Ageism: Prejudice Against Our Future Selves

By Rachel Ramer

When I was in my twenties, I had a menial interviewing job to survey seniors about their health, including their sex lives—not high school or college seniors, the octogenarian kind. After apologizing for the intrusive questions and using a monotone voice, I read from the questionnaire. I received some eye-opening answers. It taught me something: never underestimate. The experience verified at least one aspect of their health—most seniors have a healthy sense of humor!

The world is full of biases and discrimination including those directed at race, gender, nationality, and disability. One prejudice stands out as unique—the bias against what we will all become if we don't die first: *old*. We hear terms such as "boomer" now used in derogatory ways—as labels we would not dare to duplicate about another race or someone with a disability. Perhaps we find this acceptable because we know we're mocking our future selves. But those currently in an older generation feel the sting of discriminatory comments.

In 1969, Robert N. Butler coined the term in his article "Age-ism: Another Form of Bigotry." He defined this as "prejudice by one age group toward other age groups." He explained this as a particular problem in reference to the elderly. "Age-ism reflects a deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged—a personal revulsion to the distaste for growing old… and fear of powerlessness, 'uselessness,' and death."

Of course, ageism can go either way. Not only seniors among us experience chronological snobbery. We may despise the young as well as the old. Aging, however, carries a growing sense of disregard instead of respect when a younger generation gains a few years. The elderly have experienced youth, its energy and naiveté; the young have not yet gained the nuanced wisdom from shattered dreams or scarred achievements.

I recently overheard a thirty-eight-year-old woman speaking to a group of teenagers and apologizing to them for her age. This is not uncommon. It's an indicator that we're conditioning them to accept ageism. Instead of valuing experience and longevity, we tend to dismiss a wealth of information and experience. In the *Huffington Post* article, "7 Cultures that Celebrate Aging and Respect Their Elders," the author noted, "Aging isn't just a biological process—it's also very much a cultural one. In Western Cultures… aging can become a shameful experience."

Shouldn't Previous Generations Be Held to Account?

I've witnessed the bristling among the young toward those who have misused authority or exercised a flawed influence over our culture. Shouldn't we be looking to the future and the next generation instead of honoring those who have had their chance? Aren't many of the social, environmental and spiritual problems we face delivered to us by past generations? Shouldn't younger generations call them to account for their mistakes, negligence, and outright disregard for what will happen if we don't change our course?

None of this should be ignored. We pay a price for how previous generations approached—even solved—problems, often creating new problems along the way. This, of course, could happen for the next

generation as well. Still, if someone with authority in your life caused pain, abuse, or hardship, you don't have to ignore it. If someone older used their age or influence to destroy what is good, find the support and fortitude to address it. This is not an excuse for those who should be called to account.

Prejudice Includes Assumptions

It's true that seniors who struggle with technology can be uninformed and outdated, but this leads to the false assumption that technological advancement means more updated accuracy. In 1970, NASA safely brought back the crew of Apollo 13 while calculating with the use of slide rulers. This was an incredible feat with rather primitive technology. Teachers have taught effectively without technology for most of the history of the world. Did what occurred before technology make it possible for us to be where we are today?

In reality, those growing up more recently could be less educated because of a dependance on technology. In his *New York Times* opinion piece, "You Still Need Your Brain," cognitive psychologist Daniel T. Willingham makes the case for two ways the brain beats the Internet: *context* and *speed*. While past generations may have had to visit the library or reference encyclopedias, they memorized to retain the type of detail students currently search for on the Internet. This gave them speed for direct reference.

In addition, *the abundance of misinformation and outdated information currently at our fingertips shows the advances in technology and the ability to operate that technology do not automatically make people smarter*.

Seniors also have more contextual knowledge simply by living longer, which is incredibly useful to them and those around them. Of course, aging often impacts retention, yet it's a fallacy to think the younger generation is automatically more accurately informed since *more information does not necessarily mean more accurate information*, even with advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Increased Grief

When we first became aware in 2020 that Covid 19 was a global problem, the message was clear; it would hit the elderly the hardest. The medical world prepared vaccines first for those above a certain age or with challenging medical conditions. Along with the resistance to masks, vaccines and social distancing was a stark reality for seniors—some in their world (perhaps their own family) saw them as expendable, a few even suggesting their deaths were necessary for population control. While some died alone and we counted the deceased, the perceived diminished importance of their lives was on display.

Those who have lived a long time know something about grief and the value of life. Perhaps they've had siblings, life partners, or even children die before them. Maybe they've outlived several pets. Friends have passed due to accidents, disease—even suicide. Public figures who were running the world when they were young are now gone. That's a lot of grief.

Combating Ageism on a Personal Level

Whether we're young or old, ageism is an ethical issue. This generation has a unique opportunity due to advances in medical science. In an article by Robert H. Shmerling (2022) *Harvard Health* reports life expectancy within the United States was 47 years in 1900, 68 years in 1960, and 79 years in 2019. We have the opportunity to interact with longevity both in others and in ourselves.

As with other prejudices, the cure is shared humanity and empathy. What does shared humanity look like? It avoids assumptions. Seniors are still breaking barriers, like those over seventy and well into their nineties running marathons, writing books and giving back to society. Shared humanity means spending time together. Limited mobility may keep seniors from social gatherings. Hearing loss may diminish interaction even when present.

The National Poll on Healthy Aging reports that "chronic loneliness can impact older adults' memory, physical well-being, mental health, and life expectancy." The older generation isn't the only group affected by not spending time together. Children and grandchildren miss out on their perspective, support and presence.

When time is in limited supply, its value increases, not decreases. Our final years matter. We mourn the loss of time with a sense of duty to live those years well.

As I write this, former President Jimmy Carter is in hospice at the age of 99. When he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, he stated, "*The bond of our common humanity is stronger than the divisiveness of our fears and prejudices.*" ❑

Rachel Ramer is host of "Lost the Legalism, Kept the Love" on Facebook.