

The Ageism Survey: First Findings

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Purpose: To develop an instrument that can be used to answer three questions: What is the prevalence of ageism in various societies? Which types of ageism are more prevalent? Which subgroups of older people report more ageism? **Methods:** A survey instrument was developed listing 20 types of ageism. This instrument was tested on a convenience sample of 84 persons older than age 60. **Results:** The instrument appears to have satisfactory reliability and validity. The survey found that the experience of ageism was widespread and frequent among these respondents. The majority reported several incidents of ageism and over half of the incidents were reported to have occurred "more than once." The most frequent types were persons showing disrespect for older people, followed by persons showing assumptions about ailments or frailty caused by age. **Implications:** Researchers now have a reliable and valid instrument for measuring the prevalence of ageism in various societies and of various types of ageism experienced by various groups of older persons. This may aid in reducing the prevalence of ageism in our society.

Key Words: Ageism, Prevalence, Instrument

Ageism has been called the ultimate prejudice, the last discrimination, the cruelest rejection. I believe it is the third great "ism" in our society, after racism and sexism. Like racism and sexism, it is prejudice or discrimination against a category of people—in this case, against older people (Butler, 1995).

But ageism is different in two ways from the other "isms": everyone may become a target of ageism if they live long enough, and many people are unaware of it, because it is a relatively new and subtle concept.

Nevertheless, ageism is widespread in our society, in contrast to more traditional societies where old age is honored and respected (Palmore & Maeda, 1985).

Yet nobody knows how much ageism there is, nor how prevalent the various forms of ageism are in different societies and different groups. This is because, up to now, no one has developed a way to measure ageism. In order to develop such a measure, I have designed and tested an "Ageism Survey" (see Appendix) with 20 items and with questions about the respondent's age, gender, and education.

I hope this survey will be used to answer three basic questions:

- What is the prevalence of ageism in this and other societies?
- Which types of ageism are more prevalent?
- Which subgroups of older people report more ageism?

Methods

The items in the survey were developed from the literature on ageism (Barrow & Smith, 1979; Bythway, 1995; Palmore, 1999), discussions with colleagues, and experiences of older persons. The types of ageism included in this survey are based on the theoretical typology I developed (Palmore, 1999). This typology first points out that there can be negative and positive forms of ageism. However, only negative forms of ageism are included in this survey in order to keep it simple. Secondly, the typology distinguishes between prejudice (which includes stereotypes and attitudes) and discrimination (which includes personal acts and institutional policies). The survey includes examples of stereotypes, attitudes, personal and institutional discrimination.

The respondents were invited to "Put a number in the blank that shows how often you have experienced that event: Never = 0; Once = 1; More than once = 2."

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The survey items were tested on a convenience sample of 84 persons older than age 60 in local senior centers and a church group, and who responded to a preliminary publication of the survey in the *Center Report* (Palmore, 2000). The sample was 35% male and 65% female; the age range was 60–93 with a mean of 75 years; and the distribution by education was 39% with high school or less, 31% with some college, and 30% with postgraduate education. The first 21 respondents were not asked about education, but because they were from a senior center in a public housing project, we imputed “high school or less” education for that group. I know from personal experience with this housing project that few if any residents have more than a high school education.

Internal reliability was tested using the Cronbach Coefficient Alpha. A factor analysis of principal components was used to test for communality. Differences between groups were tested using Chi-square or the Wilcoxon two-sample test.

Results

Reliability and Validity

The survey instrument appears to have satisfactory characteristics for an inventory of types of ageism experienced. It appears to have one main factor with an Eigenvalue of 4.74. The Cronbach Coefficient Alpha (a measure of internal reliability) is .81. There were three items that did not correlate well with the total scores because there were few respondents reporting those items (numbers 6, 8, and 14). Reliability would be increased if we omitted those items, but we decided to keep them because they represent the more serious types of ageism (discrimination in leadership, rental housing, and employment).

The items appear to have high face validity. A panel of older persons and colleagues were asked what they thought each item meant. All the respondents seemed to understand the items without further explanations. There were few omitted responses (those few were coded as “0”).

Prevalence

The results show that ageism is perceived as widespread and frequent by the majority of respondents. Over 77% reported experiencing one or more incidents of ageism; and more than half of the reported incidents were reported to have occurred “more than once.” Each item in the survey was reported as having been experienced by one or more persons; and the average item was reported by about one fifth of the respondents.

Frequent Types

The percentages reporting each type of ageism are presented in Table 1. The most frequent type of ageism, reported by 58 percent, was Item 1: “I was told a joke that pokes fun at old people.”

Other frequent types of showing disrespect were Item 2 (“birthday card that pokes fun”: 30%); Item

Table 1. Percentages Reporting Types of Ageism (N = 84)

Item	% Reporting ^a			Event
	0	1	2+	
1	42	17	42	Told a joke that pokes fun
2	70	12	18	Sent a birthday card that pokes fun
3	69	15	15	Ignored or not taken seriously
4	82	10	8	Called an insulting name
5	61	20	19	Patronized or “talked down to”
6	99	0	1	Refused rental housing
7	92	5	4	Difficulty getting a loan
8	92	7	1	Denied a position of leadership
9	82	8	10	Rejected as unattractive
10	70	10	20	Treated with less dignity and respect
11	89	6	5	Waiter or waitress ignored
12	57	24	19	Doctor or nurse assumed ailments caused by age
13	92	4	5	Denied medical treatment
14	95	5	0	Denied employment
15	90	8	1	Denied promotion
16	67	13	20	Assumed I could not hear well
17	69	14	17	Assumed I could not understand
18	57	17	26	Told me, “You’re too old for that.”
19	95	4	1	House vandalized
20	95	2	2	Victimized by a criminal
Mean	78	10	11	

^aPercentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

3 (“ignored”: 31%); Item 4 (“insulting name”: 18%); Item 5 (“patronized”: 39%); and Item 10 (“less dignity and respect”: 30%).

However, another set of frequent types of ageism dealt with assumptions about ailments or frailty being caused by age: Item 12 (“A doctor or nurse assumed my ailments were caused by my age”) and Item 18, (“Someone told me I was too old for that”) were both reported by 43%.

Item 12 assumes that chronological age causes diseases, when in fact chronological age does not “cause” anything. Item 18 assumes that age causes frailty and/or it reflects a stereotype about “age-appropriate behavior.”

Other frequent assumptions about age causing disability are reflected in Items 16, “Someone assumed I could not hear well because of my age” (33%), and 17, “Someone assumed I could not understand because of my age” (32%).

The least frequent items had to do with specific and severe discrimination, such as Items 6 (“refused rental housing”: only 1 report), 19 (“house was vandalized”: 6%), and 20 (“victimized by a criminal”: 4%).

Differences Between Groups

I analyzed the differences by age, gender, and education as to the frequency of items reported. I had expected that older people would report more ageism, but I found little difference between those respondents older and younger than age 75 in the frequency of items reported. Similarly, I had expected that women would report more ageism because they

also suffer from sexism. I had theorized that experiencing sexism would make women more sensitive to other forms of discrimination such as ageism. Also, I thought that people in general might perceive women as being more vulnerable to ageism because of their “minority” status as women. But again, I found little difference between men and women in the frequency of items reported.

I did find that respondents with less education tended to report more experiences of ageism than those with more education: Respondents with high school or less education reported an average of 5 types of incidents; those with college education reported 4; and those with postgraduate education reported 3.5. Although these differences were not statistically significant, it may be that persons with less education are more vulnerable to incidents of ageism. Of course, because less education tends to be associated with lower income, one cannot untangle the effects of education and income in this survey.

Discussion

The major problem with interpreting these findings is the ambiguity of what caused the report of ageism (or lack of a report). A given incident could be reported because it actually happened and was correctly perceived as an example of ageism; or it may not have really been a case of ageism, but because of hypersensitivity it was perceived as such.

On the other hand, a real incident of ageism may have occurred, but was not reported because it was not perceived as ageism, or because a person might not want to admit in a survey that he or she had experienced that form of ageism.

This is a general problem in interpreting results from any attempt to measure the extent of prejudice and discrimination, as in studies of racism and sexism. Other methods, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, or experiments could help clarify these alternate interpretations.

Actually, an explicit measure of perceived ageism, such as this survey, may be less problematic than ex-

PLICIT measures of racism and sexism, because this survey does not ask people to admit that they themselves have engaged in ageist acts, but rather to report on ageist acts that others have done to them.

Whatever the explanation for these results, it appears that researchers now have a reasonably reliable and valid instrument for measuring the prevalence of ageism in general and of various types of ageism in various groups of older persons.

Future research is needed to use this survey on larger samples in various groups and cultures. Also it would be interesting to see what effects, if any, response bias has because the items are all worded in the positive direction. This version of the survey worded all the items in the positive direction to keep it simple and easy to understand. Also of interest would be to include some items dealing with “positive ageism,” discrimination in favor of older persons.

I hope that this instrument may be useful in attempts to reduce ageism. Hopefully, it may make people more aware of the many forms of ageism they and others may have been perpetuating. Also it could be the basis for more effective programs to reduce ageism, because researchers could better understand which groups suffer from more ageism and which types of ageism are more prevalent. This could develop an “epidemiology of ageism” as a first step toward its eradication.

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Appendix

The Ageism Survey^a

Please put a number in the blank that shows how often you have experienced that event: Never = 0; Once = 1; More than once = 2.
(“Age” means older age.)

- _____ 1. I was told a joke that pokes fun at old people.
- _____ 2. I was sent a birthday card that pokes fun at old people.
- _____ 3. I was ignored or not taken seriously because of my age.
- _____ 4. I was called an insulting name related to my age.
- _____ 5. I was patronized or “talked down to” because of my age.
- _____ 6. I was refused rental housing because of my age.
- _____ 7. I had difficulty getting a loan because of my age.
- _____ 8. I was denied a position of leadership because of my age.
- _____ 9. I was rejected as unattractive because of my age.
- _____ 10. I was treated with less dignity and respect because of my age.
- _____ 11. A waiter or waitress ignored me because of my age.
- _____ 12. A doctor or nurse assumed my ailments were caused by my age.
- _____ 13. I was denied medical treatment because of my age.
- _____ 14. I was denied employment because of my age.
- _____ 15. I was denied promotion because of my age.
- _____ 16. Someone assumed I could not hear well because of my age.
- _____ 17. Someone assumed I could not understand because of my age.
- _____ 18. Someone told me, “You’re too old for that.”
- _____ 19. My house was vandalized because of my age.
- _____ 20. I was victimized by a criminal because of my age.

Please write in your age: _____

Please check: Male _____ or Female _____

What is the highest grade in school that you completed? _____

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