

ATTITUDES AND STEREOTYPES ABOUT ATTITUDES ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

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In the first of 2 telephone-survey studies, factor analysis of the attitudes of 159 respondents revealed a general conservatism factor and two forms of liberalism, *traditional* and *radical*. Conservatism increased with age, traditional liberalism was strongest in women and middle-aged persons, and radical liberalism was stronger in men and decreased with age. In the second study, 240 respondents estimated the attitudes of a young, middle-aged, or old male or female target. Evidence of an "old-is-conservative" stereotype was clearest among young participants. Among old participants, the stereotype was evident only when the target was male. People associated traditional liberalism more with women than with men and radical liberalism more with men than with women. Both kinds of liberalism were expected to decrease with age. The authors conclude that age plays as important a role as gender in the attitude impressions people form during initial encounters.

Keywords: attitudes and attitude stereotypes, changes, lifespan, conservative, liberal.

Social interactions are frequently influenced by the information people have about the attitudes of others (Button, Grant, Hannah, & Ross, 1993). Much of this information is acquired gradually as the result of social comparison processes during interaction and discussion (Festinger, 1954). Some information, however, is available before any interaction takes place; expectations about a person's attitudes are formed as soon as the category or group to which the individual belongs is identified. (Byrne, Clore, & Smeaton, 1986).

Elsewhere these researchers have reported on the stereotypic expectations college students have concerning the attitudes of men and women (Grant, Button, Ross, & Hannah, 1997). In the present research, an examination of attitudes and

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inferences about attitudes in a population outside the university was conducted. The primary focus was on people's stereotypes about the liberal or conservative attitudes of young, middle-aged, and old men and women. A secondary question was whether or not these stereotypes would depend on the perceiver's own age and gender.

Attitudes concerning issues relating to liberalism and conservatism were examined because of the large number of studies (e.g., Henningham, 1996; Riemann, Grubich, Hempel, Mergl, & Richter, 1993; Truett, 1993) in which age and/or gender differences were reported on this dimension. In general, conservative attitudes have been found to be more common among older than younger participants (Danigelis & Cutler, 1991; Henningham, 1996; Truett, 1993). The evidence concerning gender differences in attitudes, however, is more mixed. Some researchers (e.g., Feather, 1979) found that women are more conservative than men, others (e.g., Ekehammar, 1985) that women are more liberal than men, and still others (e.g., Truett) found no gender differences. Riemann et al. (1993) found that women scored lower than men on a factor they labeled *liberalism and affirmation of technological progress* but that men and women scored about equally on a *general conservatism* factor. Similarly, Grant et al. (1997) found that men agreed more than did women with statements endorsing pornography, prostitution, casual sex, and police detention of potentially violent offenders. However, women were more likely than were men to endorse feminist positions and to take a tolerant view of homosexuality.

Compared to the large number of studies in which age and gender differences in actual attitudes were examined, in only a few have people's stereotypes about these differences been examined. Bassili and Reil (1981) found that both young and old participants rated elderly people as relatively conservative. Similar findings were reported by Signori, Butt, and Kozak (1982). Although the attribution of *conservatism* to old people suggests the existence of a stereotype about their attitudes, such a conclusion may not be warranted. Researchers have rarely focused participants' attention specifically on old people's attitudes. Thus, when people describe an old person as conservative they may be thinking about a broad range of characteristics and behavior that have little to do with specific social and political attitudes. Grant (1991), for example, asked university students to list the characteristics they associated with a target person described as *conservative* or *liberal*. A great many characteristics were generated but surprisingly few had anything to do with the target's attitudes.

In only a small number of studies has there been any attempt to explore the attributions that people make concerning specific attitudes of people in different age categories. In one early example, Griffitt, Nelson, and Littlepage (1972, Experiment 3) found that introductory psychology students expected a 65-year-old target, compared to one of their peers, to have a more positive attitude toward

belief in God, and more negative attitudes toward premarital sex, racial integration, Red China, and divorce. However, the results of a more recent study (Ross, 1989) suggest that age stereotypes about specific attitudes may present a more complex picture than one that can be summarized as simply, "Older people are more conservative". Ross found that most people believed that attitudes toward categories of persons (e.g., Jews, Catholics) would remain stable over the lifespan. Other attitudes, however, (e.g., toward abortion and premarital sex) were expected to show an inverted-*U* relationship with age while still other attitudes (e.g., toward pornography) were expected to become more negative with age.

The Griffitt et al. (1972) and Ross (1989) studies both suggest the existence of implicit theories about how attitudes are related to age. The studies, however, are somewhat limited in that both used only college-age participants and both ignored the possibility that target gender might affect attributions either directly (Grant et al., 1997) or in interaction with target age (Kite, Deaux, & Miele, 1991). In the research reported here, the researchers attempted to extend the scope of previous studies by asking men and women, selected from the general population and representing a wide age range, to indicate their own attitudes (Study 1) or to estimate the attitudes of a young, middle-aged, or old man or woman (Study 2).

STUDY 1

Twenty attitude statements were selected (see Table 1) from those the researchers had used in previous studies (Button et al., 1993; Grant, Hannah, Ross, & Button, 1995; Grant et al., 1997; Ross, 1997). Three criteria were used in selecting the items: each had to deal with a different social issue; each had to be one that participants in an earlier study (Grant, Button, Hannah, & Ross, 1994) had identified as clearly conservative or liberal; and finally, each item had to be suitable for a short telephone interview (i.e., easy to understand, not too personal, etc.).

The first study was designed to provide information about scale properties. Although all the statements had been used before, they had not been used together as a set. Thus the authors collected scale psychometric and normative data that were relevant to a population of respondents outside the university.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 76 men and 138 women, living in St. John's, Newfoundland, and were contacted in a telephone survey. Sixty-four men (84.2%) and 103 women (74.6%) agreed to participate. Eight people (four men and four women) were later dropped because they failed to follow instructions or because they

ended the interview before it was completed. The remaining 60 men ranged in age from 18 to 72 ($M = 38.27$; $SD = 15.51$) while the 99 women ranged in age from 19 to 76 ($M = 40.87$; $SD = 15.82$).

PROCEDURE

The telephone survey was carried out using a computer program that prompted the interviewer with a randomly generated telephone number, specified the characteristics of the person she should ask for, presented the attitude statements in a randomized order for her to read, and recorded the respondent's answers when the interviewer entered them on the keypad.

When the interviewer contacted someone, she explained that she was a graduate student at Memorial University conducting a survey and that she would like to speak to (depending on a randomized prompt from the computer) the youngest man in the household, the youngest woman, the oldest man, or the oldest woman. If the designated person was not available, the call ended and a new phone number was generated. If the designated person was reached, the interviewer informed the person that the purpose of the survey was to find out people's attitudes on certain issues and that participation would not take more than about five minutes. If the person was willing to participate the interviewer explained the response scale as follows: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *moderately disagree*, 3 = *slightly disagree*, 4 = *no opinion or undecided*, 5 = *slightly agree*, 6 = *moderately agree*, and 7 = *strongly agree* and proceeded to read the 20 attitude statements, as prompted by the computer, in random order. At the end of the interview, the interviewer asked the respondent for his or her age, as well as for information about how many adult males and females resided in the household. The respondent was then thanked for participating.

RESULTS

FACTOR ANALYSIS

Respondents' agreement scores on the 20 attitude statements were subjected to a principal-components factor analysis with varimax rotation. Six factors accounting for 52% of the variance had eigenvalues greater than 1. The last three factors accounted for little variance (8%, 8%, and 7% respectively) and too few items loaded on them for the factors to be interpretable. The analysis was redone, extracting first one, then two, and finally three factors. The total variance accounted for by the one-factor solution was 14%, for the two-factor solution, 24%, and for the three-factor solution, 32%. The three-factor solution was selected because it maximized explained variance while retaining interpretable factors.

TABLE 1
ATTITUDE STATEMENTS AND ASSOCIATED FACTOR-SCORE COEFFICIENTS FOR CONSERVATISM,
TRADITIONAL LIBERALISM, AND RADICAL LIBERALISM

Statement	Factor-Score Coefficients		
	Conservatism	Traditional liberalism	Radical liberalism
1. It is time to close the door to refugees.	.077	-.244	.015
2. The right to die with dignity is a fundamental human right.	.051	.209	.113
3. Unemployment insurance encourages people to be lazy.	.255	.026	.137
4. Mentally ill people should not be allowed positions of responsibility.	.235	-.120	.087
5. Religion is mostly superstition.	.089	-.041	.349
6. All senior citizens should pay for their own home care services.	.139	-.193	.202
7. Most members of Green Peace are just publicity seekers.	.096	-.041	-.118
8. Abortions should not be carried out under any circumstances.	.113	-.184	.019
9. There is too much sex on television.	.189	.137	-.159
10. The denominational school system in Newfoundland should be abandoned.	.036	.165	.078
11. Marijuana should be legalized.	-.034	-.004	.335
12. The breakdown of the family is a serious social concern.	.244	.157	.086
13. The idea of gay or lesbian marriages seems ridiculous.	.190	.018	-.167
14. Bilingualism should be encouraged in all parts of Canada.	-.004	.207	-.028
15. Industries should be forced to reduce toxic waste.	.043	.229	-.124
16. Condoms should be made available to adolescents.	.012	.143	.342
17. Women should avoid going out to work when their children are really young.	.202	-.015	-.003
18. Beauty contests are just harmless fun.	.071	-.055	-.066
19. Canadians spend too much money on lotteries.	.175	.195	-.051
20. Sexual abusers ought to be given counseling.	.112	.233	.197

A set of factor scores for each factor was then constructed. The factor score coefficients for each of the 20 attitude statements are shown in Table 1. All three factors reflected the liberal-conservative dimension which had been used for item selection, but each reflected a slightly different aspect of this dimension.

In the rotated solution, the first factor accounted for 13% of the variance and seemed to reflect traditional conservative concerns (e.g., breakdown of the family, rejection of gay or lesbian marriages, opposition to young mothers in the workforce, etc.). Two statements, one expressing concern about mentally ill persons in positions of responsibility and the other, the view that employment insurance fosters laziness, also loaded heavily on this factor. This factor was labeled *conservatism*.

The second factor accounted for 11% of the variance and seemed to reflect traditional liberal concerns, a compassion for refugees, senior citizens, and people with terminal illness. Statements expressing support for bilingualism and counseling for sexual abusers also had relatively high positive loadings on this factor. This factor was labeled *traditional liberalism*.

The third factor accounted for 8% of the variance and seemed to reflect a more individualistic and radical form of liberalism. Statements dismissing religion as superstition and advocating legalization of marijuana and increased availability of condoms for adolescents loaded heavily on this factor. This factor was labeled *radical liberalism*.

A separate, stepwise, regression analysis was conducted on each of the sets of factor scores. In these analyses, participant age and gender were the predictor variables. The linear and quadratic effects of age were examined first. Then participant gender was added and finally, the interactions between gender and the linear and quadratic age factors were examined.

Conservatism Scores

The linear effect of age was significant, $F(1, 152) = 11.19, p < .01$, and accounted for 6.2% of the variance in conservatism scores. Scores increased with increasing age. When a quadratic (age-squared) term was added to the equation, the variance accounted for was 9.6%, a significant increase, $F(1, 151) = 6.58, p < .05$. The addition of predictor terms for participant gender and the interactions between gender and the linear and quadratic age predictors did not add significantly to the variance accounted for. It appears that for both men and women, conservatism scores increase with age, slowly at first and then more rapidly (see Figure 1).

Traditional Liberalism Scores

The regression analysis revealed that the linear effect of age was not significant, $F(1, 152) = 3.18$, accounting for only 1.4% of the variance. When the quad-

ratio age term was added to the equation, the percentage of variance accounted for was 3.7%, a significant increase, $F(1, 151) = 4.69, p < .05$. The further addition of participant gender to the equation increased the percentage of variance accounted for to 5.7%, again a significant increase, $F(1, 150) = 4.21, p < .05$. The addition of age-gender linear and quadratic interaction terms did not add significantly to the variance accounted for. It appears that women have higher traditional liberalism scores than do men but for both men and women these scores are highest during middle age (see Figure 1).

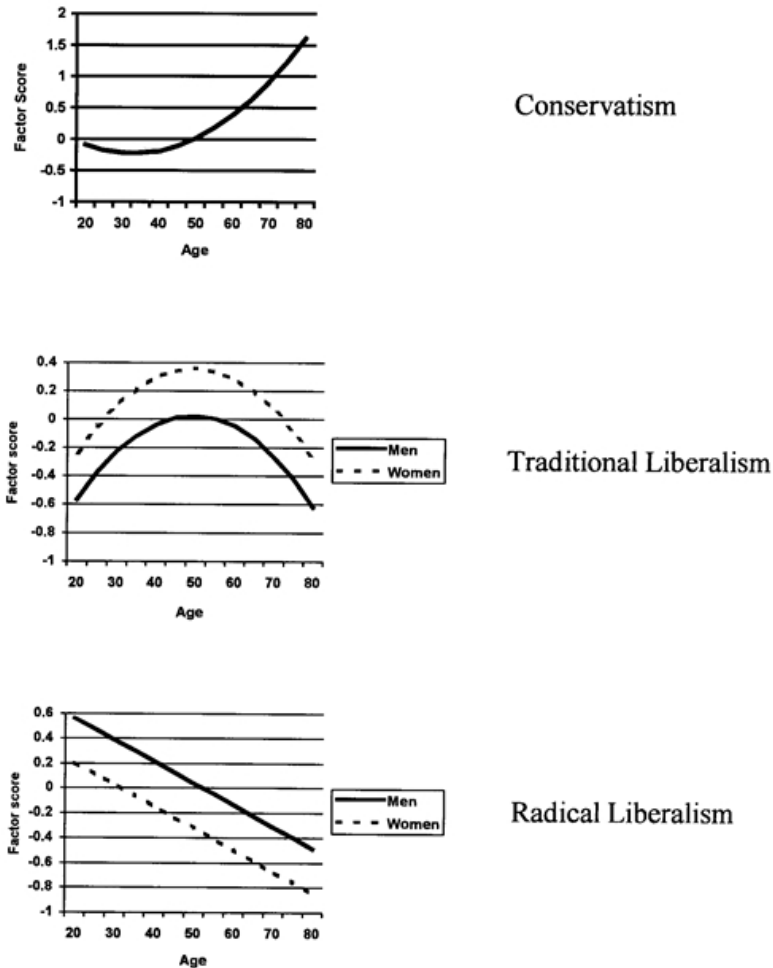


Figure 1: Best-fitting regression lines showing attitude scores of participants in Study 1 as a function of participant age and, where appropriate, participant gender.

Radical Liberalism Scores

The regression analysis revealed a significant linear effect of age, $F(1, 152) = 13.07$, $p < .01$, that accounted for 7.3% of the variance in radical liberalism scores. Scores decreased with increasing age. The addition of a quadratic age term did not result in significant improvement, $F(1, 151) = 2.22$, but with participant gender in the equation, the percentage of variance accounted for increased to 9.8%, $F(1, 151) = 5.13$, $p < .05$. The addition of predictor terms for the interactions between gender and the linear and quadratic age predictors did not add significantly to the variance accounted for. Men have higher radical liberalism scores than do women, but for both men and women these scores decrease linearly with age (see Figure 1).

DISCUSSION

The conservatism dimension that emerged reflected an emphasis on family values and the importance of hard work. Participants' scores on this factor increased with age, slowly at first and then more rapidly. The positive relationship with age is consistent with that found in several earlier studies (e.g., Riemann et al., 1993; Truett, 1993) and increases confidence in the construct validity of the measure. In particular, the curvilinear component of the relationship found here is consistent with Truett's findings that sharp increases in conservatism did not occur before people reached their forties.

In addition to conservatism, the attitude statements used in this study appear to tap two kinds of liberalism that are orthogonal to each other. The first of these reflected what the authors have characterized as *traditional liberalism* – that is, attitudes associated with a tolerance and compassion for minority groups and persons in a position of weakness. The second reflected *radical liberalism* – contentious attitudes associated with religious dismissiveness, and advocating for greater individual freedoms on matters of drugs and sexuality.

Both gender and age differences were evident in traditional and radical liberalism scores. Traditional liberal attitudes were expressed most strongly by women and by middle-aged persons. In contrast, scores on radical liberalism were higher among men than among women and declined linearly with age. The absence of any gender difference on conservatism together with the presence of gender differences on traditional and radical liberalism reflects the mixed findings in the literature noted earlier. It appears that gender attitude differences are highly issue specific. More generally, it is likely that social and political attitudes are too complex to interpret in terms of a single, bipolar, conservative-liberal dimension (cf., Kerlinger, 1984).

In summary, the results reveal an interesting pattern of age and gender differences in a population outside the university. In the second study, another tele-

phone survey was conducted to examine people's age and gender stereotypes about the kinds of attitudes uncovered in the first study.

STUDY 2

As noted earlier, previous studies concerning people's age and gender stereotypes about the attitudes of others have been focused mainly on studies of college students. Compared to people in the general population, college students are certainly younger, better educated, and very likely somewhat less conservative in their attitudes (see Truett, 1993). The question considered in this study was whether the age and gender stereotypes held by college students would be similar to those held by an older, less educated portion of the population.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants, 200 men and 179 women, living in St. John's, Newfoundland, were contacted in a telephone survey. A total of 123 males (61.5%) and 126 females (70.4%) agreed to participate. Nine people (three men and six women) were later dropped because they failed to follow instructions or because they ended the interview before it was completed. The remaining 120 men ranged in age from 18 to 79 ($M = 39.13$; $SD = 15.88$) while the 120 women ranged in age from 18 to 86 ($M = 39.83$; $SD = 15.08$).

PROCEDURE

The attitude statements and the computerized survey procedure were the same as in the first study. In this study, however, participants, rather than being asked to indicate their own attitudes, were asked to estimate the attitudes of a hypothetical target person. Twenty men and 20 women were randomly assigned to each of six target conditions. The target was described as either a man or woman in his or her "twenties or early thirties", "late thirties or forties", or "fifties or sixties". At the end of the interview the interviewer asked for the age of the respondent and thanked him or her for participating.

RESULTS

Attitude-inference factor scores for conservatism, traditional liberalism, and radical liberalism were computed using the factor score coefficients from the first study. Each set of scores was subjected to a 2 (participant gender) \times 2 (participant age: above vs. at or below the median age of 38) \times 2 (target gender) \times 3 (target age: young, middle-aged, old) between-participants analysis of variance.

Conservatism Inference Scores

The ANOVA revealed two significant 3-way interactions. The first involved participant gender, participant age, and target gender, $F(1, 195) = 4.32, p < .05$. To explore the nature of this interaction, two follow-up analyses (participant gender by target gender ANOVAs) were conducted, one using the data from the young participants and the other using the data from the old participants. The analysis for young participants revealed no significant effects. The analysis for old participants revealed a significant 2-way interaction between participant and target gender, $F(1, 98) = 4.12, p < .05$. Old men thought that conservatism would be higher among female targets ($M = .16$) than among male targets ($M = -.15$), $t(48) = -1.12, p = .27$. Old women thought that conservatism would be higher among male targets ($M = .32$) than among female targets ($M = -.13$), $t(50) = 1.80, p = .08$.

The other 3-way interaction involved participant age, target gender, and target age, $F(2, 195) = 3.33, p < .05$. Again, separate 2-way analyses (target gender \times target age) were conducted for the young and old participants. The analysis for young participants revealed only a main effect for target age, $F(2, 111) = 3.85, p < .05$. Young participants expected conservatism to increase with age ($M_s = -.35, -.13$, and $.16$, for young, middle-aged, and old targets, respectively). However, in the analysis for old participants, only the interaction between target gender and target age was significant, $F(2, 96) = 4.06, p < .05$. Old participants expected that conservatism in male targets would increase with age ($M_s = -.30, .27$, and $.37$), $F(2, 49) = 3.94, p < .05$, but that conservatism in female targets would decrease slightly ($M_s = .20, .18$, and $-.43$), $F(2, 47) = 1.69, ns$.

Traditional Liberalism Inference Scores

The ANOVA revealed significant main effects for participant age, $F(1, 195) = 6.61, p < .05$, target gender, $F(1, 195) = 11.97, p < .01$, and target age, $F(1, 195) = 7.69, p < .01$, and a significant 3-way interaction among participant age, target gender, and target age, $F(2, 195) = 5.35, p < .01$. Old participants inferred higher traditional liberalism scores ($M = .17$) than did young participants ($M = -.18$). Participants thought that traditional liberalism would be more common in female targets ($M = .23$) than in male targets ($M = -.26$) and that it would decline with age ($M_s = .28, .03$, and $-.37$).

The 3-way interaction was examined further by conducting separate follow-up analyses (target gender by target age) for young and old participants. The analysis for the young participants revealed two main effects. As in the overall analysis described above, traditional liberalism was expected to be higher in female targets than in male targets and to decrease with age. In the analysis for the old participants, there was again the main effect for target gender but in addition, there was a significant interaction between target gender and target age, $F(2, 96)$

= 6.03, $p < .01$. Old participants expected traditional liberalism in female targets to decrease with age ($M_s = .87, .55$, and $-.28$), $F(2, 47) = 7.41$, $p < .01$, but in male targets, they expected little change ($M_s = -.32, .09$, and $.04$), $F(2, 49) = 1.09$, *ns*.

Radical Liberalism Inference Scores

The ANOVA revealed significant main effects for participant age, $F(1, 195) = 9.60$, $p < .01$, target gender, $F(1, 195) = 6.53$, $p < .05$, and target age, $F(2, 195) = 28.22$, $p < .01$, as well as a significant 3-way interaction involving participant gender, target gender, and target age, $F(2, 195) = 4.13$, $p < .05$. Old participants thought radical liberalism would be more common ($M = .21$) than did young participants ($M = -.13$). In addition, participants thought that radical liberalism would be higher in male targets ($M = .18$) than in female targets ($M = -.13$) and that it would decline with age ($M_s = .54, .02$, and $-.49$). Separate 2-way analyses (participant gender by target age) were conducted on the data for male and female targets. The analysis for male targets showed a significant main effect for target age, $F(2, 104) = 16.39$, $p < .01$. Participants expected that radical liberalism in male targets would decline with age ($M_s = .73, .11$, and $-.31$). The analysis for female targets, however, revealed that in addition to a significant main effect for target age, $F(2, 103) = 16.57$, $p < .01$, there was a significant interaction between participant gender and target age, $F(2, 103) = 4.40$, $p < .05$. Women expected a decline in radical liberalism with age in female targets ($M_s = .55, -.38$, and $-.79$), $F(2, 51) = 12.95$, $p < .01$, with the largest difference occurring between young and middle-aged targets, $t(51) = 3.55$, $p < .01$. Men, too, thought that radical liberalism in female targets would change with age ($M_s = .16, .32$, and $-.60$), $F(2, 52) = 7.25$, $p < .01$. In contrast to women, however, men thought young and middle-aged female targets would be relatively similar in radical liberalism, but that both young and middle-aged targets would be more radically liberal than older ones, $t(36) = 3.04$, $p < .01$, and $t(33) = 3.24$, $p < .01$, respectively.

DISCUSSION

The results of the second study indicate that the attitude stereotypes held by young people are relatively straightforward. Young people expected that conservatism would increase with age, that traditional liberalism would be higher in females, that radical liberalism would be higher in males, and that both kinds of liberalism would decrease with age.

Old participants shared some of the young participants' stereotypes. They, too, thought that radical liberalism would be higher in males and that it would decrease with age, expectations that were consistent with the trends found in actual attitudes in the first study. Unlike the younger participants, however, older participants thought that age trends would often depend on the target's

gender. They expected the increase in conservatism with age would be true only for males and that the decrease in traditional liberalism with age would be true only for females. In addition, old participants thought that both kinds of liberalism were more common than did younger ones and that conservatism was more common in persons of the other gender.

It appears that young and old people have quite different views about gender differences and, in particular, about how the attitudes of men and women change with age. Such differences clearly warrant the use of a wide range of both participant and target ages in future studies of stereotypic inferences.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present studies support and extend earlier findings on the role of age and gender stereotypes in peoples' inferences about others. Consistent with findings gained in previous studies (e.g., Bassili & Reil, 1981; Grant et al., 1997; Ross, 1989), people inferred a variety of age- and gender-related attitude differences. Moreover, both in their own attitudes as well as in the attitudes they expected of others, people distinguished conservative attitudes from two different kinds of liberal attitudes, which have been labeled traditional and radical in this study.

The elaboration of attitude types beyond a bipolar liberal-conservative dimension is consistent with Kerlinger's (1984) contention that liberalism and conservatism are independent dimensions. Moreover, the complexity of attitude structure in this domain may account for some of the inconsistent findings in the literature noted earlier on attitude gender differences (e.g., Ekehammar, 1985; Feather, 1979).

The complexity of attitudes and attitude inferences may arise not just from the multidimensional nature of ideology but also from a variety of factors that affect people's personal involvement with particular issues. Personal involvement is known to influence people's own attitudes and their susceptibility to persuasion (cf., Johnson & Eagly, 1989). It is possible that the *perceived* personal involvement of others may mediate at least some of the attitude-inference effects reported here. Clearly, studies of attitude inferences on a wide range of issues are needed to clarify the relationship between inferences about a target's personal involvement in issues and inferences about his or her ideology.

To conclude, the present studies contribute to previous research showing that people can quickly construct coherent impressions about peoples' attitudes based on a few highly salient cues. Just as gender acts as an organizing cue for impressions, so too does age information. In an attempt to increase understanding of how perceivers use the information available in everyday social interactions, a series of studies is currently being completed using picture stimuli that incorpo-

rate other easily perceived cues (e.g., physical attractiveness) which may act in conjunction with age and gender to influence attitude impressions.

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