AGEISM: A THREAT TO ‘AGEING WELL’ IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Jocelyn Angus RN, BA(Psych), Grad.Dip Geron, PhD.
Alma Unit for Research on Ageing
Centre for Ageing, Rehabilitation, Exercise & Sport (CARES)
Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development
Victoria University
Patricia Reeve
Senior Policy Advisor, COTA

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The Goals of this Paper

- examine ageism within the concept of ‘commonsense reality’
- explore ‘dependency’ as a stereotypic and ageist mechanism and its impact on ageing-well in the twenty-first century.
- present some strategies to combat ageism within the context of ‘ageing-well’ initiatives.
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The Direction of Research

- most authors centre research on negative views of ageism
- focus on ageist attitudes and behaviours and the consequences for targets of ageism
- based on the implicit assumption that ageism is propagated by younger adults about older people

Limited research:
- attitudes of older adults towards younger people or older adults
- forms or impact of ageism as experienced by recipients
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The Concept of ‘Ageism’

- Defining ageism
  - any prejudice or discrimination against or in favour of any age group
- Forms of ageism
  - positive
  - negative
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The Power of Stereotypes

- act as short cuts for perceptual processing of categories of people
- blanket generalisations for all individuals
- exaggerate and homogenise traits held to be characteristic of particular categories
- maintain and produce ‘norms’ of behaviour and impose order on the social world
- encourage a sense of continuity and certainty
- based on myths which are usually inaccurate, simplistic and rigid.
The ‘Common Sense’ Reality of Stereotypes

- signifies a set of unquestioned beliefs that enable people to make sense of everyday life
- operates in ways that legitimate behaviours and limit the possibility for imagining and acting on alternative realities
- people are often unaware of the basis for their assumptions that inform their commonsense reality
- combating ageism requires an understanding of the interests that are served by the commonsense reality of stereotypes
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The Role of the ‘Expert’

• have an interest in the preservation of ageist stereotypes in terms of a “problem”
• knowledge about ‘dependency’, for example, is controlled and directed by the assumptions and constraints of institutional practices within which dependency is managed
• older people, as an object of research, are often defined by the midlife values of the ‘expert’
• the ‘problem’ of how to age well is also beneficial to experts in the field
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The *Productive* Dimension of Ageism

- ageism can be productive in garnering support for older people
- myths serve the purpose of making “scientific” arguments for desired changes based on age
- stereotypic discourse of the older person as ‘dependent’ and ‘frail’ remains a primary source of sympathy, legitimacy and public support.
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The New Paradigm of 'Ageing-well' in the 21st Century

- the problem of dependency is displaced with the view that older people should be responsible for their own well-being
- new stereotypes emerge that insinuate that old age becomes a non-issue and may effectively marginalise older people
- stereotypic assumptions about the ageing population remain embedded in the language of 'burden'
- recognise that even the positive aspects of the new paradigm may generate misconceptions and stereotypes
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The Threat to ‘Ageing-well’ Programs

• emphasis on individual behaviours that ignores the environment, including culture and social structures
• the effects of ageism limit social connectedness and well-being in later life
• diversity is masked by the stereotypic perception that older people are a homogeneous group
• the achievement of ageing-well requires new and creative ways of responding to the strengths of an ageing population
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Moving Towards Strategies for Change

- identification and eradication of ageism is a complex and difficult task
- need to recognise the power of the ‘expert’ in the field
- knowledge of ageing must be subjected to critical examination
- older people need to identify ageist assumptions informing their own actions
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Recommendations

• experts in academia, policy and clinical practice need knowledge of ‘self’ as well as the lives of older people
• need to embrace a life course approach to the ageing process
• research needs to take account of the ways in which ageism is context-driven
• critically examine our own tacit assumptions and move towards change in our own working lives
‘unbridled consumption (of anti-depressants) is most conspicuous in the aged community. Our thoroughfares are congested with unnaturally limber retirees exercising their Jack Russells. Suspiciously cheerful dotards ambush you in the street and cluck over your infants. More alarmingly there has been a marked coarsening of the over 80s culture, as evidenced by this sordid invitation recently overheard at the heavens Gate Senior Supervision Facility: Hiya toots! I got a cask of sweet sherry and a carton of cheap generic Viagra! Wanna boogie? Shudder. Such unwholesome vigour bespeaks a generation unwilling to pass on the baton to the next...[and] flies in the face of nature and, worse, economics’ (The Sunday Age AUGUST 8 2004: 17)
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