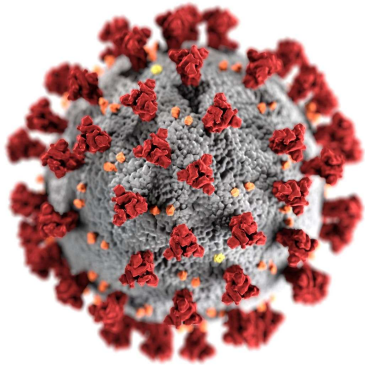# CONTACT WITH OLDER PEOPLE, AGEISM, AND CONTAINMENT BEHAVIORS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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STATEMENT OF RELEVANCE

This research analyzes how contacts with and prejudice against older people relate to behaviors aimed at reducing and slowing the spread of the coronavirus such as washing hands frequently and keeping physical distance from other people (containment behaviors). Respondents were Italians of different age groups and the research was conducted during the Italian lockdown (March-May 2020). Respondents with positive contact with older people, positive attitudes toward older people and benevolent prejudice toward older people reported more containment behaviors. This research shows the importance of promoting positive contacts with older people, as positive relations with older people could contribute to containment behaviors and public health.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Intergroup contact.** Based on intergroup contact theory, having positive interactions with members of an external group can reduce prejudice. This research confirmed such findings applied to age relations in the Italian context, because respondents with high quality contact with older people reported more positive attitudes and less hostile prejudice against older people.

- **Benevolent ageism.** Benevolent ageism is a form of prejudice against older people consisting in a homogeneous view of older people as vulnerable and dependent, and consequent patronizing treatment of older people (e.g., over-simplified speech). While such treatment has negative consequences for older people (e.g., reduced autonomy), endorsing benevolent ageism can be associated with containment behaviors, because such behaviors can be perceived as aimed at protecting older people.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

- **Contact with older people.** Societies should strive to encourage positive contact of young and adult people with older people. For example, organizations should promote age diversity in workplaces. Also, communities could propose opportunities for encounters between people of different age groups.

- **Contact with older people.** In times of social distance, it would be important to promote telephone or online contacts with older people. For example, communities could promote programs where young and adult people phone older people and get to know them.

- **Messages aimed at promoting containment behaviors against the spread of coronavirus.** Messages encouraging to follow behavioral guidelines aimed at reducing and slowing the spread of the coronavirus could emphasize protection of older people.