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Bessie's Hope blog post — The History and Future of Ageism in Our Culture

The stereotyping, judging, discrimination, ostracizing, contempt, and even abuse of older adults, otherwise known as ageism, is a phenomenon that is without a doubt deeply rooted in our western society. Speaking from a personal perspective, I don't recall when exactly I first remember noticing ageism. In fact, I hadn't heard the word "ageism" until I was probably in college, or maybe high school at the earliest. I can say, though, that when I did first hear an "-ism" used in reference to the older adult population, I immediately knew what was being referred to, because it was apparently a phenomenon that was so familiar to me.

Ageism is something that is unfortunately so deeply embedded in our culture, that most people have seen it or have been able to recognize it in some form on many occasions throughout their lives. This somber reality raises many questions. Has ageism always been a part of the human experience? If not, when did it begin, and how? Perhaps most importantly, can ageism ever be eliminated from our society? To begin to answer these questions, we need to take a look back at history.

The short answer to the historical question is yes, ageism has in fact been around for all of human history. The ancient Roman philosopher Seneca, who lived from 4 BC to AD 65 is quoted as saying "Aging is a disease".¹ This negative connotation makes sense when you consider the historical context. Not only is there the obvious fact that aging takes a toll on the physical body, but in most civilizations throughout history, the value that people attributed to older adults was proportional to how much they were able to contribute to society. Because the natural aging process is accompanied by a natural decline in strength and physical capability, older adults are typically not able to contribute as much to the labor pool in a given civilization.

Still, there is a difference between whether or not an individual is valued for what they are able to offer in terms of “manpower” in a society, and whether or not an individual is valued in terms of respect and veneration by those with less life experience than them. Even the Spartans, who are infamous for acting ruthless to members of society they deemed too weak, had high regard for their elders, and the wisdom that they provided to their communities. That is why members of its governing council had to be at least 60 years old.² Respect for elders is something that has thankfully been as historically and culturally ubiquitous, if not more so, as contempt or disrespect for elders.

Respect for elders is a value that has traditionally been a part of America and western cultures too, yet in today’s America, it seems as though the prevalence and importance of this value is experiencing a rapid decline. So when, how, and why did things change? Perhaps the reason elders are valued poorly today has less to do with what they are able to contribute physically, and instead more to do with things distribution of resources and differing ideologies. Take economics, for example. In 1988, the political magazine *The New Republic* described the elder population as “greedy geezers” who do little more for society apart from taking advantage of social security funds.¹

Even though economics have changed vastly over the millennia, the fact that the elder population tends to be more limited in what they can offer to a functioning society remains true, and it remains the motive for their disregard and animosity by the younger generations. We live in a society today that values efficiency above all else, and often, elders sadly cannot seem to keep up, leaving them marginalized. As if the often crippling fear of the unknown and depression that is associated with the end of life isn’t difficulty enough for our elders to navigate, this population that has a history of being revered across cultures is now experiencing perhaps more discrimination than ever before. A telling quote in an article titled *A History of Ageism since 1969* reads “Ageism preys on vulnerability — fragility, frailty, and dependency at advancing ages — especially as dread of dying and death mounts.”¹ This is more true today than it has ever been.

I believe that the best way to combat ageism is to reverse the cycle. Since the beginning of human history, our elder population has been told that they have less to contribute, which equates to less value. I think our society needs to start recognizing that our elders really have perhaps more to contribute than any of the younger generations. Some of the most joyous and vibrant communities from different cultures and eras have been known to value wisdom and experience above all. These are the societies that value elders the most, and have the least problems with ageism. In order to eradicate ageism, we need to change what we value. We need to shift the focus of our modern western society from efficiency and turnover back to wisdom and respect.

What does this look like in 2021 America and beyond? A systematic review and meta-analysis by Burnes et al. identifies two primary categories of strategies to combat ageism: education and intergenerational contact, with programs that include both being the most effective.³ Education consists of programs designed to “provide instruction of some kind designed to reduce ageism”.³ Intergenerational contact is defined as “interventions that feature an opportunity for contact between younger people and older people”.³ Both of these types of interventions showed improvement with ageism in several areas, including attitudes toward aging, knowledge on aging, comfort with older adults, anxiety about one’s own aging, and even interest in working with older adults, such as wanting to explore a career in geriatrics.³

In order to rekindle our society’s sense of value for older adults, there needs to be an abundance of programs that include education about aging, older adults, and ageism, as well as programs that create an environment in which older adults and younger adults can spend time interacting with each other. Bessie’s Hope is an example of an organization that incorporates both of these strategies. With their slogan “Bringing Generations Together”, they are committed to doing just that by hosting programs such as their “Youth and Elders” program. This is an ideal example of intergenerational contact, such as it is described in Burnes et al. Bessie’s hope is also committed to

spreading education and awareness in many different ways, such as through this blog. Overall, what this organization contributes to the eradication of ageism in our world is in its name. It creates hope that if intergenerational contact and education about aging and ageism become widespread enough, we can someday experience a world free of ageism.

Resources

1. Achenbaum, W. A history of ageism since 1969. *Generations*. 2015;39(3). 10-16. doi:10.2307/26556123.
2. Status of older people: the ancient and biblical worlds. Encyclopedia of aging. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/status-older-people-ancient-and-biblical-worlds>. Updated February 12, 2021. Accessed February 20, 2021.
3. Burnes D, Sheppard C, Henderson CR Jr, et al. Interventions to Reduce Ageism Against Older Adults: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Am J Public Health*. 2019;109(8):e1-e9. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2019.305123