

11. For a while he was also the *purohit* (priest) of at least two Aryan kings: Danda of the solar dynasty and Yayati of the lunar dynasty; the latter was also his son-in-law having married his daughter—Devayani.
12. In fact, among the eighteen *upa-puranas* (sub or minor *Puranas*) there is a mention of *Ausanasa Purana*, as one of them but not a single *smriti* or *non-smriti* source has drawn on it. It is difficult to explain this total black out except its unpopularity among the rulers.
13. This strategy of Aryans bears a close resemblance to the present-day attempts by some countries to send their scientists to steal nuclear secrets.
14. In fact, *Siva-linga* is always shown with *Sakti* (symbolized as *yonis*, female organ), which makes the *linga* worship the worship of *phallus* and *yonis*.
15. This point has been very convincingly made by B.K Sarkar. See his, *The Positive Background of Hindu Sociology*, (Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1985), p. 120.
16. See, B.R. Modak, *The Ancillary Literature of the Atharva-Veda* (New Delhi: Rashtriya Vidya Pratishthan, 1993), p. 26.
17. Of course, *Ṛg, Veda* does have some elements of mass culture and *Atharva Veda* has some elements of elite culture.
18. There is a view that the aboriginals of yesterday constitute the depressed classes or dalits of today. See, for example, Sarkar, *The Positive Background of Hindu Sociology*, p. 113.

The Ageism Discourse: Reflections on Some Missing Aspects

SHERRY SABBARWAL

Introduction

Everyone ages, the process of ageing being accompanied by changes in the body and cognitive capacities. However, along with being a biological category, age is also a social and cultural category and its meaning and value vary historically and cross-culturally. In other words, despite the inevitability and universality of ageing, there are cultural variations in the diverse aspects of ageing. For instance, different societies have different life expectancies. While in advanced societies like Japan, Australia, the United States of America, and most of western Europe, an average person's life can go up to the age of almost 80 years, the average life expectancy in India is approximately 64 years, not very high but not entirely disgraceful since longevity has increased in the last several decades due to improvements in sanitation and health care. Contrarily, in most of the less developed societies, especially those falling in Africa the average life expectancy is quite low, ranging between 33 to 50 years (Dowling, 2006). Differences in disease profiles, dietary habits, amount of climatic and chemical pollution, and mental and physical stress, all tend to determine the inter-societal variations in life expectancy.

Similarly, since cultures possess different values, these tend to affect the way in which the elderly are perceived and treated in particular societies. Understandably, societies that attach importance to individualism, would usually give emphasis to independence among persons of all age groups. This orientation, however, can cause complications. For example, 'independent' older persons often find it difficult to ask for help for the fear of being considered weak and needy. On the other hand, cultures that value the collective aspect, e.g., India, Japan, or the Latin American nations, underline inter-reliance, a value that is manifested in the patterns of perception and behaviour towards the elderly. But more often than not, the view of the aged, as well as, the treatment meted out to them is undergoing a transformation even in the so-called traditional societies.

Ageism

Ageism may be defined as any attitude, action, or institutional structure, which subordinates a person or group because of age, or any assignment of roles in society purely on the basis of age. As an 'ism', ageism implies holding of irrational and prejudicial views about

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individuals and groups, based on their age. It involves stereotypical assumptions about a person or group's physical or mental capacities and is often associated with derogatory language (Marshall, 1994). In simple words, ageism reflects a prejudice in society against persons of a certain age (Traxler, 1980).

One major aspect of ageism is prejudice against older people. Contemporary society can be seen maintaining a stereotypic and often negative perception of older adults and practicing discriminatory behaviour against such persons (Busse, 1968; Lawson and Garrod, 2006). Although technically, ageism is a negative feeling towards a group because of their age, the term is almost always used to refer to such feelings or behavior towards older people (Lawson and Garrod, 2006). Under its impact many times it becomes difficult for people even in their forties to find employment. And people older than them are in any case stereotyped as having physical and mental disabilities despite the fact that they may be living very vigorous and productive lives.

The bias against older people is visible in literature too, since for a long time greater attention has been paid to the study of youth culture by scholars. Even when ageing was studied, either the medical model of ageing was focused on, or the demographic changes were highlighted. Moreover, most works on ageing consisted of ethnographic studies of ageing and the experience of the aged. Additionally, usually age, like sex and gender was seen as a natural division or as a problem reserved for social policy since the aged were categorized as non-productive (in their post-retirement time) and thus, a burden. Still, with the increase in the numbers of elderly persons in every society, the process of ageing is being focused on as well, and studies are concentrating on the construction of old age across cultures and through time.

Typically, ageing is a chronological process of growing physically older. However, there is a social and cultural dimension to it that is about the meanings attached to the process (Jary and Jary, 1991). While in some societies like China the elderly have been valued and respected as a group that has accumulated wisdom, which could benefit the society, studies by Shanas and Sussman (1977) and Shanas *et al.* (1968) present ageing as a process of deprivation, and structured dependency.

Ageism is pretty widespread in its various forms. Ageism implies that as soon as a person can be described as old, one is automatically considered of little value, a burden on society, unable to accept change, slow, deaf or stupid, generally having ill health, usually physically separated from children, interpersonally and economically dependent, politically conservative, non-sexual and alienated. This negative and/or stereotypic

perception of ageing and the aged individuals is readily apparent in such areas as language, media, and humour (Nuessel, 1982). For example, such commonly used phrases as 'over the hill' and 'don't be an old fuddy-duddy', and the Hindi phrase *sathliya gaya*, (or its Punjabi version *satraya/bahatraya gaya*) denote the reaching of the age of sixty or seventy plus as periods of helplessness and ineffectiveness.

The Themes in the Discourse on Ageism

With the rising numbers of population falling under the category of the 'aged', the discourse on ageism is also, to coin a pun, coming of age. One can identify four themes that permeate the study of social and cultural aspects of ageism. First, ageism discourse examines the differences between *ageism and other 'isms'*. Since many of us experience more than one prejudice, the interaction between these prejudices needs to be examined (Traxler, 1980). Second, ageism discourse examines or attempts to understand the *causes of ageism*. Third, the *cross-cultural differences* towards ageism have also been emphasized. And fourth, it has been highlighted how only the *negative bias* or stereotypic attitude toward ageing and the aged has been the centre of attention. This damaging approach has been maintained in the form of primarily negative stereotypes and myths concerning the older adult. Let us consider each of these issues.

Ageism and Other Isms

The first theme is that of contrasting and relating ageism with other isms. Ageism is described as being different from other 'isms' such as sexism and racism. According to Woolf (1998) the differences lie in two things. In the first place, unlike sexism and racism, age classification is not unchanging and is marked by constant transformation because an individual's age classification gets modified as one advances in the life cycle. On the other hand, the taxonomies relating to race and gender remain unvarying. Secondly, although many of us may escape the other isms, no one is exempt from ageism. At some point of our life, we all achieve the status of old, and therefore, unless one perishes at an early age, we all are subjected to ageism. A third point may be added here. Whereas sexism and racism may touch the individual at only one level, that of having a perception about others, ageism can affect the individual on two levels. First, the individual may be ageist with respect to others. That is, s/he may stereotype other people on the basis of age, which may also be the case with other isms. But with reference to ageism, the individual may additionally be

ageist with respect to self. In other words, one uses this stereotype to define oneself as well. Thus, ageist attitudes may affect one's self-concept (Traxler, 1980).

In this respect it is important to focus on ageism's interface with other 'isms', the most important being gender. It is true that ageism has an impact on both men and women. But it is equally true that even though women make up the majority of the older population, they have largely been ignored by students of ageing (Block, Davidson and Grambs, 1981). Moreover, despite the diversity among the older population, allusions to elderly women usually resort to generalizations, often taking the form of stereotypes with the older women depicted as being lonely, inactive, sickly, hypochondriacal, asexual, and incompetent (Palmore, 1971). Interestingly, as Riley and Foner (1968) point out, older men are perceived as being healthier than older women even though, on the average, women live longer than men. As a result, women often find it difficult to shake off this sexist representation. Thus, some studies show that as females, women continue to experience sexism during old age and are doubly disadvantaged (Block, Davidson and Grambs, 1981) while others like Clark and Anderson (1967) found that women's self image shows greater improvement with age as compared to men. Other studies (Silverman, 1977; Woolf, 1988) point out that as men get older, they are perceived as becoming more 'feminine' with age since they show signs of psychological dependency and timidity.

Factors Facilitating (Causes of) Ageism

The second theme on ageing relates to the causes of ageism. Traxler (1980) has discussed four factors that contribute to the negative image of ageing.

Fear of Death and Illness

The first factor that is put forth to explain ageism is the fear of death, particularly so, in Western societies (Butler and Lewis, 1977). In the eastern philosophy, life and death are considered part of the same cycle inextricably woven together. However, in the west, death is considered as a phenomenon that falls outside the human life cycle. It is not seen as an inevitable part of the life course but actually as an affront to life. Therefore, death is feared. And since death and old age are viewed as being closely associated, old age too, is despised as aversion to one results in aversion to and fear of the other (Kastenbaum, 1978).

Similarly, sickness is also feared and loathed. The famous sociologist Talcott Parsons (1951) discussed the 'sick role' as a socially sanctioned deviance. He held that society could work properly only if every member

fulfilled his or her social obligations to the rest of the society. The sick do not do so as in their 'sick role' they withdraw—even if temporarily—from at least some of the obligations. The simple point being that being sick is not treated as a normal state, but a pathological one. And since the older adult is viewed as representing ageing, ailing and death, the aged persons are perceived negatively. Ageism, thus, suggests a subconscious apprehension among the young and middle-aged—a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and a fear of powerlessness, 'uselessness', and death' (Butler, 1969).

Prominence of Youth Culture

The second factor that contributes to ageism is the emphasis on the youth culture in modern society. Look at the media—whether it is films, television, magazines or novels—all highlight youth, physical beauty, and sexuality. Conversely, in all media texts, older adults are either ignored or portrayed negatively. This obsession with youth not only determines how the younger persons perceive the older people but also how the older individuals perceive themselves. If a society places too much importance on physical appearance and youth for one's identity, it is but natural that persons getting older would experience loss of self-esteem with age. This preoccupation with youth is clearly demonstrated when we hear more and more about the growing use of cosmetic surgery or Botox, where the intentions are very clear—stall ageing as long as you can.

Emphasis on Productivity

The third factor playing a major role in promoting ageism in contemporary cultures is the importance that modern culture gives to the material and utilitarian aspects of life, namely, productivity. More often than not, productivity is defined in terms of economic potential. Usually both children and the aged placed at the opposite ends of the life cycle are viewed as unproductive, while those falling in between are perceived as the productive members who have to bear the responsibility of looking after the other two groups. Children, however, are valued as future productive members and are seen as an economic investment. The elderly, on the other hand, whose productive days are past, are perceived as a financial liability. Of course, it is not correct that older adults are completely unproductive. Nevertheless, since they are usually retired, the older persons are viewed as being economically worthless and thus, held in low esteem.

Biased Research – Role of Social Scientists

The fourth and final factor described by Traxler that contributes to ageism is the manner in which ageing was originally researched in the western societies. In the initial stages of research on ageing, the investigators collected their information from long-term care institutions where the aged persons were easy to find. And this despite the fact that only 5 per cent of the older population is usually institutionalized. The end result was that since these early researches on the aged focused upon the not-so-well, institutionalized older individuals, a negative image of the older adult emerged and got reinforced by newer studies. Had research been undertaken on healthy and active older people, a very different picture might have emerged.

Cross Cultural View of Ageing and Ageism

The third theme of great salience in the discourse on ageism has been the use of cross-cultural perspectives in understanding ageism. Ageism is both a universal and a cross-cultural phenomenon, as different cultures perceive their elderly in various ways. There appears to be a great variation as to the treatment that older adults receive, ranging from extreme reverence and respect to abandonment and deprivation. Interestingly, it seems that the more "civilized" the society is, the more likely they are to be ageist and to harbour negative perceptions about the aged.

A study of Samoan people (Bradd Shore 1998a) indicated that the top five perceptions they have towards their elderly members are 'stays at home', 'sits', 'respected', 'runs the family', and 'dignity'. The results show a remarkable pattern. Even though the Samoan elders are perceived to be just sitting and staying at home, they are still perceived to have dignity and respect and be responsible for running the family. Contrarily, in more contemporary societies, people tend to have the mistaken belief that becoming elderly means the end of one's capacity to be intellectually and artistically creative and financially productive. In a similar vein, McTavish's (1971) review of the studies dealing with perceptions of old age shows that mostly attitudes toward the elderly are most favourable in primitive societies and decrease with increasing modernization to the point of generally negative view in industrialized Western nations.

Some other examples of cultural differences in this respect are those of the aged men in the Middle East who by and large view old age as life's summit (Slater, 1964). They believe that older men have attained high status and prestige. In fact, according to Slater, the word 'sheikh'

originally meant 'old man'. Slater, however makes no mention of women's status in old age in the Middle East. Nevertheless, other studies show that in many cultures even women's status and power increase following menopause. For instance, Okada (1962) states that the old widow has great power in the Japanese family. Similarly, Brown (1985) writes that women in many small-scale traditional societies also enjoy an increase in status. Older women in these societies usually experience greater sexual freedom, the right to participate in rituals, the right to participate in the political realm of the society, and a decrease in the amount of work required in the home.

The cross-cultural differences in attitudes towards the aged are based on different societal perspectives. For instance, the different ways in which societies view death. As mentioned earlier, death is not viewed in Western society as a natural part of the life cycle. Societies, which regard life and death as a continuous process, exhibit fewer ageist attitudes. Second, certain small-scale traditional societies may perceive their older members as being productive. In fact, in many traditional set-ups, the elderly are often the power brokers. This can be compared with Western society where older adults are thought of as unproductive and therefore, negatively. Last, not all societies are youth oriented. Therefore, a higher value is placed on the later stages of adulthood.

Negativist Approach to Age

The fourth theme holding sway in the discourse on ageism is that of the predominance of a critical and disparaging approach adopted while discussing the aged. It frequently escapes our attention that only the negative stereotypes of old age seem to be stressed. Although some studies (Austin, 1985) do point out that ageism has opened out and includes positive images of the elderly, nevertheless, these images even though positive, continue to be stereotypical. Moreover, these are rarely studied (Brubaker and Powers, 1976).

The Less Accentuated Aspects in Ageism Discourse

Thus, ageism discourse usually confines itself to the above-mentioned themes, namely, the interface of ageism with other isms, factors causing ageism, a cross cultural understanding of ageism and the prevalence of a negativist approach to old age. Although these aspects are important in their own right in the comprehension of the phenomenon of ageism, certain aspects are usually overlooked or not emphasized enough. In my view, two additional areas in ageism discourse need to be included.

The first of these is the issue of the manifestation of ageism in the form of the distorted presentation of the aged in media, the use of negative humour for the aged and the language of ageism. The second is the issue of the relationship of ageism to self-concept.

MANIFESTATIONS OF AGEISM

Presentation of the Aged in Media

Probably the most glaring manifestation of bias against the aged is their representation by and in the media. Studies that have explored the portrayal of older persons and ageing in prime-time and daytime serials and films etc. have shown that (a) the proportion of older individuals on television is under-represented and (b) when shown, their presentation is mostly negative and derogatory (Bell, 1992; Dail, 1988; Elliott, 1984; Peterson, 1973; Ramsdell, 1973). Prime-time television generally ignores the older adults since less than 5 per cent of television characters are portrayals of characters over the age of 60 (Northcott, 1975). Similarly, research investigating the amount of television viewing and its relationship to various attitudes about older adults has demonstrated that heavy television viewers were more likely to believe negative stereotypes about the aged (Gerbner, *et al.*, 1980). For example, heavy television viewers believed that older adults were more rigid and closed-minded.

Interestingly, in India, along with age stereotypes, even gender roles are kept intact by the media. In their representation, the elderly males are portrayed either as benign patriarchs or as inflexible heads of the family. Similarly, the elderly females are characterized either as the caring elderly women (the typical *Dadi na*), the long-suffering, helpless *bhartiya nari* or as scheming harridans. Thus, the depiction of the older adults in television or films is not only negative, it is stereotypic, as well.

Use of Negative Humour

Another manifestation of ageism is the application of negative humour towards ageing and older adults, which is often found in popular culture. Davies (1977) and Palmore (1971) both have analyzed jokes concerning the elderly and found that often the jokes about the elderly deal with death, decline in cognition, sexual ability and interests. Take for instance the joke about a youngster saying to an older person 'You are 50? . . . but you look so natural and lifelike!', or the one about a young lady saying to her Grandpa, 'I noticed that when you sneeze, you put your hand in front of your mouth.' 'Of course,' explained

Grandpa. 'How else can I catch my teeth???' or the question. 'Why don't women over 50 don't have babies? Answer. Because they would put them down and forget where they left them. Such jokes, besides being tasteless and offensive promote common myths and stereotypes about the older population. Palmore (1971) asserts that these attempts at humour both reflect real societal attitudes and reinforce them.

Language of Ageism

Much of society's negative attitudes towards ageing are reflected in its language and reinforced by it. If we examine the language of ageism, we find that ageism is readily apparent in language against both men and women (Nuessel, 1982). The terms with which older persons are described are representative of some of the more common stereotypes of older men and women. For example, the term 'little old lady' suggests incompetency and impotency based upon age and gender. On the contrary, 'old hag' or 'old witch' (also *budhiya* in Hindi) commonly refer to a woman who is physically unpleasant to look at and who has a disagreeable personality. Similarly, old men are commonly described by such terms as 'old coot' and 'old fogey', 'codger' (*budhau*). These terms suggest that old men are slightly odd or quaint. Another commonly used term, 'dirty old man', suggests some sort of unnatural sexual perversion in older men.

Relationship of Ageism to Self-Concept

The most salient feature in the discourse on ageism, often ignored, is the issue of the self-concept of older adults. This is especially relevant as it represents the group most affected by ageist attitudes. As people age, their concept of themselves becomes less positive (Kastenbaum and Durkee, 1964a). Ageing, according to Kuyper and Bengston (1984) tends to lead to a vicious circle of 'structurally induced dependence'. The cycle goes along the following lines: a) The negative societal perceptions of older people as non-valuable and non-productive lead to b) the loss of financial independence and consumer power due to loss of economic productivity, which leads to c) vulnerability and dependency among the aged, which leads to d) internalization of the 'dependent label', i.e., learned helplessness, which results in e) the aged behaving as a 'dependent' person, i.e., assuming a dependent role which leads to f) atrophy (decline due to non-use) of previous skills, competencies and self-confidence which reinforces g) negative societal perceptions (back to the 1st point).

What is being described above is that one potential

outcome of internalized ageist attitudes in the older adult is a syndrome described as the social breakdown syndrome in which the individual becomes susceptible to dependence due to external labeling by the societal view of the elderly as incompetent or obsolete. If the individual accepts this negative attitude, he/she falls into the affliction or disease of assuming a dependent role. This is followed by the degeneration of skills and finally the labeling of the self as inadequate, incompetent, and 'sick'. Therefore, what the social breakdown syndrome describes is the self-fulfilling nature of negative attitudes concerning age and ageing.

Most of us start developing stereotypes about the elderly during childhood, reinforce them throughout adulthood, and enter old age with attitudes toward their own age group as unfavourable as younger people's attitudes. It is difficult to overcome these stereotypes as they often operate without people's awareness.

Some Final Thoughts

From the above discussion, certain points emerge:

1. It is an undeniable fact that ageism exists in societies fascinated by youth culture and taut-skinned good looks.

2. As the number of the older persons multiply and millions approach their 60s, there will soon be many more potential targets of ageism.

3. Already, there is a debate as to whether ageism will ease or grow worse in the coming decades. There are some optimists who say that older people are getting smarter, richer and healthier as time goes on and that the elderly and their concerns will inevitably move higher on the societal agenda. But at present the ugly side of ageism is visible to us everywhere.

Thus, there are two kinds of ageing: one physical—involving wrinkling of skin, graying of hair, loss of hearing, weak eyesight and of course, systems failure or ill health. This type of ageing is inevitable but efforts have been there and will be there to deal with this aspect of ageing—whether it may be through health supplements, anti-ageing medicines, medical efforts etc. The second type of ageing is socio-genic ageing, which has no physical basis. It implies the role, which our folklore, prejudices and misconceptions about age impose on 'the old'. In this sense, it is an imaginary ageing or an imposed ageing. No scientific discovery can abolish this aspect of ageing—all it needs is change in the attitude.

Finally, one can make some suggestions regarding how individual ageist attitudes can be decreased:

- a) Through continual exposure to and work with older adults

- b) Through realization that older people are part of

the cycle of life, and they should not be 'compartmentalized'

- c) Through strategies that maintain bonding between generations.

Conclusion

Ageing will continue. Family members, as they age will go through changes that are a natural part of the life cycle, but that may be difficult to understand and accept. One way of rooting ageism out is by making people more aware of it by talking about it and not sweeping the issue under the carpet. It is important for each of us to talk about these changes, including appearance, abilities, health, living arrangements, and ultimately death. We are now talking about sex education for the youth. Why not age education for them as well? Additionally, we must make the young understand that elders often have special gifts to offer to the family and community. We all need to recognize and act to dispel negative prejudices about ageing and treat elders with respect and thoughtfulness. But most importantly, it is the self-concept of the elderly themselves that must change if anything has to change. They must escape this negative spiral, which drives the older person into total dependence and despondency. That is the best way to beat, if not ageing, then at least ageism. As Robert E Wood, the director of the publications division of the American Association of Retired Persons and publishing director of *Modern Maturity* magazine puts it; *ageing is not necessarily about aches and pains, ageing is about living*. And nowhere is this spirit demonstrated better than by eighty plus years old Catherine Roberts who is associated with a group that motivates seniors to participate actively in legislative and community issues called the New York City's Joint Public Affairs Committee for Older Adults. "I don't have time to get old," says Roberts, "I'm too busy."

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