

Age Discrimination

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Defining Ageism

Ageism refers to discrimination toward individuals due to their age. Although younger adults may experience ageism, researchers and governmental policies recognize ageism as discrimination toward older adults. Women define ageism as a societal fixation with youth in addition to discrimination against older adults. Ageism is unique from other “isms” because everyone who lives long enough may be subjected to this particular form of prejudice.

Stereotypes

Ageism is reinforced by age-related stereotypes. The most pervasive aging stereotypes are related to a loss of physical abilities, mental abilities, attractiveness, health, and sexual ability or interest. Common workplace stereotypes with no evidence to support them include: older workers as less motivated, less willing to change, less trusting, more vulnerable to work-life imbalance, and worse performers than younger adults. Stereotypes that older workers are less healthy and less willing to participate in training and career development activities are overstated and poorly supported by evidence. These stereotypes are dangerous in that they: (1) are used to justify discrimination towards older adults and (2) cause people to view themselves and their own aging process in negative, ageist ways.

Effects of ageism

Experiencing ageism has been shown to impact individuals' health, mental health, and career opportunities over their lifespan. In terms of individual health, ageism affects the quality of care older adults receive. Doctors treat older patients less aggressively and offer fewer

treatment options. Mental health is also impacted as research suggests that psychological distress can be increased by believing you are being treated in an ageist way; older adults are more likely to cite their age as the reason for being fired or denied a loan compared to younger adults. The relationship between physical and mental health is illustrated by research finding that individuals with a positive outlook on aging lived an average 7.5 years longer than those viewing age-related change as negative.

Ageism can contribute to financial hardships in later life due to limited employment and workplace opportunities. Age-related stereotypes contribute to findings that older employees are less likely to be hired, obtain a promotion within a company, and to be offered training opportunities. Additionally, older workers may be pushed out of their jobs into retirement by their employers.

Intersection with other identities

Contrary to positive portrayals of older adults as wise, increased age does not always mean increased social status, particularly for older adults from marginalized backgrounds. Older adults' experience with ageism may intersect with other forms of discrimination based on their gender, race, class, or sexual orientation. For example, although older men and women both report barriers to training in the workplace, women over 40 years old are more likely to report experiencing age-based discrimination in terms of opportunities for promotion and to report negative mental health outcomes due to age-related discrimination. Additionally, Black Americans have significantly higher mortality rates compared to whites; likely due to the intersection of both ageism and racism.

One understudied intersection of aging is the heightened risks to LGBT communities as they age; however, research has found older LGBT adults report poorer treatment by healthcare

professionals and employers as well as difficulty finding LGBT affirmative long-term care options. Older adults from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds have fewer financial resources and less access to needed services as they age, increasing their risk of poor health and mental health outcomes. Further, women and older adults living in the south or rural areas are more likely to have financial difficulties in later life due to increased vulnerability.

Policy

Although multiple laws have been put in place to protect people from discrimination in the workplace (e.g., Age Discrimination in Employment Act, Americans with Disabilities Act, Equal Pay Act), experiences with workplace discrimination are still prevalent. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) of 1967 protects employees and applicants 40 years of age and older from discrimination in hiring, firing, compensation, job duties, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment. Claims of reverse age discrimination are not recognized under ADEA; thus, older adults can receive benefits or preferences over younger workers within the bounds of the law.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects individuals living with disabilities, which includes an increasing number of older adults as they age, against discrimination not only in employment, but in transportation, communications, public and commercial facilities, and government agencies. The purpose of ADA is to ensure employers and facilities are making reasonable accommodations to ensure access and employment for everyone, regardless of their ability status.

Further Reading

Levy, B. R. (2003). Mind matters: Cognitive and physical effects of aging self-stereotypes. *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences & Social Sciences*, 58(4), P203.

Nelson, T. D., (Ed.). (2004). *Ageism: Stereotyping and prejudice against older persons*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.