

Ageism: Alive and Kicking

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When APS Fellow Becca Levy, associate professor of epidemiology and psychology at Yale School of Public Health, and her colleagues searched on Facebook for groups that concentrate on older people, the results gave some unsettling insight into younger people's perception of older folks. They found 84 groups, with a total of nearly 25,500 members, created primarily by 20- to 29-year-olds. Almost 75 percent of the descriptors of the groups excoriated older people, 27 percent infantilized them, and 37 percent advocated banning them from public activities, such as shopping, the team reports in a 2013 issue of *The Gerontologist*.

But bias against the elderly is often more subtle. Consider Facebook's policy on hate speech. The social networking behemoth prohibits singling out individuals based on race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or disease. Notice who's missing? Ageism doesn't capture the same level of public attention as racism and sexism, but if you have any question about its prevalence, just look at the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission statistics. Almost a quarter of the discrimination complaints filed with the commission are age-related, and the numbers are increasing.

The over-65 set is not only increasing in numbers (by 2030 the percentage of people age 65 and older is expected to increase from almost 13 percent to almost 20 percent, according to data from the Stanford Center on Longevity), they are also healthier and more active than in previous generations. Does their increasing presence — not only in nursing homes, senior centers, and doctor's offices, but also in senior management suites, in music venues, on our highways, and in shopping centers — predict an increase in ageism? Researchers say it's hard to predict the future, but as they learn more about ageism they are also learning more about how to prevent it.

A Prescribed Old Age

Michael North, a Columbia University postdoctoral researcher, and his mentor, APS Past President

Susan Fiske of Princeton University, typed the words “old people should” into a Google search when developing a scale to measure how much people subscribe to what the researchers call “prescriptive stereotypes.” Typically, stereotypes describe features of a group — old people are slow, old people smell, or even, in the case of benevolent stereotypes, old people are kind. But the stereotypes that North and Fiske have uncovered in their research describe expectations for how older adults should behave regarding shared resources, such as healthcare, jobs, even space on the road.

The prescriptive stereotypes fall into three categories: active, envied resource *succession* or “Move aside, it’s my turn”; passive, shared resource *consumption*, or “Don’t spend our limited healthcare dollars on old people”; and one that is less concrete, called symbolic *identity* avoidance. We expect older adults to essentially act their age and not steal the identity of younger people, North and Fiske report in 2013 in *Psychological Assessment*.

Based on four studies with a total of 2,010 participants, Fiske and North developed a 20-item scale to measure how much people endorse these three stereotypes. They found that younger participants were more likely than older people to endorse the stereotypes. People of different ages are equally as likely to endorse descriptive stereotypes. Men scored higher on the scale than women. (Men also score higher than women on racial prejudice.) Asians scored higher than other racial groups on the scale, a finding that “contrasts with lay beliefs that traditions of Eastern filial piety reduce ageism,” they write. This and other studies found that African Americans score among the lowest on ageism, which “echoes prior findings of young African Americans’ respect for their elders,” they write.

In another new study, younger participants were more likely to judge prescription-violating older adults as being incapable and less warm, Fiske and North report in 2013 in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. (Those who don’t fit the prescriptive stereotypes of older people may stay on the job into their 70s instead of making room for younger workers to move up, or may choose to have elective surgical procedures in their 90s, using up medical resources.) But younger people did not care that much about how young or middle-aged people behaved.

In the workforce, older employees are viewed as having many more negative traits than positive ones, as a meta-analysis in 2011 in *Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* demonstrates. The analysis included field and laboratory studies dating back to the 1970s. Age negatively affected advancement, selection, evaluations, and ratings of interpersonal skills. However, it had a positive effect on ratings of reliability. These attitudes toward older workers held true over the decades and have showed no signs of abating, says coauthor Cort Rudolph, an industrial and organizational psychologist at Saint Louis University.

Ageism Gets to Your Heart, Health, and Head

New research indicates that being ageist could harm your health. Scientists analyzed data from the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging on the ageist attitudes of 440 people ages 18 to 49. Having negative stereotypes of older adults was associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular disease years later, Levy and her colleagues reported in 2009 in *Psychological Science*. In the study, 25 percent of people who held negative stereotypes had a heart attack 30 years later, and only 13 percent of people with positive views of the elderly suffered the same fate.

A person's belief about being old is also associated with how well they recover from disability, Levy and her colleagues reported in a research letter to the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 2012. Almost 600 healthy participants of a Connecticut health plan, ages 70 and older, were asked monthly between 1998 to 2008: "When you think of old persons, what are the first five words that come to mind?" Participants with positive age stereotypes were 44 percent more likely to fully recover from a severe disability than were those with negative age stereotypes, that study showed. Her team's other research suggests that a positive stereotype may promote recovery by limiting cardiovascular response to stress, enhancing self-efficacy, and increasing engagement in healthy behaviors, Levy says.

Ageism affects memory performance as well. Participants from the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging who held more negative stereotypes about older adults had a 30 percent greater decline in their memory 40 years later, compared with people who viewed old age more favorably, Levy and colleagues reported in 2011 in the *Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*. In another small study of people in their 60s, researchers led by Catherine Haslam of the University of Exeter found that 70 percent of participants scored in the dementia range on a cognitive test when under stereotype threat, compared with 14 percent of test-takers not under the threat, they reported in 2012 in *Psychology and Aging*.

However, stereotype threat can improve performance in some cases, report Sarah Barber, a postdoctoral researcher, and Mara Mather, professor of gerontology and psychology at the University of Southern California, in an article in press in *Psychological Science*. Normally on memory assessments, test-takers get points for remembering items. So the researchers tested the effects of rewarding people for remembering items and also rewarding them for not forgetting items.

In the experiment, the team gave some study participants, who were in their mid- and late-60s, money for remembering an item. They gave another group money at the outset and then took some back if those participants forgot an item. When under a stereotype threat, the test-takers did slightly better — but only when the outcome was losing money. Why? Stereotype threat causes older people to focus on avoiding losses, and people do better on cognitive tests when their focus matches the reward, notes Mather.

"In the aging literature we've never seen stereotype threat improve memory," says Mather. The team is now testing a modified version of a standard memory test, in which test-takers will be told that they lose points for forgetting items, she says.

Putting a Stop to Ageism

Promoting collaboration between people of different age groups is a primary way to conquer ageist attitudes. Focusing on creating positive experiences between generations will be more successful than educating or training people about ageism, Rudolph and others say.

Ageism research still tends to lump "older people" together as one homogenous group, according to North and Fiske. So do policymakers — consider that everyone over 65 is categorized as a "senior." Even stereotypes describe conditions, such as being frail, that apply primarily to the oldest age groups. We need to distinguish between the active "young-old" and the potentially more impaired "old-old," North and Fiske write in a 2013 issue of *Social Issues and Policy Review*.

Older adults are commonly stereotyped as sweet and incompetent, but psychological scientists are only now studying traits that improve with age, North says. We know that compared with younger workers, older people tend to be more knowledgeable, have more experience, have greater emotional stability, and are able “to stand back and see the big picture,” Fiske said in an interview for the website *Over 50 and Out of Work*. As we do appreciate what remains and improves with age, however, it’s important to not view the natural aging process as unusual or deviant, Fiske and North write.

So the question remains: Will the increasing numbers of older adults cause an increase or decrease in ageism? “Ageism could get worse — but it could get better,” says Rudolph, expressing an opinion shared by other researchers. The fact that older people are working longer or are rejoining the workforce post-retirement could heighten conflicts in the workplace, Rudolph says. Meanwhile, younger people are more educated and being promoted more quickly than older workers were at the same age.

But their sheer numbers may give older people a greater say in how our country is run, says Erdman Palmore, 83, professor emeritus at Duke University’s Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development.

“Older people vote in greater frequency, and it may result in more positive legislation and activities to reduce ageism,” he says. He’s also optimistic that “society is moving towards more equal treatment, opposing prejudices in a lot of areas like gay marriage and not just racial relations and sexism.”

When asked whether ageism will increase or decrease, North said, “I usually hedge that one, but there are arguments for both sides. Personally, I’m an optimist, so I think it will get better. As more older people show they can be productive ... I think the perceptions of what people can or can’t do will change.”

References and Further Reading

US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission statistics,
www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/statistics/enforcement/adea.cfm

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