

Aging, ageism and the power of fear



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The Old Man in the Mirror:

Aging, Ageism and the Power of Fear

I admit it. On the road, when I am behind a driver who leaves his or her directional on, or who drives fifteen miles per hour under the speed limit, or who cannot seem to stay between the lines, I assume he or she is an elderly person. Sometimes, it is an elderly person. Sometimes it is another young adult or some woman on her cell phone. But my first assumption is always that he or she is old, senile and the opposite of a safe driver. At one time my anger toward elderly drivers grew so intense I even participated in a formal debate about the topic, citing statistics and studies of why older men and women should be required to retake licensing examinations or not drive at all. I also admit that my discrimination toward elderly people is rather consistent—I am equally biased on and off the road, to men and women, strangers and even family. It hurts to be honest, but when I was younger, I never wanted to go out with my grandmother—I saw her as an embarrassment, and I believed my parents and I would be treated differently if we were with her. Sadly, that last assumption was probably the most truthful assumption I ever made. My bigoted attitude toward elderly people is shared by an increasing percentage of the world population. Gone are the days when elders were revered for their wisdom and experience; now, put bluntly, most young people simply wish the older generation would hurry up and die.

Like sexism and racism, ageism is discrimination, a “ deep and profound prejudice against the elderly” (Monsees, 2002). As such, it is a legitimate issue that needs legitimate attention. At the same time, however,

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stereotypes do not appear on their own. Somewhere in the midst of the fear of being politically correct, there are important factors associated with old age that must also be addressed. Across the United States, news reports weekly focus on elderly drivers who push the wrong pedal or misread road signs and end up driving into buildings or through markets, harming themselves and those around them. However, the problem is the assumption that all elderly drivers, for example, will push the wrong pedal or misread road signs. While it is true that some older men and women are unfit to drive, as physical and mental reaction times do slow with age, generalizing such findings to the entire elderly population is ageism. Some people will contest that ageism is simply an attempt at political correctness, but as an individual who does often succumb to discrimination toward the elderly, even I can admit that something should be done, especially because I know when I am old I will want to be treated fairly—and I will probably not want to lose the autonomy that activities such as driving provide simply because I am over the age of 60.

As a society, we have yet to understand ageism the same way we understand sexism and racism. In other words, we are unaware of the consequences of discrimination toward the elderly. In fact, we actively take part in the bigotry every day, sometimes without even realizing it. The media is one of the biggest proponents of ageism, from movies and television to “jokes about aging, greeting cards [and] senior discounts” (Monsees, 2002). For example, I knew about the supposed poor driving skills of older men and women long before I ever got behind the wheel thanks to comments I overheard from my mother. Like most stereotypes, ageist beliefs become

inadvertent and unconscious because they are literally ingrained in our social interactions—we never deliberately act ageist because we do not know how to not act ageist. In my opinion, ageism was born from fear, the fear of aging and dying, or more appropriately, the fear of the end of life. In civilizations where death was honorable, where an afterlife was assured, men and women did not fear growing old. In fact, they welcomed it—with old age came status, and with that status the comfort of knowing the end, and a new beginning, was near. In modern society, however, old age means an end to beauty, wealth, success, fun and most importantly, life. The natural consequences of aging that were once accepted with open arms are now shunned—deafness, blindness, forgetfulness, wrinkles, pain (Dittmann, 2003). And the more younger men and women can separate themselves from the elderly by focusing on these negative biological breakdowns, the better they feel about themselves.

I hated when my grandmother visited, and I know I never tried to hide my feelings. Looking back, I realize now that she was proud enough to not take my obvious distaste to heart, and when she died, I hope she forgave me. But for some elderly people, the effects of ageism are destructive to more than the ego. Ageist stereotypes have the ability to render older men and women helpless—so prevalent are the beliefs that they cannot function on their own that they are not allowed to function on their own (Monsees, 2002). They are placed in nursing homes by their children or they are forced into retirement by their bosses, creating a loss of control. Beyond a doubt, the work environment is a breeding ground for ageism. Most job sites are a mixture of all age groups, with each individual fighting for promotions, hours and pay.

Older workers are often fired or forced to quit due to stereotypes about their work performance, even if they have never personally exhibited these stereotypes (Amble, 2007). When elderly people search for employment, they are often told they are overqualified, when secretly they are just too old (Monsees, 2002). Ageism in the work place is perpetuated by employees and employers, but also by many governments. Many careers require workers to retire after a certain age, and with most other careers offering retirement after the age of 60, it is no wonder that most people believe older workers should retire—those who desire to work or who need to work are simply ignored. Ageism festers in public policy even in England where “ while nine out of 10 Britons think they should have the right work for as long as they like . . . one in five employers still insist on imposing a default retirement age of 65” (Amble, 2007).

Ageism is destructive, and in a world that is not yet ready to surrender its assumptions, it will only get worse. However, that is no reason not to try. Like other forms of discrimination, ageism can only be reversed if it is first reversed in the individual (Monsees, 2002). In other words, since stereotypes are literally passed on from generation to generation, we each have a responsibility to break the cycle. I know I have ageist thoughts, but if I make a conscious attempt to not believe these stereotypes, than my children too will not believe these stereotypes. We each have a particular sphere in which we live, a small little system of places we call home. In our homes, our schools, our churches, our jobs and anywhere else we visit, if we each take a proactive stance against ageism, than slowly the bigotry will end. We cannot change everyone’s mind, but if enough minds are changed, eventually those

individuals, out-numbered and out-voiced, will no longer speak up. And the media, as a reflection of culture, will no longer find a market in ageist jokes and greeting cards. Finally, the elderly population itself must be made aware of ageism—many older men and women simply accept the discrimination because they do not know their rights (Dittmann, 2003). Yes this is an optimistic outlook, but not completely unfounded. In my own life, I learned the hard way, maybe too late in relationship to my grandmother, but my eyes were opened nonetheless. The debate I gave about elderly drivers? I lost it. I thought my case was flawless, indisputable—how could anyone prove that elderly drivers were anything but a threat to the safety of society as a whole? But the other team did, and since then, well, I have realized a lot about the older generation, and a lot about myself. And in the long run? I am not really afraid of growing old anymore.

References

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