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**Susan Krauss Whitbourne Ph.D.**  
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# Are You Letting Ageism Affect the Way You Judge People?

New research shows ageism's effects on how you judge and are judged by others.

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The 2020 Democratic presidential debates that aired on NBC in June 2019 were replete with negative comments by younger candidates toward the older tier of presidential hopefuls. Such expressions as “[passing the torch](#)” suggest that those younger candidates believe that age alone defines in a negative way an individual's value system, attitudes, and political savvy. At the same time, there is a global movement, in line with the [World Health Organization's Sustainable Development Goals](#), to build Age-Friendly Communities, a movement that has spread to university campuses as well in the Age-Friendly University initiative. Why, given the backdrop of a population that is aging, and the recognition that having healthy older adults benefits the world as a whole, would political candidates take such an age unfriendly stance?

One might argue that the older generation should indeed pass the torch rather than edge out the young. Indeed, the quality of “generativity” implies that once individuals reach their middle adult years and beyond, they seek to foster the growth of the generations that will follow them. However, the older generation is going to be around for a while if current trends continue, and rather than put them off on the shelf because of their age, why not put their minds and experience to good use? An age-friendly society isn't one that only is intended to benefit older adults, but has at its core the idea that intergenerational exchanges and contact provide the healthiest environment for all.

In this context, research on ageism provides insights into the factors that lead older adults to be viewed in a negative light by younger generations. In “ageism,” stereotypes (usually negative) and prejudices toward older adults become expressed in various behaviors such as [discrimination](#) on the basis of age, attempts to avoid contact with older people, and jokes or derogatory comments aimed at aging individuals.

One of the problems in studies on ageism is that, as is true in studying other forms of stereotypes and prejudice, people don't like to admit openly that they hold these views (some of those Democratic candidates aside).

Therefore, researchers who study ageism either use measures of implicit attitudes (tapping [unconscious](#) bias) or use methods that examine behavior rather than attitudes. Stanford University's Ashley Martin teamed up with New York University's Michael North and Columbia University's Katherine Phillips (2019) to put ageist stereotypes to the test with these more behavioral methods, studying as well the interaction between ageism and sexism.

Martin and her collaborators focused on the notion of “succession” across their series of six carefully-designed studies to tap into the combined effects of ageism and sexism on perceptions by younger generations of the “resource threat” represented by members of older generations. Their measure of ageism incorporated the idea of agency prescriptions, “the expectation that older people should actively step aside, ceding agency, to facilitate the younger generation's economic and [leadership](#) opportunities” (p. 342).

Because older women are perceived as less of a threat than older men when it comes to control over resources, the researchers proposed that agency-related prescriptive biases would be directed particularly at older men.

economic penalties” (p. 343).

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How might these penalties manifest? In the workplace, it’s illegal to engage in outright discrimination against a person on the basis of age, but there are other ways to stifle an older worker’s opportunities.

The excuses of downsizing and “reorganization” are just two tricks that managers can use to replace older with younger employees. There are other ways to make older people feel unwelcome, such as not including them in social gatherings, shunning them, or adding unpleasant responsibilities to their workload.

Jokes and comments about their age add to this unpleasant environment. Martin et al. believe that if older people are seeming too “agentic,” i.e., continuing to strive for advancement past the age considered “appropriate,” they would be particularly vulnerable to negative treatment by younger individuals in the workplace.

Martin and her fellow researchers began their investigation by doing headcounts of U.S. Congressional appointments, finding that women are older when they begin their first term in Congress, suggesting that once they pass a certain age, they are considered more “electable.” Next, the authors asked online participants (N=205) to indicate who they voted for in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, an opportunity that allowed for evaluations of a man and woman of approximately equal ages (though with vastly different political agendas). In addition, they asked participants to complete a measure of succession bias with such items as, “If it weren’t for older people opposed to changing the way things are, we could probably progress much more rapidly as a society,” “Older people are often too stubborn to realize they don’t function like they used to,” and, “It is unfair that older people get to vote on issues that will impact younger people much more.”

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A related measure asked participants to indicate whether too many social resources are being used to support the old (“Older people don’t really need to get the best seats on buses and trains”). Identity questions asked participants to indicate their agreement with items such as “Older people shouldn’t even try to act cool.”

Be honest. How did you answer these questions? You can see that these behaviorally-oriented measures truly put ageist attitudes to the test by asking participants to choose between the old and young rather than just say how much they like or dislike older adults.

factors and concluded that, despite the problems of comparing two very different individuals, the results support the interpretation that “expectations to avoid agency that hold women back at a younger age may weaken as women grow older” (p. 345).

The following studies in the series reported in the Martin et al. paper provided continued support for the idea that older men are targeted more by succession bias than older women. A resume-rating study asked participants to indicate who they would be more likely to hire and, once again, it was the older male employees who were rated more negatively as potential employees. The young adults in this rating study didn’t even want to interact with an older male, compared to their greater favorability toward an older female, although in general they preferred interacting with young people.

In the final study, the authors asked participants to imagine themselves in a meeting with an older man vs. an older woman who varied in the extent to which they exhibited agentic behavior (taking over the conversation). The men who tried to overpower the meeting received the most negative ratings on such measures as liking, respect, promotion, and threat when they tried to overpower the conversation. The same set of biases did not apply to the older women in the scenario. Thus, for women, who spend much of their lives fighting off stereotypes that prevent them from behaving in agentic ways, aging seems to provide somewhat of a grace period. Men, by contrast, may be expected to cede their power and influence because the young are threatened by them. Gender stereotypes, then, do not apply equally over the lifespan and suggest “the need to fully consider gender dynamics of the older generation” (p. 355).

**To sum up**, the present findings suggest that whether you’re a man or woman will determine whether ageism will target you as you go through life trying to reach your goals. If you’re perceived as a threat, a case more likely for an older man, you’ll be blocked from those goals or at least face a great deal of resistance. We can only hope for a more age-friendly society, in which people will be able to seek fulfillment, no matter what their age or gender.

#### References

Martin, A. E., North, M. S., & Phillips, K. W. (2019). Intersectional escape: Older women elude agentic prescriptions more than older men. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 45(3), 342–359. doi:10.1177/0146167218784895

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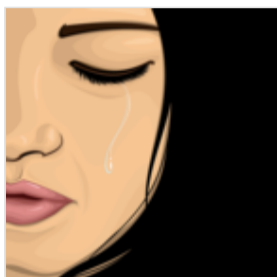


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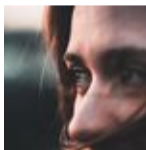


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