

Ageing and ageism in the UK

What is ageism?

Ageism is prejudice or discrimination based on a person's age. It is mostly used to describe the disadvantages faced by older people. It was first used by Robert Butler in 1969. This is his definition:

"[a] process of systematic stereotyping or discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish with skin colour and gender. Ageism allows the younger generations to see older people as different than themselves; thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings." ¹

The World Health Organisation uses this definition:

"Ageism is the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people on the basis of their age. Ageism is widespread and an insidious practice which has harmful effects on the health of older adults. For older people, ageism is an everyday challenge. Overlooked for employment, restricted from social services and stereotyped in the media, ageism marginalises and excludes older people in their communities.

Ageism is everywhere, yet it is the most socially "normalized" of any prejudice, and is not widely countered – like racism or sexism. These attitudes lead to the marginalisation of older people within our communities and have negative impacts on their health and well-being." ²

How widespread is ageism?

Research suggests that ageism is both widespread and often considered to be a minor issue. The Equality and Human Rights Commission published a report in 2018 which shows that a higher proportion of British adults reported experiencing prejudice based on their age than any other group, but that more than half of the people surveyed thought that ageism was not at all or only slightly serious. ³

Research published recently in the Lancet Public Health suggests that a quarter of people over the age of 50 have felt discriminated against when they access services or when doing everyday tasks like going to the shops. ⁴

¹ (as cited in Butler, 1975) [48]...(Robert N. Butler. Why survive? Being old in America. New York: Harper & Row. (1975)

² <https://www.who.int/ageing/ageism/en/> (accessed 1.10.19)

³ Developing a national barometer of prejudice and discrimination in Britain, Dominic Abrams, Hannah Swift and Diane Houston, University of Kent, Centre for the Study of Group Processes, Birkbeck, University of London. Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018

⁴ Associations between age discrimination and health and wellbeing: cross-sectional and prospective analysis of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, Sarah E Jackson, PhD, Ruth A Hackett, PhD, Prof Andrew Steptoe, DSc(2019) [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(19\)30035-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(19)30035-0/fulltext) (Accessed 1.10.19)

What is ageist stereotyping?

Stereotyping is a term commonly used when trying to tackle discrimination. It means that over-generalised beliefs are applied to everyone in a particular social group (like older people). It is often a set of expectations and assumptions which are applied to every person from this particular group. An example of a stereotyped view of older people could be:

“Older people are all set in their ways, and don’t want to learn new things.”

In a report ‘That Age Old Question’ by the Royal Society for Public Health it was revealed that:

‘Children as young as six years old can show an awareness of ageist stereotypes, and the majority of children display overwhelmingly negative attitudes to the notion of getting older’⁵

and

‘Millennials (aged 18-34) were found to have the most negative attitudes to ageing and older people, compared to other groups.’⁶

People of all ages, often unintentionally, take on these negative beliefs and this can be particularly harmful for older people.

Ageing demographic

In Leeds, as in the rest of the UK, we have an ageing population. More people are living for longer, and the proportion of the total population made up of older people is growing. In 2017 the over 65s made up 18% of the UK population, which is expected to increase to 23% by 2035.⁷

Are older people a burden or an asset?

These social changes have produced concern around the consequences on our economy and health and social care systems. It is assumed that older people are a burden both financially and on our health and social care systems.

However, evidence shows that older people are not an economic burden when we include the contributions they are making in the form of volunteer work, caring for family and friends, unpaid childcare to enable their adult children to work, as well as the ‘grey pound’ spending power which supports the economy. Counting all of these contributions as well as the costs of social care and the NHS older people are making an annual net contribution of £40 billion to the UK economy, which is predicted to rise to £77 billion by 2030.⁸

⁵ That Age Old Question, Royal Society for Public Health and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, (2018), p 11
<https://www.rspg.org.uk/uploads/assets/uploaded/a01e3aa7-9356-40bc-99c81b14dd904a41.pdf> (Accessed 1.10.19)

⁶ Ibid, p 5

⁷ A New Narrative on Ageing, Editors: Peter Dale and Nick Wilson, EngAgeNet Publications, 2018, p13

⁸ Ibid, p 27

Find out more

Look at the other documents on our **Resources** page. **Challenging**

Ageism - Top Tips has more detail about how you can encourage people to learn more and change their attitudes towards older people.

You can sign up to the Centre for Ageing Better's email newsletter here:

<https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/enews>

'This Chair Rocks, A Manifesto Against Ageism' by Ashton Applewhite, Melville House UK (2019) is a recently published book calling for an end to age discrimination. It contains lots of facts on the subject of later life, that challenge the myths around ageing.

Also take a look at her Ted talk here:

https://www.ted.com/talks/ashton_applewhite_let_s_end_ageism?language=en

To find out more about ageism and Equality Law:

<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/age-discrimination>

Misconceptions about ageing are explored here:

<https://www.who.int/ageing/features/misconceptions/en/>

To find out more about definitions and concepts around ageism, this article goes into the topic in detail:

<https://www.lco-cdo.org/en/our-current-projects/a-framework-for-the-law-as-it-affects-older-adults/older-adults-funded-papers/ageism-and-the-law-emerging-concepts-and-practices-in-housing-and-health/ii-ageism-concepts-and-theories/>

