

# Ageism Doesn't Work

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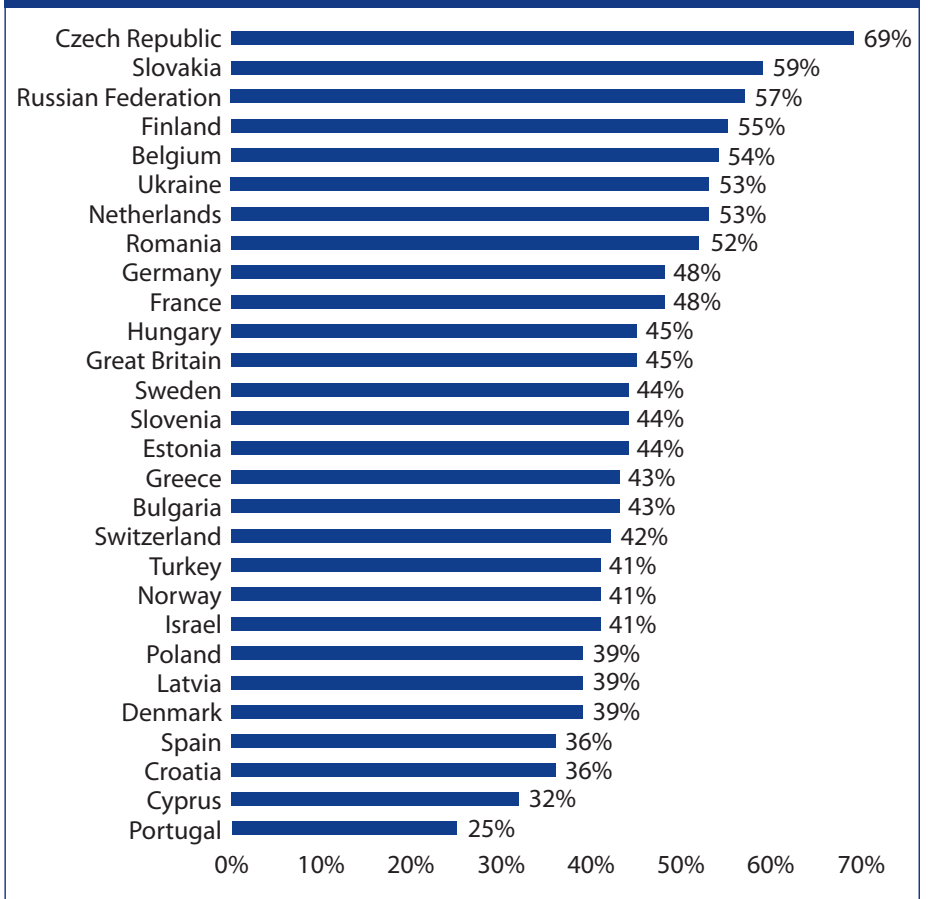
Ageism is the stereotyping of, and discrimination against, people based on their age. Ageism is the most commonly experienced form of prejudice in the United Kingdom and in Europe (Abrams, Eilola, & Swift, 2009; Abrams, Russell, Vauclair, & Swift, 2011; Eurobarometer, 2008). For example, across 28 countries assessed in the 2008–2009 European Social Survey (ESS), 24 percent of respondents reported that they had experienced prejudice because of their gender and 16 percent because of their race or ethnicity. However, an even larger proportion of the population (34 percent of respondents) reported having experienced age prejudice in the last year, 37 percent said they had felt a lack of respect because of their age, and 28 percent said they had been treated badly because of their age. Overall, 46 percent of respondents said they had experienced at least one of these forms of age prejudice in the last year. These data support the inference that ageism is a significant societal problem that affects more than 300 million people throughout Europe.

However, evidence also suggests that ageism is not inevitable. For example, as Figure 1 shows, ageism varies considerably among countries. Therefore, ageism may be strongly influenced by such external factors as culture, legislation, and social and economic conditions—admitting the possibility of developing policies and strategies that would help prevent and challenge ageism.

Age discrimination is more likely to occur when, based on age, an opportunity arises to favor one person over another, or to restrict or deny access to resources (Abrams, 2010). Selection for employment is an example of such situations, so perhaps it is not surprising that people who are not working for pay or retired experience more ageism (Abrams, Vauclair, & Swift, 2011; Abrams et al., 2009).

This article examines some psychological processes underpinning ageism that older workers may face. First, we consider how people use and apply the category labels *old* and *young*. We then describe the associated images and stereotypes of older workers and review experimental evidence that demonstrates how these stereotypes are likely to disadvantage older adults. Finally, we draw attention to the importance of intergenerational relationships within the workplace and wider society as a vehicle for reducing ageist attitudes and their impact on older people.

**Figure 1. The prevalence of ageism experienced in European countries.**



## Age Categorization

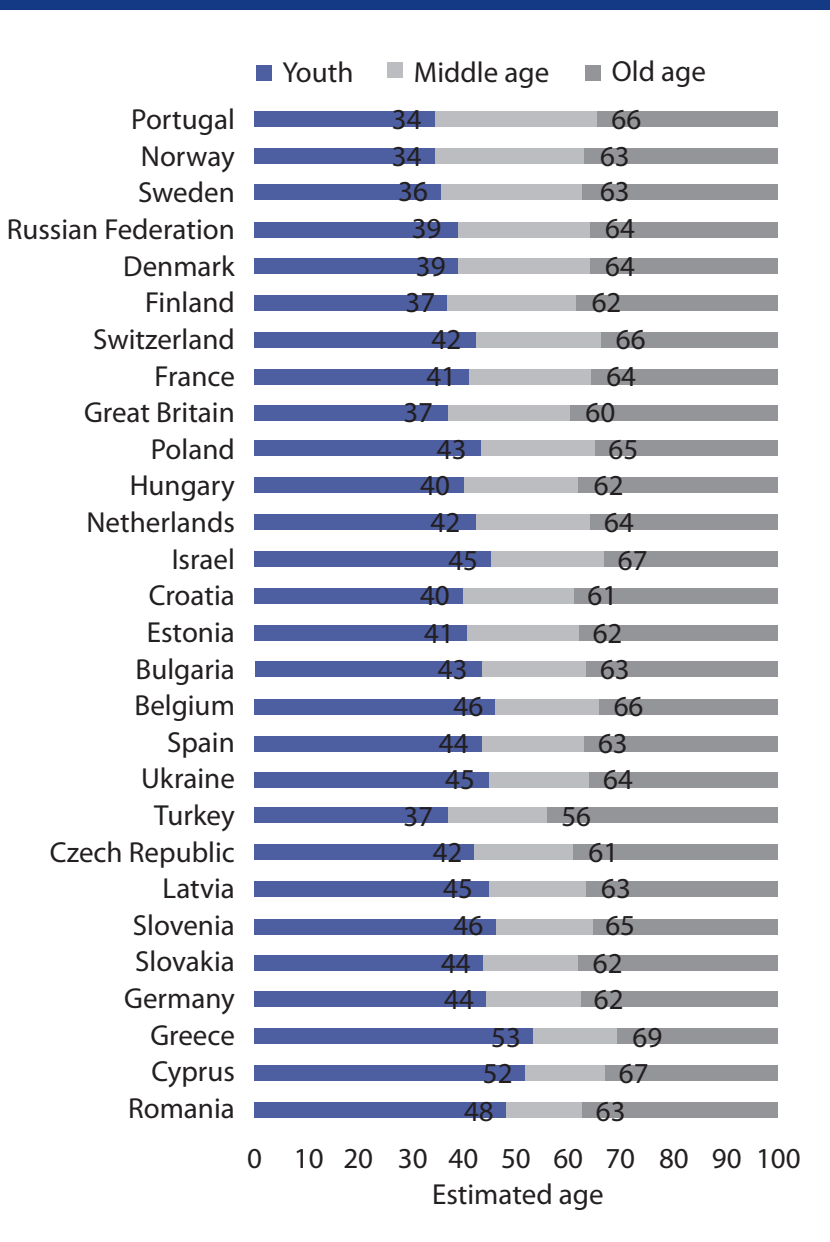
The life course, particularly stages of education, parenthood, and work, is generally segmented by age. This segmentation arises in almost all cultures, although they do not always apply the same thresholds (e.g., age of consent, voting age, retirement age). These age

thresholds are reinforced by legislation, norms, and customs. Category labels and boundaries are important because when people categorize others, they exaggerate similarities among members within a category and exaggerate differences from members of other categories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The perception that all older people are the same is an obvious basis of age discrimination because of unwarranted assumptions that older people's needs, likes, and dislikes are the same. Importantly, age categories are not wholly determined by physical aging. ESS respondents were asked to nominate the age at which youth ends and at which old age begins. As Figure 2 shows, these perceptions varied widely throughout the world, resulting also in large variations in the perceived duration of middle age. These data highlight that even the simple categorization of a person as young or old is affected strongly by social context.

### Stereotypes

Age categories are more than labels—they are also imbued with meaning that denotes status and power. Such categories are associated with stereotypes and expectations, which form the basis of prejudice (Allport, 1954). Societal stereotypes are socially shared beliefs about the characteristics (e.g., traits, appearances, or behaviors) of members of a social group (Schneider, 2004). A variety of stereotypes apply to older workers. For example, aging is associated with declining competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), and older workers are likely to be perceived as less energetic, motivated, creative, committed to their careers, productive, technologically savvy, and trainable. In general, they tend to be judged less favorably compared with younger people (Bendick, Jackson, & Romero, 1996; Shore, Cleveland, & Goldberg, 2003). However, the assumption that job performance or ability declines with age is questionable. Although age-related changes occur for certain abilities, these abilities decline gradually and in the very late stages of life. In fact, most older adults remain healthy and functionally capable until very late in life (Czaja, 1995). Indeed, some age stereotypes—for example, that older workers may be perceived as more reliable, loyal, stable, and dependable—are positive (Warr & Pennington, 1993).

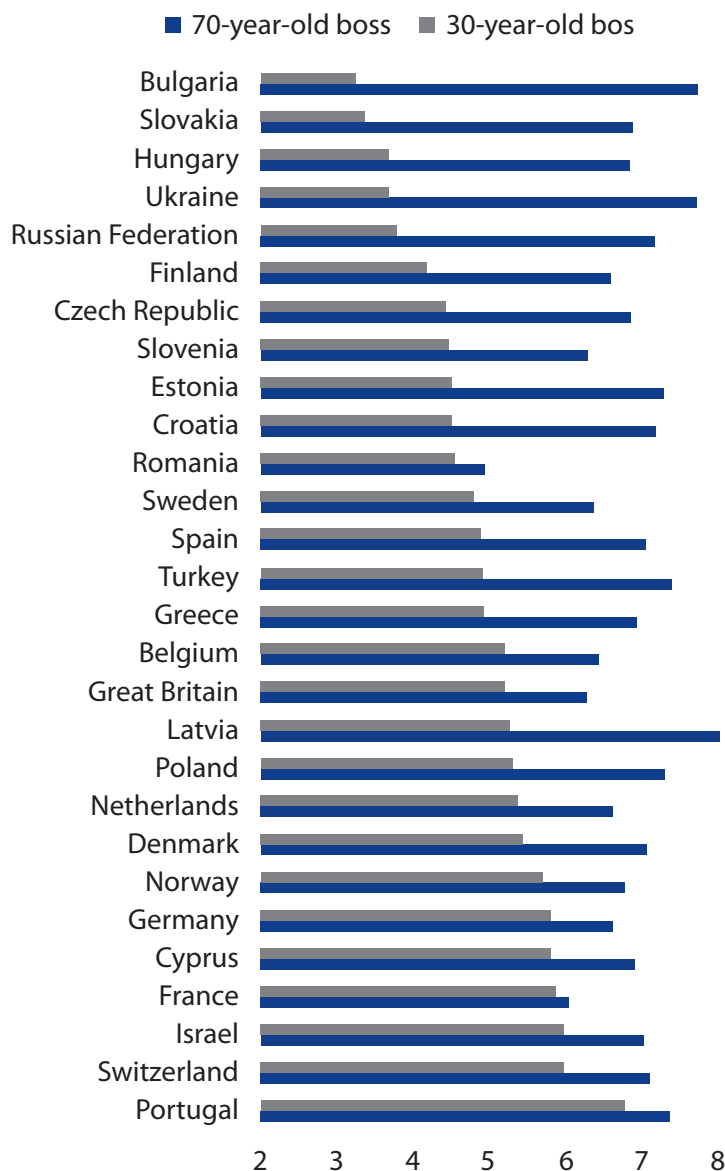
Figure 2. Perceived end of youth and beginning of old age in Europe.



Unfortunately, these positive images of aging may not be sufficient to prevent discrimination based on stereotypes.

We have frequently conducted exercises in which people are asked to imagine that they are an employer whose goal is to maximize profits, and then to consider the positive strengths of two candidates for employment. Person A is described as polite, a skilled mediator, understanding of others' viewpoints, good at solving crossword puzzles, and having a healthy diet. Person B is described as creative, quick to learn new skills, a good driver, facile with the Internet, and into exercising. When asked, most people say they would employ person B.

**Figure 3. Level of acceptability of a 30-year-old and a 70-year-old boss.**



Note. Acceptability was measured on a scale ranging from 0 (completely unacceptable) to 10 (completely acceptable).

We had previously conducted a national survey for Age UK in which we asked people to consider whether a “typical 25-year-old” or a “typical 75-year-old” (or neither) would be better on each of these attributes and aptitudes. The traits people perceived to be typical of a 75-year-old were those used to describe person A, whereas the traits that people believed were associated with a typical 25-year-old were those describing person B (Swift, Abrams, & Marques, in press). This finding shows that even the relatively positive traits associated with older people are likely to create a stereotype-based

disadvantage when they are considered as prospective employees.

### Age Stereotypes and Paternalistic Prejudice

How is it possible to have a positive image of a group yet still discriminate against it? The Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002) suggests that most stereotypes are based on two underlying dimensions: perceptions of competence and perceptions of warmth. The combination of different levels of perceived competence and warmth produce different emotional reactions to members of particular social groups. Older people are generally stereotyped as warm, but also as lacking competence. This mixed (positive and negative) stereotype generates emotional reactions that can result in a paternalistic form of prejudice in which older people are more likely to be pitied and patronized (Fiske et al.). Consistent with earlier studies, the ESS shows that older people are likely to be rated higher on warmth (“friendliness”) than competence (“capability”; Abrams, Russell et al., 2011). These stereotypes clearly have negative implications for people’s willingness to give older people opportunities to occupy high-status roles that require competence.

### Aging and Social Status

Different age groups are associated with different social roles, status, power, and social responsibility. The ESS asked respondents how worried they were that employers might prefer people in their 20s rather than people in their 40s or older. Worry increased significantly with

respondents’ age. This outcome can be explained in terms of the finding that middle-aged groups are afforded the highest status in society, followed by younger and older age groups (Abrams, Russell et al., 2011). The implications of status perceptions of a group is that its members may be assumed to be more or less legitimate holders of positions of authority and power, regardless of their competence. For instance, we asked ESS respondents to report how accepting they would be of a suitably qualified boss who was 30 years old and one who was 70 years old. Data showed a clear preference for

younger over older bosses. However, as Figure 3 shows, the extent of this preference differs among countries, being largest in Bulgaria and smallest in France.

### Age Stereotypes Are a Self-Fulfilling Threat

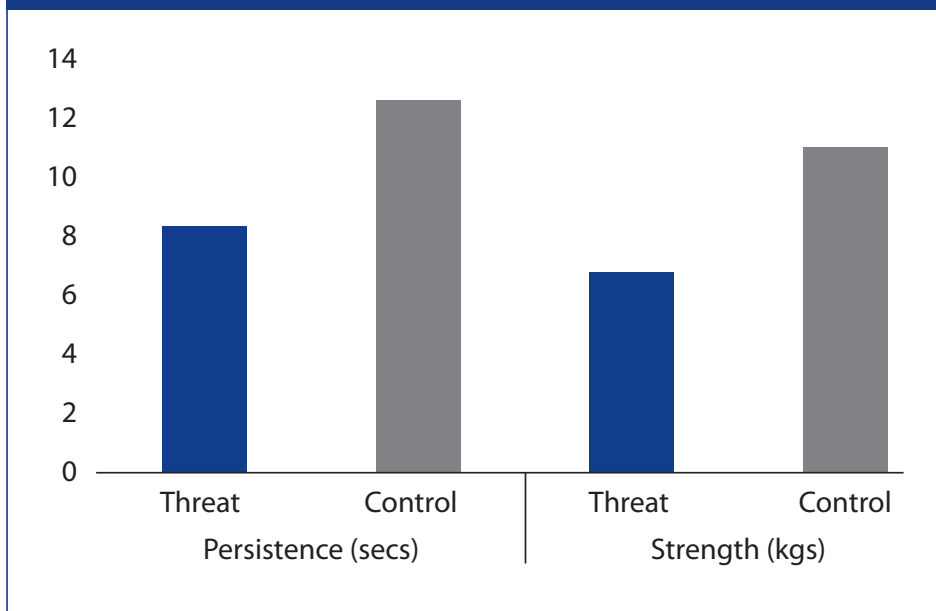
Status judgments and stereotypes can also be applied to the self. The continuous nature of age categorization means that negative attitudes toward older people become increasingly relevant to the self. People's assumptions about the age fit of different types of work influences how they evaluate experiences of work, the type of work they apply for, and what career decisions they make (Shore et al., 2003).

Negative age stereotypes of older people, when applied to the self, also can directly damage performance. When people are being evaluated by others, they may fear confirming a negative stereotype about their group. As a result, perhaps because of anxiety or distraction caused by this concern—that is, stereotype threat—they are liable to underperform and, ironically, to reinforce that very stereotype (Steele, 2010; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Most research on stereotype threat has focused on gender and ethnicity. Stereotype threat affects women's math performance, as well as the intellectual performance of ethnic and minority groups (Nguyen & Ryan, 2008).

There is a relative dearth of research on the effects of stereotype threat on older people. However, older people might be particularly vulnerable to such threats because they are characterized by negative age stereotypes that infer low competence and poor memory ability. Indeed, evidence confirms that older people are strongly susceptible to stereotype threat, showing deficits in cognitive performance when faced with such threat (Abrams, Crisp, Marques, Fagg, Bedford, & Provias, 2008; Desrichard & Köpetz, 2005; Hess, Hinson, & Statham, 2004). However, evidence also shows ways to combat such effects (Abrams et al., 2008).

We conducted a series of studies in which stereotype threat was elicited through an intergroup comparison (Abrams et al., 2008; Swift et al., in press). Older participants were told that their performance would be compared with the performance of younger

**Figure 4. Effect of stereotype threat on older people's hand-grip ability.**



participants. Other participants (control conditions) were simply told that their performance would be compared with that of other people. No mention was made of age. We predicted that the mere comparison with younger people would be sufficient to invoke old-age stereotypes and to produce anxiety about underperformance. Consequently, we expected those who experienced the threat manipulation to underperform on cognitive tasks involving recall, comprehension, math, and verbal ability. In all four studies, participants in the threat conditions performed significantly less well than those in the control conditions, and this difference was partly accounted for by their increased levels of anxiety.

Given that stereotyping of older people involves images of frailty and physical decline, we also examined whether stereotype threat could affect a basic physical capability that requires no skill: squeezing a hand dynamometer as hard and for as long as possible. A hand dynamometer measures grip strength, which is a widely used diagnostic measure of individual disability or capability, muscle strength, and functionality. As shown in Figure 4, we found that the threat caused participants' physical strength and endurance to decrease by almost 50 percent (Swift, Lamont, & Abrams, in press). This finding has significant implications in many domains, because grip strength is an indicator (used in occupational and health assessment) of a person's ability to do many everyday activities, ranging from opening a door to writing, carrying bags, and opening jars and cans.

## Intergenerational Relationships

Stereotypes and misperceptions of age seem likely to reflect lack of contact between people of different generations. According to intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), increasing the amount of positive contact between members of social groups promotes positive attitudes and behavior. Friendships with individual members of a different age group should therefore generalize to more positive attitudes and less negative stereotyping of the group as a whole.

Society conspires to segregate older people from younger people in various ways, ranging from special arrangements, facilities, and social activities for older people to sheltered housing and age-segregated residential schemes. ESS data show that 86 percent of people between the ages of 65 and 75 had a friend over the age of 70, but only 39 percent had a friend under the age of 30. An important context in which

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intergenerational relationships might form and be sustained is the workplace, where people can potentially mix with colleagues, customers, or clients of different ages. In fact, the ESS found that, among people who are working, those between 65 and 75 are equally as likely to spend time with others of their own age (50%) as they are with people in their 20s (52%).

Aside from affecting people's attitudes to others of different ages, our experiments on stereotype threat (Abrams et al., 2008) have shown that participants who have a higher number of friendships with younger people are significantly less vulnerable to the threat effect. Importantly, it is possible to produce this improvement merely by asking participants to *imagine* having a pleasant interaction with a young person. These studies show that maintaining or creating a psychological bridge

between older and younger people has the potential to neutralize, or provide a buffer against, age-related stereotypes.

## Summary and Conclusions

In the context of national and international economic and demographic challenges, ageism and attitudes about aging present significant barriers to older people. Ageism is a significant problem across ESS countries; however, the prevalence of ageism varies considerably, as do perceptions of status and old age. This variability means that different strategies to deal with ageism may be needed if they are to be effective in different countries. Broadly, however, it is also important to recognize that strategies can be deployed at different levels. At the social psychological level, it is important to change people's stereotypes of aging and their associated emotional reactions to older people. It is also important

to find ways to enable older people to challenge such stereotypes and avoid stereotype threat. At the organizational level, it is important not only to raise awareness of the effects of age segmentation and age-based assumptions in terms of their likely costs (e.g., underusing skilled older workers) and lost opportunities but also to incorporate age into procedures that ensure equal opportunities.

At the societal level, age presents special challenges for policy because of the difficulty in defining particular age ranges or boundaries at which particular policies and legislation should apply. We would encourage policies that treat age as a continuous attribute and do not confound age with specific rights, abilities, or needs.

This is not to advocate an age-blind approach. Rather, policies should focus on binding society across age, avoiding stigmatizing labels and treatment of particular age groups or categories. Policies relating to health, housing, and pensions sometimes risk reinforcing age divisions. It is important to be mindful of these effects, as well as to take advantage of opportunities to improve intergenerational contact through institutional support in work and leisure settings. Ageism is a significant source of inequality and unfairness in society, and it has a detrimental impact on performance, productivity, and social cohesion. In short, ageism doesn't work.

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