



The Crystallization of Contemporary Racial Prejudice across the Lifespan

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The conventional wisdom is that racial prejudice remains largely stable through adulthood. However, very little is known about the development of contemporary racial attitudes like symbolic racism. The growing crystallization of symbolic racism through the lifespan is tested using two data sets that measure the stability, consistency, and predictive validity of symbolic racism in samples ranging in age from young adults to the elderly. The results provide evidence that the crystallization of symbolic racism generally takes on a curvilinear trajectory across the lifespan, showing that it is already largely crystallized by voting age, that it continues to crystallize still further through adulthood and that it begins to decline in coherence in late adulthood. The results generally provide evidence confirming early speculations of symbolic racism theorists concerning the crystallization of symbolic racism across the lifespan and are discussed in terms of different theoretical perspectives on the relationship between aging and attitudes more generally.

KEY WORDS: Symbolic racism, Attitude stability, Attitude consistency, Aging

Sociocultural approaches to racial prejudice usually conceive of it as remaining more or less unchanged through the lifespan. Children who show signs of prejudice in grade school are thought to be destined to remain among the more racially prejudiced when they reach adulthood, and to remain so through life, absent later powerful interventions (Allport, 1954; Sears & Levy, 2003). Yet there has been little direct evidence that contemporary versions of prejudice truly persist through later life. The main point of this paper is to address this issue in the lifespan developmental literature.