
Preface

In social perception, people tend rather automatically to categorize others along three major dimensions: race, sex, and age (Kunda 1999). Ever since the early days of social psychology, researchers have been interested in the causes and consequences of such categorization, with specific focus on the stereotypes and prejudice that arise from this automatic social perception. Much empirical and theoretical attention has been devoted to the study of racism and sexism, but comparatively very little research in psychology has been directed at understanding what some refer to as the “third ism,” ageism (Barrow and Smith 1979). To illustrate this, consider the results of a PsycInfo database search I conducted minutes ago. I ran three searches and set up the search criteria to look for the words *racism*, *sexism*, and *ageism* anywhere in the abstract of each article. The results indicated 2,215 articles for racism, 1,085 articles for sexism, and a mere 215 articles with the term *ageism* in the citation (a title search yielded a similar pattern: 548, 249, and 68 articles, respectively). Clearly there has been a pattern of underinterest in ageism research in the mainstream psychological literature.

But why the lack of interest? There are a myriad of possible reasons, but perhaps the most obvious is that age prejudice is one of the most socially condoned, institutionalized forms of prejudice in the world—especially in the United States—today. For example, there is a whole industry in the greeting card business built around the “over the hill” theme. Such cards are often portrayed as humorous, but the essential message is that it is undesirable to get older. As you will see in reading the chapters of this book, most Americans tend to have little tolerance for older persons and very few reservations about harboring negative attitudes toward older people. Whatever the reasons for the comparative dearth of theoretical and empirical research on ageism among psychologists, it is clear that much more research is sorely needed.

According to the U. S. Bureau of the Census (1990), the number of people over age 65 is expected to double by 2030. This “graying of America” represents a great challenge to the social, political, medical, and economic structure of society, and it also represents a challenge for prejudice researchers. In about ten years, many baby boomers (those born roughly between 1946 and 1965) will begin to retire, and the population of the elderly will begin to mushroom. In preparation, the National Institute of Aging is issuing a massive push for grant proposals for researchers to begin, in earnest, programs of research to understand the psychological effects of aging. Prejudice researchers should seek to be at the forefront of this research.

This book is organized into three major sections, dealing with the origins of ageism, the effects of ageism, and reducing ageism and future directions.

Origins of Ageism

One of the unique features of ageism is that age, unlike race and sex, represents a category in which most people from the in-group (the young) will eventually (if they are fortunate) become a member of the out-group (older persons). Thus, it seems strange that young people would be prejudiced toward a group to which they will eventually belong. Where does this negative affect originate? To begin, Cuddy and Fiske examine the basic cognitive and affective processes underlying stereotyping and prejudice. They then present evidence from their research that supports earlier research (Brewer, Dull, and Lui 1981; Hummert 1990; Kite and Johnson 1988; Schmidt and Boland 1986) concluding that people have multiple, often contradictory views of older persons. Cuddy and Fiske suggest that today’s elders are seen as incompetent (low status) but warm (passive), and discuss the functional basis for the creation of prejudice against older people. Chapter 2, by Greenberg, Schimel, and Mertens, suggests that age prejudice arises out of a fear of our own mortality. These authors present evidence to support the contention that one likely reason that people develop prejudice against older persons is due to thoughts and feelings about their own mortality that are evoked at thinking about the older person. That is, merely thinking about (or seeing) an older person tends to arouse anxiety about the fact that one has a short time on earth, and the fear associated with such cognitions tends to provoke the perceiver to dislike the individual (or group) who elicits such fear. Greenberg’s terror management theory well for ageism by attributing it to our desire to

dissociate ourselves with any reminder of our own impending mortality.

In chapter 3, Levy and Banaji discuss their research on how age stereotypes can implicitly (without conscious awareness) affect our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Levy and Banaji make a compelling case for the notion that because there is a lack of strong hatred toward older persons coupled with a widespread, institutionalized acceptance of negative beliefs about older people, it is even more important to understand the effects of implicit cognitions about age. The authors show that avoiding thinking about automatically activated age stereotypes may be more difficult than we think. In chapter 4, Montepare and Zebrowitz present a detailed analysis of the developmental literature that indicated children learn age prejudice at a very early age. Additionally, structural changes in society have changed the extended family unit to a nuclear family, with grandparents often out of contact their grandchildren. The influence of media, peers, and parental attitudes toward older people also converges to foster in the child a negative impression of older people. Montepare and Zebrowitz conclude by suggesting directions for future research on the development of ageist attitudes in children.

Effects of Ageism

This section examines how ageist attitudes affect the targets of such prejudice (older persons), as well as the influence of ageism on the perceiver. Kite and Wagner start us off in chapter 5 with a social-cognition perspective on ageist attitudes. They discuss ways researchers have tried to measure ageism and the difference between positive and negative ageism. They then turn their attention to address reasons that we view older men and older women differently and conclude with suggestions about how various social psychological theories can advance the study of ageism. In chapter 6, McCann and Giles examine the devastating consequences of ageism for older persons in the workplace. They argue that a better understanding of workplace discrimination of older people will be attained through an examination of the ways older and younger persons communicate their attitudes, values, and expectations to each other. They then conclude by highlighting the need for further theory development and empirical inquiry in the area of intergenerational communication of ageism. Continuing the examination of age discrimination, Pasupathi and Löckenhoff take an in-depth look at a wide range of discriminatory behaviors, from policy to interpersonal actions. They introduce an

important distinction between age-differentiated behavior and ageist behavior. They then highlight unanswered questions in ageism discrimination research. In the last chapter of this section, Whitbourne and Sneed discuss the effects of ageism on the older person's sense of self and identity. As other chapters have aptly shown, our society favors the young and devalues older people. So Whitbourne and Sneed ask, What is it that allows some older individuals to maintain high self-esteem and sense of self-worth while other elders internalize society's negative views of older people and feel demoralized and a burden to others?

Reducing Ageism and Future Directions

In chapter 9, Golub, Filipowicz, and Langer discuss ageism from the perspective of Langer's theory of mindfulness. They suggest that mindfulness can account for how ageist attitudes are formed and how they are maintained, and also illuminate ways to reduce ageism. For example, they touch on a rather unique angle with regard to how ageism is perpetuated, suggesting that younger adults often create stereotype-perpetuating environments for older persons which foster dependence. We tend to categorize people rather automatically according to their age. Of course, a problem with this is that our stereotypes and prejudice associated with a certain age group could then also become automatically activated upon perception of that person.

While many of the chapters in the previous two sections have touched on the reduction of ageism and future directions of ageism research, the chapters in this section specifically focus on these issues. In chapter 10, Ng discusses the need to understand cross-cultural variations in attitudes toward older persons. Most ageism research has not considered this important perspective, and if we are to have a more accurate understanding of the factors that increase or decrease age prejudice, then it is crucial that we consider the ways that culture influences age-related attitudes. Braithwaite, in chapter 11, discusses ways that society can reduce stereotypes, prejudice, and the stigma associated with aging. She presents research suggesting that through policies and intervention programs, society can move toward ageism reduction. However, Braithwaite argues, it is only when society is willing and able to confront its fears about aging and loss (physical, status, social, economic) that it will be able to make significant inroads in the reduction of prejudice against older persons. Finally, Wilkinson and Ferraro nicely conclude the book with a detailed review of the history of ageism research, spanning over thirty years, to

present. They highlight the major findings in four areas of inquiry—language, physical appearance, media, and values—and discuss directions for future research on ageism.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this book will represent a loud and clear call to all prejudice researchers to examine the problem of ageism and find out ways to use their theoretical and empirical talents to address the issues that confront society as we just begin to scratch the surface of this long neglected area of prejudice research. This book addresses ageism from several different perspectives (e.g., gerontology, communication, psychology), and the distinguished chapter authors present the latest theoretical and empirical advances in our understanding of the causes and effects of ageism. Ideally, researchers will use the theory and findings set out here as a point of inspiration for their own future research on ageism and bring us ever closer to an understanding of how age prejudice begins, how it is maintained, and how it can be reduced.

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