

## AGEISM AND STEREOTYPES IN OLDER ADULTS

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**Abstract:** The term "ageism" was coined in 1969 by American psychiatrist Neil Robert Butler. Butler used "ageism" as a synonym for "starizem" (Slovenian term for ageism) and defined it as a combination of three interconnected elements: prejudice towards older people, age, and aging; discriminatory treatment of older people; and institutional practices and policies that reinforce and maintain stereotypes about older adults (<https://sl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Starizem>). Stereotypes about older people are often generalizations based on false or oversimplified beliefs about older individuals. These stereotypes may relate to physical, cognitive, emotional, or social characteristics, but they fail to account for the fact that older adults are an extremely diverse group with different experiences, abilities, and needs.

**Keywords:** aging, older adults, age, stereotypes, ageism

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Ageism (or age discrimination) is the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people based on their age. It is a social problem that can affect people of all age groups, but it is most common among older adults. Scientists consider ageism to be a significant social problem that negatively affects individuals of all ages, especially the elderly. Research indicates that ageism leads to a reduction in quality of life, social exclusion, and a worsening of mental health. One of the most recent studies was conducted by Kokubun (2024), who analyzed data from 55 countries collected as part of the World Values Survey. Ageism

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manifests in various forms, which are presented in the following subchapters.

Ageism is a multifaceted concept that has undergone numerous changes and become more complex over time. Although many definitions of ageism have been proposed over the years, Iversen et al. (2009) offered their own. The authors describe ageism as negative or positive stereotypes, prejudice, and/or discrimination toward (or in favor of) aging people, encompassing the affective, cognitive, and behavioral components of aging, conscious and unconscious dimensions, as well as the individual and societal/institutional significance of the problem (ibid.). Examples include assumptions about individuals' capabilities, interests, or needs based solely on their age, such as the stereotype that older people are less productive or technologically illiterate.

Nelson (2002) addressed stereotypes about older people and how they affect society and individuals. The author analyzes various forms of ageism and how stereotypes can change over time. Rupp & Vodanovich (2006), on the other hand, focused their research on age stereotypes and discrimination in the workplace, analyzing how interactions with younger colleagues influence the formation of these stereotypes.

V. Švab (2013) finds that stereotypes about old age in Slovenia are often negative and associated with ideas of declining physical and mental capabilities, loneliness, and dependence among older people. He emphasizes that the elderly are often portrayed as unworthy, passive members of society who are no longer productive or important. He states that negative stereotypes about old age affect the self-confidence and quality of life of older adults. Many feel excluded from social activities, which leads to loneliness and a feeling of worthlessness. He warns of the belief that aging always brings physical and mental decline. This view leads to the marginalization of older adults and diminishes their social status.

## **2. STEREOTYPES ABOUT OLDER ADULTS**

Stereotypes about older people are often generalizations based on false or oversimplified beliefs about older individuals. These stereotypes may relate to physical, cognitive, emotional, or social characteristics, but they fail to account for the fact that older adults are an extremely diverse

group with different experiences, abilities, and needs. Below are some of the most commonly used stereotypes:

### **A. Older People Are Physically Incapable**

The stereotype that older people are physically incapable is not necessarily true. Many older people maintain physical activity and good physical health. In fact, numerous researchers agree that physical activity can help prevent many health problems and improve the quality of life for older people. These include Caspersen, Powell & Christenson (1985). Hajduk & Sušanj (2011) also believe that the stereotype that older people are physically incapable is often false, as many older adults maintain good physical condition and engage in physical activities. Numerous researchers in Slovenia agree that physical activity significantly contributes to maintaining health in later years.

### **B. Older People Are Not Technically Literate**

The Pew Research Center (2017) notes that many assume older people cannot master modern technology. However, research shows that many older people successfully use digital devices such as smartphones, computers, and communication applications. Although there is a common belief that older people are not adept at using technology, research in Slovenia (Kovačič & Dobrila, 2017) shows that older adults are increasingly engaging in the world of digital technology, despite certain existing barriers.

### **C. Older People Are Backward and Closed to New Ideas**

There is a belief that older people are inclined toward traditional thinking and are not open to change. However, research shows (Palmore, 2001) that many older people embrace new ideas and are active participants in contemporary social and political life. The stereotype that older people are closed to new ideas often does not align with reality. Zupančič (2014) states that Slovenian research indicates that many older people are open to new approaches and changes, especially in the context of education and technology.

## **D. Older People Are Forgetful or Mentally Unstable**

Lichtenberg & Stiles (2010) believe that although dementia and other mental illnesses become more common with age, they are not an inevitable consequence of aging. Many older people maintain mental clarity and actively participate in intellectual activities. Ropret (2011) also believes that although cognitive disorders such as dementia are more common in older people, many older adults maintain mental clarity and are active in intellectual life.

## **E. Older People Are Lonely and Depressed**

A common stereotype is that older people are often lonely and depressed, but numerous studies show that many older people maintain rich social networks and enjoy an active life, according to Koželj & Novak (2013). Chou (2013) finds that the stereotype of loneliness and depression among older people often does not reflect reality. Many older people have rich social lives, participate in social activities, and have strong social support networks.

## **F. Older People Are Not Productive or Useful to Society**

Binstock & George (2006) believe there is a perception that older people are less productive, but numerous studies show that many older people still actively participate in social activities, volunteering, and work, contributing to the development of society. Černigoj (2012) adds that the stereotype that older people are no longer productive is often false, as many older people still actively participate in society, either through volunteering or work.

In conclusion, stereotypes about older people in the Slovenian context are often a reflection of false beliefs and poor opinions held by younger individuals, which fail to take into account the actual diversity and abilities of older persons. Slovenian research and literature often highlight the importance of recognizing the value of older people and their active participation in social life. It is important to realize that age does not necessarily mean a reduction in abilities or quality of life. By considering these facts, we can enable a more inclusive and respectful place for older

people in society. Based on their knowledge, abilities, and experience, they certainly deserve this. This work largely contributes to understanding how stereotypes shape the social role of the elderly and highlights the importance of their integration into society to reduce social exclusion and discrimination. It emphasizes the need for greater connection between generations and better mutual communication to reduce age discrimination and improve attitudes toward the elderly. More on this in the next subchapter.

### **3. BRIDGING STEREOTYPES ABOUT OLDER ADULTS**

Stereotypes about older adults stem from a combination of historical, cultural, social, and psychological factors. These prejudices are often rooted in false beliefs, fear of aging, and a lack of contact between generations.

One of the main reasons for stereotypes about the elderly is the fear of aging and death, as a society that prioritizes youth, beauty, and productivity often rejects aging as something negative. People project their fear of their own aging onto the elderly, which leads to prejudice. The media often reproduces negative stereotypes, where the elderly are presented as weak, inflexible, unproductive, or a burden on society. The lack of positive role models contributes to reinforcing these prejudices. Western culture, for example, often glorifies youth, productivity, and rapid adaptation to change, while associating old age with physical weakness, dependence, and backwardness. Finally, health problems in older adults (e.g., dementia, poorer physical condition) also create the stereotype that all older people are sick, slow, or unable to contribute to society.

Let's look at what scientists think about this pressing problem or what they are researching.

Butler (2008), a pioneer in gerontology, for example, researches the social impact of longevity and warns of the need to change the perception of older adults as inactive members of society. Applewhite (2019) examines how stereotypes about the elderly affect their role in society and proposes strategies for overcoming prejudice, including positive role models and awareness. Carstensen (2009) highlights the positive aspects of aging and promotes a model of active aging based on the inclusion of older adults in social activities. Kenda Jež (2010) in Slovenia studies the

representation of older adults in Slovenian media and the impact of these representations on social stereotypes and the self-perception of the elderly. She is joined by Ramovš (2003), an expert in the field of research on the lives of older adults and everything related to them, who researches stereotypes about the elderly in Slovenian society and proposes approaches to increase intergenerational cooperation and the active involvement of older adults.

#### **4. REASONS FOR STEREOTYPES ABOUT OLDER ADULTS**

Stereotypes about older adults are often the result of various social, cultural, and psychological factors that shape the perception of aging and the elderly in society. Positive views on aging contribute to a longer and healthier life. B. Levy (2022) researches how beliefs about aging shape age stereotypes and how these affect the physical and mental health of older adults. She emphasizes that positive views on aging can contribute to a longer and healthier life. Brockman (2014) researches the presence of age discrimination in the workplace, including how stereotypes affect the employment and promotion of older adults. The author also analyzes the impact of ageism on the productivity and health of older workers. Atchley (2020) offers an overview of how society perceives aging and how stereotypes about the elderly are formed and affect their life opportunities. He also extensively analyzes the impact of these stereotypes on the quality of life of older people. Zupančič (2017) researches the social exclusion of older adults in Slovenia and the role of stereotypes and discrimination in their exclusion from various social spheres. He emphasizes the need for greater inclusion of older adults in society. J. Fatur (2019) focuses on the phenomenon of age discrimination in the Slovenian context. He studies both the legal and social aspects of discrimination against older adults in Slovenia and proposes measures to reduce age stereotypes in society. These and many other authors have dedicated their research to various aspects of age stereotypes, discrimination, and the social inclusion of older adults in Slovenia, contributing to a better understanding and management of these challenges in the Slovenian environment.

So, how can we bridge stereotypes about older adults? Certainly, through education, as this increases knowledge about the potential of the elderly and the barriers caused by stereotypes. We must change the image of older adults in the media by showing their active and positive roles. We should try to include older adults in volunteer activities, employment programs, and intergenerational projects as often as possible. Finally, it should be emphasized that it is necessary to continuously support research that proves the value of older adults to society and to formulate policies that reduce age discrimination. Of course, understanding the reasons for stereotypes is key, as it is the first step towards eliminating them and creating a more inclusive society.

Stereotypes about older adults are therefore generalized beliefs about a group of people who are older. These stereotypes are often negative, false, or exaggerated and do not take into account the individual differences among older adults. They can relate to various areas of life, such as:

- **Physical abilities:** "All older people are weak and sick."
- **Cognitive abilities:** "All older people are forgetful and slow."
- **Personality:** "All older people are grumpy and stubborn."
- **Technological literacy:** "All older people cannot cope with technology."
- **Productivity:** "All older people are unproductive and cannot contribute to society."

Negative stereotypes have numerous harmful consequences, as they can lead to discrimination (ageism) against older adults in various fields, such as employment, healthcare, and social interactions (as already stated). Because of them, older adults can be denied opportunities for learning, working, or active participation in society. Research shows that negative stereotypes about aging can even negatively affect the physical and mental health of older adults and, what is particularly bad, they can contribute to the social isolation of older adults, as others may avoid them or not take them seriously. Therefore, this area needs to be treated very carefully, helping the elderly, standing by them, and above all, understanding them and realizing that we will all be old one day. If, of course, this is made possible for us, because the path there is anything but easy and simple.

## 5. DISCRIMINATION OR AGEISM

Ageism ("Starizem") is a type of stigma (also a synonym for ageism, which is why one form is often used for the other and vice versa) that encompasses stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination against individuals based on their age. Stereotypes are beliefs based on generalized or untrue facts. Prejudices develop when we accept stereotypes as true and they evoke strong emotions in us. Discrimination, however, represents the behavioral component that leads to different behavior towards a certain group of people to whom the stereotypes and prejudices apply.

Ageism in older adulthood often involves stereotypes that reflect mistaken beliefs about the poorer abilities, lower productivity, or lower value of older individuals. In a society that emphasizes youth and vitality as one of the greatest ideals, older adults can often be treated discriminatorily – e.g., as a burden or unproductive members of society. Ageism differs from other forms of discrimination (e.g., discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, skin color) in that all of us can experience it in one form or another if we reach an older age (<https://podprimostarejse.si/dusevno-zdravje/soocanje-s-tezkimi-zivljenjskimi-situacijami-starizem/>). On this website, you can also find information about the psychological and sociological origin of ageism, the impact of ageism on physical and mental health, all reinforced by sources.

In conclusion, it is necessary to actively fight against ageism, as well as against all other forms of stigmatization. As a society, we can achieve this in several ways, namely through/with:

- Tolerant, respectful communication without creating one's own conclusions about a person
- Attention to one's own stereotypes and prejudices
- Early and continuous education of the whole society
- Change of attitude at the level of local and national policy
- Encouraging intergenerational connection and cooperation, and cooperation with the media (ibid.)

Unequal treatment based on age, for example, in employment, healthcare, or access to services. Discrimination against older adults, also known as ageism, refers to prejudice, stereotypes, and unequal treatment

of individuals based on their age. Reasons for this type of discrimination include negative stereotypes about aging, lack of education about age, and social norms that glorify youth. The consequences of ageism can be social exclusion, reduced employment opportunities, limited access to health services, and worsening mental and physical health of older people.

Ageism is an important risk factor for the abuse of older persons. As defined by the independent expert, ageism refers to stereotypes, prejudices, and/or discriminatory acts or practices against older persons based on their chronological age or on the belief that the person is "old". Negative stereotypes and prejudices are the foundation of the concept of ageism and can lead to harmful consequences, including violence against older persons and their abuse and neglect ; for example, the older population can be treated as a burden on society. Stereotypes play a key role in maintaining the abuse of older persons and in hindering their access to appropriate care and support, and in many places also to access to legal remedies and compensation (Mahler, 2023).

Ageism, discrimination based on age, is a deeply rooted social problem that affects individuals, economies, and societies as a whole. Despite efforts for equality and respect for human rights, ageism is still often expressed in stereotypes, prejudices, and unequal treatment of older persons in various areas of life, including employment, healthcare, social inclusion, and culture. Discrimination against older adults, also known as ageism, is a global problem that has been addressed by numerous international authors. We list some of them:

- Nelson (2002) compiled contributions from various authors (Amy J. C. Cuddy, A. J. C. and Fiske, S. T.; Greenberg, J., Schimel, J. and Martens, A.; Levy, B. R, and. Banaji, M. R.) in his edited volume, who research stereotypes and prejudices against older persons and their consequences at the social and individual level.
- Abrams, Johnson, Swift (2016) present the results of extensive research on public attitudes toward age and aging in Great Britain, with an emphasis on the prevalence of ageism and its impacts.
- Sargeant (2011) explores in her book how age discrimination intertwines with other forms of discrimination, such as gender, race, and disability, and offers insight into the complexity of multiple discrimination.

- Button & Frandsen (2018) analyzed the impact of age discrimination in the labor market in the US in their study, using economic models to assess the effects of ageism on the employment opportunities of older workers.
- Macnicol (2006) offers an in-depth analysis of the historical and contemporary aspects of age discrimination in his book, with a special emphasis on employment and social security policies.

Lešnik and Tomažič (2017) defined the concept of ageism in their paper through the views of various domestic and foreign experts. Let's look at what they think about this interesting and increasingly relevant area of older adults' lives.

Ageism (also *starizem*, *staromrzništvo*, *starostizem* in Slovenian literature) is the process of systematic discrimination, stereotyping, and devaluation of older adults solely because of their age (Kydd & Fleming, 2015). It is based on the chronological age of the individual, is quite widespread, and is only intensifying with the process of global population aging. It is manifested in the stigmatization of older adults due to their changed physical, psychological, and social abilities (Phillips, et al., 2010). Ageism is a pervasive, uncritical force that encroaches on all areas of social life. It can be encountered everywhere: in interpersonal relationships, in the fields of education, culture, politics, social work, and healthcare (Goriup, 2015). Lipič and Ovsenik (2015) believe that ageism is a reflection of a stratified society in which concrete mental fictions are the result of upbringing and examples from the environment, where older adults are presented only with negative stereotypical characteristics. In shaping relationships and interaction between people, stereotypes play an important role, as they influence an individual's behavior towards others (Kornadt & Rothermund, 2015).

Older adults who are exposed to stereotypes often internalize them, which leads to the self-fulfillment of attributed forms of behavior, lowers self-esteem (Stewart, et al., 2012), and causes stress that depletes the psychological resources needed for participation in self-care and the process of healthcare for the older adult (Rivera & Paredez, 2014). As a result, older adults are more frequently hospitalized and evaluate their own health more negatively (Ramírez & Palacios-Espinoza, 2016).

People often strive to be different from others, to stand out and be visible. Differentiation, however, becomes socially unacceptable when it

is based on an individual's personal circumstance without reason. At that point, differentiation becomes discrimination, which occurs in the form of individual, structural, and institutional discrimination (Kogovšek Šalamon & Petković, 2007). The increased interest in ageism in the last three decades coincides with the process of population aging and the desire to shape new social values, where chronological age will no longer be an appropriate indicator for the social construction of inevitable norms of behavior, lifestyles, and roles of the individual based on age (Šadl, 2007).

Although there has been slightly more talk about ageism in recent years and research points to the existence of ageism in the clinical setting (Rodgers & Gilmour, 2011), its extent is still unknown, as older adults rarely express their feelings that would let the environment know which actions affect them discriminatorily. Older adults are often not even aware of ageism, as it appears less obviously or more subtly. For example, the decision on the course and intensity of healthcare depends on the age of the patient.

Pečjak (2007) believes that ageism is a concept similar to racism and sexism. It is a kind of exclusion of older adults from social life. It is a feeling of threat, as there are more and more older people, and younger generations may feel threatened by their needs and demands. For Ramovš (2010), ageism is a kind of resistance to old people, aging, and old age, and the associated social or psychological neglect and devaluation of old people because of their age. Alford (2008) finds that ageism is an unconscious defense, mainly on the part of the young. Aging is usually associated with death and dying, and because people are afraid of death and dying, they want to separate themselves from it. The consequence is the distancing of people from the older population.

Žigon (2011) writes that regardless of whether ideas about aging are based on general socio-demographic data, personal opinions, or the image shaped by public opinion and social influences, aging is considered undesirable, and older adults are a less popular segment of the public. They often have to give up their jobs to younger and stereotypically more capable people. Relatives often move them to nursing homes, and then only remember them on personal and family holidays. Because people traditionally associate aging with images of illness, senility, and helplessness, it is considered just a step closer to death.

## 6. CONSEQUENCES OF AGEISM

The consequences of ageism are multi-layered. At the individual level, ageism can cause reduced self-esteem, social isolation, and poorer mental and physical health. At the societal level, it leads to the inefficient exploitation of the potential of older adults, which affects economic productivity and creates an additional burden on social and health security systems. In companies, ageism is reflected in reduced employment opportunities for older workers, leading to their premature retirement and the loss of valuable experience.

The fight against ageism requires a holistic approach that includes education, legislation, and cultural changes, states WHO (2021). Educational programs can help in breaking down myths and stereotypes about age and encouraging respect between generations. Anti-discrimination legislation must be strict and effective, which includes protecting older workers in the labor market. In addition, it is necessary to create inclusive policies that enable active aging, which includes access to lifelong learning, work opportunities, and involvement in social activities. Every individual bears the responsibility for recognizing and eliminating ageism in their behavior and relationships. Society as a whole must promote intergenerational solidarity and recognize that aging is a natural part of human life that brings both challenges and opportunities. Older persons play a key role in passing on knowledge, experience, and values that enrich society. At the societal level, ageism causes the ignoring of the productive and creative abilities of older adults who were forced to retire solely due to reaching a certain age. This leads to the inefficient exploitation of the potential of older adults, which affects economic productivity and creates an additional burden on social and health security systems ([https://opro.si/arhiv/predsodki-in-izkljucenost-stari/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://opro.si/arhiv/predsodki-in-izkljucenost-stari/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)).

## 7. CONCLUSION

We conclude that ageism is not just a problem for older adults; it is a problem for the whole society. By solving "this problem," we not only improve the lives of older adults but also build a more just, inclusive, and sustainable future for all generations. Awareness of the value of older

adults and the elimination of prejudices and discrimination based on age are key steps towards forming a society that values all stages of life.

Ageism and age-related stereotypes are deeply rooted in society and often operate subtly, but they have serious consequences for individuals and communities. They reduce people's dignity, limit their opportunities, and reinforce false beliefs about the abilities, value, and role of an individual based solely on their age. Such stereotypes do not only affect the elderly but also younger generations, as they create artificial divisions and misunderstanding between age groups.

To overcome ageism, it is crucial to develop critical thinking, encourage intergenerational dialogue, and raise awareness about the diversity of experiences and potential of people of all ages. Only by eliminating prejudices and consciously striving for respect and inclusion can we build a fairer society in which age will not be a measure of value, but part of a rich and diverse human experience.

Aging is therefore an inevitable part of the life cycle, but the social perception and experience of old age differ greatly, as Macuh and Raspor (2025) wrote in their scientific monograph entitled *Aging – Stigma or Challenge*. Instead of perceiving it as a natural and valuable process, aging is too often met with stigma, fueled by ageism and deeply rooted stereotypes. These are manifested in the belief that old age is synonymous with powerlessness, reduced abilities, and a burden on society. However, we can and must transform aging into a challenge, an opportunity for growth, wisdom, and continued contribution. Key to this is promoting intergenerational cooperation. As is the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and perspectives between different age groups, which enriches all involved. Young people can learn from the life experiences of older adults, and older adults can stay connected with new trends and technologies, thus reducing the digital divide. Such cooperation breaks down stereotypes and builds bridges of understanding.

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