

EXPOSING AGEISM

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Introduction

Throughout much of the past century, old age was considered as a social problem (Matcha, 1997). However, a sociological analysis of old age clearly indicates that the weak position of older people in society is ultimately a result of hegemonic ideological manoeuvres that keep older persons out of power relationships and exclude them from accessing various material and social resources (Scrutton, 1990). Sociologists refer to discrimination on the basis of age by the term "Ageism". Although ageism may affect the young as well as the old, my concern here is with the older members of society. In the latter sense, ageism refers to a "systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this of skin colour and gender" (Butler, 1987, p. 22). The concept of ageism was brought to the fore by Maggie Kuhn, a senior citizen who founded the Gray Panthers to fight against age discrimination after she was forced to retire from her job at the United Presbyterian Church. Presently the most widely accepted definition of ageism is "prejudice and discrimination against older people based on the belief that ageing makes people less attractive, intelligent and productive" (Ferraro, 1992, p. 296). Without doubt, the concept of 'ageism' is highly institutionalised in today's society. Consider for example, *Roget's Thesaurus* citation of synonyms for "elderly":

Old age, anno domini; pensionable age; advanced years; grey hairs, white hairs, old person; senescence, declining years, vale of years, evening of one's days, winter of life, weakness; second childhood, dotage ... senility, deterioration ... matured; overblown, run to

seed; not so young as one was; no chicken, past one's prime, getting on ... hoary-headed, long in the tooth ... moribund ... drivelling, doddering ...
(Tyler, 1986, p. 66)

In contemporary societies, ageism is considered to be a powerful discriminatory force on a par with racism and sexism, and manifests itself as a complex and subtle phenomenon in historical, cultural, social, psychological, and ideological dimensions (Butler, 1994). However, unlike sexism and racism, most people have not even heard of ageism or have only heard of it very recently; ageism affects everybody irrespective of race and gender and, unlike the physical signs of race and gender, the signs of old age are gradual and subtle (Palmore, 1990). In some social quarters it is even highly worrying that ageism is giving way to 'gerontophobia', a "fear of growing old or fear or hatred of the aged" (Hillier and Barrow, 1999, p. 18).

This article presents three distinct aims, namely, to provide an analytic overview of the notion of ageism, to discuss how ageism manifests itself in the public sphere, and finally, to present a rationale on which to establish an anti-ageist practice.

Ageism: An Analytic Overview

Although some researchers point out that the major factors that are thought to cause ageism include socialisation processes (Victor, 1994), industrialisation (McGowan, 1996), and retirement policies (Laczko and Phillipson, 1991), other researchers argue that the reality surrounding ageism is far more complex. In fact, Hugman's (1994) summary of the idiosyncrasies found in a historical and contemporary analysis of ageism indicated clearly that the case is

surely not as straightforward as these reports would have us believe. Sokolovsky (1993, quoted in Hendricks, 1995) pointed out that discussions of ageism must not fall into the trap of an overly simplistic distinction between pre- and post industrialisation, since anthropological cross-cultural and historical research found serious faults with such an approach (Posner, 1995). In fact, ageism is hardly a new phenomenon. As early as 2500 BC, the Egyptians referred to old age as a time of mental deterioration. Similarly, the Romans (approx. 216 BC) referred to old age as a disease (De Beauvoir, 1977). Moreover, ageism is not a uniform cross-cultural phenomenon. There appears to be a great variation as to the treatment that older adults receive, ranging from extreme reverence and respect to abandonment and deprivation. For example, men in the Middle East view old age as life's summit, with older men viewed as having attained high status and prestige. In fact, the word "sheik" originally meant "old man" (Woolf, 2000). Even women's status and power does increase in some cultures following menopause. Woolf (ibid.) cited studies to indicate that old widows and post-menopausal women have great power in Japanese families and traditional societies respectively. The latter in fact grant older women greater sexual freedom, the right to participate in ritual and in the political realm of the society, and a decrease in the amount of work required in the home.

Ageism is a complex of beliefs which condones the use of age as a means of recognizing a particular social group depicting the members of that group in negative, stereotypical terms, which consequently generates and reinforces a fear of the ageing process and a denigration of older persons (Hughes, 1995). Ageism is maintained in the form of primarily negative stereotypes and myths concerning the older adult. Traxler (1980, quoted in Woolf, 2000) outlined four factors that have contributed to this negative image of aging. *The first* factor consists of the fear of death in Western society. As such, death is felt and perceived as an offence to the self rather than a normal and foreseeable part of the life course. This can be compared with

Eastern societies where life and death are all part of an unbroken cycle, with death and life being closely intertwined. To be a person, in Western society, however, means that one must be alive and in control of the events of one's life. Therefore, death is dreaded. As death is feared, old age is also viewed with alarm since the two are seen as synonymous in Western society. The *second* factor is the emphasis on youth culture in society. For example, the media place a high emphasis on early life, bodily attractiveness, and sexual characteristics. The elderly are mostly disregarded or represented in an off-putting manner. The emphasis on youth not only affects how older individuals are perceived but also how older individuals become aware of themselves. Persons who are dependent on corporal looks and youth for their identity are consequently more likely to undergo a decrease of self-worth with age. The emphasis on production, denoted assiduously in terms of economic capability, represents the *third* factor contributing to ageism. Yet, both ends of the life cycle represented by children and the aged, are viewed as unproductive, with the middle-aged perceived as carrying the burdens imposed by both the other groups. Children, however, are not discriminated against since they are viewed as having impending economic potential; in a way, they are seen as an 'economic investment'. Economically, older adults are perceived as a financial liability, and upon retirement, the older adult is no longer viewed as economically productive and is thus undervalued. The *fourth* factor contributing to ageism is the manner in which ageing was originally scientifically investigated. Poorly controlled gerontological studies have buttressed the unenthusiastic image of older adults. When ageing was originally studied, scientists went to long-term care institutions where the aged were easy to find. However, only a small percentage of older persons is institutionalised. Therefore, the early gerontological research was based upon older individuals with poor functional abilities. Undoubtedly, research that focuses on healthy, community-dwelling older populations is highly warranted.

In recent decades, ageism has taken on a new

form. Termed as 'new ageism', it *"stereotypes the elderly in terms of the characteristics of the least capable, least healthy, and the least alert of the elderly ... it perceives the older person as, in effect, a relatively helpless dependent individual who requires the support services of agencies ... it encourages the development of services without adequate concern as to whether the outcome of these services contributes to reduction of freedom for participants to make decisions controlling their lives"*.

(Kalish, 1978, p. 389)

In other words, this refers to a tendency to patronise the elderly and be overly solicitous. It may involve attitudes that discourage the elderly from taking risks, dissuade them from exercising, and even deny their sexuality. In fact, one study on adjustment to life in a nursing home found that the most vulnerable individuals were those who had lost control of their own lives. One woman in her 80s described the devastating loss she felt after her children sold her home and belongings without consulting her first so she would not have to worry about it (Quadagno, 1999).

Ageism in the Public Sphere

The consequences of ageism are to be observed in the social and economic policies which discriminate against older people as a group in the allocation of resources of all kinds; in the attitudes and values of people generally in society and the way that these shape the treatment of, and behaviour towards, older persons in both professional and personal encounters; in the experiences of older people and the ways in which old age, and attitudes to it, interact with other aspects of social identity such as race, gender, sexuality and disability to manufacture highly personalised experiences as well as feelings about oneself as an older person (Hughes, 1995). Since older people are both a group in themselves and, at the same time, an aggregate of infinitely diverse individuals (Atchley, 2000), an investigation of the effects of ageism has to be carried out from two perspectives: "older persons as a group" and

"older persons as a diversity". The first three parts, that is "images of old age", "employment and retirement", and "economics of old age", highlight how ageism affects all older persons. Subsequently, the remaining parts focus on "social class" and "older women" to signify how certain categories of older persons are more negatively discriminated against than others.

Images of Old Age

An analysis of societal images of old age indicates clearly that old persons are consistently represented in a negative manner (Kart, 1997). According to McGowan, (1996) the dominant myths surrounding old age include

- (i) inevitable mental decline ... inability to learn,
- (ii) inevitable senility,
- (iii) inevitable physical decline,
- (iv) inevitable dependence and need of institutionalisation,
- (v) inability to contribute usefully and productivity,
- (vi) older persons being a drain on society, a burden,
- (vii) older persons' lack of interest in and capacity for sex, and finally,
- (viii) that older people are all the same.

Victor (1994) has also added the stereotypes that older persons are socially isolated by their family and neglected by them, and that retirement is more problematic for men than for women. This is an important observation since visual images play a key role in the social construction of social life and can represent a form of symbolic stigmatisation against the experience of growing old (Featherstone, and Hepworth, 1996). Ageist images have been detected in western art and literature (Covey, 1991), humour (Victor, 1994), children's books and fairy-tales, literature and poetry (de Beauvoir, 1977), novels (Loughan, 1977, quoted in Gunter, 1998), children's television programmes (Gunter, 1998), newspaper reports (Blytheway, 1995), advertisements (Zhou and Chen, quoted in Gunter, 1998), birthday cards (ibid.), television commercials (Francher, 1983,

quoted in Gunter, 1998), music (Cohen and Kruschwitz, 1990), and the mass media (Vasil and Wass, 1993). Undoubtedly, the last, is perhaps the most powerful provider of ageist images and stereotypes. In television series, radio programmes, and cinema films older persons are in the background, and are mostly found in roles that are generally supporting characters rather than the heroes or heroines. Moreover, newspapers, tabloids and women's magazines are commonly interested in older persons as victims (Saito, 1995).

Employment and Retirement

In relation to employment and older persons, Kendig (1979, pp. 3 02-03) maintained that age discrimination exists mainly in the

- (i) "dismissal of older employees without cause",
- (ii) "involuntary retirement on an individual basis and not as an agreed condition of employment",
- (iii) "maximum age limitations for initial employment within an organisation with little or no supporting justification for such a requirement",
- (iv) "limitations placed on promotion or training based on age", and
- (v) "consideration of only younger employees for certain positions without valid occupational reasons for doing so".

Moreover, older persons are perceived as less efficient, less creative, less promotable, more resistant to change, slower, disinterested in training and retraining, incapable of adapting to change, undependable, costly, unable to meet the physical and mental demands of work, more rigid, and prone to illness and accidents ... passive, reserved, obsolete, and inflexible compared with younger workers.

(Cleveland and Shore, 1996, p. 630)

For those elders who are successful in keeping their occupation, they soon encounter a stronger type of age discrimination which is very difficult, if not impossible, to evade: *retirement*. The phenomenon of retirement has an immense

impact on both individuals and social grouping (ibid.). Retirement is oppressive because it was established and shaped in order to accommodate structural social dynamics, especially the emergence of industrialisation and post-industrialisation, rather than to satisfy the needs of older persons (Phillipson, 1999). The discriminatory effects of retirement were succinctly summarised by Troisi when he stated that:

[mandatory retirement] does not only demoralise older persons but may entail their being sidelined by their own society, largely engendering their dependency and placing them in a precarious environment. (Troisi, 1996, p. 69)

Walker (1986) refuted the widespread assumption that the cessation of older people from participation in the workforce is to be attributed to changes in the individual characteristics of older persons. Consequently, retirement can be regarded as an oppressive political response of wealthy industrialised countries to population ageing and as the driving force behind the wider development of ageism in modern societies. Phillipson (1983) saw retirement as only a solution to escalating unemployment and argued that, through retirement,

the old are sacrificed in the corporations' drive for order and efficiency: speed-ups on the line, work-measurement techniques, etc., sealing the fate of the ageing worker. (Phillipson, 1982, p. 155, quoted in Turner, 1987, p. 121)

Economics and Old Age

Recently, researching the affinity between the economy and old age, economic analysts have maintained that older persons are gaining from social security benefits as much as they earned in their middle-age, and that therefore the aged are relatively well off (Enright, 1994). This has resulted in erroneous belief that older persons are 'woopies' - well-off individuals whose incomes place them in the top 20 per cent of the total individual income distribution (Falkingham and Victor, 1991). However, the *European Union Observatory Barometer on Ageing* (1992)

found that "poverty and low incomes persist among a significant minority of older people in most countries" (Walker and Maltby, 1997, p. 53). Moreover, it was also reported that 71.7% of older persons surveyed thought that their pensions were "too low" (*ibid.*, p. 61), and the conclusion is that "the concentration of poverty and dependency in old age has persisted" despite thirty years of welfare state provision, with the blame put on politicians for utilising pension policies to regulate the economy rather than meeting the needs of older persons.

Research in social gerontology has been slow to incorporate *social class* within its analysis, despite the fact that social class is a key factor in influencing the experience of old age in all societies (Moody, 1998). It is lamentable that up to last year work on this topic was "surprisingly underdeveloped" (Estes, 1999, p. 23). Sociological studies have shown clearly that older persons are heterogeneous and highly differentiated by class variables (e.g. Evandrou and Victor, 1989), highlighting the presence of both "affluent" and "marginal" older persons (Nelson, 1982). Marginal elderly are likely to be individuals living alone, female, coming from an ethnic minority, and of advanced years. They are individuals who worked as unskilled or semiskilled labourers, or domestic workers who rarely have access to occupational income to supplement state pensions. As may be expected, research studies report that it is the "marginal" elderly who are affected most negatively by ageism (*ibid.*) - with the middle class entering later life with better health, more financial resources, better housing, and fewer worries (Harris, 1990). As Walker points out "There are those, mainly salaried workers, who are able to choose whether or not to leave work at the retirement age ... Then there are those, predominantly manual workers, who are effectively coerced into retirement and sometimes early retirement by poor working conditions, ill-health, redundancy and unemployment" (Walker, 1986, p. 10). Research indicated that marginal older persons are invisible in the political arena, demonstrate higher mortality levels (Victor, 1994), suffer more acute illnesses and are more likely to be

classified as disabled (*ibid.*). Moreover, the *cumulative advantage hypothesis* argues that, not only are older persons differentiated by economic variables, but that the retirement transition may actually increase previous intracohort differentiation (O'Rand and Henretta, 1999). More specifically, middle- and upper-class persons bring several advantages into old age that raise their relative class position in relation to working class older persons (Pampel, 1998).

Double Jeopardy: The Case of Older Women

Finally, there is no doubt that ageism and sexism combine together to the extent that there are significant material and social differences with prejudicial effects between older men and older women. 'Double jeopardy' refers to the fact that women experience a worse ageing experience than men due to the double combination of sexism and ageism (Gibson, 1996; Sontag, 1997). As stated earlier, it is lamentable that although the older population is predominantly female, for a number of years the gender dimension of ageing was completely neglected, leading to accusations of "gender-obliviousness" (Phillipson, and Walker, 1986). In plain terms, double jeopardy consists of adding the disadvantages of another ascribed status, in this case femininity (Pampel, 1998). This 'double standard of ageing' manifests itself in various aspects. Older women are more commonly ridiculed and referred to by derogatory colloquialisms in jokes, fictional literature, poems, the media industry, and many film and theatrical productions. Older women are also less likely to earn a full pension due to breaks in their employment patterns during maternity and family care (Eurolink Age, 1995), or to be covered by private pensions when compared to older men (Matcha, 1997). It is thus not surprising that studies (e.g. Arber and Ginn, 1991) indicate a higher incidence of poverty amongst older women. Moreover research has indicated that widowed older persons were economically worse off than divorcees or never-married older persons (Bound, Duncan, Laren and Oleinick, 1991). In respect to older males, research also indicated

that older women suffer more failing health and disabilities (Victor, 1994, Crimmings, Saito, and Reynolds, 1997), had a more limited school education (Eurolink Age, 1995), and are more likely to be victims of crime (Arber and Ginn, 1991). Moreover, since most older women spend their final stage of life as widows or as single persons, they find it very difficult to find available care-givers, forcing many to become dependent and live in institutions (Peace, 1986).

Resisting Ageism

It is frequently argued that the only effective political action in favour of older persons is organised collective campaigning. One organisation which can be taken as a model for collective action by older persons in the future is the *Gray Panther* movement. This movement was launched in 1970 by Maggie Kuhn (1902-1995) and five other involuntary retirees to protest against the Vietnam War. Eventually, the Gray Panthers evolved into a movement which militated in favour of older persons' grievances. The Gray Panthers currently investigate and analyse various aspects of old age, as well as providing recommendations in favour of equitable national health plans, affordable housing, flexible work and retirement schedules, and increased intergenerational networking. The Gray Panthers, together with other 'gray lobby' groups such as the American Association of Retired Persons and National Council of Senior Citizens, have been effective in staving off large cuts in elder health care policies, reductions in Social Security, and higher taxes in Social Security benefits, as proposed by the Clinton administration. However, despite the fact that commentators often point to the potential voting power of the elderly, there is no evidence at this time that older persons are likely to exercise this power and to vote as a block and, as a result, politicians by and large have not responded to the threat (Binstock, 1997). Hughes (1995) argued that the values which must underpin the desire to implement an anti-ageist perspective in both personal encounters and professional practice are both simple and complex: simple in their expression but highly complex in their translation into behaviour and practice.

However, Hughes (ibid.) argued that all anti-ageist practices are to be founded on the following principles:

Personhood: a belief in personhood perceives the older individual first and foremost as a person, rather than old;

Citizenship: older persons are not just consumers but citizens with their full rights and entitlements;

Celebration: it is important that society celebrates old age and acknowledges the attainment of old age as a noteworthy achievement for both the individual and, in so far as more people are living longer, for society as a whole.

Hughes (ibid) also suggests five principles of anti-ageist practice which are to be used as criteria against which the outcome of a particular practice or intervention for the older person might be evaluated. These are:

Empowerment: older persons must get together to have, or acquire, control over their own life and all that goes with power and control - freedom, autonomy, dignity and feelings of personal self-worth;

Participation: older persons have a right to share, and be involved, in decisions;

Choice: older persons must be given the opportunity to make choices and to determine as far as one can the outcome of events;

Integration: older people want to live in mixed communities and not segregated with people with whom they might share one particular characteristic; and

Normalisation: older persons must be enabled to carry on living in the same way, with the same or better quality of life as other people in society.

Undoubtedly, other principal ways of reducing ageism include education (of oneself first), propaganda and persuasion to change attitudes, informing friends and relatives about ageism, protesting against ageism in the media, and joining organisations to fight ageism. One also needs to highlight the advantages of ageing since most people are not aware of the many advantages of old age. There are two types of advantages, those that primarily benefit society and those that chiefly improve the quality of life of older persons (Palmore, 1990). Society benefits from older persons in five major ways since older persons tend to:

- (i) *be more law-abiding:* older persons are much less prone to criminal behaviour than younger persons
- (ii) *participate more regularly in political arenas:* elder persons are better citizens in the sense that they vote more frequently, are more interested and informed about public issues, contact public officials more often, and often serve in public office;
- (iii) *partake frequently in voluntary activities:* many older persons serve society through maintaining or increasing their participation in voluntary organisations and churches;
- (iv) *be better workers:* most studies show that in most jobs older persons (over age 50) perform as well as or better than younger workers on most measures (except speeded reaction times); and
- (v) *have greater wisdom:* although there are no agreed-upon measures of wisdom, because wisdom is dependent on years of experience and the maturity that comes from experience, it seems probable that elders tend to be wiser than younger persons.

Despite the increasing institutionalisation of ageism, and the advent of “new ageism”, the future is bright. This is due to the fact that there are currently at least five trends which promise to reduce ageism in the future. These include:

- *an increasing knowledge about ageing:* there is an increasing interest in ageing among the public, the mass media, the government, and academia, as well as more undergraduate and graduate courses in gerontology - this knowledge will surely reduce both prejudice and discrimination against elders;
- *a growing social scientific interest on ageing:* as more old-age interest groups are being founded this has consequently resulted in an increase of gerontological research that has been reducing ageism both by revealing the facts about ageing and by finding ways to treat and prevent disease in old age;
- *improving health status of elders:* partly as a result of research and better medical care and healthier lifestyles, older persons as a group are getting healthier - thus decreasing the stereotype that most older persons are sick or disabled;
- *increasing education levels of elders:* as each incoming older generation has more educational attainment levels and qualifications than its predecessor, older persons are becoming more able to engage in intergenerational activities;
- *increasing affluence of older persons:* as a result of less poverty among older persons than in previous years, this has tended to undermine the stereotype of the pitiful elderly depending on charity and handouts; and finally
- *declining racism and sexism:* as a result of people having become more aware of prejudice and discrimination in general and less likely to approve or practice it; legislation designed to combat racism and sexism also tends to reduce ageism - moreover, people working to reduce ageism can learn from the successes and failures of other movements.

Conclusion

In conclusion it has become clear that the defeat of ageism is essentially a political question. Gerontologists have the obligation to engage in a critical reflection on how older persons are being oppressed and discriminated against on the basis of their old age. However, reiterating my firm belief in praxis, we must not stop here and we need to combine reflection with appropriate direct action towards the democratic transformation of society. This is, in my opinion, the biggest challenge for gerontological studies in the new millennium: *highlighting and acting upon the fact that albeit current society professes to be in favour of older persons and purports to be so, we are in fact patronising older people, making decisions for them, telling funny stories about them, and feeling good that they are being "looked after"*. This process must not be based on individual effort but must be co-ordinated within an intergenerational perspective that seeks to transform the current political, social and economic contexts towards the emancipation of all older persons in general.

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