

# Ageism Stakes Its Claim in the Social Sciences

Perhaps because of its complexity and self-perpetuating nature, ageism is finally piquing the interest of science, advocacy movements, and society in general.

Tom is not just a typical baby boomer; he has always been one of the hipper ones. A regular participant in Civil Rights marches, a Woodstock attendee, an open proponent of free love, and a career-long jazz bassist, Tom has always managed to stay at the epicenter of cool.

But as the years pass, Tom has noticed subtle changes in the way people view him. On the street, complete strangers have begun to smile at him, almost apologetically. When he sports his historically popular leather jacket, people today don't praise his fashion sense. When he goes out to eat, he feels ever-so-subtly that the wait staff doesn't pay as much attention to him as they do to other customers—and when they do, they often talk to him in an exaggerated, slow, high pitch, as if he were a child. Sure, people are polite, but Tom can't help but feel less relevant, less connected to the mainstream. The change has been so gradual, yet palpable, that he wonders exactly how and when things got to be this way.

## Age, Aging, and Ageism Are Under the Radar

Tom's perplexity can be chalked up to a number of issues. One is that the aging process sneaks up on everyone, and any subtle treatment might also go largely unnoticed, by perpetrators and

recipients alike. Indeed, save for annual (usually derogatory) birthday-related jokes, people rarely acknowledge getting older as they go about their everyday lives. Despite the fact that everyone is aging, the subject remains largely—and sometimes surprisingly—taboo.

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Similarly, the study of ageism—the systematic stereotyping of and discriminating against people on the basis of their age—also has been relatively neglected in the social sciences. This might be for practical reasons: Until recently, national-level, systematic research initiatives for studying the issue have been relatively scant (Carstensen and Hartel, 2006). A different meta-explanation is that ignoring the study of ageism might represent a bias in and of itself, where researchers are either in denial of their own aging, or guilty of overlooking ageism as a prejudice, due to its unusually socially condoned nature (Nelson, 2005; North and Fiske, 2012).

Nevertheless, the importance of understanding ageism is undeniable, for reasons that go well

beyond the practical realities of an aging population. For one thing, it is widely known that the three fundamental categories of social perception are age, race, and gender (Fiske, 1998). Moreover, age is the only category composed of groups that every living person eventually joins, provided sufficient life span. Nevertheless, when it comes to understanding forms of discrimination, the latter two categories have enjoyed greater research attention—not to mention greater social movement momentum. Age has remained below the radar, and ageism is mostly a “second-class civil rights issue” (Cohen, 2009). Fortunately, this is changing—albeit slowly.

### Why Does Ageism Persist?

Given the universality of aging, that ageism persists at all is perplexing at first glance. Although the topic is generally understudied, the following scholarly theories/perspectives may help explain its rootedness in our culture and society:

**Death anxiety.** A common theory is that aging is uniquely threatening, deriving from people’s anxieties surrounding their own mortality. Per this “terror management” theoretical perspective, older adults are pushed aside, physically and psychologically, as a coping mechanism (Greenberg, Schimel, and Mertens, 2004), thereby spurring ageism. The threat of getting older is so closely linked with death anxiety that older adults themselves often dis-identify as “old” (Weiss and Freund, 2012).

**Sociocultural trends.** Other explanations derive from a variety of historical events, which gradually devalued the roles of elders in society as primary sources of storytelling and wisdom. Such trends include the introduction of the printing press and increased literacy (improving record-keeping and de-emphasizing verbal narratives) and the Industrial Revolution (emphasizing youth-oriented manual labor; Nelson, 2005). These trends have relegated older adults

to a generally noncompetitive, low-status position in society—generating interpersonal perceptions of benevolence, but low competence (Cuddy and Fiske, 2004).

**Generational tensions.** A different theory de-emphasizes mortality and focuses more on practical assets (jobs, healthcare) and symbolic ones (“coolness”). This standpoint conceptualizes ageism as deriving from generational tensions over resources, and argues that a uniquely intergenerational form of ageism derives from expectations for older generations to make way for new ones, literally and figuratively—including explicit expectations to provide financial support and to transfer wealth (North and Fiske, 2013a, 2013b).

### Ageism in Relation to Other “isms”

Ageism shares parallels with other prejudices, such as racism and sexism. Like any form of bias, ageism effectively reduces individuals to broad, stereotypical categories—often unfairly. In the case of older adults, common ageist stereotypes might suggest that any individual older than age 65 is mentally and physically incapacitated, even though the overwhelming majority of older

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adults are not (Plassman et al., 2007). Much like sexism—in which good intentions can result in the subjugation of women (e.g., believing that women “should be cherished and protected by men”; Glick and Fiske, 1996)—ageism often takes a benevolent form, such as when people (including health practitioners) communicate in well-intentioned but demeaning “elderspeak,” resembling baby talk (Kemper, 1994).

Also, like other forms of prejudice, ageism’s targets are at risk of internalizing negative ex-

pectations and prejudicing themselves. In a psychological process known as “stereotype threat,” older adults performed worse on a reading task framed as indicative of memory, as compared to a comparable group of older adults who performed the same task under the guise of reading comprehension (Kang and Chasteen, 2009). The same internalization-based underperformance pattern has applied to women in math-focused domains and ethnic minorities within standardized testing contexts (Steele, Spencer, and Aronson, 2002).

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Nevertheless, ageism is unique in a variety of respects. One is its noted status of being more socially condoned than other forms of bias—to the point of people overlooking it as an extant form of prejudice. This obliviousness leads to alarming consequences: In healthcare, doctors might dismissively undertreat certain symptoms as part of the “natural aging process,” and medical schools spend comparatively little time on geriatric training (North and Fiske, 2012). More broadly, many believe ageism to be based on greater truth than other stereotypes, given the “inevitability” of age-based decline—though research increasingly shows that perceptions of declines in domains such as memory (Salthouse, 2011) and work performance (McEvoy and Cascio, 1989) are largely overblown.

Another important distinction is that, as noted, every person (if living long enough) eventually joins each age group—rendering ageism the only prejudice that eventually targets everyone. This also makes ageism self-contradictory, as virtually everyone strives to live a long time, while simultaneously moving toward joining a (mostly) undesirable social group. Perhaps as a result of

this—and adding to ageism’s complexity—older people are ageist, often holding negative attitudes toward “the elderly” (Nosek, Banaji, and Greenwald, 2002) and psychologically dis-identifying from their own chronological age group (Weiss and Lang, 2012). Ageism is unique in being actively perpetuated by its most at-risk population—older adults.

**Can Ageism Change?**

All of this might paint a pessimistic and seemingly inevitable picture. After all, if older adults are ageist, then who is not? Some elements of the issue present significant challenges, as negative attitudes toward aging appear largely automatic and resistant to change.

Nevertheless, there are reasons for optimism, which include the following:

**A pressing societal need to accommodate the older population.** Demographic trends are making the issue of ageism virtually impossible to ignore, as societies around the world undergo unprecedented population aging. In the United States, already more than 13 percent of the population is older than 65 years of age, and, by 2030, that number will increase to at least 20 percent (Ortman, Velkoff, and Hogan, 2014). Meanwhile, a corresponding steady rise in labor-force participation among older age groups (Copeland, 2014) has coincided with a spike in age discrimination charges (increasing 66 percent from 1999 to 2011; Kreamer, 2012).

Society is thus being forced to accommodate the growing older population—considered by some to be world’s primary growing natural resource. According to a “contact hypothesis” prediction, an increased presence of older adults should bring about enhanced respect, provided they are not seen as directly impeding younger generations (Dovidio and Gaertner, 1999).


**A growing body of research.** Taking note of these demographic trends, a rising number of social science researchers are enhancing scholarly knowledge on ageism, in fields like psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science,

and economics (North and Fiske, 2012). Such work not only covers the social policy implications of the issue, but also indirectly helps to combat it by identifying the positive qualities that come with age (e.g., wisdom and perspective-taking; Grossmann et al., 2010). All of this helps elucidate the ways in which older adults might be best utilized and properly valued in the modern world. This is a key ingredient for reducing prejudice, given perceptions of older adults as societal non-contributors (Cottrell and Neuberg, 2005).

**A growing advocacy movement.** Meanwhile, a community of writers and activists also are raising awareness about ageism's existence and potential interventions (as described elsewhere in this issue of *Generations*). Grassroots movements, such as The Radical Age Movement (<http://theradicalagemovement.com>), are working to generate and change the conversation around aging and ageism, much as those who protest to and speak out against

racism, sexism, and gay bigotry have accomplished success in their respective movements.

## Conclusion

Although scholarly focus on ageism has been comparatively sparse, demographic, economic, and political trends are beginning to change this. This increased amount of attention has begun to uncover the similarities, as well as surprising differences, of ageism compared with other forms of bias. Social scientific identification of exaggerated, negative age-based perceptions and positive aspects of aging—combined with growing advocacy movements—promise to rectify this emergent and uniquely universal social concern. 

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