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10-31-2018

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Jasmin Tahmaseb-McConatha

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[Jasmin Tahmaseb-McConatha Ph.D.](#)

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Aging in an Age of Intolerance: The Gendered Face of Ageism

Ageism in the workplace is an increasing problem.

Posted Oct 31, 2018

In response to a technology related question on a new program being implemented in our department this past week, a colleague of mine had declared the program “easy to learn.” To further prove his point, he went on to say that he had even taught his aunt how use the new program to manage data. While I very much appreciated the time my colleague took to answer my question, I detected, in his wording and tone, a subtle message of ageism. I couldn’t help but wonder why he felt it was necessary to make a reference about his aunt? As this mundane example suggests, ageism in the workplace is widespread, overt, and subtle. Rather than assuring me that the new program was indeed manageable, his answer made me question my competence.

Could I learn the new program?

Such treatment is one of the most frequent instances of ageism and can be called “momism.” It is often directed towards working women over 55. In fact, a study conducted by AARP (2014), found that nearly two-thirds of workers ages 45 to 74 have experienced age [discrimination](#) in the workplace. Such discrimination often results in self-doubt, loss of [confidence](#) and competence, marginalization, and ultimately feelings of isolation.

What is driving age discrimination?

In the US, a youth-centric culture is the norm. The contemporary work place is saturated with buzz-word associations like “innovative,” “energetic,” and “flexible,” many of them associated with “youth.” In striking contrast, an older worker may be weighed down with stereotypical labels like “stubborn,” “change resistant,” “unhealthy,” and therefore “costly.” Young workers are painted in a better light and consequently seen as the better investment. In addition, corporations have been trending towards downsizing their work forces as they outsource major work functions. This trend has led to increased [fear](#) of job security among workforce participants and heightened competitive tensions between the younger and older generations in the workforce (Rosignano, 2010).

Ageism is a widespread phenomenon in every aspect of society (WHO, 2017). Described as “the third great ‘ism’ in our society, after racism and sexism,” (Palmore, 2001) ageism is the act of stereotyping or discriminating against a person or a group of people based on their age. While not as widely acknowledged, it is the most universal of the ism’s, as it can be experienced by anyone who lives long enough. Ageism is also gendered; women are more likely to be victimized by ageist attitudes and behaviors and are subjected to the intersecting prejudices of age and [gender](#) bias (Barrington, 2015). With an increase in the number of older workers, ageism in the workplace has also become more prevalent. By 2019, it is predicted that there will be twice as many women over the age of 55 in the workforce than women ages 16 to 24. It is likely that this increase will lead to an associated increase in ageism (AARP, 2018). Ageist treatment in the workplace has a bearing on workers self-perceptions, their levels of [stress](#), their job satisfaction, and their well-being.

Being victimized by ageist treatment in the workplace creates considerable stress. Consider the various stress-inducing assessments of ageist treatment:

- What is the cost of challenging the treatment?
- Did the treatment actually occur?
- Did I deserve it?

The resolution of these questions leads to possible coping strategies. One option is a direct problem focused approach in which the person challenges ageist treatment. This method can be difficult, especially if ageist treatment has been subtle and perhaps even [unconscious](#). An alternate approach is to cope with negative feelings of distress associated with ageist treatment and to seek support and validation from relationships (Kim, Noh, & Chun, 2015). In a university setting it is also possible to become active in an advocacy organization that focuses on [education](#) and awareness of the discrimination. Unfortunately, ageism is a form of discrimination not often addressed by such organizations. Institutions that promote diversity, equality, and justice, all too often do not address ageism. In fact, they tend to communicate the message that ageism is a non-issue or not as important as other issues. Unlike women of color and LGBTQA women, older women have neither focused research on their own identities or taken on activist roles fighting against age biases. Ageism leads not only to marginalization but also reinforces age inequality, ageist language, and age segregation. In contemporary American society, there are few social costs for denigrating elders. Awareness and change are needed on social, political, institutional, and interpersonal levels. It is to the benefit of all to encourage people of all ages to be professionally and socially engaged. As people live longer healthier lives, they deserve to be treated with respect and given the opportunity to continue to be make contributions to their profession and societies.

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