Understanding Ageism and How to Combat it in Society

When younger generations think of elderly individuals, they very likely think of a beloved grandparent, or maybe an aunt or uncle. Perhaps they think of the sweet comforts that this loved one provides to them- the aroma of homecooked meals in their home or the warmth of their welcoming hugs. For younger generations, viewing elderly individuals in the workforce or as functioning members of society may seem unusual or uncommon to them because their expectations of the capabilities of elderly individuals lies primarily in their perception of said family members and their experiences with them. These family members are often retired from employment, or perhaps residing in long term living facilities. The fact of the matter is that while these generalizations may seem harmless, they can in fact be very dangerous to the elderly population and to societal and social equality. This is where the idea of "ageism" comes in.

Ageism has been defined as stereotypical assumptions, prejudicial ideologies and even discriminatory actions towards individuals due to a person's age. While ageism has been reported in younger adults, it is most commonly experienced by older adults in the workplace, in society, and in healthcare.[1] Ageism can impact economical constructs and societal norms by influencing the way younger generations perceive the abilities of older adults in the workplace- viewing older adults as "frail" or "unable to keep up with the fast paced demands of the workday" can generate inequities and reduce the opportunities of older adults.[2] There is also a cognitive, behavioral and emotional element to ageism as well when we utilize given stereotypes of older adults and manifest these notions into actions and behaviors that may come off as demeaning or insulting to the older individual.[1] A Stereotype Content Model supports this notion by suggesting that societal norms dictate that individuals be classified through varied levels of warmth and competence- utilizing this model, older adults are commonly placed on the spectrum of being warm and welcoming but incompetent in their cognitive ability. This in turn generates

notions and behaviors related to pity and sympathy from the rest of society, further perpetuating actions of discrimination and prejudice.[2]

One of the most difficult elements of ageism is that many younger members of society do not realize that their actions towards older adults can be categorized as discriminatory or prejudice. They may even view their actions of pity and sympathy towards an older adult as respectful, but in reality there is a fine line between respecting elders and demeaning or patronizing the individual's character. Studies have shown that negative stereotypes and perceptions of older adults have manifested in patronizing intergenerational interactions such as secondary baby talk, otherwise known as elderspeak.[3] Elderspeak is essentially the slowing and simplification of speech with the addition of louder volumes of voice, exaggerated connotations, and often times a higher pitch in the tone of voice. This is a common practice in the workplace, in long term residential care facilities, and in health care as well. Utilizing elderspeak can communicate to the older individual that they are no longer equals with the societal norms of middle aged adults, and as a result their opinions and physical and mental capabilities will be overlooked.[3] This has been shown to have negative consequences on both the individual and to society as a whole- it generates a very low self- esteem and sense of self-worth in the individual which can ultimately hinder their very valuable contributions to their family and to society. In health care, this can diminish a patient's autonomy and the ability for the health care professional to develop a strong relationship with the patient; in society, this can reduce the individual's desire to contribute and participate in the workforce and in hobbies they enjoy; in families, this can minimize their perceived competence level which can be detrimental to open communication and productive interaction between older parents and their adult children.[3]

So how exactly does society combat ageism and implement strategies for individuals to become more aware of its detrimental effects? Various studies have explored increasing intergenerational contact and implementing educational resources and to help improve the attitudes and perceptions between age groups and minimize the effects of ageism.[4] It is predicted that since ageism can be instilled from a very young age, intervening in these very young age groups can achieve the greatest success. One approach is to combine long term senior living facilities with preschools or daycare programming to encourage positive intergenerational interactions that are both fun and rewarding to all age groups involved.[3] The idea is that these positive interactions will negate the detrimental effects of ageism and provide a more hopeful and successful future to society as a whole.[5]

The other avenue to consider is the educational component- educating younger generations about the effects of ageism as well as the overall constructs of aging in a larger sense can promote a greater sense of awareness. One study shows that among younger generations, negative attitudes towards aging and lack of overall knowledge of aging had a greater effect on ageism than feeling comfortable with interacting with older adults did.[4] When applying educational components regarding the dangers of ageism as well as general knowledge of the normal conditions of aging, perceptions towards aging were more positive and the risk of ageism ideologies significantly decreased. This indicates that education regarding aging beginning at a very young age can very likely help eliminate ageism from society.[4]

Understanding ageism is just the first big step towards taking action to eliminate bias and combat its detrimental effects on society. It is important to change our outlook of the older population- to not just view those within the older population as beloved family members who we visit on holidays, but as contributing and important members of society. Together as a

society, we can educate ourselves and seek opportunities to engage in intergenerational activities

that will help cultivate an equal and fair society for all individuals no matter their age.

References

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