Chapter 18

Introduction to the Section: Against Ageism

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So far, the chapters in this book have provided convincing evidence that ageism is bad for you.” It is bad for the individual, as it potentially affects wellbeing, quality of life, social life, sexuality, and the type and quality of health and mental health services one receives. It is also bad for society at large, as it creates divisions between generations and potentially establishes power imbalances that can prevent older adults from realising their full potential (see Chapters 1–17 in this volume). It is not surprising, then, that in 2016, the World Health Organization received a mandate to combat ageism (Officer et al. 2016).

The present section contains five chapters on interventions against ageism. The first four chapters are focused on policy and legal interventions to target ageism, whereas the latter chapter is a case example of an educational intervention to fight ageism.

The chapter by Doron, Numhauser-Henning, Spanier, Georgantzi, and Mantovani (2018; Chap. 19) presents a legal framework for European law to fight ageism. The chapter starts by describing the slow progression of the field of elder law. The fact that elder law is a relatively new phenomenon presents an obstacle to protecting older adults’ rights and fighting ageism. Old age is not mentioned as a potential basis for discrimination in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, nor in any other UN declaration since then. This hampers the ability of legal authorities to address issues associated with old age discrimination and the violation of older people’s rights.

The chapter by Mikołajczyk (2018; Chap. 20) provides a specific overview of the Council of Europe’s approach towards ageism. The author concludes that addressing the rights of older people through the Council of Europe is a relatively new and still under-developed phenomenon. Ageism is hardly ever recognized in

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official documents of the Council of Europe. Like Doron et al. (2018), Mikołajczyk (2018) argues that the Council of Europe is just beginning its fight against ageism.

The chapter by Georgantzi (2018; Chap. 21) provides a complementary but less favourable view of ageism and law in Europe by focusing on the European Union's approach towards ageism. The author argues that although the EU advocates for a society for all ages, which is free of discrimination, age categorization remains a justifiable and acceptable form of inequality. Georgantzi implies that the EU is concerned with population ageing, but equates it with dependency, frailty, and burden, rather than focusing on the protection of the rights of older adults and ensuring their equal participation in society.

In contrast to chapters 19-21, which address the macro-level in Europe and point to the current inadequacy of the system, the chapter by Larsson and Jönsson (2018; Chap. 22) provides a more local outlook on the fight against ageism by drawing on Sweden as a case example. The authors propose that the equal rights framework in Sweden ensures that young people with disability are able to fully participate in society. Older people with disability, however, suffer from institutional ageism, which prevents them from obtaining similar rights. The authors argue that older adults in the third age, who represent the active ageing model, should serve as a typical group, against which older adults with disability could be compared in order to improve the long-term care provided to them.

The concluding chapter in this section, by Requena, Swift, Naegele, Zwamborn, Metz, Bosems, and Hoof (2018; Chap. 23), takes a completely different look at interventions to target ageism. Drawing from intergroup contact theory, the authors demonstrate the effectiveness of an educational intervention that brings young and old people together as members of the same community. The authors outline an intervention which addresses communication style between the generations as a way to potentially reduce ageism.

Overall, these five chapters demonstrate that we are only at the beginning of the journey to combat ageism. Whereas the negative consequences and manifestations of ageism are well-documented, much less is known about fighting ageism. Literature on psychological interventions, such as campaigns to raise awareness about ageism (Mendonça et al. 2016), or educational interventions to improve knowledge and attitudes about ageism, such as ("Combating Ageism: Change in Student Knowledge and Attitudes Regarding Aging," Cottle and Glover 2007) would be helpful complements to the chapters presented here.

The diversity of theoretical explanations used to account for ageism suggests that there are multiple pathways to combat ageism. For instance, terror management theory (Martens et al. 2005) might suggest that disassociating old age from death and disability could be a useful way to combat ageism. Alternatively, de-sensitizing people to death and disability could also be an effective tool in the fight against ageism. Because older adults can be seen as a symbolic or realistic threat to younger generations (North and Fiske 2012), emphasizing older adults' contribution to society could be another means to combat ageism.

It is important to note that there is still a need to fine-tune the messages delivered to potentially reduce ageism. Do we want to foster feelings of empathy and pity or would a message of admiration of older adults be more beneficial? Should we target knowledge about older adults or attitudes towards older adults? Should we focus on

hard laws enforced by legal and political authorities, or should we strive for a bottom-up change in the way we view and behave towards older adults? To date, these questions have not been comprehensively addressed, but the chapters in this section introduce some compelling and fresh perspectives.

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