Definition: **ageism** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Prejudice against people because of their age. Ageism often takes the form of discrimination against older job applicants.

In contrast to discrimination on the basis of gender, race, or disability, ageism has not been legislated against in the UK. Several organizations support rights for older people, however, for example Help the Aged (founded in 1961), Age Concern (founded as an independent federation of charities in 1971), and Heyday, a membership organization launched by Age Concern in 2006 which subsumed the Association of Retired Persons (founded in 1988).

Summary Article: **AGEISM**

from *The Encyclopedia of Elder Care*

Age Discrimination in Employment Act, ADEA, chronological age, discrimination, employment, gerontology, individual ageism, institutional ageism, Medicare, older adult, prejudice

Adult, Ageism, Discrimination (Psychology), Employment, Geriatrics, Medicare, Prejudice

Ageism, a concept made popular by Robert Butler (1969), is a way to describe prejudice and discrimination against individuals who occupy a specific chronological age. Ageism is therefore an all-encompassing concept that refers to negative beliefs, thoughts, and practices that disadvantage individuals who are defined by chronological age. Although typically used in reference to older individuals, the concept is applicable when prejudice and/or discrimination are practiced against any individual or group of individuals who are defined by chronological age. Just as an individual’s sex or race can be a marker for negative attitudes and unfair or discriminatory treatment, one’s chronological age or even a perception of one’s chronological age can be a marker for such attitudes and treatment. Furthermore, ageism can be individual or institutional, implicit or explicit (Levy & Macdonald, 2016).

Individual ageism occurs when a person feels or acts in a discriminatory way because of chronological age. For example, a person could tell an ageist joke, publicly espouse the myth that older individuals are “all bad drivers,” or avoid talking to an elderly individual because of ideas about what that individual might be like because of age. An individual employer might also avoid hiring or promoting an individual once after seeing an individual’s age. Institutional ageism is more complex than individual ageism. Institutional ageism is practiced through the enactment and adherence to laws, rules, policies, and practices that systematically disadvantage older individuals. For example, a mandatory retirement age would be considered institutional ageism. Widespread denials of mortgage or credit card applications, grandparents’ rights to gain custody of grandchildren, or teenagers’ rights to make personal medical decisions, if based on the implementation of ageist policies, could all be considered clear-cut and explicit examples of institutional ageism.

Institutional ageism is not always clear-cut or even purposeful, however. Ageism may also refer to the practice of rendering older individuals as useless, a drain on economic resources and a social and...
economic threat to society. It could also be exemplified by a lack of attention to widespread abuses, such as the lack of attention to elder abuse in state policy. This is the difference between explicit and implicit ageism. Whether ageism is implicit or explicit depends on the perpetrator's intentions, whether that perpetrator is an individual, law, or policy. When an individual expresses ageism with awareness to actions, thoughts, or feelings, it is considered *explicit* ageism. That is to say, the individual purposefully behaves, feels, or acts in an ageist way. *Implicit* ageism, on the other hand, is an expression of prejudice or discrimination in which the perpetrator does not intend to discriminate. Implicit ageism is not only more typical, but also it is more likely to be expressed in a negative way. For example, a common negative and implicitly ageist behavior is to use an overly accommodating or condescending tone (even *baby talk* or elderspeak) when interacting with older adults. Individuals who use such tones with older individuals do not always intend to be ageist; in fact, they might view their actions as helpful or well intentioned. This type of speech, however, is buried in a negative stereotype that older adults are incapable individuals who are child-like in their capacities.

Ageism may be more acceptable than other *isms* in society because of the many stereotypes that exist in the United States and elsewhere about older individuals. Older adults are often constructed in popular culture as sad, lonely, impoverished, greedy, frail, dependent, and stupid, as well as unable to handle important decisions. Similar judgments are made about teenagers and young adults, reminding us that ageism affects multiple age cohorts simultaneously. For example, in June 2009, Pixar Animation Studios released the animation film *Up*, in which a newly widowed “curmudgeon,” Mr. Wilkinson, attaches his long-lived-in home to hundreds of colorful balloons and floats toward Paradise Falls, Venezuela, instead of being forced by court order, by two aides in medical scrubs, and a “paddy wagon” to move to a retirement community. Although well intentioned as a feel-good movie, the underlying message of this film is that older adults are incapable of making their own decisions, and children, the “do-gooders” of society, are victims to older adults’ choices.

Most older adults claim to have experienced ageist treatment. The most prevalent type of ageist incidents is initiated by a general disrespect for older persons and assumed (yet false) connections about sickness and growing old. For example, it might be assumed that people walk with a limp because they are old, instead of merely injured. In other words, once they reach a certain age individuals are equated with their medical conditions and illnesses rather than viewed as the individuals they still are. In addition, older individuals’ desires are overridden by younger family members and medical providers at times, simply because an assumption is made that they do not have their own best interests at heart. Although most incidents of ageism occur at an individual level, ageism is also addressed at the policy level to protect older individuals’ civil rights.

In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) to address ageism in the work environment. It promotes the employment of older persons based on their ability rather than their age, prohibits arbitrary age discrimination in employment, and helps employers and workers find ways of meeting problems arising from the impact of age on employment (Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, 2017). The ADEA protects individuals older than 40 years from ageist hiring practices (e.g., when a company refuses to hire a worker older than 50 years). Before the ADEA, employers could discriminate in hiring practices, working conditions, and termination practices for employment (e.g., stating a person is too young or old for a job). In addition, the ADEA prohibits forced retirement and guarantees reinstatement of employment or retroactive pay if the ageist offense is found to be intentional. However, most acts of ageism are not explicit or intentional;
they are implicit, or unintentional. ADEA is a policy that protects older workers and individuals, the result of which has increased employment of older workers. However, it has not eradicated personal ageist feelings. Approximately 64% of older persons have been, or have seen someone else be, the victim of ageism at work (Fleck, 2014). Yet, age discrimination cases are nearly impossible to prove because employers can find other reasons to discriminate against older adults in the workforce.

Perhaps one of the reasons ageism is such a widely accepted social phenomenon is because of the negative language associated with growing old. For example, we express ageism when we say, “Don't be an old maid!” or, “Stop acting like an old geezer!” Negative language extends beyond what words we choose to use personally as well. In the 1980s, older adults were characterized as “greedy geezers” as initial cuts in Social Security were made, and those sentiments are still housed within debates about Social Security and Medicare today. There is also negative language situated around the Baby Boomers, a generation of individuals born between 1946 and 1964 that is just now entering old age. Baby Boomers are being blamed for creating an economic and social “crisis” in American society because of a shift in the demographics of the population.

Students, practitioners, and scholars of age and aging should pay close attention to both structural and personal instances of ageism in everyday interactions, studies, and work. Many scholars of aging have suggested that ageism is even buried within the discipline and practice of gerontology; thus practitioners should be especially careful when considering the theories used and the sociopolitical contexts of growing old that surround research projects and gerontological practice. While working to solve societal and individual issues and problems related to aging, it is also necessary to check whether the theories used, the studies constructed, and the policies influenced and enacted are not unintentionally ageist.

See also Elderspeak; Employment.

REFERENCES


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