

## Tilburg University

### Ageism

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# Ageism: An Old Concept From New Perspectives

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The term ageism was coined by Robert Butler over 50 years ago (Butler, 1969). Since then, the term has gone through numerous transformations, which reflect the nuances within the term (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018). However, it was only in 2021 that the World Health Organization launched the first ever global report on ageism in recognition of its detrimental impact on the quality of life, well-being, health, and life expectancy of each and every one of us (World Health Organization, 2021).

The current definition of ageism acknowledges its multi-dimensional nature and manifestation as stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination against, but also in favor of, people because of their age. Ageism is manifested at the micro, intraindividual level through the internalization of ageist stereotypes throughout the life course; at the meso, interpersonal level in social relations; and at the macro, institutional level through policies and regulations (World Health Organization, 2021).

This special issue aims to offer a broad and innovative perspective on ageism. The first section addresses *new developments in the conceptualization of ageism*. This section focuses not only on the negative side of ageism, but also on benevolent ageism, which is manifested in protective attitudes and behaviors towards older persons because of their age, following the stereotype of older persons as a vulnerable group that needs protection. The first article by Sublett and Bisconti examines benevolent perceptions of older persons from their own perspective and their relationship to environmental mastery. The study reports that perceptions of ageist benevolent experiences are associated with reduced environmental mastery, defined as one's perceived ability to choose or change his or her surroundings. This association is partially accounted for by decreased metamemory confidence and is moderated by self-compassion towards oneself. The next article by Gans and colleagues stresses benevolent versus hostile ageist acts directed towards older persons. The authors report that benevolent acts are seen as more acceptable than hostile ageism. The article also examines intersectionality, thus highlighting other forms of "ism" in addition to ageism. Next in this section, the article by Frey and Bisconti uses qualitative research to explore "new" older persons' stereotypes, such as the "OK, boomer" stereotype. Hence, the article highlights contemporary societal changes associated with the construction of old

age and older persons as closed-minded, offensive, and extremely out of touch.

The second section concerns *the manifestation of ageism: between traditional and underexplored arenas*. The first article addresses ageism in the workforce (Tybjerg-Jeppesen et al.). The article highlights how intergenerational workplace climate affects self-perceived aging, work engagement, and turnover intentions in an age-diverse sample. The study by Lagacé and colleagues shows how knowledge sharing practices in the workforce account for the relationship between intergroup contacts and positive views about older workers as well as age-based discrimination. The study stresses the importance of promoting age diversity in the workplace.

The following four articles address the manifestation of ageism in social relations. Jung and Kim use a multi-level analysis to examine whether the association between perceived age discrimination and happiness varies based on the overall level of age discrimination in the environment. The study provides support to the social norm hypothesis that predicts a weaker association between perceived age discrimination and happiness in environments of high average levels of age discrimination. Next, Rosell and Vergés show how ageism is positively associated with loneliness and in turn with depressive and anxious symptoms. Shiovitz-Ezra and colleagues report on the short- and medium-term effects of ageism on loneliness in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, Weissberger and colleagues highlight the interpersonal manifestations of ageism. The article stresses the association between ageist attitudes, subjective age, and vulnerability to financial exploitation, thus addressing an under-explored link between ageism and elder abuse.

Ageism in relation to the design, use, and acceptance of technology is addressed by two articles. The first examines the perceptions of staff, advocates, and developers concerning the implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) in long term care (LTC). Using a qualitative design, the study demonstrates how negative scripts about aging, care, and the technological capacity of older persons evolve in sociotechnical ageism around the development of AI applications in LTC (Barbosa Neves et al.). Related to these concepts, the article by Mannheim and colleagues examines the role of ageism in technology acceptance. The article places ageism within the context of the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology model. Initial quantitative findings suggest that (self-)ageism and

negative attitudes towards older persons using technology might have a role in behavioral intentions to use digital technology.

The next two articles examine the association between ageism and the environment. Using a multi-level linear regression, Chan and colleagues examine the association between the neighborhood-built environment and ageism. The authors report that more parks are associated with lower levels of ageism, even in low income and low education environments. More libraries are associated with lower levels of ageism, but only in high income environments. Ayalon and Roy, in turn, evaluate the relationship between ageist attitudes and worries about climate change and willingness to act. The study shows that holding more negative prescriptive views towards older persons can serve as an incentive to act pro-environmentally and at the same time also is associated with concerns and worries about the changing climate.

Ageism also is present in the media and in music preferences. Allen and colleagues explore the social exclusion of older persons from media reports during the pandemic by interviewing LTC residents, administrators, and journalists. Gvili and Bodner examine the relationship between ageism and attitudes towards music produced in different periods. The study shows that ageist attitudes are negatively associated with liking old songs among young and middle-aged participants. Young participants also demonstrate a negative link between ageist attitudes and liking intermediate-age songs. However, no associations between ageism and liking new songs are reported.

The third section concerns *innovative methods to explore the concept of ageism*. This section relies on innovations in qualitative and quantitative methods to explore nuances in the manifestations of ageism. Keskinen and Nikander illustrate the use of qualitative longitudinal research to understand the diverse experiences of ageism. Relying on four longitudinal narratives of individuals of the same age, the authors demonstrate how interviewees “do,” “undo,” and “challenge” ageism over time. Ng and Indran rely on texts written in the past 210 years to examine the association between old age and occupations’ status. The article demonstrates how the association between old age and different occupations can result in reduced ageism.

The next section addresses *interventions to reduce or prevent ageism*. Levy and Apriceno report the results of a systematic review and meta-analysis to examine intervention strategies to reduce ageism towards older persons. The study concludes that both education about aging and positive intergenerational contact reduce ageism.

The last section concerns a *book review*. The book “Breaking the age code: How your beliefs about aging determine how long & well you live,” by Becca Levy outlines the importance of ageist beliefs in our aging

process. The book, reviewed by Peterson, highlights the strong connection between the body and the mind by showing how diseases which have been considered age-related, such as cardiovascular disease or memory problems, are highly related to the way older persons perceive their own aging.

The contributions contained in this special issue show both the broad spectrum of manifestations of ageism and the extent to which it permeates a multitude of areas of life. In doing so, the studies cast the spotlight on those areas of the lifeworld, where older persons are and can be confronted with ageism. Despite varied perspectives and diverse methods used, this special issue ends with a call to broaden the research on the topic of ageism in years to come. Particularly, there is a need to further the research on interventions that reduce or prevent ageism towards older persons. There is also a need to better understand the role of policy and social campaigns in reducing ageism towards older persons.

Moreover, we as editors must admit that the voice of older persons is certainly underrepresented in the present issue. To gauge the correspondence of our scientific concepts and findings on ageism to the subjective meaning of the problem for older persons, it is necessary to confront this academic knowledge with older persons’ subjective perspective. Against this backdrop, we call for future research to take the findings presented in this special issue back to the field and explore how older persons themselves talk about their own experiences facing and confronting ageism.

As research methods continue to evolve, and the body of knowledge on ageism is growing we expect to have additional opportunities to understand the origins, manifestations, and consequences of ageism in a variety of under-explored contexts and intersections. These opportunities will contribute to more refined theories and understanding of the personal and social ramifications of ageism.

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