



#NoWrinklyHands: visual ageism during Covid-19

In a year when ageing and later life have featured so powerfully in news reporting on Covid-19, we have witnessed an explosion of ageist and stereotypical images of older people. While the hashtag #NoWrinklyHands has been around for quite some time, media organisations have excelled in linking stock images of older people's body parts to any type of story that touches even vaguely on issues of ageing.

Researchers whose work focuses on social aspects of ageing have long recognised the damaging impacts of ageism and ageist attitudes in society. When Robert Butler developed the term 'ageism' in 1969, he defined this as "prejudice by one age group against another age group" (Butler 1969, p.243). Ageism is regarded as one of the main forms of prejudice that remains widely tolerated in countries like the UK.

In the half century that has followed Butler – a period marked by major changes in the age structure of our societies alongside other significant developments, including increasing individualism and a relentless shift to digital technologies – scientists are still interested in what constitutes ageism.

In their recent [book](#), Liat Ayalon and Clemens Tesch-Römer (2018) define ageism as the "complex, often negative construction of old age, which takes place at the individual and the societal levels" (p.3). This links to work that describes different forms of ageism.

Writing in the 1990s, Julia Johnson and Bill Bytheway (1993: 205) drew attention to three particular types of ageism:

- Institutional ageism relates to the ways in which age discrimination is embedded in our social and political structures through, for example, the application of age thresholds that govern who can do what at a particular chronological age.
- Internalised ageism concerns the negative and prejudicial beliefs that people hold, leading to the use of derogatory language to refer to older people or encouraging individuals to mask the signs of their own ageing.
- Benevolent patronage, sometimes referred to as compassionate ageism, refers to all sorts of assumptions that are made about older people being dependent, in need of special protections, and incapable of making decisions without the support of other people.

These forms of ageism are well described in research and also form part of most older people's experiences of everyday life. In many ways, the Covid-19 pandemic has only served to render more visible the deep-seated nature of ageism within society. However, another form of ageism has emerged as being

If anything positive is to emerge from the terrible experience of Covid-19, it has to be that many people are now better attuned to the existence of ageism in society. It's our collective responsibility to ensure that this type of prejudice, in all its forms, becomes unacceptable and ceases to be tolerated in a civilised society.

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Further reading

- Ayalon L. & Tesch-Römer C. (2018) Introduction to the Section: Ageism—Concept and Origins. In: Ayalon L., Tesch-Römer C. (eds) *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism. International Perspectives on Aging*, vol 19. Springer, Cham. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73820-8_1
- Butler, R. (1969) Age-ism: Another form of bigotry, *The Gerontologist*, 9(4), pp. 243-246
- Johnson, J. & Bytheway, B. (1993) Ageism: concept and definition. In: Johnson, J. & Slater, R. (eds) *Ageing and Later Life*, London: Sage, pp. 200-206
- Loos E., Ivan L. (2018) Visual Ageism in the Media. In: Ayalon L. & Tesch-Römer C. (eds) *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism. International Perspectives on Aging*, vol 19. Springer, Cham. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73820-8_11

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