
Is Age Discrimination Ever Acceptable?

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As the U.S. population ages, more Americans may encounter ageism—negative attitudes or actions based on a person’s age—in their day-to-day lives. Age discrimination, in which older people are treated less favorably, and reverse age discrimination, in which younger people are treated less favorably, are becoming recognized as social problems. For instance, according to data from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2012), the percentage of the charges filed with the commission that are attributable to age has increased steadily over the past 15 years. In 2011, almost one in four claims was related to age discrimination. However common age discrimination is, though, a substantial amount of disagreement exists over how much, if any, is acceptable. So-called acceptable institutional age discrimination is embedded within organizational practices, such as requiring older adults to renew their driver’s licenses more often or allowing senior citizen communities to deny residency to younger adults. In this brief article, we discuss the cultural and economic sources of ageism within the United States, offer some examples of institutional age discrimination that most Americans consider acceptable, and highlight some of the potentially negative unintentional consequences of moving away from the idea that institutional age discrimination is acceptable within limits.
Ageism in the United States

Ageism stems from cultural and economic beliefs, and often includes a complex mix of both unfavorable and favorable attitudes about older adults. For instance, many Americans believe that cultural differences exist between generations. One survey, conducted by the Pew Research Center (2010), asked people from various generations what made their generation unique. The Millennial Generation (also called Generation Y; born 1981 to 1993) and Generation X (born 1965 to 1980) were most likely to identify technology as what made their generation unique, whereas members of the Baby Boomer Generation (born 1946 to 1964) most often mentioned their work ethic. Furthermore, evidence shows that Americans from different generations value different qualities. As shown in Figure 1, when asked to identify the most important lesson for children to learn to prepare them for life, members of the Silent Generation (born 1928 to 1945) and of the Baby Boomer Generation were most likely to say “To think for oneself.” Members of more recently born generations, such as Generation X and Generation Y, were most likely to state “To work hard.”

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

In addition to perceived cultural differences, concerns about the potential imbalances between the economic burdens placed on different generations have given rise to other ageist beliefs. Beginning in the 1980s, concerns about generational equity began to proliferate in policy circles and the popular press, promoting the idea that older individuals were taking too much and giving too little relative to other age groups (Kingson & Williamson, 1993). Proponents of the generational-equity perspective argued that if Americans reduced spending on Social Security and Medicare, more money would be available to spend on educational and other programs for
children and young adults (Williamson & Watts-Roy, 2009). The stereotype of older adults as greedy directly contended with the more established stereotype of older adults as financially needy and attempted to present the interests of older adults as achievable only at the expense of younger people.

The idea of conflict between age groups, manifest in both cultural assumptions about generations and policy discussions, may have taken root in part because of the decreasing affluence of U.S. workers. Rapid growth in real wage rates through the 1960s meant that Americans had reason to be optimistic about their financial futures, leading to a willingness to spend on elders and other groups perceived as needy. However, stagnant or declining wages characterized the period from the 1980s through the 1990s. Furthermore, inequalities in wage rates between educational groups grew dramatically in the 1980s (Autor, Katz, & Kearney, 2008). The late-2000s recession has further reinforced the idea in many people’s minds that not enough resources are available to provide for everyone (Edsall, 2012). Within this context, ageist stereotypes that pit younger and older adults against each other may flourish.

“Acceptable” Institutional Ageism

Stereotypes, whether they arise from debates over the potential financial burdens of an aging population or beliefs about differences between generations, affect what is thought of as acceptable treatment for adults of different ages. Most people do not consider intentional age discrimination (i.e., practices that are carried out with the knowledge that they are discriminatory against older people) acceptable. More ambiguity surrounds unintentional or inadvertent age discrimination (i.e., practices that are unknowingly biased against older people). Even more ambiguous are various forms of institutional ageism, in which organizational practices are biased
against older people, and institutional reverse ageism, in which organizational practices are biased against younger people—both of which are accepted on a day-to-day basis by most Americans.

Historically, most recognized forms of institutional discrimination have concerned race or gender. For instance, redlining, sociologist John McKnight’s term for how banks avoided investing in low-income neighborhoods (Sagawa & Segal, 2000), describes discrimination that targets the locations where minorities or other disadvantaged populations live rather than the individuals themselves. The Fair Housing Act prohibited such discriminatory practices as redlining on the basis of race, ethnicity, and religion (Civil Rights Act of 1964). Today, despite the persistence of race-based redlining (Cohen-Cole, 2011; Ezeala-Harrison, Glover, & Shaw-Jackson, 2008; Mendez, Hogan, & Culhane, 2011), many Americans would consider institutional discrimination based on race reprehensible.

At face value, age is often considered analogous to gender or race. In part, this perspective is a legacy of the civil rights movement. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, for instance, paralleled Title VII of the Civil Rights Act in numerous ways (Macnicol, 2006). However, much of U.S. society’s behavior suggests more openness to institutional age discrimination than to institutional gender or race discrimination. Consider five types of institutional age discrimination: mandatory retirement policies, senior discounts, age-restricted communities, driver’s license retesting for older adults, and age-based determination of who receives organ transplants.

• For most occupations, mandatory retirement policies, which require workers to retire at a specific age (such as 60 or 65), are considered archaic and unfair. However, certain
occupations (such as firefighting and law enforcement) still are subject to mandatory retirement (Gokhale, 2004).

• Senior citizen discounts—which usually take the form of a percentage price reduction for goods and services—typically are not viewed as harmful types of age discrimination.

• Age-restricted communities, in which 80 percent or more of residents are ages 55 and older, have become fixtures throughout the United States, particularly in states favored by retirees, such as Florida. Based on the Housing for Older Persons Act of 1995, age is considered an exception to laws prohibiting redlining.

• Older drivers in many states have additional or more frequent testing involved in renewing their drivers’ licenses. For instance, in 18 states, older adults must renew their licenses more often than younger adults (Adler & Rottunda, 2010).

• Older adults who need organ transplants, such as those with end-stage renal disease, are much less likely to be placed on the waiting list for a new organ than their younger counterparts. Some evidence suggests that this situation is changing, with patients ages 60 to 75 about twice as likely to receive liver transplants in 2006 than in 1995 (Schaeffner, Rose, & Gill, 2010), but younger adults are still much more likely to be approved for waiting lists.

Most or all of these practices are considered acceptable, yet if the same practices were applied to women or to Hispanics rather than to older adults, they would be widely condemned. For instance, a housing community requiring 80 percent White inhabitants would be considered redlining, yet retirement communities enforce similar rules regarding age composition. Requiring only women to be retested behind the wheel for license renewals would meet with widespread
public outrage, but the same is not true of elders. Compared with race or gender discrimination, the gray area of age discrimination is large, whereas the black (definitely wrong) and white (definitely right) areas are small.

Why the much different reaction to age discrimination? Implicitly, age is believed to be different in several respects. First, one might assume that older adults are in poorer health than younger adults—an assumption that has some merit. As shown in Figure 2, disability rates steadily increase with age, from 6 percent at age 15 to 77 percent at age 90. Perceived declines in functional ability and health are major reasons for such practices as driver retesting. Second, one might believe that older adults are less well off financially than younger adults—a reason given for such practices as senior discounts. Third, people do not usually cross ethnic, racial, or gender boundaries in their lifetimes, but people do age. Hence, even if people receive more than they give during certain stages of their lives, such as childhood or old age, any assessment of fairness and equity would consider people’s net contribution over their entire lifetime rather than at any given life stage. Despite the claim implicit in much of the talk about ageism, society’s actions and the practices deemed acceptable imply that age is different.

(Insert Figure 2 about here)

**Unintended Consequences of Institutional Age Neutrality**

Attitudes toward age discrimination and ageism reveal two contradictory sets of beliefs. On one hand, as U.S. legislation on age discrimination seems to suggest, people want to treat age as parallel to race or gender. From this perspective, hardly any case of discrimination can be justified. On the other hand, people implicitly treat age as different from race or gender, either because of the prevalent characteristics of older adults (e.g., higher rates of disability) or because
people age from advantaged to disadvantaged groups (or vice versa). Overall, the practices prevalent in the United States today, from mandatory retirement for certain occupations to frequent retesting of older adults renewing their driver’s licenses, suggest a stance of so-called acceptable discrimination on a scope that would not be deemed appropriate for race, ethnicity, gender, or religious background. What would be the consequences of moving toward a stance of institutional age neutrality, in which institutional ageism and institutional reverse ageism were considered just as unacceptable as the parallel types of discrimination based on race or gender? Taken at face value, institutional age neutrality would be fairer than allowing and promoting institutional ageism.

However, exactly equal treatment across age groups has potential unintended consequences. First, one of the primary rationales for institutional discrimination of any kind is that not discriminating threatens public safety. For instance, a common argument justifying racial, religious, or gender profiling in airports (e.g., additional screening of male passengers from the Middle East or other geographic areas with large proportions of Muslims) is that it is necessary to ensure the safety of other passengers. Similarly, the perceived acceptability of certain measures, such as requiring older adults to renew their licenses often, hinges on the belief that forgoing these additional tests would endanger other drivers. Although age-neutral methods of ensuring safety (such as requiring all drivers to be retested at frequent intervals) are possible, they are often judged to be too costly. When considering older adults as a group, it might be less expensive to retest just those with relevant health-related limitations (e.g., slower reaction time)—if inexpensive, nonintrusive ways were available to determine who should be retested. Currently, this alternative seems to be politically unfeasible and prohibitively expensive.
Second, neutral treatment across age groups could be seen as a justification for the elimination or scaling back of entitlement programs based primarily on age. Strictly interpreted, age neutrality discards elders as a protected group in need of additional consideration or resources (Macnicol, 2008). In light of concerns that older adults are receiving more than their fair share of economic resources, age neutrality might weaken the rationale for such programs as Social Security and Medicare. This issue is likely to become increasingly important over the next few decades, as the U.S. population continues to age. As shown in Figure 3, the old-age dependency ratio will steadily increase over the next few decades. In 1965, the baby boomers were children and teenagers, and most dependents (defined based on their age) in the United States were under age 20. By 2055, approximately half of dependents will be ages 65 and older.

(Insert Figure 3 about here)

Conclusion

“Is age discrimination ever acceptable?” is a question more complex than it might at first appear. Many people think about age discrimination as analogous to gender, racial, ethnic, or religious discrimination. In fact, age discrimination and discrimination based on other types of social diversity do have many parallels. From this perspective, age neutrality—treating all age groups equally—seems desirable. However, to some extent, age is different from almost every other social category in that almost all people age from one group to another. Furthermore, the rationales for many practices that discriminate based on age are generalizations about the health or wealth of older adults, but the consequences of these practices—both positive and negative—occur within a diverse population of older adults. For instance, the elimination of senior discounts would not be a hardship for relatively affluent older adults, but it might be for those
with meager financial resources. Recognizing examples of institutional age discrimination, ranging from those that are generally advantageous to older adults (e.g., senior discounts) to those that are generally disadvantageous to older adults (e.g., mandatory retirement), provides a starting place for thinking about the amount and type of age-related differential treatment deemed acceptable.

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**References**


Figure 1. Percentage of adults from five generations saying characteristic is “the most important for a child to learn to prepare him or her for life,” 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Greatest Generation</th>
<th>Baby Boomers</th>
<th>Generation X</th>
<th>Silent Generation</th>
<th>Generation Y</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To think for oneself</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To work hard</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To obey</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help others</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Percentages are based on responses from 1,343 adults, and are weighted by nonresponse-adjusted weights. Differences are significant for “To think for oneself” and “To work hard” at $p < .05$. Generations are defined by birth year, including the Greatest Generation (1901–1927, $N = 50$), the Silent Generation (1928–1945, $N = 231$), the Baby Boomers (1946–1964, $N = 482$), Generation X (1965–1980, $N = 392$), and Generation Y (1981–1993, $N = 188$).

Figure 2. Percentage of population that is disabled, by age.

Note. Percentages are based on responses from 2,474,368 respondents and are weighted by person-level weights. Source: U. S. Census Bureau (2012).
Figure 3. Old-age and total dependency ratios.

Note. Intermediate projections are shown. The child dependency ratio is defined as the ratio of the population under age 20 and the population at ages 20 to 64. The old-age dependency ratio is defined as the ratio of the population at ages 65 and over and the population at ages 20 to 64.