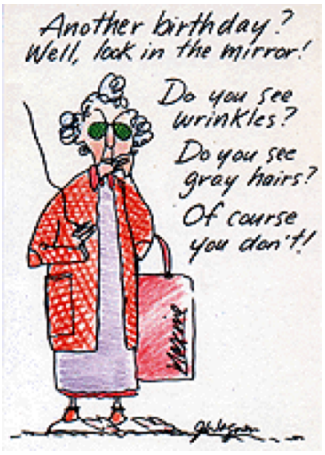
Ageism: An Introduction



Your eyesight's gone!

. . . but you look so natural and lifelike!

American society has been described as maintaining a stereotypic and often negative perception of older adults (Busse, 1968). This negative and/or stereotypic perception of aging and aged individuals is readily apparent in such areas as language, media, and humor. For example, such commonly used phrases as "over the hill" and "don't be an old fuddy-duddy" denote old age as a period of impotency and incompetency (Nuessel, 1982). The term used to describe this stereotypic and often negative bias against older adults is "ageism" (Butler, 1969).

Ageism can be defined as "any attitude, action, or institutional structure which subordinates a person or group because of age or any assignment of roles in society purely on the basis of age" (Traxler, 1980, p. 4). As an "ism", ageism reflects a prejudice in society against older adults.

Ageism, however, is different from other "isms" (sexism, racism etc.), for primarily two reasons. First, age classification is not static. An individual's age classification changes as one progresses through the life cycle. Thus, age classification is characterized by continual change, while the other classification systems traditionally used by society such as race and gender remain constant. Second, no one is exempt from at some point achieving the status of old, and therefore, unless they die at an early age, experiencing ageism. The later is an important distinction as ageism can thus affect the individual on two levels. First, the individual may be ageist with respect to others. That is s/he may stereotype other people on the basis of age. Second, the individual may be ageist with respect to self. Thus, ageist attitudes may affect the self concept.

Much research has been conducted concerning ageism. However, the empirical evidence is inconclusive. Some research demonstrates the existence of ageist attitudes (Golde & Kogan, 1959; Kastenbaum & Durkee, 1964a, 1964b; Tuckman & Lorge, 1953) and other research does not (Brubaker & Powers, 1976; Schonfield, 1985). This discrepancy is most likely the result of methodological differences and, in particular, methodological errors. A brief discussion of the major methodological errors or problems found in ageism research may be helpful in clarifying this point.

The first major problem is that the majority of ageism research suffers from a mono-method bias. In other words, each study used only one method to operationally define the ageism construct. Methods commonly

used have included sentence completion (Golde & Kogan, 1959), semantic differential (Kogan & Wallach, 1961; Rosencranz & McNevin, 1969), Likert scales (Kilty & Feld, 1976), and adjective checklists (Aaronson, 1966). The problem inherent in the use of a mono-method is that any effect found may be an artifact of the method employed rather than the construct under study. Thus, a researcher should employ more than one method to look for consistency in the results.

Another problem, according to Kogan (1979) is the use of within-subjects designs in ageism research. In other words, a subject will be asked to complete a questionnaire regarding both younger and older adults. Kogan asserts that by using this methodology, age is pushed to the foreground of a subject's mind. The subject thus becomes aware that the researcher is looking for age differences. Therefore, age differences are found.

The use of primarily younger populations to study ageism represents another problem with ageism research. The majority of ageism research uses children, adolescents, or young adults as subjects and examines their perception of older adults. Only a few studies have examined the perceptions of the population whom the construct affects most - older adults. Those studies which have used an older subject population have unfortunately used primarily institutionalized individuals as subjects (Kastenbaum & Durkee, 1964a; Tuckman & Lavell, 1957). Therefore, they do not represent the vast majority of older adults.

Another problem with much of ageism research is that it only examines the negative stereotypes of old age. More recent studies have suggested that while attitudes toward the aged are increasingly positive, they are still stereotypic (Austin, 1985). Therefore, ageism has been expanded to include positive stereotypic images. However, these are rarely studied (Brubaker & Powers, 1976).

Two additional problems are primarily theoretical in nature. First, ageism research rarely examines or attempts to understand the causes of ageism. Thus, while much theoretical work has been conducted concerning the factors contributing to ageism, little empirical research has been conducted in this area. Second, ageism research rarely examines the interaction between ageism and other "isms". As many individuals are in a position to experience more than one prejudice, the interaction between these prejudices needs to be examined.

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