Exploring Age-Based Oppression: Adultism, Ageism, and Their Potential Interactions

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Abstract

This manuscript provides a first-person narrative review of the author's research exploring age-based oppression, including the story of how these ideas developed in cultural and historical context. Projects reviewed in this paper began from a wish to better understand potential factors impacting the geropsychology workforce shortage. Over time, research has expanded to encompass other questions related to ageism, adultism, discomfort with death, and media representations of emerging adults and older adults at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. A measure of adultist concerns is also described along with findings from several studies using this scale. Qualitative comments from graduate students in psychology and counseling are reviewed through the lens of adultism, suggesting multiple connections between students' lack of interest in working with older adults, adultist concerns, and attitudes about intergenerational relationships. Lastly, discussion questions and learning activities are suggested to help educators engage the topic of age-based oppression in a variety of settings.

Keywords: adultism, ageism, generational solidarity, age-based oppression

Introduction

Within the field of psychology, geropsychology is a niche specialty focused on the mental health of older adults. Only about 1-2% of psychologists specialize in this area (Moye et al., 2019), and I am one of them. I am a clinical psychologist

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primarily serving older adults, as well as an associate professor and the geropsy-chology concentration director within a clinical psychology doctoral program.

This is a story that begins with an extraordinary workforce shortage. There is a striking paucity of geropsychologists available to serve the rapidly growing pop-ulation of older adults (Hoge et al., 2017). Many in the field of geropsychology are attempting to understand what keeps students away from this specialty, and how to better attract more clinicians to serve this population. Papers on the topic have dramatic, and entirely appropriate, titles invoking a "big shortage" that is a "crisis" requiring "urgent action" (Merz et al., 2017; Jeste et al., 1999; Moye et al., 2019).

In research thus far, I have zeroed in on adultism as a potential contributor to students' lack of interest in serving older adults. In this paper, I will share how I came to this understanding. I will review key findings of past projects and take a fresh look at existing data through the lens of adultism. I will conclude with a dis-cussion, describe directions for future research, and offer suggestions for learning activities to improve understanding of age-based oppression.

Narrative Review of Research

Project 1: Why don't you want to work with older adults?

The first study I undertook in this area surveyed graduate students in a coun-seling training program (King, 2018). My primary goal was exploratory, with the hope of simply capturing the kinds of comments I had heard students make about older adults in the classroom and informal discussion. The second goal was to see whether students with or without an interest were significantly different in terms of demographics or other potentially relevant attitudes.

The exploratory portion of this study gifted me with numerous thoughtful qualitative responses to two simple, open-ended questions: "What benefits or sources of satisfaction might a person experience in helping older adults?" and "When you think about providing treatment to older adults, what personal con-cerns or hesitations come up for you?"

At the time, I did not view the results through the lens of adultism. Yet look-ing at responses now with this awareness, I can identify several related themes. Below are three prominent themes with new commentary on each. These include:

Feeling disqualified due to younger age.

"I believe that because I am younger, older adults will think that I am unable to help them because I don't have much experience in life."

"I look young, so my concern is that older adults will think that I am unable to relate to them so therefore cannot help them."

"I have worked with adults and it is hard to convince them that you are qualified when you are so much younger than them."

"They may find me too young"

Commentary. Among many potential outcomes, Bell (1995) states that adultism can lead to "undermined self-confidence and self-esteem; an increasing sense of worthlessness; an increasing sense of powerlessness; a consistent experience of not being taken seriously… [and] feeling unloved or unwanted" (p. 2). Student responses here illustrate these themes. Students seem to anticipate that older adults will not want to work with them, and that they will have to convince them of their expertise. Such students likely walk into patient encounters with reduced confidence, and with a sense of powerlessness to change how they are viewed. It is certainly true that some older adults will reject a younger person as a therapist. No prior research has explored how commonly this actually occurs, nor is there any data identifying therapist qualities that older adults may uniquely prefer. Anecdotally, I have found that acceptance by older clients has been much more the norm in my own clinical practice.

Sense of disconnection with older generation.

"I don't know much about the population…"

"Unfamiliar age group."

"Age gap, generation gap, unable to understand their culture."

"Not being able to relate to their problems."

Commentary. Many messages in the mass media emphasize a generational divide, implying that people in different age groups have more differences than similarities. Superficial differences in music and fashion tastes are overemphasized, leading people to assume they "just can't relate" to one another.

Albert Memmi (2000) has written of four parts of racism. First, there is an "insistence on a difference." Second, whatever is seen as different is valued negatively. Third, those qualities are generalized to the entire group, and fourth, such negative value is used to legitimize hostility. Although writing about racism, these components are useful to consider for many oppressed groups. Love and Phillips (2007) apply this theory to both adultism and ageism, and at minimum the first component is illustrated here. Young people in our survey understand older adults to be so different that they feel they cannot understand or relate to them at all, which then for many students leads to a lack of interest in helping them.

Assumption of older adult competence or wisdom.

"Wisdom, as also they are a source of knowledge."

"Wisdom/experience from them."

"Incredible perspective and wisdom."

"Their experience and wisdom; their stories."

"Learn from their knowledge and wisdom."

Commentary. Many adults and older adults lay claim to wisdom to justify the power they hold over youth and young adults. Wisdom is generally seen as something that young people do not—and cannot—have, unless they are particularly gifted and labeled "wise beyond their years." This assumption can contribute to feelings of inadequacy in young adults, and foster the feeling of being an "adult-in-the-making" (Fletcher, 2015) well into one's adult years.

The idea of wisdom remains poorly defined, often granted by cultural or religious groups after having achieved certain age or life milestones. Yet research has shown that aging alone does not confer wisdom. For example, Webster et al. (2014) found that wisdom peaked in midlife rather than older adulthood Weststrate and Glück (2017) revealed that how one processes one's life experiences (e.g., with enhanced meaning making) was an important aspect of developing wisdom.

In the second part of this project, I explored whether there were differences between interested versus uninterested students on various potentially relevant attitudes and demographic factors. Indeed, T-tests showed multiple significant differences. For example, students uninterested in helping older adults were more likely to want to avoid sick or dying clients ($p < 0.0001$) and more likely to believe this work would be depressing ($p = 0.001$) or challenging ($p = 0.003$). Germane to the topic of adultism, those who were uninterested were significantly more likely to feel that they did not have enough life experience to treat this population ($p = 0.03$).

With regard to demographic differences, interested students were more racially and ethnically diverse (56% African American, Latinx, Asian or Other, and 44% White/Caucasian students), while uninterested students were primarily White (68% White/Caucasian and 32% African American, Latinx, or Other). Although this result may be due to sampling error and has not yet been studied on a larger scale, it raises the question of whether White individuals receive a different kind of socialization about age and aging than other racial or ethnic groups that potentially impacts their ability to feel confident helping older adults as a young person. Although this question has not been explored systematically, it could be that exposure to white supremacy culture has a particular impact on White youth's attitudes towards older adults. In my experience as an educator, I have noticed that students who are reluctant to engage with older adults seem to also be influenced by components of white supremacy culture such as perfectionism, paternalism, and the fear of open conflict (Okun, 1999). These may impact their comfort working with older individuals they perceive may hold them to a high standard.

It has also been found that there are distinct differences in the cultural embeddedness of older adult caregiving in European Americans compared to Asian American, Hispanic American, and African Americans (Pharr, et al., 2014). The latter groups view caregiving as a normative family activity, whereas European

Americans "lacked a cultural prescription for caregiving" (Pharr et al., 2014, p. 6). It may be that interest in working with older adults extends from these cultural differences, and people from cultures where caregiving is more normative may have greater interest.

Project 2: Exploring Adultism, Ageism, and Geropsychology Interest

Between the previous study and the next project, I encountered the idea of adultism and immediately saw its application to the research I was doing. In reviewing literature, I discovered there was a paucity of research exploring adultism. I learned that many scholars have used the term ageism to capture all forms of age-based oppression. I was skeptical about the utility of this, generally valuing precision of terminology in scientific inquiry. Distinct terminology contributes to the visibility of each form of oppression (Fletcher, 2015). Using the same word ("ageism") to describe all age-based oppression obscures the unique experiences of oppression experienced by different age groups. Since ageism has long been applied to describe oppression of older adults for an extended period, separate terms such as adultism or childism seem more useful to capture the phenomenologically different experience of childhood age-based oppression. Similarly, youngism has been suggested as a term used to describe the experience of young adults in the workplace (Francioli & North, 2021).

While there was little research on the topic of adultism, there was even less that examined the intersections between different forms of age-based oppression. I sensed there was a relationship to be discovered here but was not quite sure what it was. I remembered the voices of peers, and now students. Their concerns about how older adults would treat them did not seem like ageism, but more like fear. In reflecting on the source of this fear, it seemed likely to me that they had been on the receiving end of adultist oppression by adults or older adults and that this was informing their fears now. While it's certainly possible that their concerns were also related to a simple lack of confidence due to the early stage of their training, it seemed to disproportionately impact how they felt about working with older people. This made me suspicious it went beyond normal early career insecurity, and informed plans for the next phase of research.

The next project was a survey of graduate students in the clinical training program where I had recently been hired. I wanted to understand the students' interest in, experience with, and exposure to older adults, and I began to work with a co-investigator with similar interests. Inspired by the idea of adultism, we developed an Adultist Concerns Scale for this project. This scale was based on our shared professional experiences and comments from the previous study described above. It was specifically designed to evaluate the degree to which students expressed concerns about adultist attitudes that prospective older adult clients might hold. The scale has five items, each rated on a seven-point Likert scale

from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). The items are: an older adult client would think I am not competent because of my age; an older adult client would think that I can't understand them because of my age; an older adult client would think that I haven't had enough life experience because of my age; an older adult client would think that I can't help them because of my age; an older adult client would not want to work with me because of my age.

In this study, 109 psychology doctoral students completed the Adultist Concerns Scale. They were 82% female, 18% male, and predominantly White. The scale performed well, with strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .952$) and factor loadings between .853 and .929 (Graham & King, 2022). Scores ranged from 9 to 35, with an overall mean of 22 ($SD = 6.79$). Adultist Concerns were significantly negatively correlated with age ($p = .000$), meaning that younger participants tended to score higher on these concerns. Females had a significantly higher mean score ($M = 23.18$, $SD = 6.46$) when compared to males ($M = 17.75$, $SD = 6.54$; $p = .003$). Although needing further exploration and replication, it may be that growing up experiencing both sexism and adultism together later increases a person's concerns about how older adults will view their competence.

With the Adultist Concerns Scale as part of our survey, we were able to explore multiple hypotheses related to adultism. One project expanded on the existing Working with Older Adults Scale (WOAS; Graham & Rosén, 2020) by exploring new variables as potential distal antecedents impacting people's plans to work with older adults. We found that adultist concerns influenced subjective norms (e.g., perceived social approval of doing this work), which was one of multiple variables predicting the intention to serve this group (Graham & King, 2022). To our knowledge, this is the first paper in the field of gerontology to expressly identify adultism as a factor influencing student interest in working with older adults and potentially contributing to the larger workforce shortage across geriatric health care specialties.

This study also gathered more qualitative data, asking students what they wanted to learn about helping older adults. This data was later published as part of a program evaluation manuscript (King et al., 2023). Although qualitative analysis did not focus on applying the lens of adultism, reviewing responses now I can identify multiple responses capturing this theme. For example, students reported wanting to learn:

"How to handle when they talk about your lack of experience."

"How to relate to them."

"I would love to know the best way to approach helping them to understand that despite being much younger, you can help them and make a difference in their life."

"How to navigate conversations related to my lack of life experience."

Similar to prior qualitative comments, these responses again demonstrate stu-

dents' sense of disconnection from older adults. They anticipate that they will have to convince older clients of their skills, and fear that they will be unwanted or deemed incompetent largely due to their age.

Exploring Adultist Concerns, Ageism, and Death

We went on to explore connections between adultism, ageism, and discomfort with death (Church, et al., 2020). Ageism and death anxiety have been explored in past research, with one such study revealing a positive association between ageism and fear of the dying process (Galton, et al., 2022). Other studies have found links between ageism, aging anxiety, and/or death anxiety (Rababa, et al., 2023; Kolushev et al., 2021). For our study, we wanted to understand whether discomfort with death (e.g., "I experience fear, dread, or other uncomfortable emotions when I think much about death") had any relationship with adultist concerns or ageism, which we measured using the Relating to Older Persons scale (Cherry & Palmore, 2008). Our hypothesis started with the assumption that death and dying tend to be taboo subjects that frequently brings up themes of dependency, loss of autonomy, and fear of pain or isolation. For this reason, individuals' age-related attitudes or concerns might be inextricably linked with how they relate to death and dying more broadly. Indeed, although we did not find a relationship between discomfort with death and ageism in our study, we did discover a significant positive correlation ($p = .000$) between discomfort with death and adultist concerns (Church, et al., 2020).

Another study we conducted at this time directly explored relationships between adultism and ageism (King, et al., 2020). We found statistically significant positive correlations between adultist concerns and overall ageist behaviors ($p = .002$), as well as negative ageist behaviors in particular ($p = .002$). Although we were not able to establish what drives this correlation, one hypothesis may be that past experiences with adultist oppression makes one more likely to anticipate future oppression by older adults as well as more likely to develop ageist attitudes against older adults. Future research is needed to more fully explore these relationships.

Project 3: Media Portrayals of Emerging and Older Adults

The story took an unexpected but enriching turn during the COVID-19 pandemic. I saw stark evidence of both ageism and adultism in public discourse at this time. At the beginning of the pandemic "the discursive stage was dominated by the 'vulnerable old' in need for help by the 'normal' population" (Ellerich-Groppe, et al., 2021, p. 168). I also became familiar with the idea of intergenerational solidarity at first time. For example, Ayalon et al. (2021) published an impactful editorial in an important gerontology journal pointing out ageism and the need for generational solidarity. They wrote "with the pandemic there

has been a parallel outbreak of ageism. What we are seeing in public discourse is an increasing portrayal of those over the age of 70 as being all alike with regard to being helpless, frail, and unable to contribute to society" (Ayalon et al., 2021, p. e49). They emphasized the need to foster intergenerational solidarity, called for an end to divisive public policies (e.g., arbitrary age cutoffs to access certain COVID-19 treatments), and articulated the importance of creating opportunities to foster personal connections across age groups to help move beyond intergenerational strife.

We conducted a survey of undergraduate students soon after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among other things, we asked them about their perceptions of media portrayals of emerging adults and older adults at that historical moment (Pestritto, et al., 2021). Participants were 97 undergraduate students (51.5% female, 46.5% male), and their responses demonstrated a keen awareness of largely negative media portrayals of both groups. Many observed that emerging adults were portrayed as not taking COVID-19 seriously, being reckless or irresponsible, uncaring, careless, or selfish. For example, they wrote:

> *"They are portrayed as reckless and careless..."*

> *"Many young adults are portrayed as not caring...I've seen lots of people getting upset about it and things on media about kids throwing parties on beaches...and making it seem like all young adults are doing this and don't care."*

> *"Either young adults are giving no care to the virus and going out and partying, or we're 'destroying the economy and country' by staying socially isolated... We're also being painted as callous and uncaring people who give no care to 'expendable deaths' and are mocking those at risk..."*

Participants also observed changes in how older adults were portrayed, primarily reporting awareness that older adults are viewed as needing protection or care, being vulnerable, and being potential pandemic victims.

> *"I've noticed that the media has fixed in everyone's minds that they [older adults]...are weak and vulnerable..."*

> *"It shows that they're more at risk, but I think has shown them in a positive light because I feel like a lot of these changes are to protect them."*

There was notable mirroring in the language used to describe portrayals of older adults and emerging adults. Young people were portrayed as careless; older adults were portrayed as in need of care. Young adults were reckless and doing risky things; older adults were at risk and vulnerable. Young adults were selfish; older adults needed us to act selflessly to protect them.

Just as Ayalon et al. (2021) noted, the public discourse at the time was clearly both reflecting and contributing further to age-based oppression. Although some of this messaging seems to have subsided since the global pandemic was initially

declared, what was revealed at that time were attitudes that likely form an undercurrent of age-based oppression long present beneath the surface.

Takeaways and Future Directions

I never thought my interest in the geropsychology workforce shortage would inspire me to begin studying childhood experiences—yet this seems to be a feature of sincere scientific inquiry. Finding a compelling question and following all leads takes you to unexpected places. Our research so far raises critical questions about early experiences of adultism and later attitudes, experiences, and career choices related to older adults.

Increasingly, I have come to understand ageism and adultism as having a reciprocal and mutually reinforcing quality. When children learn that age is a viable reason to oppress somebody, many will internalize this and potentially perpetrate age-based oppression against others. Perhaps this starts with maligning younger siblings or peers, expands to distrust or hatred of "grown-ups" like parents and teachers, and grows further into ageism against older adults as well.

When adults engage in adultist oppression of children, it can't help but foster generational divisions. These youth are likely to grow up feeling badly about how they were treated, feeling badly towards adults who treated them poorly, and—perhaps most tragically—badly about themselves. Internalizing these experiences, many may go on to develop gerontophobia, ageist attitudes, or other insecurities that lead them to limit their lives by avoiding anyone they perceive as older.

Over time, people may come to internalize and expect hierarchical, oppressive relationships based on age or related constructs such as generational position in families and society. If such people later have children, grandchildren, students, mentees, or other younger people in their lives, they may find themselves perpetrating the same adultist oppression to this younger cohort. Generational discord likely also breeds dehumanization across age groups, and increases the risk of cross-generational violence within and outside families. When other forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, white supremacy culture, domestic violence) intersect with this age-based oppression, outcomes can be expected to be even more negative for all involved.

There are no winners here, individually or societally. Lack of generational solidarity has social and political implications, as it decreases the likelihood of effective coalitions across age groups on matters of shared concern. For example, Roy and Ayalon (2022) recently published a paper exploring intergenerational tension within the climate movement. They describe youth activists blaming older generations for the current crisis, while youth may be accused of being too idealistic or naïve in their efforts. They also share heartening examples of intergenerational solidarity and call for an effective movement resting on values of "compassion, empathy, understanding, consideration, cooperation, respect, trust,

and hope" (Roy & Ayalon, 2022, p. 11). On a more intimate level, the mental health benefits of intergenerational relationships are well-established for older adults (Earl & Marais, 2023; Davey & Eggebeen, 1998). Comparably less has been done looking at similar benefits for youth, though some research has demonstrated benefits to close grandparental relationships (Ruiz & Silverstein, 2007).

The full personal and societal consequences of adultism remain poorly understood. Facing anti-youth attitudes, young people may internalize adultist beliefs and come to devalue their own contributions, competence, and worth to society. It may also lead to later mental health problems, impostor syndrome, low self-esteem, and a more limited sphere of potential career choices.

The story of intergenerational relationships and age-based oppression is still unfolding, with plenty of work that remains to be done. Thus far, our own research has been limited in scope and thus in its generalizability. Future development of sound measurement tools to capture different dimensions of adultism is essential to engaging in further systematic research in this area. From there, links between adultism and ageism, potential adult consequences of childhood oppression, and other outcomes can be more fully explored. We also need to better understand how age-based oppression intersects with other forms of oppression, and establish how such experiences play out across generations in a potentially mutually reinforcing cycle.

Learning Opportunities

How do we help people better understand adultism and ageism, and how they potentially relate to one another? There has been a vanishingly small amount of work exploring age-based oppression as a singular entity potentially impacting people of all ages. One recent publication provided learning activities to help people understand how both adultism and ageism are forms of oppression (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., 2021). Using the Five Faces of Oppression as a teaching tool (Young, 1990), they suggest students generate both adultist and ageist examples of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. They provide multiple useful examples from their own teaching. For example, an adultist example of exploitation is forcing older children to babysit younger siblings without pay, while an ageist example could be grandparents babysitting without compensation. For violence, an adultist example could be physical punishment of children, while an ageist example could be elder abuse by caregivers.

Love and Phillips (2007) created a comprehensive lesson plan extending over four modules of at least three hours each. Themes include understanding ageism and adultism; institutional ageism and adultism; cultural ageism and adultism; and, transformation and change. These lessons also integrate Young's five faces of oppression (1990), as well as Memmi's four dimensions (2000). The lessons include short descriptions of new concepts, prompts for personal reflection and

discussion, videos to stimulate discussion, and instructions for group leaders to support effective facilitation.

Suggested Activities

This section grows out of my experience as a geropsychologist and psychology professor, as well as my readings and research so far on the topic, to offer potential starting points for personal reflection and discussion on the topic of age-based oppressions.

Questions for Everyone:

How can I challenge generational divisiveness (such as "us-versus-them" comments) when it shows up in close relationships, professional settings, and society more broadly?

How do I not idealize or devalue any group based solely on their (or my) age?

How do I help people of all ages foster a belief in their own value and worth?

How can I show up in my world in a way that does not perpetuate any form of age-based oppression?

In what ways does age-based oppression intersect with other forms of privilege or marginalization that I experience?

Questions for Adults and Older Adults:

As I get older, how do I share my growing expertise and experience without developing a sense of entitlement to power or wisdom based solely on my age?

How do I encourage youth, students, junior colleagues, and others younger than me, to own their voice(s) and share their perspective, regardless of fears about their age?

How do I help younger people to stop being afraid of the "grown-ups" by being an adult ally in my varied social locations?

How do I challenge myself to continue to see the value that youth bring to the world and my life? This may be each new generation in your family, or each new cohort of students or younger employees.

Questions for Youth and Young Adults:

What fears or concerns come up when I imagine relating to older adults? What life experience(s), media representations, or other factors influence these concerns?

How can I affirm the value that I have to offer the world as a young person so that I can overcome internalized adultism?

Have I ever had a relationship with somebody older where I felt like a peer or equal? What did it feel like, or what do I imagine it might feel like?

How do I challenge myself to continue to see the value that older adults bring to the world and my life? (If family relationships are challenging, consider older adults in your community or society more broadly.)

Activities For Everyone

Age-Based Deservingness. Age is often used as an excuse to grant certain rights as well as to withhold or take them away. Consider the following questions, then explore where these attitudes come from and whether you might like to change any of your existing views.

Do I engage in any age-based entitlement, believing people have more value, more rights, etc., solely due to age? For example, you might believe that older adults are entitled to respect simply because of their age, with no regard to how that person behaves or treats others.

Do I engage in any age-based devaluation, believing people have lesser value, fewer rights, etc., solely due to age? For example, you might believe that children can have their bodily autonomy violated through physical discipline, or that children shouldn't have the right to express opinions about family matters.

Sentence Completion Activity. See how many different ways you can complete these sentences. See what is revealed about implicit biases you may carry, messages you might have received from society, and attitudes or assumptions you'd like to unlearn.

Young people are…

Old people are…

Policing Age-Appropriateness. When are you "too old…" for something? When are you "too young…" for something? Consider these questions as they relate to your context. Some general examples might be related to the age-appropriateness of certain styles of dress, certain rigorous activities (e.g., marathons, bungee jumping, enjoyment of sex, travel, getting married, having children, being a rock star, learning a new skill, starting a new career). Who decides what is "appropriate" for each age group?

Opportunities to Experience Equality. Consider ways you can develop meaningful relationships across age differences that emphasize equality and mutual respect. Many institutions create "service learning" programs that may be ageist against older adults (assuming older adults are needy and dependent). Alternatively, programs may be set up for older adults to provide "mentorship" or "life lessons" in ways that might be adultist in their presumption that wisdom or expertise only flow from older to younger persons. There is certainly a place for

service learning and mentorship, but consider the radical potential of programs simply encouraging meaningful friendships and work relationships.

Author Note

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