Ageism: An Overview

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Aging Texas Well

Grumpy, frail, sick. Stereotypes of aging are pervasive in the American mindset. The media, use of language, and culture foster negative images of aging and often characterize older adults as cantankerous elderly with illness or need for care.[1] These images can have profound consequences on the lives of older adults.

Why do words matter?

Words shape the perceptions and meanings of the people and things around us.[3] These perceptions are enhanced by images we use. These images form our ideas of what aging looks like and after repeated use in movies, television, stories, and advertisements, the images become socially accepted. They shape our values, attitudes, and culture regarding aging and older adults[4], while influencing our interactions, choices, and views.

Ageism is the use of negative language and insulting images to discriminate against older adults.[2]

A model to examine Ageism in policy-making

Symbols of older adults as sick and frail portray growing old as an unpleasant process. It may create ideas among younger people that older adults are a burden (both monetarily and time-wise) and foster a perception of dependency. Policies created from a *dependency perspective* may inadvertently produce barriers to thinking about older adults as active participants in their community and unintentionally isolate them. [5, 6]

We tend to categorize people based on their membership in a group.[7] Decisions on selecting the categories in which people are placed are influenced by our ideas of what we think about membership groups. Images of aging depict older adults as either dependent or capable.[8] These views can shape policies that result in either equitable or inequitable outcomes for older adults - whether they are capable or dependent.[9] These outcomes can result in equitable and inequitable policies affecting: Freedom, Stability, Limited Freedom, or Instability. [10]

Figure 1: Potential outcomes of parallels between images of aging and equitable or inequitable policy narratives

This information has been developed and provided by an Aging Texas Well Advisory Committee guest contributor.

Individual categorization of people

CATEGORIES	Capable	Dependent
Equitable	Freedom	Stability
Inequitable	Limited freedom	Instability

Source: Keyes and Dicke, 2016

Figure 1 provides a two by two model to consider relationships between images of aging and possible policy outcomes under these four conditions:

- **Freedom:** Older adults have access to public and private resources, allowing them to exercise and improve choices.

- **Stability:** Older adults have access to some government resources to subsidize their living environment.

- **Limited Freedom:** Not all older adults live in communities with housing options and price points available to them.

- **Instability:** Older adults needing government support have few or no housing options and available to them

Today's images of aging emerged through an evolution from the late 1800s to the present time, growing from generational tensions, encouraged retirement, a rise of poverty among older adults, and increased longevity.[11] An examination of federal policy responses also suggests a parallel between negative images of aging and dependency policy narratives that ultimately ignore the capacity and contribution of older adults. [12]

The two by two model provides a lens that can be used to examine values against policy decisions. For example, most older adults want to remain at home while they age, however, many experience less freedom and greater instability in housing. This is due to many factors, including availability of home and community-based services and respite care for caregivers, supports that help to keep older adults out of institutionalized living.[13,14]

Impact

Ageism has direct impact on the lives of older adults. The influence of negative stereotypes may perpetuate in the following areas and result in negative outcomes for older adults:

- **Family Life** – Attitudes that older adults are a financial burden to family members; feelings of being demoralized, marginalized, and/or patronized. [15] By 2030, Texas will be home to over 5.9 million individuals over the age of 65 years old. [16]

- **Ongoing Employment** – Difficulty in obtaining and maintaining employment, job displacement [17] the lack of promotion[18] and views that older adults are unwilling to change. [19] By 2024, 13 million individuals over the age of 65 will make up the national workforce. [20]

- **Health Care** – Lack of availability of specialist physician services[21] and physicians that understand Medicare; [22] and overall devaluation of concerns. [23] In Texas, over 374,000 older adults per month in 2016 were enrolled in Medicaid. [24]

- **Public policy** – Sentiment that older adults are a social and financial burden. [2]

Recommendations

Policy makers are encouraged to:

- Understand how images shape their own views and beliefs.

- Consider the evidence used to make policy decisions.

- Safeguard the rights of all older adults with little resources that may fall into the category of limited freedom or instability.

Making strides to break down negative images of aging requires attention to our own perceptions and use of language. Policy makers, community leaders, and organizations can:

- Influence the way older adults are portrayed in media

- Recognize older adults in their workforce

- Prompt proactive behavior to ensure equitable policy outcomes

- Include older adults in policy making to learn directly about need

Consider appropriate opportunities to advance policies that are age-friendly, especially in areas that affect their independence, such as:

- Housing affordability and choice

- Planning or public infrastructure and location of services (i.e. senior center, recreation, public parks)

- Senior oriented programming (i.e. recreation, lifelong learning programs, etc).

- Mobility options including safe driving programs, larger signs and street markings, pedestrian crossings timed for the speed of older walkers, public transit access as well as transit training, bus buddy programs and discounted or free access, etc.

Efficient policy administration requires an understanding of the changing demographics in your community and gaining an awareness of how cultural biases may affect policy outcomes.[26, 27] This is critical, as the older adult population continues to grow, with limited public resources. Policy makers cannot ignore the powerful influence of societal ideas and images as they enact policies and make decisions that affect the lives of older adults.

Resources to learn more

- LeadingAge, Ageism Resources:
  http://www.leadingage.org/ageism-resources-0
- The Legacy Project:
  http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/ageism.html
- Generations, October 2015, American Society on Aging,
  http://www.asaging.org/archive_generations/201510

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