

GUEST EDITORIAL

Combating ageism

In primitive societies, old age was frequently valued. (Simmons, 1945). Older persons often provided knowledge, experience and institutional memory that was of adaptive – even survival – value to their societies. Although nomadic groups in various parts of the world abandoned the old and disabled when safety and security were at stake, overall older people were venerated. However, as the number and percentage of older persons, especially the frail and demented, increased, the perception grew that they were burdens to their families and society. This perception became widespread as societies shifted from agrarian economies, where older men had traditionally owned the land, to industrialized economies, where work was no longer centered in the home and older persons lost their authority.

However, it must be noted that the status of older persons and our attitudes toward them are not only rooted in historic and economic circumstances. They also derive from deeply held human concerns and fears about the vulnerability inherent in the later years of life. Such feelings can translate into contempt and neglect.

In Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1958 [1866]) we read a blunt example of ageism and the clash of the generations overheard by Raskolnikov, who becomes a philosophical murderer. Raskolnikov hears:

"I could kill that damn old woman and make off with her money, I assure you, without the faintest conscience-prick," the student added with warmth. "I was joking of course, but look here; on one side we have a stupid, senseless, worthless, spiteful, ailing, horrid old woman, not simply useless but doing actual mischief, who has not an idea what she is living for herself, and who will die in a day or two in any case. On the other side, fresh young lives thrown away for want of help and by thousands, on every side! A hundred thousand good deeds could be done and helped, on that old woman's money which will be buried in a monastery!" (pp. 58–59)

Older women, in particular, experience the impact of ageism. Living longer and alone and making up some 80% of the residents of nursing homes in the U.S.A., they are more vulnerable than men to abuse and poverty. But there are other ramifications. Through a series of experiments, psychologist Becca Levy demonstrated the adverse physiological effects of ageism, showing that older individuals who are presented with negative stereotypes of

aging over time experience detrimental changes, such as a decline in memory performance and a heightened cardiovascular response to stress.

However, ageism can be seen not only in these specific areas but also in making scapegoats of older men and women and in stereotyping them. It is seen in the deferral or denial of the realities of aging. Our language is replete with negative references, such as "dirty old man" and "greedy geezer," that would never be acceptable if applied to any other group. Graphic pictorial images that denigrate old age often appear in our media.

The cost of ageism

The U.S.A. has learnt that prejudice against women (sexism) and against race (racism) was costly to society. Productivity suffered. Cultural sensibility was offended. Likewise, the impact of ageism is considerable, for older people can and do play a major role in social and economic development. Yet we fail to maximize the potential of older persons on either a paid or voluntary basis and deny them the opportunity to play a significant role in our cultural life. Recognizing that age discrimination exists both advertently and inadvertently in personal and institutional form, and that economic and psychological factors play a major part in ageism as well, the International Longevity Center (ILC) has set out to examine the problem of age prejudice, also known as ageism. (Butler, 1975).

Ageism is inherent in the human condition and transcends national boundaries, but the ILC believes it is important to document the extent to which it exists in America and elsewhere to examine the status of legislation and case law at work to overcome this prejudice. We regard our effort to transform the culture and the experience of aging in America as quintessential and urgent. *Ultimately, such initiatives will benefit all who would grow old.*

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