



## Ageism

Ageism is discrimination against people on the grounds of age. It is extremely common; we probably all think and behave in ageist ways without even knowing it by absorbing an idea of what is 'normal' for different ages. The more extreme examples include being refused a job because we are too old or too young or being considered 'past it'; in fact, many older people have ageist attitudes about themselves. We may feel that bright clothing is inappropriate for our age group or that we shouldn't take up a job that a younger person could do. We may assume that travel is for the young or shopping with a tartan wheelie trolley is for the older person.

So what are we talking about? Really, it is a state of mind that we have ascribed to how people behave depending on how many years they have been alive. This is not to deny that the likelihood is that we change as we live longer, but the changes are usually minimal once we accept some physical decline. As children we thought that twenty year olds were very grown up and had more serious lives than our own. We may have looked forward to the idea of being twenty because of how we thought it would be, only to be disappointed with the reality when it arrived. Similarly, as we reach later life, we may realize that our mental picture of aging does not match our own experience. We may even find that the wrong perceptions can lead to matching our lives to our perceptions rather than the other way around.

In recent years there has been an attempt to recognize and counteract age discrimination in the workplace and socially. Irish law includes the Employment Equality Act, which contains provisions to prevent unlawful age discrimination in the workplace. Age discrimination is not defined in the Act however, and it does not apply to those over 65 or under 18, so clearly it is seen in a narrow manner. In the United States, similar laws are bringing enormous numbers of cases into the courts. This has not happened to the same extent yet here.

The media also have great power to influence general perceptions of older people. Where common stereotypes of older people are used to raise visions of pity, helplessness or even heroism at overcoming odds, it takes away from the individuality of the person. The Advertising Standards Authority of Ireland are also active in looking at discriminatory views of ageing in advertising and they deal regularly with complaints.

Much of the ageism in our society may be caused simply by not having regular

social contact between age groups. Research done by the National Council for the Elderly in 1986, *Attitudes of Young People to Ageing and the Elderly*, produced some interesting results. It was shown, among other things, that while a slight majority of young people said they would like to reach 75 years of age at least, approximately the same proportion experienced some fear or anxiety about growing old. Outside the family circle, two-thirds of the young people surveyed had no regular social contact with any elderly person. It follows then that they knew no elderly persons they would regard as a friend, however they still felt that their relationship with older people in general was a friendly one. Negative images of dependency and decline prevailed among more than half of the young people surveyed, but a larger majority held negative images of how most older people regarded the young. The study concludes that when social contact and communication exists between the generations, there is a positive attitude and more recognition of the individual characteristics of the person, less on their age, either old or young.

Similarly, research in the USA on young people's attitudes have largely confirmed earlier studies, but they found that when induced to make judgments about specific elderly individuals, they did not, as might have been expected, form more negative impressions of specific elderly people than of specific young people. Older people whose energy and attractiveness contradicted the stereotyped images of the elderly held by the respondents tended to be rated more positively than young people with similar characteristics. Clearly, the positive attitudes are there when there are close personal relationships.

Of course, in the bigger picture, ageism is apparent in all age groups. Thirty-year-old women are being told that they are too old to sell 'young' clothes and 40 year olds are told they are too young to be chief executives. While ageism regarding the elderly is rampant, it is just one strand in the continuum of how age is perceived as a defining feature rather than just how long we have been alive.

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