Chapter 1
Introduction to the Section: Ageism—Concept and Origins

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Human ageing is not solely the biological process of senescence—the gradual deterioration of bodily functions that increases the risk for morbidity and mortality after maturation. Human ageing is embedded in social contexts and is shaped by social factors. We grow old within a social network of partners, family members, and friends. In many countries, we count on old age pensions as well as health and social care services. And we have explicit and implicit assumptions about older people (as a social group), growing old (as a developmental process), and being old (as part of the life course). These assumptions, expectations, and beliefs shape human ageing, as well. We often speak about older people in general (and not about different individuals), about "the" process of ageing (and not about the multiple, unique courses which exist), and about old age as a uniform stage at the end of life (and not about the diverse and heterogeneous living situations of older people). As soon as we neglect the differences between individuals, we over-generalise and treat older people, ageing, and old age in a stereotypical manner. This stereotypical construction of older people, ageing, and old age is called "ageism."

Ageism is ubiquitous: It is in our perception of older people and in our actions towards older people. We even look at ourselves as ageing persons through the lens of ageism. Most often, we are not aware of our ageist perceptions and behaviours. Ageism is prevalent in different domains of life: at work, in public spaces, in shops, and in doctors' offices. Elements of ageism can be found in individuals' behaviour, in organizational regulations, and in cultural values. Ageism is often negative and it

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can harm older people because stereotyping ageist beliefs may lead the older person to act as she or he is expected to behave: as a stereotypical older person. Hence, ageism may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As scientists, we want to look into the origins of ageism (e.g., how does ageism come about?) and we want to describe the manifestations and consequences of ageism (e.g., what does ageism look like and what follows from ageism?). We are also in need of practical tools with which to study ageism and to adequately monitor its occurrence. This is not enough, however. As scientists, we are also interested in interventions against ageism (e.g., what works best?). Consequently, this book is composed of different sections. The first section contains five chapters on the *concept and aetiology of ageism*. These chapters provide a review of potential ways to conceptualise and explain the occurrence of ageism. The second section is focused on the *manifestations and consequences of ageism*. This section is the largest in the book and contains ten chapters, which range in scope from the micro- to the macro-level, including different settings and groups exposed to ageism. The third section includes five chapters dedicated to *interventions to fight ageism*. Four of the chapters discuss legal and policy interventions, whereas the latter chapter is on interventions in the field of education. Finally, a section on *researching ageism* is devoted to knowledge gained by quantitative and qualitative researchers with regard to research in the field of ageism. This section contains seven chapters which address philosophical, methodological, and cultural issues concerning research in the field of ageism.

In this introductory chapter, we discuss definitions of the concept of ageism and give an overview of the most important theories used to explain ageism on different levels. We also introduce the chapters of the first section of this book.

1.1   Ageism: Concept

Definitions and concepts of ageism have changed over the years. The term was first defined by Robert Butler, one of the pioneers in ageing research. Butler used the word ageism to describe "prejudice by one age group against another age group" (Butler 1969, p. 243). Butler argued that ageism represents discrimination by the middle-aged group against the younger and older groups in society, because the middle-aged group is responsible for the welfare of the younger and older age groups, which are seen as dependent. He compared the effects of ageism to the negative effects of racism or discrimination based on social class and discussed the intersections between ageism and other forms of discrimination and disempowerment (Butler 1969). In subsequent work, Butler (1980) continued to compare ageism to sexism and racism (the other two well-known "isms"), arguing that ageism is manifested as attitudes, behaviours, and institutional practices and policies directed towards older adults. Ageism can be either positive or negative, yet it tends to carry negative consequences by creating self-fulfilling prophecies (Butler 1980).

Erdman Palmore, another eminent ageing researcher, has argued that older adults should be seen as a minority group in society (Palmore 1978). Palmore (2000) has argued that normal ageing is seen as a loss of functioning and abilities. Hence, it carries a negative connotation. Accordingly, terms such as "old" or "elderly" have negative connotations and thus should be avoided (Palmore 2000). This corresponds with the notion of language as shaping reality and constructing the meaning of old age (Nuessel 1982).

A clear acknowledgement of the presence of ageism not only in the way one group treats another but also as the "enemy within" was introduced in a paper by Levy (2001). According to Levy, ageism is often directed at one's self and can be implicit. It occurs with very little awareness or intention and literally impacts the social interactions and life of each and every one of us. This definition considers ageism as having behavioural, attitudinal, and emotional components based on chronological age. It can be positive or negative and is thought to shape most interactions with older adults. It has been argued that older adults have internalised negative ageist messages throughout their lives. This, in turn, impacts their view of themselves as well as their view of others in their surroundings (Levy 2001; Levy and Banaji 2002). Every person who grows old is likely to be the target of ageism at some point in life. This is very different from other types of discrimination, which are not likely to impact all people in society (Palmore 2001). Hence, the scope and breadth of ageism are massive (Ayalon 2014).

A more general definition of ageism equates it with discrimination based on age. Because age-related stereotypes are embedded in our lives, we disregard them and hardly notice their effects. It has been suggested that ageism is broadly defined as prejudice or discrimination against or in favour of any age group. While both young and old are affected by ageism, as both age groups are commonly defined as being dependent, rather than as productive members of society (Angus and Reeve 2006), also individuals in middle adulthood may suffer from ageism. Additional attempts at a comprehensive definition of ageism address its emotional, behavioural, and cognitive aspects; its implicit and explicit nature; its positive and negative impacts; and its possible manifestations at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (Iversen et al. 2009).

Although both stereotypes and discrimination are discussed with regard to ageism, it is largely accepted that age stereotypes precede age discrimination. Chapter 2 by Voss, Bodner, and Rothermund (2018) in this section suggests that a reverse direction should also be considered. The authors argue that expectations and behaviours reinforce each other. This occurs both at the actor and the perceiver levels and has a domain-specific nature. Hence, this chapter provides a fresh look at the concept and its occurrence.

In this book, we define ageism as the complex, often negative construction of old age, which takes place at the individual and the societal levels. Despite the fact that ageism is regarded as affecting the lives of people of all ages, the entire book is primarily devoted to ageism towards older adults.

1.2   Ageism: Aetiology

Over the past few decades, multiple theories have attempted to explain the occurrence of ageism. We look at three levels of ageism: the micro-level, which is concerned with the individual (thoughts, emotions, actions); the meso-level, which is concerned with groups, organizations, and other social entities (e.g., in the domain of work or health care services); and the macro-level, which relates to cultural or societal values as a whole (e.g., political regulations). A division of theories according to micro-, meso-, or macro-level explanations for the occurrence of ageism is somewhat arbitrary as theories can relate to several levels at the same time. Obviously, other categorizations are also possible.

1.2.1   Micro-level Theories to Explain the Origins of Ageism

Theoretical approaches to ageism on the micro-level of the individual come from two traditions of psychological research: social psychology (terror management theory, social identity theory, and the stereotype content model, among others) and developmental psychology (theories based on the social-developmental perspective, stereotype embodiment theory, and others).

Terror Management Theory provides a prominent explanation for the occurrence of ageism. According to terror management theory, older adults serve as a constant reminder of one's mortality and vulnerability. In order to manage the anxiety that their presence produces, individuals unconsciously sustain faith in cultural worldviews that offer literal or symbolic immortality. By adhering to these cultural worldviews, individuals attempt to increase their self-esteem which in turn provides for the person a buffer against death-related anxiety. These efforts, allow the person to maintain relative equanimity despite awareness of one's vulnerability and mortality (Greenberg et al. 1986, 1997).

Social Identity Theory proposes that individuals do not act just on the basis of their personal characteristics or interpersonal relationships, but as members of their reference groups. Group memberships are the basis for the individual identity of group members and, moreover, determine an individual's relationships with members of other groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Social identity theory posits that people want to have a positive self-identity. They achieve this goal by demonstrating biases which create positive distinctions between their group (in-group) and other groups (out-groups), and by elevating their in-group status above that of other groups (Kite et al. 2002; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Because age can be one criterion for group identification, the theory can be used to explain ageism, as proposed in the Chap. 4 by Lev, Wurm, & Ayalon in this section.

The Stereotype Content Model suggests that groups of people are commonly classified by varying levels of warmth and competence. Older adults, for example, are commonly perceived as being warm but incompetent. These perceptions lead to feelings of pity and sympathy and less so to feelings of envy (Cuddy and Fiske 2002; Fiske et al. 2002).

Theoretical approaches from the perspective of human development emphasise changes over time. According to this group of theories, ageism has origins in childhood and its focus and outcomes may change over the life course. A *social development perspective* suggests that ageism develops throughout the life course. Perceptual, affective, and sociocultural mechanisms are responsible for the development of ageism. Age-based categories are thought to be universal. For instance, children might perceive older adults negatively with regard to dimensions of activity and potency and positively with regard to social goodness. Negative attitudes towards ageing might also be universal, but seem to vary with children's age, social class, and older adults' gender (Montepare and Zebrowitz 2002).

Stereotype Embodiment Theory proposes that lifetime exposure to negative stereotypes of older adults leads to the internalization of ageism. Over the course of their lives, older adults have internalised negative attitudes towards their own age group, often implicitly. In support of these claims, longitudinal studies have shown that negative age stereotypes and self-perceptions of ageing among older adults have an adverse influence on health, longevity, and cognitive performance (e.g., Levy et al. 2002a, b, 2012; Wurm and Benyamini 2014; Wurm et al. 2007).

Efforts to separate the ageing body from the "young spirit" are seen as attempts to accept old age and mortality. These attempts are equated with the concepts of *successful ageing* or *active ageing*, which aim to differentiate between pathological processes that occur in old age, normal aspects of ageing (like decline in cognitive and motor speed), and "exceptional" (successful) aging (aging with low illness burden, good functioning, and high social engagement). These concepts can be seen as combatting certain negative stereotypes of ageing; however, they can also be seen as ageist, because they place the responsibility for failure to "age successfully," which includes a large portion of the population of older adults, on the individual (Liang and Luo 2012).

Chapter 4 by Lev et al. (2018) in the first section of the book attempts to explain the origins of ageism at the individual level. According to the proposed model, terror management theory offers reasonable explanations for the origins of ageism among younger age groups, but not among the oldest-old, who are less concerned with impending death. Stereotype embodiment theory, on the other hand, argues that ageism and its manifestation as discrimination against one's own age group in old age is internalised over the life course. The authors conclude that whereas successful ageing, healthy ageing, and active ageing models can be effective for some older adults, the acknowledgement of decline and losses should be a viable option as well.

1.2.2   Meso-level Theories to Explain the Origins of Ageism

Ageism does not always start at the individual level. Groups, organizations, and other social entities might be the precipitators of ageism, as well. An important example concerns the rules governing entry to and exit from an organization. In the labour market, age can be decisive for entry into a company ("too old to be hired") or for exit from a company ("pension age").

Evolutionary Theories on Group Membership have argued that people are programmed to be part of a group and that they learn that their own wellbeing is interdependent on that of other members of the group. A living arrangement that consists of small groups results in social transactions, cooperation, and reciprocity among members, and the criteria for determining the exchange of assistance are usually implicit, rather than explicit. In this theory, a person's age, wealth, reputation, and health play a role in determining whether or not assistance will be provided, because individuals who are perceived to have greater reproductive potential are more likely to be helped. The degree of threat posed by a situation is also an important factor in determining people's willingness to help. When life is in danger, people are more likely to assist relatives and those who are younger, healthy, and wealthy. Nevertheless, when there is no risk to one's life, people are more likely to assist the very young or old, the sick, and the poor (Burnstein et al. 1994).

Age Segregation is a prominent explanation at the meso-level. In most modern Western societies, there is a clear segregation between the young and the old, based on pre-planned life scripts, which include: (a) education, (b) family creation and work, and (c) retirement (Riley and Riley 1994). When the younger and older generations do not socially engage, ageism is likely to flourish (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2005).

Intergroup Threat Theory suggests that individuals react in hostile ways towards outgroups, particularly when outgroups are perceived as potentially harmful. The theory identifies two major threats—realistic threats and symbolic threats—which serve to enhance intergroup hostility and conflict. Realistic threats refer to threats to the group's power, resources, and welfare; symbolic threats are threats to one's world view, belief system, and values (Stephan and Mealy 2011). Although the theory was not developed specifically to explain ageism, it can be used to account for age divisions in society.

Intergenerational Conflict Theory proposes three bases for intergenerational conflict, which are exacerbated by the expectations that younger generations have of older generations. These include expectations for the succession of resources from the older to the younger generations; minimal consumption of shared resources by older generations; and age-appropriate symbolic identity maintenance, which means that the older generation should not attempt to "cross the line" and become

indistinguishable from the younger generation (North and Fiske 2013). When these expectations are not met, ageism might flourish.

Chapter 5 by Naegele, De Tavernier, and Hess (2018) in this section addresses ageism at the meso-level as it manifests in the workplace. The authors identify organizational and contextual factors at the meso-level, which contribute to the occurrence of ageism in the organization. This adds to a broader understanding of ageism in the workplace as well as to a theoretical understanding of meso-level explanations that account for ageism.

1.2.3 Macro-level Theories to Explain the Origins of Ageism

Ageism can also be located at the macro-level, in cultural values that depreciate older people, and in societal institutions, such as age-related retirement regulations.

Modernization Theory postulates that through the process of societal modernization, which includes advancements in technology and medicine, older adults have lost their social status in modern times (as compared to pre-modern eras). For one, advancements in technology and medicine have resulted in a larger number of older adults. As a result, old age is no longer the exception, representing a "survival of the fittest," but rather a common occurrence generally associated with frailty, morbidity, and disability. In more modern societies, the accumulated knowledge of older adults is often considered obsolete as a result of advancements in technology. The fact that younger generations tend to have higher levels of education than older generations is yet another contributor to the low status of older adults in modern society. In addition, with increasing urbanization, younger people tend to move to the city, leaving their older parents behind, so that the degree of contact between the generations declines (Cowgill and Holmes 1972). Finally, increased secularization has a role to play in reduced levels of familism and the embracement of individualism (Burgess 1960). In essence, even though this theory is primarily concerned with the declining status of older people, it also predicts an increase in power and status of the younger generations, who are seen as holding the knowledge and skills valued by modern society (Cowgill and Holmes 1972).

Chapter 6 by Stypińska and Nikander (2018) in this section uses the modernization theory to account for ageism in the workforce. The authors also discuss the roles of anti-discrimination policies and macro-level structural, political processes with regard to ageism. This chapter provides context-specific examples for the occurrence of ageism due to macro-level processes.

Ageism may be considered to be one mechanism creating societal inequality, similar to inequalities stemming from gender, race, poverty, and sexual orientation. A more nuanced picture of ageism can be achieved by looking at several mechanisms together, rather than only looking at one mechanism and neglecting the

others. Hence, it is important to look at ageism from an *intersectionality perspective*. Intersectionality theory suggests that it is not age per se, but the intersection of age and gender, race, socioeconomic level, sexual orientation, and/or other factors which results in discrimination (Boggs et al. 2014; Krekula 2007; Marcus and Fritzsche 2015; McMullin and Berger 2006?/2013?). Chapter 3 by Krekula, Nikander, and Wilińska (2018) in this section views ageism within a wider context of multiple marignalizations. It is argued that discrimination is never solely based on age alone, but rather, on a multiplicity of characteristics, such as gender, appearance, financial status, and socioeconomic status.

1.3   Conclusions

Clearly, there is no consensus regarding the concept of ageism or its causes. Ageism as a concept has gone through various changes, and although it is currently acknowledged that ageism can be directed towards any age group, ageism against older adults has thus far received the most attention. In addition, although positive ageism is well-defined, it has hardly been examined in the literature. Hence, ageism directed at younger age groups and the positive aspects of ageism are potential subjects for future research.

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