
Ageism

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What is 'Ageism'?

- Stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against individuals or groups based on age (Butler, 1969)
- Can be:
 - Implicit
 - Explicit
 - Universal



Types of Ageism

Institutional

- Policies or practices that disadvantage certain age groups

Interpersonal

- Negative attitudes or behaviours in social interactions

Internalized

- When individuals adopt ageist beliefs about themselves

Institutional Ageism

- It is less visible but highly impactful, shaping opportunities, health, and societal attitudes.
- Intersectionality (e.g., older women face compounded discrimination).

Examples:

- Mandatory retirement policies.
- Age-based rationing in healthcare.



Age Discrimination



- Managers have a more negative view of older workers (age 60) compared to younger workers (age 30; Rosen & Jerdee, 1976)
 - Less capable, less adaptable, slower physically and mentally
- Younger people rated younger workers (<30 years old) more favourably than older workers
 - Older people showed no bias against any age group (Finkelstein et al., 1995)
- Older workers less likely to be interviewed for a job than younger workers (Finkelstein, 1997)

Institutional Ageism

Healthcare

- Age-based rationing of care and exclusion from clinical trials are common forms of institutional ageism (WHO report)
- Structural ageism in healthcare predicts negative age beliefs, which correlate with worse physical and mental health across 35 outcomes. (Levy, 2022)

Employment

- 61% of workers aged 45+ report experiencing age discrimination; 90% believe it is common.
- Recruitment ads emphasizing “young, dynamic teams” and lack of training opportunities for older employees (NCEA)

Global Policy

- Sustainable Development Goals prioritize reducing “premature mortality” (ages 15–70), implicitly devaluing older lives (Lloyd-Sherlock, 2016)

Psychological Theories Explaining Institutional Ageism

Ecosocial Framework

- Institutional ageism is a meso-level phenomenon, where organizational rules and practices perpetuate stereotypes and discrimination.

Stereotype Embodiment Theory (Levy, 2009)

- Institutional practices (e.g., age-based exclusion from training programs) reinforce these stereotypes, leading to self-fulfilling prophecies.

System Justification Theory

- People justify institutional ageist policies (e.g., “fair innings” argument in healthcare) as natural or fair, maintaining status quo.

Interpersonal Ageism



- Interpersonal ageism is pervasive and often invisible, expressed through everyday interactions.
- It has real psychological and health consequences, reinforcing stereotypes and reducing autonomy.
- Examples:
 - Assuming older adults are technologically incompetent.
 - Using patronizing speech (“elderspeak”).
 - Jokes about aging (“OK boomer,” birthday cards mocking age).

Interpersonal Ageism

Everyday Ageism Prevalence

- National Poll on Healthy Aging (University of Michigan, 2020):
- 82% of adults aged 50–80 report experiencing everyday ageism.
- 45% experience interpersonal ageism (e.g., assumptions about tech skills, memory).

Health Consequences

- Interpersonal ageism linked to poorer physical and mental health, including higher depression and loneliness (Allen et al., 2022)
- Subtle ageist behaviours (e.g., avoiding eye contact) reduce trust and increase stress responses in older adults (Ng et al., 2025)

Lived Experience

- Older adults describe interpersonal ageism as “lack of respect” in family and social settings.
- Often subtle and normalized, making it hard to confront.
- Li et al. (2024)

Psychological Theories Explaining Interpersonal Ageism

Social Identity Theory

- People categorise others into age-based in-groups and out-groups

Stereotype Embodiment Theory (Levy, 2009)

- Cultural stereotypes about aging become internalized and influence interactions.

Communication Accommodation Theory

- Younger people often modify speech when talking to older adults (e.g., slower, louder, simplified language).

Stereotype Threat

- When older adults sense negative expectations (e.g., "You'll probably forget this"), they may underperform in cognitive tasks, reinforcing stereotypes.

Internalised Ageism

- Internalized ageism is powerful and pervasive, influencing health, cognition, and identity.
- It begins early and accumulates over time, making prevention and awareness critical.
- Example:
 - An older adult avoids learning new technology because they believe “I’m too old to learn.”



Empirical Research on Interpersonal Ageism

Health Outcomes

- Negative age beliefs predict 7.5 years shorter lifespan
 - Negative stereotypes linked to higher risk of cardiovascular disease and depression.
- (Levy et al., 2002)

Cognitive Performance

- Older adults reminded of age stereotypes perform worse on memory tasks (Lamont et al., 2015)

Mental Health

- Internalized ageism correlates with loneliness, low self-esteem, and reduced life satisfaction (Szczeciński et al., 2020)

Psychological Theories Explaining Internalised Ageism

Stereotype Embodiment Theory (Levy, 2009)

- Age stereotypes are internalized across the lifespan and influence self-perceptions and behaviour.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

- Believing “older people are frail” can lead individuals to reduce physical activity, increasing frailty.

Social Comparison Theory

- Older adults compare themselves to youthful ideals promoted by media, leading to dissatisfaction and withdrawal

Identity Theory

- Aging challenges self-concept; internalized stereotypes shape identity

Why is Ageism Unique?



BIDIRECTIONAL

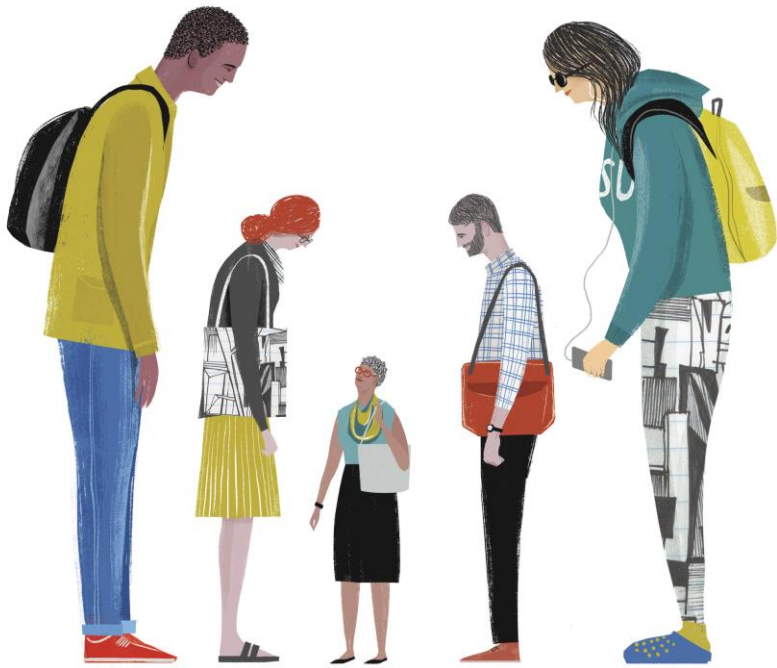


SOCIAL
ACCEPTABILITY



DYNAMIC

Ageism Is A Strange Prejudice To Have...



- Ageism is different to other forms of prejudice:
 - Prejudice against a group that we will (hopefully) one day be a member of
 - We may be very positive towards certain members of the group (parents, grandparents)
 - Hold positive and negative views about old people
 - But twice as many negative as positive views (Hummert, 1990; Schmidt & Boland, 1986)

So why do we have ageism?



Automatic vs Controlled Processes

Levy & Banaji (2002): Implicit Association Test (IAT) shows strong unconscious preference for younger over older adults.

Stereotype Activation & Application

Hess et al. (2004): Older adults judged less competent in memory tasks even when performance was equal.

The 'Elderly' as an Outgroup (SIT)

- Classical ingroup protection/outgroup derogation seen in most group studies
- Activate negative stereotypes about the outgroup
 - Photos of older people (outgroup) activate more accessibility to death-related concepts in younger (ingroup) members (Greenberg et al., 2004)
- Participants primed with stereotypes of the elderly walk more slowly afterwards (Dijksterhuis et al., 2002)



Stereotyping Theories

Stereotype Content Model (SCM) – Fiske et al., 2002

- High warmth, low competency (Cuddy et al., 2005)
- Often manifests as benevolent prejudice (North & Fiske, 2012)

Self-Stereotyping and Stereotype Threat

- Negative age stereotypes predict worse health outcomes and shorter lifespan (Levy, 1996)
- Older adults perform worse on cognitive tasks when reminded of age stereotypes (Lamont et al., 2015)

Terror management

Awareness of mortality increases prejudice toward groups that remind us of death.

Martens et al. (2005)

- Mortality salience experiments show participants rate older adults more negatively after being reminded of death.

Levy & Banaji (2002)

- Implicit age bias linked to existential anxiety.

(Levin & Levin, 1980)

- Gerontophobia: Fear of older people is a fear of our own impending end

Media & Cultural Narratives

Media Influence: Older adults often portrayed as frail or comic relief; youth linked to beauty and success.

Social Learning: Children internalise age stereotypes early through media and family discourse.

Research: Robinson et al. (2008): TV shows underrepresent older adults and depict them negatively.



Media and Ageism

Reinforces Negative Age Stereotypes

- Often portrays older adults as frail, dependent, or a burden (Camacho-Markina & Santos-Diez, 2025)
- negative descriptions of older adults outnumber positive ones by 6 to 1 (American Society on Aging, 2023)

Media Exposure Shapes Implicit Bias

- Long-term exposure to stereotypical news content creates negative implicit attitudes (Arendt & Northup, 2015)

Underrepresentation and Cultural Impact

- appear in only 6.6% of primetime TV characters, mostly in stereotypical roles (Markov & Yoon, 2020)
- Only 6.4% of ads feature people over 60

Consequences of Ageism



Psychological Consequences

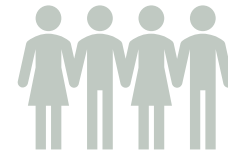
Self-Stereotyping (Stereotype Embodiment Theory; Levy, 2009)

Stereotype Threat



Behavioural Consequences

Workplace Discrimination
Healthcare Bias



Societal Consequences

Policy Implications
Intergenerational Tension

Are there any
positives?

Benevolent Ageism

Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002)

Social Developmental View

Tripartite Model of Attitudes:

- Cognitive: Beliefs that older adults need help.
- Affective: Feelings of sympathy or pity.
- Behavioural: Overaccommodation (e.g., speaking slowly, offering unsolicited help).

Empirical Research on Benevolent Ageism

Everyday Contexts

- Older targets offered help were rated as warmer but less competent, even when they declined assistance (Vale et al., 2020)

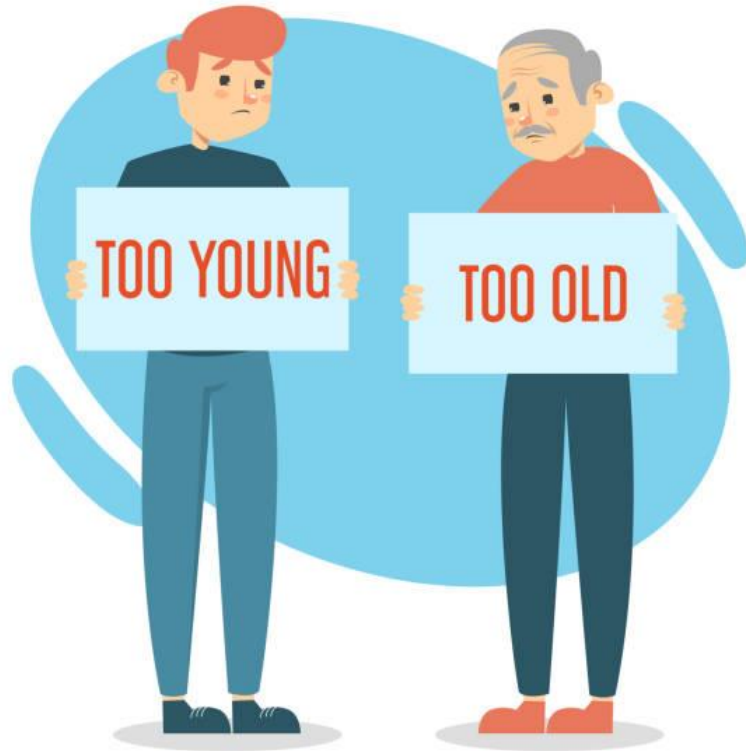
Social Media Analysis

- Messages framed older adults as “vulnerable” and “in need of protection,” reinforcing dependency stereotypes (Dossing & Craciun, 2020)

Perceived Acceptability

- found benevolent ageism widely tolerated across age groups (Gans et al., 2023)

Juvenile Ageism



- Juvenile ageism (also called anti-youth ageism or youngism) refers to negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination directed at adolescents and young adults because of their age
- Juvenile ageism is generationally focused, rooted in perceptions that younger cohorts are irresponsible, lazy, or entitled (Wray-Lake et al., 2024)

Psychological Theories for JA

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

- Adults often view adolescents as an out-group, reinforcing power hierarchies.
- This leads to adultism—systemic privileging of adults over youth in decision-making and social norms (Wray-Lake et al., 2024)

Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002)

- Young people are often stereotyped as low warmth and low competence in certain context, or as high competence but low warmth in others
- These ambivalent stereotypes fuel both condescension and exclusion (Francioli & North, 2021)

Developmental Perspective

- Adolescents are perceived as impulsive and risk-prone due to brain immaturity, reinforcing stereotypes of irresponsibility.
- Neuroscience shows prefrontal cortex development continues into the mid-20s, influencing decision-making and risk-taking (Du, 2020).

Reducing ageism

Education-Based Interventions

- PEACE Model (Positive Education about Aging and Contact Experiences; Levy, 2016)
- negative descriptions of older adults outnumber positive ones by 6 to 1 (American Society on Aging, 2023)

Intergenerational Contact Programs

- Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954): Positive contact under conditions of equal status, cooperation, and common goals reduces prejudice

Implicit Bias Training

- Stereotype Embodiment Theory (Levy, 2009): Internalized ageism harms health and cognition; interventions target self-perceptions.

Therapeutic Interventions for Internalized Ageism

- Stereotype Embodiment Theory (Levy, 2009): Internalized ageism harms health and cognition; interventions target self-perceptions.

Do Ageism interventions work?

Education-Based Interventions

- Meta-analysis by Burnes et al. (2019): Education improves knowledge and attitudes (effect sizes $d = 0.33-0.42$).
- Knowledge $\neq$ Behaviour Change: Increased knowledge does not always translate into reduced discriminatory behaviour.

Intergenerational Contact Programs

- Christian et al. (2014): Quality of contact predicts reductions in ageist attitudes.
- Quality Matters: Superficial or negative contact can reinforce stereotypes.

Implicit Bias Training

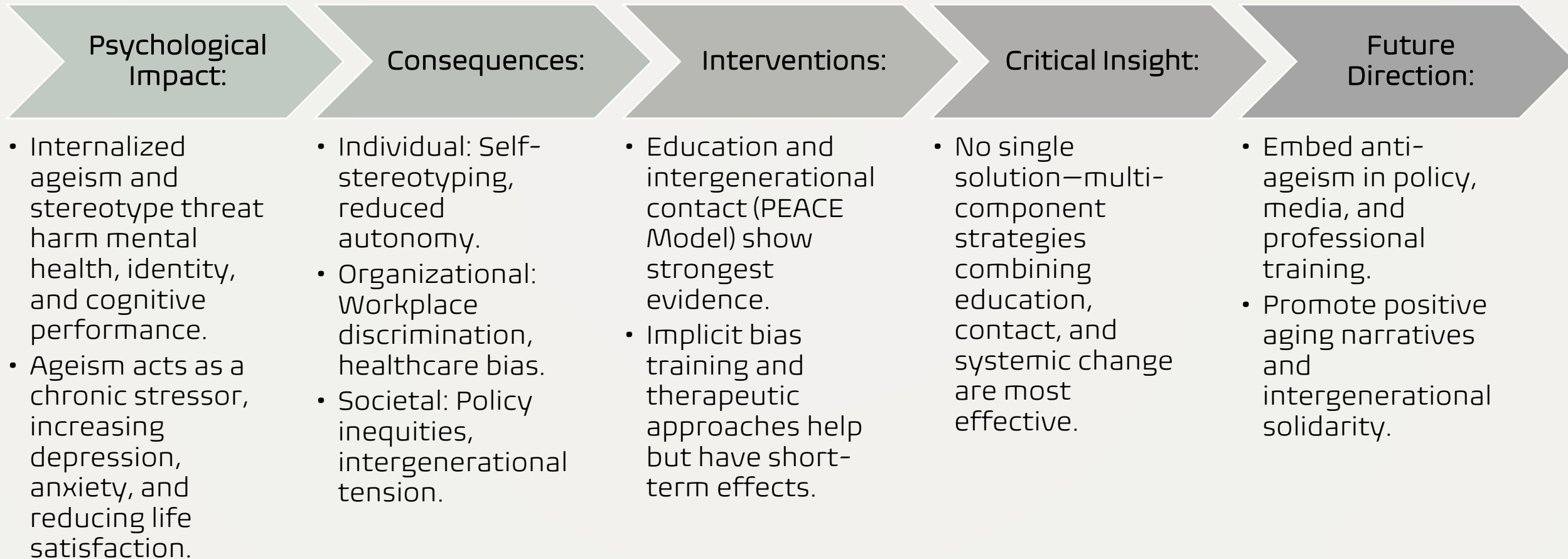
- Techniques like exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars and framing interventions showed short-term reductions in implicit bias (FitzGerald et al., 2019)
- Short-lived Effects: Gains often disappear within weeks.

Therapeutic Interventions

- Reimagine Aging Program (Murphy et al., 2025): ACT-based intervention improved psychological flexibility and reduced internalized ageism.
- Individual-Level Focus: Does not address structural or cultural ageism.

Summary

Ageism is pervasive and multidimensional, affecting older and younger people through stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination.



THANK YOU FOR
LISTENING
