

Chapter 25

Normative, Empiricist, and Interpretive Considerations in the Ageism Research Process



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25.1 Introduction

This chapter reflects on the normative, empiricist, and interpretive considerations researchers are facing in the process of researching ageism. The starting point of this study was a doctoral dissertation that, by triangulating data, methods, and theory, explored how ageism is manifested in the lives of older people (Snellman 2009). Such a research endeavour is warranted by system justification theory, arguing that support for an ageist structure of society is sometimes strongest among individuals who are most harmed by it (Jost et al. 2004). A large and increasing number of ageism studies report on empirical data; however, these studies are rarely explicitly related to epistemological and ontological questions. Little attention has previously been devoted to the philosophy of science aspects of ageism and therefore there is a gap in what we know about the wider scope of challenges in researching ageism and how we view and understand ageism in our world.

One way to devote attention to the philosophy of science aspects of ageism is to focus on the normative, empiricist, and interpretive (Howarth 2000) considerations and choices we as researchers are forced to make during the research process. In short, these considerations enable researchers to (a) take a standpoint against and strive to change negative ageist consequences in society (normative); (b) observe accurately and show how ageist elements are related in a narrow context (empiricist); and (c) observe, show, understand, and reflect critically on how ageist elements are related in a wider context (interpretive).

Among the myriad of choices to be made is the choice of what definition of ageism to use in any given case. This chapter demonstrates different types of ageism definitions. These are influenced by normative, empiricist, and interpretive

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considerations, each of which is crucial to how the research process will play out and what claims will be able to be made, and not made, about ageism. To make one choice of definition automatically prevents the analytical possibilities coupled to the choice of other alternatives. The chapter provides examples of ageism studies, which are influenced by normative, empiricist, or interpretive considerations. These examples should not be understood as strict representations of normative, empiricist, or interpretive types of study. Rather, these types of considerations have led to specific outcomes, and reveal the choices made during the research process. It is not reasonable to claim that any study on ageism is strictly coupled only to one of these considerations and simultaneously uncoupled from all of the others. Fragments of all considerations, to a varying degree, are present in any ageism research process and in any definition of ageism. Inspired by Howarth's (2000) reasoning on discourse theory and normative, empiricist, and interpretive types of science, I draw here on the experiences made in trying to triangulate data, methods, and theory to show how ageism is manifested and sustained in older people (Snellman 2009).

25.2 Triangulating Data, Methods, and Theory to Explore Ageism in Older People

My starting point for this discussion of ageism research process considerations was my doctoral dissertation, "*Old Folks*" [*gammfolket*]. *On Life Experiences and Everyday Ageism* (Snellman 2009). The dissertation consisted of three empirical studies and an analytical summary that investigated the connections between them. *Gammfolket* is a dialect form commonly used in the northern inland of Sweden, roughly translating to "old folks". It has positive connotations inasmuch as it signals a group of people we should in some way admire, treasure, and protect. It can also have negative connotations: it can be used ironically to describe older people who are no longer able to do something or are lagging behind in current trends or knowledge, such as new communication technologies. These meanings are not exhaustive—others could be added—but, in essence, the word *gammfolket* captures different nuances of how we use often ambiguous, ageist language in society.

The research process leading to *Gammfolket* started with an interest in older people's experiences of age discrimination, which eventually led me to something quite different. The first study (Snellman 2005) demonstrated that there were similarities in narrative elements in the ways the older people sampled in the study talked about their lives—for instance, that there were clear boundaries between different life stages (childhood, war-time experiences, working life, and retired life) and similar types of narrated experiences within those life stages. When the older people in the study summarized their lives it tended to be done in a meaning-making manner that ended in a rich and positive view of life. This rich view of life emerged independently of how many traumas the informants had experienced during their lives, and how severe those traumas were. Deeply unsettling life experiences and

traumas (of which encounters with discriminatory practices were not even a small part) were woven into a meaningful narrative of life.

The design of the first study included two significant challenges. First, it was not appropriate to ask people directly about age discrimination, because people often do not eagerly admit to being a member of a disadvantaged group in society. Second, in 2002, when the study was conducted, Butlers' (1969) definition of ageism did not turn out to be useful for analysing how ageism was manifested and sustained in the life stories of older people. Ageism, as well as its Swedish equivalent *ålderism*, was not a familiar word to Finno-Swedish older people living in the Western coastal regions of Finland. Consequently, empirical questions containing "ageism" were not possible to use. General theories in social gerontology that were available at the time (Bengtson et al. 1999) also did not provide explicit guidance on how to research age discrimination in older people. An alternative study design was decided upon, which was considered novel at the time. The choice was made to collect life stories from 16 people (9 women and 7 men in their late 70s and early 80s), with the expectation that this would allow people to freely share their lifetime experiences of age discrimination. This expectation turned out to be naïve. Despite my sense that the informants did talk about age discrimination during the interviews, it was disappointing and frustrating to listen to the recordings and read the transcribed text, because not once during the many hours of life story interviewing did the informants mention the word "discrimination". Additionally, the word "age" was explicitly mentioned by only one informant on one occasion. The word "age" was ostensibly not used at all in the narration of these life stories.

When the life-story study was being finalized, an opportunity emerged to design and include survey questions within Interreg's Gerontological Regional Database (GERDA) project funded by the European Regional Development Fund. Coming on the heels of the difficulties I had demonstrating how age discrimination is manifested and sustained in older people by using life stories, explicit survey questions on age discrimination and attitudes towards older people within different domains of society were included in the GERDA survey in 2005. This study found a high proportion of individuals who reported negative attitudes towards older people within the labour market (70.1%), and a smaller number of people who reported negative attitudes towards older people when visiting shops or banks (12.3%) as a customer. A theoretically informed structural equation model suggested that the reported attitudes were latent factors of structural, cultural, and individual levels of ageism in society (Snellman 2009). As opposed to not being able to make any explicit claims about age discrimination by utilizing life-story data, the GERDA survey data allowed for making explicit conclusions about both age discrimination and ageism.

In this second study, however, there was uncertainty as to whether the designed items were valid and reliable. During the research process there was a lot of discussion on aspects of language and about what the informants actually had in mind when they responded to the questions. In addition, even though I had intended this empirical study to deliver the data that would finalize the dissertation, there was no obvious way to relate the outcomes to the first study that used life stories. The two

simply did not add up. They seemed to be of two totally separate scientific worlds, and, frankly, did not contribute as much as I had hoped to exploring how ageism is manifested and sustained in older people.

A third empirical study (Snellman et al. 2012) and research process was therefore designed in parallel. This study design returned to the advantages of having the informants speak freely about their experiences. When I thought about my role as a researcher I realized the importance of how to introduce the topic in the first instance and that the way questions are posed to informants is crucial. This led to a focus group design. Six focus groups (three in Sweden and three in Finland) were carried out with the novel idea of allowing different types of birthday cards to guide the participants' discussion of age and ageing. Six cards in total were presented to participants: one was a humorous card on the topic of sexual activity, another merely had the number 75 printed on it, and so on. This design required extremely little involvement from me as a researcher. The focus group interviews more or less guided themselves and the informants participated very eagerly in the discussion, asking and answering questions amongst themselves. The focus group design created a sort of miniature version of society and allowed for a kind of demonstration of how ageism is negotiated. It enabled us to see the complexity of meaning that was triggered by the birthday cards, and it highlighted the infeasibility of providing a simple explanation of ageism. For instance, it was made obvious that the positive views some respondents had of one type of birthday card did not hold true for other respondents. This was also the case for cards that were initially judged as conveying negative views.

By listening to the recordings and reading the transcripts it became apparent that silence and changing the subject were tactics used to negotiate ageism. The informants talked about age discrimination. For example, when one of the informants said, "I think he wants us to talk about discrimination," they did talk about discrimination for a short while (the role of age and gender among women active in municipal politics), but eventually changed the subject and continued discussing age-related aspects of life that they were more interested in. Although previous research has suggested that birthday cards convey negative views of older people, none of the six focus groups was in unanimous agreement that the cards they were shown were negative or inappropriate and should be prohibited. The focus group design made it evident that older people themselves are co-creators of ageist language and culture.

After having completed the three empirical studies of ageism in older people, I returned my attention to the overarching aspects of what connected the different studies. During the process it became clear that the focus group study and the study that drew on survey data were explicitly related to ageism. The study that drew on life stories, however, was still a loose end: it did not seem to relate to ageism or age discrimination in any explicit way. Guided by discourse theory and by themes that were identified in the focus group study, the life stories were revisited. With a modified understanding of ageism as much more complex and as something continuously negotiated, a pattern that had not been evident before revealed itself in the life stories, perhaps because it was too simple and familiar. The life-story data contained

a very high number of words such as “old,” “older,” “young,” “younger,” “time,” “year,” “month,” and so on. The number of these signifiers of everyday ageism (Snellman 2009) suggested that they held meaning for the narrators of the life stories. These signifiers, and the meanings coupled to them, seemed both to *mask* and to *mark* ageism in society.

To summarize, identifying how ageism is manifested and sustained in older people, in a societal context in which there was no linguistic awareness of ageism, posed a significant ontological challenge. This challenge was addressed by triangulating different types of data, methods, and theories. An inductive starting point in older people’s life stories utilized deconstruction and theories of social gerontology; descriptive statistics, structural equation modelling, and explicit ageism theories were applied to survey data; and focus group interview data analysed with thematic content analysis and informed by discourse theory and the theory of age coding enabled the discovery of ageism signifiers such as “older” and “younger”. In other words, there was no easy answer to the question of how ageism is manifested and sustained in the lives of older people. It was a long process: the findings did not appear overnight, and the process required multiple data sets, methods, and theories. Researching ageism in older people required its own theoretical and conceptual customization, which was derived from normative, empiricist, and interpretive considerations and decisions during the research process.

25.3 Normative Considerations

Taking into account normative considerations in the ageism research process mainly implies two things. First, normative considerations require taking a standpoint (without necessarily making theoretically informed interpretations) that ageism *per se* is negative. Second, the phenomenon of ageism concerns a certain target group of people, commonly referred to as “older people” or “the elderly”. Normative considerations are often accompanied by an automatic and unquestioned assumption that the problem, whatever it might be, is a problem of discrimination—that is, that it is negative by definition. Ageist discrimination or negative treatment is invoked instead of analysed (Cruikshank 2003), without a substantial understanding of what is behind a certain kind of behaviour or practice.

Normative considerations imply reactivity against things that are perceived as inappropriate in society. These considerations are commonly brought to the fore when we are observing troubling issues for the very first time or at an early stage of acquaintance. For instance, this was my un-reflected position when I was first attempting to demonstrate how ageism is manifested and sustained in older people by collecting and analysing life-story data. In my own case, the drive to use life stories was inspired by my own previous discriminatory actions toward my paternal grandmother, who suffered a period of severe mental illness and who attempted suicide twice. I felt that I had not respected my grandmother’s fullness as a person when, for example, I went with her to a doctor’s appointment and accused her of

lying. As a result of my actions, I considered it important to allow older people to speak their minds freely about what matters to them, without allowing anyone else to define their reality. I was doing normative consideration, which, according to Howarth (2000), “seek[s] to advocate and justify the key principles around which society [should be] structured” (p. 130). Awareness and the observation of unjust age-related phenomena can be imperative for an early stage conceptualization of ageism and more generally how society should be structured, by allowing us to consider more insightfully our common sense views of what is acceptable and not acceptable in an age-friendly society.

Normative considerations are evident in the way ageism was first defined by psychiatrist and gerontologist Robert Butler (1969) as

the systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender. Old people are categorized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old fashioned in morality and skills ... [A] geism allows the younger generation to see older people as different from themselves; thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings. (p. 243)

Considering that this was the first definition of ageism it is not surprising that it is normative, as it arose in reaction to something perceived as unjust. As a definition it categorizes older people as a group; it is difficult to view as anything other than targeting the negative; and it arose reactively from Butler’s identification of issues with unsatisfactory housing for older people. Several years later, Butler continued the conceptualization process by adding other considerations to what he had first discovered and defined. In his article, “Dispelling Ageism: The Cross-Cutting Intervention”, Butler (1989) added that he was just as concerned with older people’s negativism towards younger people. Butler’s work shows the importance of renewed and continued consideration and reasoning that goes beyond the normative by practising bold self-criticism. Butler’s 1969 article is very often cited in publications focusing on ageism, whereas the article from 1989 is hardly ever mentioned. This alone calls for critical reflection on the homogenizing normative power that early conceptions and definitions can have. It also highlights the need to question habitual categories initially created during research training and to continue training the “capacity to break old mental habits and create new ones” (Swedberg 2012, p. 19).

Normative considerations are justifiable as long as they are understood not to be the only possible approach to studying ageism, and as long as they are not allowed to define and delimit the broader field. In fact, normative considerations can be viewed as critical in the first stages of a research process or as a first step in changing society. For instance, legislation is needed to secure fair treatment of older and younger workers within the labour market; but legislation would not be needed unless it addressed something we collectively agree is unjust. Regardless of what has been scientifically demonstrated, we have agreed, as a society, that something is needed to prevent discrimination within the labour market. Legislation on age discrimination has been introduced across all European countries partly as a result of the EU council directive on equal treatment in employment and occupation (2000/78/EC). The directive forced EU member states to introduce legislation

against age discrimination and is an example of an applied supranational, reactive, normative consideration, that indicates how societies should be structured, viewed from an EU perspective. However, previous research has shown that the directive was received differently in member states (Nygård and Snellman 2014). Legislation on age discrimination was quite automatically adopted in Finland, whereas there was more debate, resistance, and negotiated exceptions in Sweden. This shows how early normative initiatives are interpreted in different ways and that these initiatives might not automatically fit all societies, unless they are adapted in order to correspond better with the norms and values that already exist in a specific societal context.

It is not explicitly stated in scientific publications that normativity is applied, which in itself is not surprising. We tend to avoid the idea of applied normativity because we think science should not be affected by mores. Smith (1995), however, writes “*all* self-images [of disciplines] reflect normative concerns” (p. 30), which begs the question whether any of the considerations used in studying ageism or in published studies on ageism can be considered non-normative.

The use of normative considerations is key in intervention studies when researchers set out to demonstrate whether it is possible to improve an unjust or negative outcome. The starting point of any intervention study must be that some aspect in a group of people’s lives is negative and that it can possibly be improved by intervening in an appropriate way. An example of using normative considerations within a randomized controlled trial context is a study by Jacobson (2006) entitled, “Overcoming ‘Ageism’ Bias in the Treatment of Hypercholesterolaemia”. The term ageism is mentioned four times in the article, but the inclusion of it in the title puts ageism in the spotlight and discloses its significance. Ageism in the title has been assigned quotation marks, which signals something that is not explicitly communicated. The review article showed that statins are more often prescribed to younger patients than to older patients, who are thereby denied the benefits of the intervention. The clinical findings demonstrated that statins are safe and well tolerated when prescribed to older patients, and that there is no obvious reason not to prescribe statins to those with the highest cardiovascular risk. The article shows that, even when appropriate methodological rigour is used, there can be a glide into applying normative arguments, without including scholarly sources on ageism research. The argument against ageist practice is accomplished without an explicit theoretical foundation at any stage of the research process. In some cases this makes sense, for instance when all other alternative explanations have been overthrown. It is, in other words, possible to invoke ageism in a reactive manner, even though it has not been empirically analysed. This conveys a normative message about how society should be organized.

Another example of a study that addresses negative views of older people is Kane’s (2004) “Ageism and Intervention: What Social Work Students Believe About Treating People Differently Because of Age”. Kane investigated whether social work students’ perceptions, needs assessments, and recommendations varied as a function of the age of people diagnosed with severe cancer as described in a vignette. This study found that social work students were more likely to think that older

people should be allowed to commit suicide (which was ethically problematic) and that younger people had a greater chance of recovery (which was not true). The findings have obvious relevance for social work practice, but did not provide evidence on how social workers would actually make decisions in practice. This study pinpoints a pattern of reasoning that people might not necessarily be aware of. Like Jacobson's study (2006), Kane's study (2004) examined the normative foundation the work of a certain group relies on and how and why this foundation should be changed. In other words, it showed that there are other key principles around which professions and society should be structured.

Other studies within the field of social work have shown that substance users' age affects professionals' perceptions of substance use severity (Samuelsson and Wallander 2014) and treatment recommendations (Wallander and Blomqvist 2009). These studies, however, did not explicitly use the term ageism, but nonetheless serve as examples of applying normative considerations and attempting to raise awareness of age-related perceptions in social work practice. There are a large number of scientific publications, on a range of topics, that demonstrate the significance of age, but that are not explicitly coupled to theories of ageism.

25.4 Empiricist Considerations

Traditional forms of (logical) empiricism emphasize the utmost accuracy in making empirical observations and represents a nomothetic (generalizing) notion of an ideal form of knowledge. As a starting point for knowledge, empiricism generally opposes speculation, intuition, feelings, and other sources that are difficult, if not impossible, to quantify (Andersen 2001). It is not possible to categorically avoid empiricist considerations in any given research process. However, there can be some variation in the degree to which empiricist considerations find their way into the actual practice of collecting data. The goal for social sciences is to explain social phenomena (Elster 2007). The explanation needs to be grounded in reality, and on observations and empirical data about this reality. So we have to decide how to observe reality based on ontological views we have about how ageism exists. Whether or not we consider ourselves to be empiricist researchers, we always struggle to identify the most appropriate methods for obtaining data at some point in the research process. In every single research process, we strive to design our investigation in a way that enables us to observe ageist reality in the most accurate manner. Observations we make of the ageist reality are theory-dependent (Føllesdal et al. 2001), and the emphasis on accurate observations which characterizes empiricism presumes a theoretical foundation at an earlier stage in the research process. This simultaneously sets constraints on what observation-based interpretations it is possible to make.

Collecting data with surveys, carrying out experiments, and using existing data registers are examples of methods that at the design stage are more clearly influenced by empiricist considerations. However, it would not be accurate to think that

quantitative data is the only type of data that is influenced by empiricist considerations. Qualitative data collection is also influenced by empiricist considerations. Empiricist decisions can be seen to be made when we arrive at a point in the research process where we know with greater certainty what we want to assess and how. For instance, the focus group study collecting qualitative data on ageism in birthday cards can be seen as more influenced by empiricist considerations than the survey that collected quantitative data by asking direct questions about age discrimination. When I asked direct questions in survey form, I had only a vague notion of what I wanted to observe. But in the focus group study, I had a much clearer sense of how and what I wanted to observe, based on an empiricist understanding.

Empiricist considerations are also evident in definitions of ageism as a prejudice, a method of stereotyping, and discrimination (e.g., Wilkinson and Ferraro 2002; Iversen et al. 2009). Empiricist considerations in the ageism research process can be seen in efforts to accurately assess individual-level components of ageism (stereotype, prejudice, discrimination) (Thompson 2006; Palmore 1999, 2005) using explicit and implicit measures of ageism (for an overview of such measures, see Lassonde et al. 2012, pp. 175–176). Lassonde et al. (2012) developed an implicit way of assessing ageism using the so-called contradiction paradigm “to measure age-related stereotypes in passages describing older adults” (p. 174). They found that people read sentences more slowly when the content portrayed behaviours that were inconsistent with age-related stereotypes as compared to content that was consistent with age-related stereotypes. Their results were not related to explicit ways of assessing ageism, which, according to the authors, confirmed that the contradiction paradigm can be used to assess age-related stereotypes. The researchers acknowledged that the scale is not an alternative for assessing affective (prejudice) and behavioural (discrimination) components of ageism. Lassonde et al.’s method of assessing stereotypes is an important theoretical contribution, and a result of systematic empiricist consideration. Their study demonstrates robust empirical results, a transparent description of the study design and decisions made during the research process, and a highly effective way of instantiating what prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination corresponds to in real life situations.

North and Fiske’s (2013) development of an intergenerational-tension ageism scale illustrates an explicit way of assessing ageism in an empirical study. In this study, North and Fiske did not depart from a definition of ageism, but from existing ageism scales, which they felt focused mainly on descriptive stereotypes and what older people *are*. Instead, they empirically tested a three-factor model of prescriptive ageism. These factors were described as “active, envied resource succession, symbolic identity avoidance, and passive, shared resource consumption (SIC)” (North and Fiske 2013, p. 706). The SIC-scale fulfilled the requirements for internal validity, i.e., statistical explanations of the data were identified that qualified the results as a scale.

Lassonde et al. (2012) and North and Fiske (2013) focused on stereotypes and prejudice and did not engage in discussion about what the scales are linked to in terms of outcomes. Both contributions end in a suggestion that the scales can be

used for purposes of investigating how ageism relates to behaviour, which is a very challenging task. Tornstam (2006), in a study of age-related attitudes and discrimination, demonstrated that even if we are predisposed to behave in a certain way (for example, by embodying negative attitudes), we do not necessarily do so. Other studies using empiricist considerations have, however, investigated ageism and beliefs related to different outcomes.

Becca Levy has made significant contributions to empirical studies of ageism. She proposes that ageism and self-stereotypes have an effect on memory performance in old age (Levy 1996), on handwriting (Levy 2000), on the will to live (Levy et al. 1999), hearing decline (Levy et al. 2006a), myocardial infarction (Levy et al. 2006b), cardiovascular events in later life (Levy et al. 2009), and longevity (Levy et al. 2002). These studies make important contributions because they provide statistical explanations related to outcomes most people can comprehend. Many people would agree that ageism—even if they do not necessarily recognize the term—at least in principle is important. It is not, however, until we start linking it with potential challenges in our own bodies that people really understand its impact on life and society. Measuring ageism accurately and demonstrating its relation to outcomes requires empiricist considerations at an early, theory dependent, stage of the research process.

25.5 Interpretive Considerations

Interpretive considerations in the ageism research process concern designing studies for activities of interpretation, understanding, and meaning-making of a complex ageist reality. Interpretive considerations originated with scholars such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Weber, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Interpretive design considerations are brought to the fore in the research process when we want to explore the uniqueness of situations in an ageist reality and when the study focus is of a type that does not repeat itself in a regular manner (i.e., when ageism is considered too complicated to explain by making generalizations). These occasions require that ideographic notions— notions that describe the uniqueness of individual situations—are utilized. The dependency on interpretive theory (Føllesdal et al. 2001) is more present in later stages of the research process.

Interpretation is viewed as necessary in situations in which we do not understand the complexity of what is being studied (Føllesdal et al. 2001). This type of dilemma presents itself in unique, previously unexplored cases in which we do not have a clear idea of how to accurately observe ageism. Without interpretation in these cases, there is no way of understanding ageism, no way of making sense of or identifying the meaning of how and why ageism takes place in our world. For instance, the unintentional discovery of and labelling of ageism signifiers in the life stories study (Snellman 2009) was the result of an extensive process of triangulating empirical data, analytical methods, and a variety of theories to interpret and understand

the unique and challenging phenomenon of how ageism is manifested and sustained in older people. This discovery was enabled by critically scrutinizing empirical data collected at different points in time during the research process. In the process, words such as “older” and “younger” were observed, but, without combining different types of data, methods, and theories, I would not have been able to label those words signifiers of ageism. The fragments of a complex ageist reality that surfaced in the later stages of the research process required interpretive considerations to bring them to the fore.

There are other distinctive features to interpretive considerations. One feature is the two-way direction between the overall structure of society on the one hand and individuals living and making choices in society on the other. This has been called the “dialectical confluence of ageism” (Wilkinson and Ferraro 2002), and is perhaps the main reason why empirical data needs to be interpreted with the use of theory in the later stages of the research process. A second feature is that actors in the role of researchers are co-creators (meaning makers) of society’s ageist structure (Bytheway and Johnson 1990; Føllesdal et al. 2001; Snellman 2016). A third feature is awareness, which is needed to understand, among other things, (a) the uniqueness of situations and the broader consequences of ageism, (b) what comprises the ageist structure of society, and (c) how the ageist structure is sustained.

Interpretive considerations can be identified in definitions describing ageism in terms of practices (Bytheway et al. 2007; Snellman 2016). There are other useful conceptualizations of (ageist) practices that use other terms than ageism, such as “age-relations” (Calasanti 2003) and “age coding” (Krekula 2009). Elsewhere I have suggested an interpretive (constitutive) working definition of ageism as

constitutive practices which are permeated with our experiences of the chronological, social, biological and psychological life course. We utilize age—or some other adjacent terminology that signifies age—in a myriad of different ways to organize our own and other people’s lives and to make our social worlds intelligible. (Snellman 2016, p. 149)

This working definition of ageism was enabled by the triangulation of empirical data, methods, and theory that I arrived at during an extended research process. In addition to the word “practices”, the word “constitutive” in the working definition has important implications for continued interpretive considerations. Constitutive is generically described as “having the power to enact or establish” (*Merriam-Webster n.d.*). Constitutive means that structure—in the meaning of established societal practices—influences (not determines) individual behaviour (is constituted by) and individual behaviour establishes (constitutes) the structure in the meaning-making practices of society. In other words, this is the “dialectical confluence of ageism” as described by Wilkinson and Ferraro (2002). This, in turn, implies that if structure is not complete, decisively finished, it can potentially be changed. So, interpretive considerations in the research process are sometimes more about reflecting on who has the power to define and label an ageist reality. Interpretive considerations allow for an understanding of how people themselves can become aware of and master

their life-world (Freire 1996). Higher levels of awareness spill over into enhanced possibilities of exercising power over one's own situation. Departing from definitions of ageism as practices enables a more open form of investigation that allows for the discovery of aspects that could not even be anticipated in the early stages of the research process. Interpretive considerations in the ageism research process also bring us closer to exploring the intersectional complexity of situations and society (Wilińska et al. 2018; Chap. 26, in this volume). In simple terms, intersectionality means that we try to observe and analyse several uniquely socially organizing principles simultaneously; for example, how aspects of age, gender, ethnicity, and class overlap in a given situation.

Interpretive considerations in the ageism research process include other ways of collecting data than carrying out experiments, collecting survey data, and using existing registers. For instance, Bytheway et al. (2007) used diaries to examine people's accounts of discrimination, exclusion, and rejection. They were able to show that everyday events, such as going to the hairdresser, were perceived as discriminating when individuals were not given the haircut they wanted. This type of study design was needed to capture unique, ageist events that often occur in everyday life but still in some countries are considered too trivial to qualify as discrimination in, for example, a legal sense.

25.6 Discussion

In this chapter, I reflect on how normative, empiricist, and interpretive considerations have influenced the ageism research process and definitions of ageism. Normative considerations in the research process are characterized by taking a stand against something perceived as immoral or negative in society and wanting to change something which is viewed as problematic. A normative research process is not dependent on ageism theory or theorizing at any stage of the process. Rather, it is characterized by taking a stand, making a claim, and invoking ageism (Cruikshank 2003) as a means to explain practices when other explanations have been precluded. Reliance on normative considerations can be depicted as the initial step in theorizing ageism and as a way to suggest new testable hypotheses and novel research questions. Normativity on the structural level of society enables common sense decision making about what the morally correct thing to do is in a variety of situations. As human beings, we are quite often, but not always, good at common sense decision making. However, acting on normativity, always to some degree, leads us into a biased dead-end. Normative characteristics in ageism definitions show most evidently in the description of the phenomenon as something negative and as a way to distinguish older people (for example) as a target for intervention. Normative considerations guide us towards designing research (perhaps even without intention) in a way that allows us to express opinions about and strive to change negative consequences of ageism for a variety of target groups in society.

Empiricist considerations in the ageism research process are characterized by making as accurate as possible assessments of ageism. This requires having a clear idea of *what* and *how* to assess, which, in turn, presupposes a foundation in theory at an early stage in the research process. Empiricist considerations are theory dependent at early stages of the research process. This is for instance accomplished by assessing prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination. These three elements are the most obvious empiricist characteristics in ageism definitions. Accuracy resulting from empiricist considerations has provided the research field with validated scales to assess ageism (e.g., Lassonde et al. 2012; North and Fiske 2013) and demonstrated how stereotypes affect a range of different outcomes. Empiricist considerations allow us to assess ageism in as valid, reliable, and accurate a manner as possible. Empiricist considerations in early stages of the research process help guide research towards accurate observation and allow us to show how ageist elements are manifested in specific contexts.

Interpretive considerations in the research process are brought to the fore when the phenomena being studied are unique and extensively complex, that is, when complexity surpasses the possibilities of accurate assessment. In this chapter, for example, the discussion involves the complex challenge of demonstrating how ageism is manifested in and sustained among older people. Our notions of a complex ageist reality are often present in a variety of ways, but uncertainties about how to make sense of a complex reality often prevents us from proceeding. Addressing situations of great complexity regarding ageism requires a process in which we observe reality, collect rich data about age-related aspects of everyday life, and link those data to more abstract types of theories in later stages of the research process. Interpretive considerations in the research process are distinctively characterized by theory dependency in its later stages. In order to make sense of complex situations, it is of the essence that the choice of ageism definition is of a type that allows an interpretive kind of process. Such definitions of ageism include those that identify it in terms of practices. Unique, complex situations can be explored by using a definition of ageism that includes “practices”, as this enables a wider contextual conceptualization not circumscribed by narrower alternatives, such as stereotypes. Interpretive considerations in later stages of the research process guide our investigation towards meaning making and understanding of a complex ageist reality, and towards reflecting critically on how ageist elements are related in a wider context.

Normative, empiricist, and interpretive considerations can be seen as being active in different stages of the research process, and are differently theory dependent. The purely normative is not theory dependent at any stage; the empiricist is theory dependent at an early stage; and the interpretive is theory dependent at a later stage of the research process. Depending on the degree of complexity and what we hope to accomplish in researching ageism, normative, empiricist, and interpretive considerations guide our choices and influence our notions of what the most useful forms of knowledge are. As researchers, we are often inclined to make one-sided choices about whether a normative, empiricist, or interpretive design is the most

appropriate solution. This depends largely on what kind of research training we have. Research training, rather than the research problem, tends to guide what we eventually use. In this chapter, I have argued that a customization of normative, empiricist, and interpretive considerations—in other words, a triangulation of data, methods, and theories in an extended research process—can be a fruitful and creative way to pursue ageism research. Hopefully, the merits of customized triangulation have been demonstrated in a way that will inspire creative identification of novel research questions that will continue to help raise awareness of ageism and identify ways to intervene against the elements of ageist reality that we do not want and retain the elements of ageist reality that we still need.

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