a participant's relative working in a long term care facility for older people. This person, often their mother, was described as a key factor in many participants' involvement in the intergenerational programme. Both in bringing the programme to their attention, in motivating them to join and in being a source of information about what to expect in the long term care facility. Those who had a relative working as a health care professional, explained that they had heard stories from their relative about the care for older people, the shortage of staff and loneliness among the residents. Additionally, some of these participants had actually seen their relative working in the long term care facilities and described this as "caring", "loving" and "rewarding". The interviewees detailed that these experiences and stories gave them an impression of older people and what it is like to interact with them. This shows that, although not being part of their own age group, the young adults did experience some form of extended contact through the experiences of their older relatives (Wright et al., 1997). This, in combination with their search for a fun and productive way to spend their school holiday, motivated them to participate in *Zomervisite:*

> I heard about it [Zomervisite] from my mother. She told me that there is a shortage of staff in most care homes and that the older people would enjoy it if I would come by for an hour or so. Go for a walk or have some tea … In comparison to, for example working at Albert Heijn [supermarket], this is way more appreciated as well. The people really thank you for your time (female, 15-year-old).

The second reference that greatly influenced the young adults' conceptualisation of older people are the participants' grandparents. Although not explicitly asked about in the interviews, the relationship with a grandparent was often used as comparison to the intergenerational encounters during *Zomervisite*. Especially when describing positively framed aspects and characteristics of older people. For example, one 16-year-old male interviewee said: "My grandparents were very nice and sweet. I see the same in the people here [long term care facility]." Some interviewees even used familiar designations such as the words *oma* and *opa* (reg. Grandma and Grandpa) when referring to the seniors

they met during the programme in the long term care facility. Additionally, when describing their motivation to participate in *Zomervisite*, the participants revealed that they wanted to see if the seniors living in the long term care facilities were similar to their grandparents and would show comparable characteristics. For some this meant seeing if seniors in long term care facilities were also nice and caring, while others were more curious about the fitness of older people, if they have dementia or whether they would be very dependent on care. Several interviewees revealed that their grandparent(s) had been quite negative about care homes. One interviewee explained that she believed that her grandparents were afraid of losing their independence and freedom when moving into a long term care facility. For her, participating in the programme was also a way of finding out if this concern was in fact valid.

Besides comparing the seniors encountered during *Zomervisite* to previous grandparent-grandchild experiences, the participants also seemed to take their grandparents as a source of comparison in conceptualising older people in general and the seniors they met during *Zomervisite* in particular. This was imminent throughout the interviews. Independent living grandparents were often described with positively regarded terms - such as social and active - whereas more negative associations with age - such as dependency and forgetfulness – were not associated with their grandparents but were considered designating 'the old'. In fact, several participants with fit and healthy grandparents did, often unconsciously, define their own grandparents as *not* old, regardless of their age. As this 15-year-old female interviewee described:

> When I think about older people, I tend to think about the people living in care homes. One of my grandmothers for example is very active, as if she is still fully alive. Although, she is also almost 80, I think. But she is fit … she still rides her bike and goes out to do things. Not like the people in the care home, who have to stay there all day.

Finally, a last element of the participants' frame of reference that influenced their conceptualisation of older people, is that of stories in social media or broadcasted in popular television shows about older people in the Netherlands. The notion that several of the participants did not see their own grandparents as old was often substantiated by referring to the public discourse and media outlets. Interviewees described how when media spoke about 'old people' they would mainly refer to the people living in long term care facilities: those who receive care, are dependent on someone, and forgetful. Furthermore, some participants believed seniors living in long term care facilities to be "lonely older people" due to what they had seen on television. For these young adults, seeing these stories and images was both a motivation to participate in the intergenerational programme and influenced their image of older people as being lonely and dependent.

Experiencing intergenerational contact

After the participants' frame of reference, the actual encounters during the intergenerational programme *Zomervisite*, turned out to be an important influence on the young adults' conceptualisation of older persons. In line with the intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954), the effect of these encounters on interviewees perceived notions of older people, greatly depended on five conditions: (1) the one-to-one contact had to include (2) an equal status and (3) corporative interaction, that involved (4) sharing of personal information in a (5) sanctioned setting (Levy, 2016).

Overall, participants in this study revealed rather high levels of satisfaction with the intergenerational contact they had and described it as "open" and "natural". The majority of the young adults emphasized the ease with which they communicated with the older persons about personal topics. For example, they talked about how the seniors showed them pictures of their family and told them stories about their own youth. One interviewee, 20-years-old, spoke about the conversations she

had with a woman whose husband had been ill: "She showed me pictures of her husband and family and told me stories about her life, very private and personal stories." Another interviewee, 16-years-old, had a similar experience and was surprised by the openness with which some of the seniors talked to her: "Even about her past, they are so open about everything that has happened, I would not have imagined this openness." The participants pointed out the importance and significance of the seniors' willingness to start a conversation and open up about their lives (Miller, 2002). They revealed how this openness had a disarming effect on them in which personal information could be shared. As described by the following, 17-year-old, male interviewee:

> They [the seniors] were particularly interested in me, they wanted to know everything about me, where I go to school, what I like to do. When someone ask you questions, it becomes easier to ask them questions back and build a relationship.

Some interviewees explained that the communication felt natural due to the earlier mentioned reference to their relationship with their own grandparents. The seniors in the long term care facility were just as interested in their lives as their own grandparents - asking similar questions (e.g. about school) – and just as friendly and nice.

In what way and to what degree participants were able to establish a meaningful intergenerational relationship varied amongst the young adults. This variation seemed to be in line with the intergroup contact theory conditions, as the possibility of a meaningful relation was related to: the setting in which the contact took place (one-to-one or group contact), the level to which cooperation (working together) towards a common goal was possible, and the openness of the seniors and the young adults allowing for individuation (Harwood et al., 2005). As mentioned in the methods section of this article, not all participants were able to spend all their hours one-to-one with a senior, some also spent time in a group setting at the day care, which made the interaction less personal. A number of obstacles were discussed in relation to encounters with seniors at the day care, such as difficult communication due to hearing problems or cognitive decline. One participant (female, age 21) explained that the senior she was visiting did not hear well, which made it difficult to communicate long sentences and have an in-depth conversation. One of the male participants (age 17) encountered a woman with dementia who thought he was her husband. The interviewee disclosed that most of their conversations were about, as he described it, 'fantasy topics', and focused on keeping the woman at ease rather than having a mutual exchange. This particular participant did not mind spending his hours this way, but he did disclose in the interview that he did not get to know the seniors on a personal level nor did his image of older adults as "vulnerable" and "old" change.

Although a few of these participants emphasized that they had some private conversations and even saw a diverse group of older people in day care, it seemed as if the group setting limited communication and cooperation, and did not provide them the right conditions to establish meaningful relationships. As one, 24-year-old female interviewee describes:

> I liked working on the group, but I think I preferred the one-on-one time. Mainly because I had a real connection with the resident, whether she recognized me or not, we always gave each other a hug and had a good connection, that was nice.

Additionally, several participants claimed that being accompanied by a professional employee, which was not the intention of the programme, made it feel less natural to start a personal conversation with a senior. Others explained that this employee often did not know the reason of their presence and as a result made the young adults help with lunch, dishes or other chores, which limited the personal time with older people. This shows that although the programme offered institutional support by bringing the young adults together with older residents and endorsing contact between them, a relatively sanctioned setting actually

caused counterproductive effects as this limited 'free and natural' contact between the young adults and the seniors present.

The preference for one-to-one contact, however, was not described by all participants as a few (14%) preferred the group setting. These participants liked to be accompanied by a professional employee in the actual interaction and appreciated that in the group there was always "something to do". Furthermore, these participants revealed that they liked baking cakes, playing games or reading the newspaper with older people rather than spending one-on-one time with a senior because this made them feel shy and uncomfortable. These feelings seemed to be related to the unfamiliarity of having contact with somebody from a different age group, especially somebody much older. The young adults mentioned that they felt anxious about having one-to-one contact as they did not know what to talk about and described the situation of being alone with somebody that much older as "awkward". This shows that underlying mechanisms such as intergroup anxiety (Drury et al., 2016) did limit the sharing of personal information and level of cooperative contact for some participants. Although the young adults themselves did not mind this, the influence of contact on their group image seemed limited as they kept on using terms such as nice but also dependent and "old" to describe older people, referring to them as one group and not as individuals.

Importantly, none of the 35 young adults described the contact as a negative experience. However, the form of contact as described above, did influence the interviewees process of stereotyping and thus the way in which older people were conceptualised after the intergenerational programme. For example, one interviewee indicated that she learned that not all residents of long term care facilities are lonely, nor does everybody need care 24/7 and that some are active, while others are not. On the other hand, others described quite the opposite in that their image was broadened due to them encountering older people with dementia, mobility issues or loneliness showing them new sides to older people that were not known to them before. Overall, the young adults described a diversity of people living in long term care facilities and in doing so (un)consciously started to acknowledge the heterogeneity among older people. In their own terms, the participants said their image of older people had broadened, as eloquently described by this 18-year-old female:

> First, you only see your own grandparents and maybe some older people on the internet or on the streets. But now, I see that they [older people] do differ from each other, actually quite a lot, also among themselves. Just like we differ from each other when we are young.

Whether this heterogeneity was mostly linked to experiencing and acknowledging the physical diversity of older people, or also translated towards individuation – the acknowledgement of unique attributes of the older individuals (Harwood et al., 2005; Miller, 2002) - greatly depended on the intergenerational encounter and its degree of openness. While some interviewees mainly spoke about the activities they did or the physical characteristics of older people in long term care facilities, others - primarily those who experienced an open and personal intergenerational relationship - talked extensively about the actual person they encountered. For example, one participant, whose own grandparents were still relatively young (mid 50s) and living independently, expected all older adults in long term care facilities to be grumpy or stand-offish due to what she had seen on TV and heard from other people. In the interview she explained that she discovered that those older people who are in fact less communicative often have a reason for it. She talked about their lives, the things they had experienced and the pain they had encountered. For this particular interviewee the interaction during *Zomervisite* and the extensive exchange of personal information gave her contextual information and experiences she needed to see older people as individuals.

Creating a group image

The third and final theme that emerged from the interviews is related to the group image of older people held by young adults. In their description and references to older people as a collective, it seemed that the young adults used their experiences during *Zomervisite* to follow a certain pathway in integrating these new experiences in their previously held group image. As described above, in doing so virtually all participants described new subtypes of older people which they had not previously envisioned. In their eyes, their conceptualisation of the older population was broadened. Nevertheless, in spite of this self-acclaimed change or broadening of the participants' image, further questioning uncovered that this did not mean that the participants overall group image of older people changed as well. Although for some it did, the majority of the young adults revealed that, regardless of their experiences during *Zomervisite,* they still described the old as "nice" and "caring" but also as "dependent" and "forgetful". In line with the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), the participants scored older people high in terms of warmth but low in terms of competence. The degree to which these evaluatively mixed stereotypes were used and if this resulted in a (slight) change of group image, seemed to be entangled with the participants' process of intergenerational contact and their personal frame of reference. Within this process, we discovered roughly four pathways followed by our interviewees (Fig. 1).

The first pathway is related to the group image of 'the old' as those who receive care or who live in a long term care facility. This particular conceptualisation of older people was described by a small majority of the interviewees and seemed to be tightly linked to the young adults' perception of their own grandparents. Several participants compared their known ideas about older people, often based on their grandparent-grandchild relationship, with the seniors living in the long term care facilities. In doing so they discovered that the people in the long term care facility were just as nice and open as their grandparents, which was often emphasized as something positive, however, when it concerned physical aspects the seniors encountered were characterized quite differently (e.g. less mobile, hearing problems, forgetfulness). This qualification resulted in distinguishing 'older people' and 'the real old'. The group image of 'the old' as both caring but also dependent was furthermore substantiated by stories from relevant others and popular television programmes (e.g. *Geer en Goor*). As this 18-year-old female interviewee described:

> I still see people in care homes or wheelchairs when I think about older people … I think this is mainly because of the (social) media and the news. When it concerns older people, they always show someone in a wheelchair. They never show someone living at home, who takes care of himself. That's just a person who lives at home, just like any other person, not 'old'.

For these interviewees, the most significant aspect that determined their image of older people did not change due the intergenerational encounters during *Zomervisite* but was rather substantiated. Hence, their image stayed imminently linked to the stereotypical notion that advanced physical decline is equated with 'being old', as described by the following quotes: "Older people who can still do everything and who are completely good in their heads, should not be called older people" (female, 15-year-old). And: "I would only describe them as older people when they are in a wheelchair" (female, 16-year-old).

A second pathway showed that contrary to the majority of our interviewees, a few (11%) participants followed the same process of categorisation between those living independently and those who receive care, but with a different outcome. Rather than describing 'the real old', these participants revealed detailed information about their active and healthy grandparents when speaking about older people in general. They claimed to know more about this group of older people, as this 22-
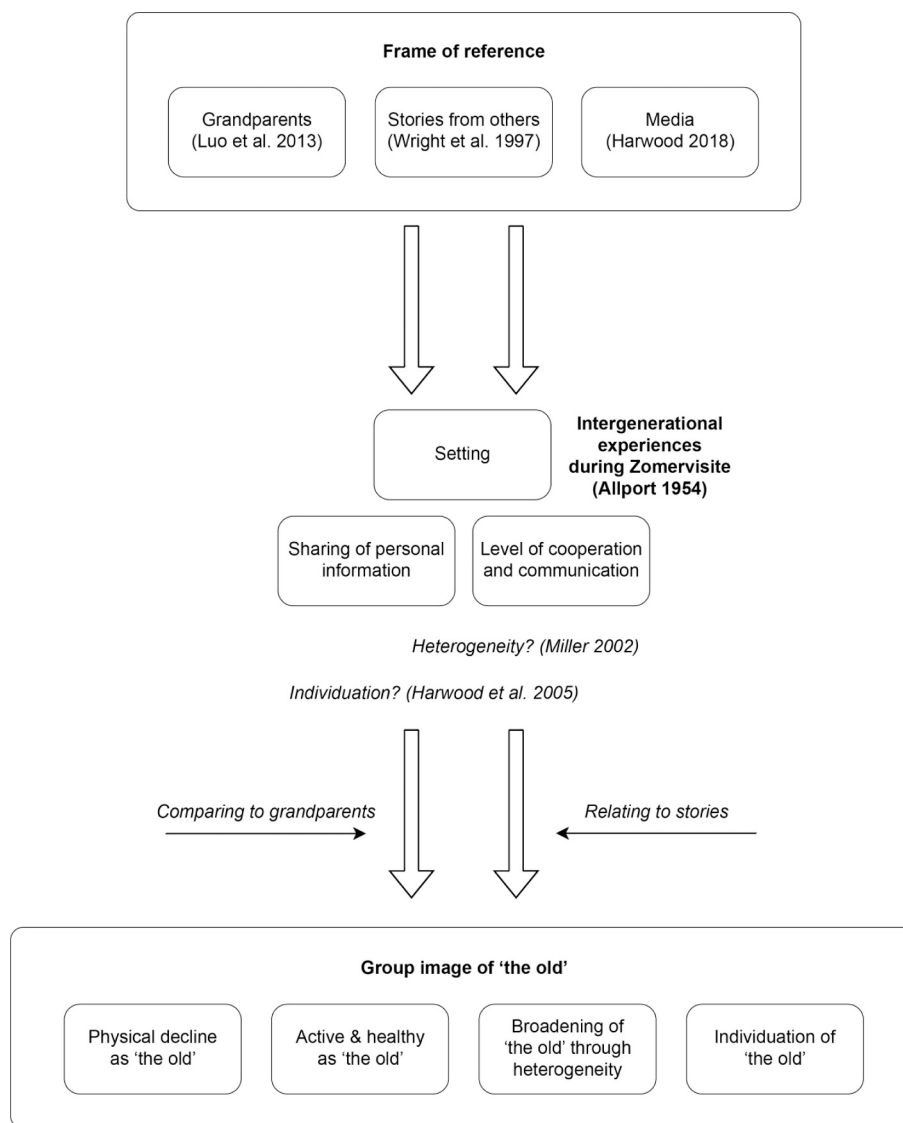
Fig. 1. Process of change in relation to the intergenerational contact experience.

year-old female interviewee explained: "There might be different kinds of older people, but I have not been in contact with enough people in a care home yet. So, I still think about them [her grandparents] and their characteristics when thinking about older people." This particular interviewee had spent most of her hours in a group setting, walking and playing games with people with dementia. She did acknowledge that she learned more about this particular disease and what it does with people, but this did not change her image. She, and others like her, also described some of the features of the residents when describing older people - such as dementia but also dependency and care. However, for these particular participants, their general image of 'the old' stayed linked to what they knew before; their active and healthy (grandparents).

A third group, slightly smaller than group one, described a variety of older people when describing 'the old', as they had encountered seniors with dementia or loneliness in the care home but also seniors that reminded them of their own grandparents. Hence, their image of 'the old' seemed to have broadened through their acknowledgement of heterogeneity. As described by a 17-year-old male interviewee: "I actually see different groups, also in the care home, some are almost comparable to my own grandparents, but some are very forgetful." Furthermore, another 15-year-old female mentioned that when thinking

about older people, she imagined active people like her grandparents but also lonely people that she had seen on popular TV shows. Although these examples seem similar to those mentioned in the two previously described pathways, the interviewees did not focus on solely one image of 'the old' but linked together different sets of images based on both old and new experiences, again in relation to their personal frame of reference.

Finally, a fourth pathway revealed that, unlike the examples above, a rather small minority of participants did not relate their image to any previous encounters or stories from others but instead focussed on the diverse and personal characteristics of seniors they met during the programme when speaking about their image of older people. In doing so, this group of young adults conceptualised older adults through a process of individuation (Harwood et al., 2005; Miller, 2002). For example, when asked about how she thought about older people, one interviewee described a detailed definition of the senior she encountered and stated that she could not speak about other older individuals as she had not met others yet. Another 15-year-old female interviewee simply stated: "When thinking about older people I think about people living here [in the long term care facility] but also people living at home, they are all older people". However, this group of participants was relatively small and stood out as they claimed that they could not stereotype the

whole group with one definition as there are "Many older people, who are all a bit different" (female, age 16). Hence, they were able to place several subtypes of older people beside each other rather than solely focus on the physical aspects or personal prejudices of ageing (Marques et al., 2020), resulting in a more heterogeneous, diversified image of older people.

When exploring the different processes of intergenerational contact and the pathways that the young adults followed, it becomes clear how complex the pathways towards conceptualisation of the group image of 'the old' actually is. As shown in the figure, the outcome of the inter-generational contact is related to the positioning of the intergenerational experience within the young adults' frame of reference. Similar experiences could lead to different conceptualisations of 'the old', as every participant – often unconsciously - processed the new information gathered during *Zomervisite,* within their own context and frame of reference.

Discussion

This study draws on qualitative data collected by means of 35 in-depth interviews with young adults between the ages of 15 and 24. Our interviewees were all participants of *Zomervisite* and spent up to 25 h each with older persons living in long term care facilities in the Netherlands. The young adults varied not only in age but also in educational level, personal interests and previous experience with seniors or voluntary work. They also spent the 25 h in different ways and in different settings, ranging from one-to-one contact to group-based day care activities.

Our first finding is related to these different settings and concerns the acknowledgement of heterogeneity among older people living in long term care facilities by the young adults. In line with several studies on intergenerational programmes (Christian et al., 2014; Requena et al., 2018; Tam et al., 2006) and the intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954), we found that the level of equality, cooperation and sharing of personal information did indeed influence the intergenerational contact. Our findings show that an open and personal, one-to-one, relationship resulted in self-disclosure among both the senior and the participant, which for some resulted in the acknowledgement of heterogeneity and individuation (Harwood et al., 2005). Contrary, in situations with too much professional control (often in the group setting), communication obstacles (limiting cooperation) or when experiencing higher levels of personal intergroup anxiety (Drury et al., 2016), we found that the level of personal information shared seemed to be lower as there was less self-disclosure (Miller, 2002). For some, this anxiety was higher during individual contact, yet even though the group setting may have been more comfortable it did not allow for individuation as 'free' contact between the young adult and older resident was limited.

Thus, like many other studies on intergenerational programmes, this study emphasises the need for an open, natural and mutual relationship in order to facilitate negative attitude reduction. However, we are also critical of focussing solely on the setting of an intergenerational programme when it concerns changing ageist stereotypes and attitudes. In this study we demonstrate, in contrast to previous evaluations of inter-generational programmes (Agmon, Doron, & Ergon-Karlin, 2017, Cook, Vreudenhil, & Macnish, 2018; Penick et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2019), that even a perfect setting will not necessarily decrease an individual's ageism. This has, we suggest, to do with the young adults diverse and both positive and negative previous experiences, their grandparent-grandchild relationship (Luo et al., 2013), stories from others (Wright et al., 1997) and personal characteristics (Marques et al., 2020). This brings us to the second finding of this study, that previous experiences, observations or even indirect stories about older people can greatly influence the way current intergenerational encounters are conceptualised into a group image. Whereas previous research has tended to focus on the effect of the five conditions (Christian et al., 2014; Teater, 2018) or the mediating role of prior (extended) contact (Flamion et al., 2017;

Harwood et al., 2005; Luo et al., 2013) as a linear process, our research looked at the interaction between these elements as a continuous process.

We show that prior experiences of (extended) intergenerational contact will continue, often unconsciously, moderating the effect of present relationships on young adults' expressions of ageism. This means that new intergenerational experiences are often placed in the context of previous direct or indirect contact (e.g. stories or social media). This would also explain why in a previous study we found no significant effect of previous experience with older persons (Kusumas-tuti et al., 2016), as the *quality* and *nature* of this contact and whether it resulted in a positive or negative valence of older individuals were not measured. As shown in Fig. 1. we found that all newly gathered information and experiences during *Zomervisite*, were placed in reference to what the young adults already knew about older people (cf. Harwood, 2018). In this process, most of the people encountered in the long term care facility fit the description of 'the real old' given by the media and public discourse as they received care and showed signs of physical limitations, therewith focusing on incompetence and decline (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018).

In their mixed-methods study, Luo et al. (2013) have shown that the effect of a grandparent-grandchild relationship is based on many factors (e.g. educational, social or economic). We believe that these keep on playing a role, even during new intergenerational encounters. Although the participants of *Zomervisite* themselves did not qualify the relationship with their grandparents as previous intergenerational contact, most of them did use them as comparison to those living in the long term care facility ('the real old') to conceptualise their definition of older people in general (Flamion et al., 2017). For some participants, encountering seniors different from their grandparents or what they had known before, broadened their conceptualisation of 'the old', while for others – regardless of the openness of the contact - it actually substantiated their ideas. In line with Pettigrew and Tropp (2008), we therewith point to underlying processes in which, due to the personal nature of the young adults' frame of reference, similar experiences during the intergenerational programme became embedded in very different views on older people.

In conclusion, we propose that regardless of similar experiences or intervention settings, young adults can show and describe different group images of 'the old' due to the frame they hold and paths they follow. Their group images are most related to their previous frame of reference and personal process of intergenerational contact. That is, even though the personal experiences during *Zomervisite* were characterized as positive by all participants, the influence it had on their overall group image of older people differed from (negative) group stereotypes to individuation, due to their previous experiences and knowledge. This teaches us that the intergenerational contact and its potential outcomes do not follow a linear process but are actually differentiated by the individuals' intergenerational experiences in relation to their personal frame of reference.

Limitations

As the intensity of interactions as well as the previous frame of references vary between the participants, the results of this study are not intended to be generalisable or transferrable. However, taking on a qualitative approach gives us the opportunity to discover underlying patterns and processes which, on their own, can be generalisable and offer opportunity for future research.

Furthermore, we discovered that regardless of their experiences during *Zomervisite*, all participants labelled their image of older people as positive. Most of the terminology described however, was also mentioned by the young adults before the start of the intergenerational programme and did not, in their own perspective, change so much but more so broadened from participation. Following Hannon and Gueldner (2008), we believe that it is logical to assume that the very act of

volunteering in a programme such as *Zomervisite* suggests that the young adults already had a somewhat positive attitude towards older people. In addition, we acknowledge several biases that might have influenced the positive outcome. Firstly, as the participants were actually paid for their participation in *Zomervisite*, some interviewees might have emphasized their positive experiences or given socially desirable answers even though we tried to reduce this bias through open questions and in-depth interviewing techniques. Secondly, although characteristic of care-settings, the high number of female participants might be a potential bias in our findings as they tend to express less ageist attitudes than men. A third potential bias is the fact that most of the participants had family member(s) working at long term care facilities, meaning that they might already had a clearer image of older people living in long term care facilities than other young adults and may have been more inclined to work with older people, as well as more exposed to older individuals than other groups suggesting that this may be a group with less ageist tendencies than a more general group of younger adults.

Last, we emphasize that the setting of the intergenerational contact - a long term care facility - might have influenced the process of inter-generational contact and even the outcome, as long term care facility residents fit rather well in the young adults' conceptualisation of 'the real old'. The people encountered are in fact dependent on care to some degree, experience forgetfulness or have hearing problems. Although we do not see this as a true limitation of this research as the setting was knowingly chosen, it does raise the question how the process of inter-generational contact and the personal pathways would look like when taking place in an informal setting, such as a home, with 'active' seniors. Therefore, we would like to make two recommendations, the first being that it would be wise to conduct additional qualitative research on the process of intergenerational contact in different settings. Secondly, we recommend future research focusses on the usage of observation to also learn about the unspoken communication, atmosphere and the reactions and perspectives of the older individuals involved as well.

Conclusion

In this study, we examined young adults' conceptualisation of older people after participating in the intergenerational programme *Zomervi-site*. We found that people's personal frame of reference strongly in-fluences the outcomes of intergenerational contact. We focussed on the underlying process of intergenerational contact to understand the dif-ferential outcomes of such a programme. This process, shown in Fig. 1, shows that besides a fitting setting, the young adults' personal frame of reference should be taken into account when it comes to changing ste-reotypes. Previous experiences, stories from others, and public discourse persisted by way of comparison to the newly gathered information. Thus, following the pathways of our interviewees, we discovered that seemingly similar encounters and conditions led to different group im-ages of 'the old', due to the previous encounters with grandparents and stories from others. With this study we further clarify why it remains difficult to substantiate the effects of intergenerational programmes on negative stereotyping or ageism as the outcomes can be very different from one person to the next.

Funding

Declaration of Competing Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Acknowledgements

References

Abrams, D., Eller, A., & Bryant, J. (2006). An age apart: The effects of intergenerational contact and stereotype threat on performance and intergroup bias. *Psychology and Aging, 21*(4), 691–702. https://doi.org/10.1037/0882-7974.21.4.691

Agmon, M., Doron, I., & Ergon-Karlin, S. (2017). Gerontological activism: An example of an intergenerational academic course within a university-community partnership. *Educational Gerontology, 44*(7), 447–458. https://doi.org/10.1080/03601277.2018.1495890

Alcock, C. L., Camic, P. M., Barker, C., Haridi, C., & Raven, R. (2011). Intergenerational practice in the community: A focused ethnographic evaluation. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 21*(5), 419–432. https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.1084

Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Ayalon, L., & Tesch-Römer, C. (2018). Introduction to the section: Ageism – Concept and origins. In *Contemporary perspectives on ageism, volume 9 by Ayalon, L., and Tesch-Römer C.* https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2F978-3-319-73820-8.pdf.

Bousfield, C., & Hutchinson, P. (2010). Contact, anxiety, and young People's attitudes and Behavioural intentions towards the elderly. *Educational Gerontology, 36*(6), 451–466. https://doi.org/10.1080/03601270903324362

Christian, J., Turner, R., Holt, N., Larkin, M., & Cotler, J.H. (2014). Does intergenerational contact reduce ageism? When and how contact interventions actually work? *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3(1):1-15. Doi:10.18533/journal.v3i1.278.

Cook, P. S., Vreudenhil, A., & Macnish, B. (2018). Confronting ageism: The potential of intergenerational contemporary art events to increase understandings of older adults and ageing. *Australasian Journal on Ageing, 37*(3), 110–115. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajag.12561

Cuddy, A. J. C., Norton, M. I., & Fiske, S. T. (2005). The old stereotype: The pervasiveness and persistence of the elderly stereotype. *Journal of Social Issues, 61*(2), 267–285. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00405.x

Drury, L., Hutchinson, P., & Abrams, D. (2016). Direct and extended intergenerational contact and young people's attitudes towards older adults. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 55*(3), 522–543. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12146

Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J. C., Glick, P., & Xu, J. (2002). A model of (often mixed) stereotype content: Competence and warmth respectively follow from perceived status and competition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 82*(6), 878–902. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.82.6.878

Flamion, A., Missotten, P., Marquet, M., & Adam, S. (2017). Impact of contact with grandparents on Children's and Adolescents' views on the elderly. *Child Development, 90*(4), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12992

Hannon, P. O., & Gueldner, S. H. (2008). The impact of short-term quality intergenerational contact on Children's attitudes towards older adults. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships, 5*(4), 59–76. https://doi.org/10.1300/J194v05n04_05

Harwood, J. (2018). *Understanding communication and aging.* Developing Knowledge and Awareness: Second Edition, Cognella Academic Publishing.

Harwood, J., Hewstone, M., Paolini, S., & Voci, A. (2005). Grandparent-grandchild contact and attitudes towards older adults: Moderator and mediator effects. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 31*(3), 393–406. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167204271577

Kornadt, A.E., & Rothermund, K. (2015). "Views on Aging. Domain-Specific Approaches and Implications for Developmental Regulation." In Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics, 35 by Diehl, M., & Wahl, H.W. (2015). doi:https://doi.org/10.1891/0198-8794.35.121.

Kusumastuti, S., van Fenema, E., Polman-van Stratum, E. C. F., Achterberg, W., Lindenberg, J., & Westendorp, R. G. J. (2016). When contact is not enough: Affecting first year medical Students' image towards older persons. *PLoS One, 12*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0169977

Levy, S. R. (2016). Toward reducing ageism: PEACE (positive education about aging and contact experiences) model. *The Gerontologist, 58*(2), 226–232. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnw116

Luo, B., Zhou, K., Jin, E. J., Newman, A., & Liang, J. (2013). Ageism among college students: A comparative study between U.S. and China. *Journal of Cross-Cult Gerontology, 28*, 49–63. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10823-013-9186-5

Marques, S., Mariano, J., Mendonça, J., de Tavenier, W., Hess, M., Naegele, L., … Martins, D. (2020). Determinants of ageism against older adults: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17*(7), 2560. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17072560

Miller, N. (2002). Personalization and the promise of contact theory. *Journal of Social Issues, 58*(2), 387–410. https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-4560.00267

Penick, J. M., Fallshore, M., & Spencer, A. M. (2014). Using intergenerational service learning to promote positive perceptions about older adults and Community Service in College Students. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships, 12*(1), 25–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/15350770.2014.870456

Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2008). How does intergroup contact reduce prejudice? Meta-analytic tests of three mediators. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 38*(6), 922–934. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.504

Requena, M. C., Swift, H. J., Naegele, L., Zwamborn, M., Metz, S., Bosems, W. P. H., & van Hoof, J. (2018). Educational Methods Using Intergenerational Interaction to

Fight Ageism. In Contemporary Perspectives on aAgeism, volume 9 by Tesch-Romer C. and Ayalon L. https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2F978-3-319-73820-8.pdf.

Schultz, A., Luckmann, T., Zaner, R. M., & Engelhardt, J. T. (1973). Structures of the life-world. In *Volume 1*. Stories in: Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy.

Schwartz, L. K., & Simmons, J. P. (2001). Contact quality and attitudes towards the elderly. *Educational Gerontology, 27*(2), 127–137. https://doi.org/10.1080/03601270151075525

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research. Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). Sage Publications Inc.

Sun, Q., Lou, V. W., Dai, A., To, C, & Wong, S. Y. (2019). The effectiveness of the young-old link and growth intergenerational program in reducing age stereotypes. *Research on Social Work Practice, 29*(5), 519–528. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731518767319

Tam, T., Hewstone, M., Harwood, J., Voci, A., & Kenworthy, J. (2006). Intergroup contact and grandparent-grandchild communication: The effects of self-disclosure on implicit and explicit biases against older people. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 9*(3), 413–429. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430206064642

Teater, B. (2018). How stereotypes and attitudes toward older adults are challenged through intergenerational contact: Young people explain the process. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education, 39*(1), 104–116. https://doi.org/10.1080/02701960.2015.1115985

Wright, S. C., Aron, A., McLaughlin-Volpe, T., & Ropp, S. A. (1997). The extended contact effect: Knowledge of cross-group friendships and prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73*(1), 73–90. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.1.73