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ARTICLE

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Biases that won't budge: implicit ageism, or explicit gerontocracy?

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ABSTRACT

This paper has two aims: first, to introduce a philosophical audience to research on implicit and explicit biases related to age; and second, to identify and explain ageist biases *within* social-scientific research. In the first case, evidence drawn from massive datasets, including both large language corpora and online tests with millions of participants, shows that implicit ageism has stayed remarkably persistent across time and space. This persistence stands in contrast to explicit ageism and other implicit biases, many of which have declined dramatically in the 21st century. In the second case, however, researchers have been preoccupied with a small fraction of biases related to age: for example, against the old rather than the young, and against 'old people' in general rather than specific oppressed older subgroups. Claims about the all-around intransigence of ageism are thus oversimplified overgeneralizations, which fail to heed lessons from contextual, embodied, critical, and intersectional perspectives on the social mind and world. Stubbornly flawed assumptions and methods have prevented the social sciences from addressing core questions for intergenerational justice, including the systematic disempowerment of the young. Fortunately, there is nothing inevitable leading to these oversights; empirical developments in the 2020s suggest that these limitations can – and have begun to be – overcome.

KEYWORDS Ageism; intergenerational injustice; gerontocracy; implicit bias; intersectionality; social cognition; social categories

Introduction

Biases related to age and intergenerational injustice have been slow to change – in two senses. On the one hand, research suggests that implicit ageism persists across both time and space, even as explicit ageism and other implicit biases (particularly related to sexuality and race) decline. On the other hand, biases *within* the social sciences have persisted as well. Demonstrably false preconceptions have led researchers to accumulate a colossal wealth of data about a miniscule range of age-related biases. Systematic mistakes and patterns of inattention have left the social sciences ill-equipped to speak to

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several of (what strike this author as) the most pressing intergenerational and ageist injustices shaping our present and future.

I begin by reviewing evidence from massive datasets revealing stubborn and widespread implicit biases against the old. Implicit ageism, these data suggest, displays striking properties that set it apart other implicit and explicit biases. But I turn next to interrogating the equally striking shortcomings in prevailing research programs. Very little rigorous, quantitative research has investigated biases against the young, or spoken to the outsized power of older populations.[1] Little empirical work on ageism examines power and relational inequalities *at all*. This leads to a second and related cluster of problems revolving around the tendency to focus on biases against the general category of 'old people,' and especially against *older workers*, rather than exploring a wider range of prejudices and practices oppressing specific subgroups among the old. This paper thus draws on insights from contextual, embodied, critical, and intersectional perspectives to learn where ageism research went wrong. (I go into greater depth about the intersectional shortcomings of ageism research in Madva (in preparation).) The good news, however, is that the limitations I identify can – and by the 2020s began to – be surmounted.

A final prefatory note: research on implicit social cognition, and the social sciences more generally, has endured boatloads of criticism related to replication, prediction, measurement, and more.[2] The concerns I raise here dovetail with these criticisms, but the basic orientation of this essay is that social-scientific research into bias and discrimination has done much to advance our understanding of injustice, and how to combat it. This essay is written in the spirit of enriching the science of ageism rather than criticizing it – and definitely not dismissing it altogether. The call for change is coming from inside the house.

Findings from Project Implicit and friends

A landmark paper by Tessa Charlesworth and Mahzarin Banaji (2019) studied large-scale trends in Americans' evaluations of six salient social topics: age, race, sexual orientation, skin tone, body size, and disability. Data were drawn from the Project Implicit website, which measures participants' views both explicitly, through self-report surveys, and implicitly, through less direct methods. One measure asks participants to report which of two groups they prefer, e.g. 'I strongly prefer young people to old people.' Another is a feeling thermometer asking participants to report how warm or cold (or neither) they feel toward a group. Implicit evaluations are measured with the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald et al., 1998). On this task, participants sort stimuli (words, images) into categories as quickly as possible. For the Age IAT, participants sort positive or negative words (like 'joyful' or 'evil')

with images of young versus old faces. When participants are faster and more accurate at sorting *young* with *positive* and *old* with *negative*, they're said to have an automatic preference for young over old people – an anti-old implicit bias. These evaluations are said to be *implicit* because they are harder to control and perhaps difficult to access introspectively.

Charlesworth and Banaji examined over four million tests by US participants from 2007 to 2016.[3] Anti-gay and anti-Black biases fell, in some cases dramatically, over this 10-year-span, on both implicit and explicit measures. Explicit biases related to age, disability, and body size also declined. There was, however, next to no change on *implicit* measures of age, disability, and body-size biases. Charlesworth and Banaji (2019, p. 17) speculate that these three biases reflect distorted perceptions of the 'decline of the body.' They might, that is, be three different manifestations of ableism. Perhaps people harbor an automatic and especially entrenched dislike for bodies perceived as less capable. (in two sections below, "Youngism" and "Putting the Data Together")

Among these three intransigent biases, ageism exhibited further distinctive features. Implicit anti-old biases were among the highest tested, while explicit anti-old biases were among the lowest, and the lowest correlation between implicit and explicit bias was for age ($r = .12$). The same pattern held for attitude *change*. While explicit anti-old biases moved 34% closer to neutrality, implicit anti-old biases fell just 5%. Charlesworth, Sanjeev, et al. (2023) also examined an international dataset, including over 2 million tests about seven topics from 34 countries. Around the world, the strongest implicit bias was against the old, while explicit anti-old biases were much weaker. In these respects, the received narrative about modern-day prejudice – that people are becoming more egalitarian in their reflective commitments even as their unreflective assumptions and negative gut feelings toward stigmatized groups don't budge – may be nowhere truer than for biases related to age.[4]

Another striking feature of implicit ageism is that it's shared by young and old alike. Many implicit evaluations (like their explicit counterparts) are shaped in part by ingroup favoritism and outgroup antipathy. White people, for example, are more likely to exhibit anti-Black implicit biases than Black people are. Not so for the Age IAT: participants are pretty much equally biased against the old regardless of their age. Or so, at least, it seemed up until about 2016.

A follow-up study assessed whether the US trends from 2007 to 2016 continued through 2020, noting this period's 'unpredicted and tumultuous events … from the election of Donald Trump and the rise of White supremacy groups to the emergence and growth of progressive movements for social justice' (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2022, p. 1). Generally, the earlier trends persisted. Both implicit and explicit anti-Black and anti-gay

biases continued to decline, in some instances reaching neutrality. But in one domain, earlier trends reversed. From 2017 to 2020, explicit anti-old biases actually *rose* 4%. Charlesworth and Banaji (2022, p. 17) observe that this was 'the only case of any attitude (whether implicit or explicit) changing in the opposite direction of the forecast [based on 2007–2016 data] and the only case of any explicit attitude changing toward increasing bias.' They speculate that the increase in anti-old bias reflects a 'growing generational war … [over] economic inequality, climate change, and racial injustice' (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2022, p. 10). I'd add to these speculations that the salience of powerful septuagenarian politicians during this time – including Donald Trump, Mitch McConnell, Nancy Pelosi, and the emergence of then-candidate Joe Biden – could have increased animosity toward the old. Supporting such hypotheses, the rise in ageism was concentrated among young and left-leaning participants, for whom explicit anti-old biases fell from 2007 to 2016 but rose 20% from 2017 to 2020. Given prominent concerns about President Joe Biden's age, and ongoing tensions between upstart and traditional Republicans, I'll stick my neck out and predict that the early 2020s saw an uptick in anti-old biases among young US right-wingers, too.

Project Implicit isn't the only Big-Data source finding persistent, pervasive anti-old biases. Corroborating evidence has emerged from analyses of large bodies of text, including billions of words in Google Books, Wikipedia, Twitter, and The New York Times. Analyses of these corpora stretching back over 200 years and across dozens of languages find, for example, that older-sounding names like 'Gertrude' and 'Wilbert' more often appear near negative words while younger-sounding names like 'Tiffany' and 'Joey' appear more with positive words (e.g. Caliskan et al., 2017; Charlesworth et al., 2022; R. Ng et al., 2022).

These corpora do provide some evidence of surface-level changes in ageist biases. The specific traits most frequently associated with different age groups have shifted over the centuries. For example, the old were 'objective' in 1800 but 'bossy' in 1990; the young were 'romantic' in 1800 but 'antisocial' in 1990. However, Charlesworth, Sanjeev, et al. (2023) found that these shifts in top-associated traits – what they call the *manifest stereotype content* about social groups – masked striking persistence in more *latent* dimensions of stereotype content – namely, valence, warmth, and competence. In other words, while people use different terms to describe the young and old from one decade to the next, their underlying prejudices and stereotypes – who's warm, who's competent, and who's preferred overall – persisted through these superficial changes.[5] Moreover, Charlesworth, Morehouse, et al. (2024) found that the patterns in these large bodies of text correlate more strongly with implicit than explicit measures of bias. While reflective (or at least self-reported) commitments to treat everyone fairly regardless of age have

evolved, the implicit ageist biases cropping up unprompted in language use have not.

Having summarized the key findings about ageism emerging from these big-data studies, this essay next takes a more critical look at the underlying research programs. What should we make of this global and intransigent implicit ageism? As explicit age attitudes march towards neutrality, how much should we worry that collective tendencies to associate *old* with *bad* and *young* with *good* won't budge? Why, that is, should we care?

Ageist biases and real-world implications?

A substantial literature examines disparate age-based treatment and outcomes, particularly related to employment and healthcare. In field studies, for example, older job applicants receive fewer callbacks for interviews than 'prime-aged' applicants in their 30s (e.g. Carlsson & Eriksson, 2019; Farber et al., 2019). But are these patterns tied to discriminatory and distortive stereotypes and prejudices (e.g. Murphy et al., 2022)? Disparate treatment in the job market could be driven less by inaccurate or disrespectful biases about older workers than by employers' (more or less accurate) perceptions that older workers are likely to demand more pay, e.g. because they have more experience (Oesch, 2020).

In fact, there is *shockingly* little research on the predictive power of implicit measures of ageism. As late as 2017, ageism experts Maria Clara de Paula Couto and Dirk Wentura wrote that, 'to the best of our knowledge, there is no published study exploring the predictive validity of implicit ageism measures for behaviors toward the elderly' (de Paula Couto & Wentura, 2017, p. 52). Subsequently, in one study with 110 participants, Sara Zaniboni et al. (2019) found that a modified Age-Stereotype IAT, which sorted old and young faces with the categories *good worker* and *bad worker*, predicted participants' evaluations of job applications from younger versus older people.[6] Not until Giasson and Chopik (2020) were results published correlating Project Implicit's standard Age IAT with social phenomena. They found that US states with stronger average anti-old implicit biases had worse (self-reported) health outcomes among people over 65, and spent more on elderly healthcare. What's more, older people in these states reported larger gaps between their chronological age and their 'subjective age,' as measured with questions like 'How old do you feel?' That is, they reported feeling younger than they were. These studies suggest the Age IAT is tracking something meaningful, but more work is needed to establish exactly *what* it's measuring, and how it relates to real-world discrimination. For example, while several studies have tested strategies for reducing ageism (e.g. Busso et al., 2019), there is still no evidence that changes in implicit ageism predict changes in behavior.

Of course, Project Implicit hardly holds a monopoly on ageism research, and there are more ways to measure it than IATs and feeling thermometers. But it's an open question whether the other tools being used in economics, sociology, etc., are adequate. A systematic review of ageism scales found that only one of eleven measures 'met minimum requirements for psychometric validation' (Ayalon et al., 2019, p. 1). A review and meta-analysis of research on the relationship between ageism and health concluded that many studies are of 'poor quality' (Hu et al., 2021, p. 35). A further challenge is operationalizing the contrast between 'old' and 'young.' One set of experiments finds that merely mentioning a job applicant's age disadvantages 60-year-olds relative to 20-year-olds (Kleissner & Jahn, 2021); another finds that reporting applicant age does *not* disadvantage 50-year-olds relative to a 30-year-olds (Kaufmann et al., 2016). Are these findings in conflict? (Maybe reporting age disadvantages 60-year-olds but not 50-year-olds.) In fact, as a person in their early 40s, this author has been delighted to discover that anyone under 50 still counts as 'young' in some literature reviews (de la fuente-Núñez et al., 2021), but disheartened by field studies suggesting I'm already disadvantaged relative to people in their mid-30s (Carlsson & Eriksson, 2019).

Stepping back from this operational mess, a persistent oversight of ageism research is how rarely it even *tests* for bias against people *younger than 30*. The few studies testing effects across a wider age distribution sometimes uncover a u-shaped pattern of discrimination: people in *both* their 20s and their 60s are disadvantaged relative to 'prime-aged' people (Belschner, 2024; Farber et al., 2019). This persistent inattention to youth-based disadvantage is no accident. Researchers don't look for anti-young discrimination because they expect to find it. Specifically, they anticipate a disadvantage for people in their early 20s due to having less experience (which is to say, *not* due to anti-young animosity). Yet the sources of inattention to anti-young bias run deeper.

What even is ageism? Why do social scientists care about it, and why should we?

Does discrimination against the young even *count* as ageism? This echoes longstanding questions in other domains. Is it possible to be racist against white people and sexist against men? I believe the answer to those questions is yes, but even if you disagree, I hope (by the end of this essay) you'll take anti-young ageism seriously. A second, related question is why to care about ageism. Philosophers offer numerous reasons to investigate and combat age-based and intergenerational bigotry and injustice, revolving around trying to build a world where individuals and institutions treat all people as equals, with respect, on terms of justice (e.g. Bidadanure, 2021; Bognar & Gosseries,

2023). Surveying the quantitative empirical literature, however, one could be forgiven for concluding that the concerns driving social-scientific investigation into ageism are much narrower.

Take one definition of ageism from Todd Nelson's influential 2002 volume, *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice Against Older Persons*:

> Ageism can most simply be defined as negative attitudes or behaviors toward an individual solely based on that person's age. Defined this way, negative attitudes toward people because they are young would qualify as ageism. However, throughout this chapter and consistent with the spirit of this book, we will use the term ageism to refer specifically to negative attitudes and behavior toward the elderly, *focusing exclusively on this most troubling and consequential form of ageism*. (Greenberg et al., 2002, p. 27 emphasis added)[7]

Other researchers don't even *nod* to the possibility of anti-young bias, simply defining ageism as the 'unfavorable attitudes people hold of aging adults' (Montpare & Zebrowitz, 2002, p. 77).

Even when researchers uncover anti-young biases, they're quick to reframe them. Take an insightful study by Reuben Ng and Nicole Indran (2024) examining 600 million words in US media publications between 1810 and 2019. They found that portrayals of *young doctors* became more positive over time, while portrayals of *old doctors* became slightly more negative. But this turned out to be an occupation-specific result: portrayals of *old lawyers* became *more positive* while portrayals of *young lawyers* turned negative. These results could as easily be advertised as uncovering an emerging bias against young lawyers as against old doctors. But that's not how the abstract frames their conclusions:

> Depending on the occupation, one's age may either be seen as an asset or a liability. Efforts must be expended to ensure that older professionals are recognized for their wealth of knowledge and skills. Failing to capitalize on the merits of an older workforce could ultimately be a grave disservice not only to older adults but to society in general. (R. Ng & Indran, 2024, p. 1)

They shift immediately from acknowledging the *context-dependent* effects of age, as variously 'an asset or liability' relative to the occupation in question (e.g. Reeves et al., 2021), to narrower concerns about the exclusion of older workers. Evidently, what's most 'troubling and consequential' is a growing bias against old doctors rather than against young lawyers – the latter of which, I'd hasten to add, are far more likely than older lawyers and doctors to be women, people of color, and members of other groups historically excluded from prestigious professions.[8]

Moreover, Ng and Indran's framing echoes a pervasive trend in ageism research: an overarching capitalistic, pseudo-individualistic, and pseudo-meritocratic preoccupation with the prospects and status of older people

qua workers. The quantitative literature gives the distinct impression that the greatest contemporary concerns for intergenerational and ageist justice are, first, to destigmatize the old and, second, to thereby remove ageism as an obstacle from the grand project of stuffing the most fit people into the most fitting jobs:

> . . . in this globally competitive environment it is becoming increasingly important for countries to prevent the underuse of specific segments of their workforce that could occur because of unfounded assumptions, biases, or stereotypes that can marginalize some workers. . . age-based discrimination may result in an underuse of older workers who have many productive years left in their working lives. (Posthuma et al., 2012, p. 298)

I describe this orientation as only 'pseudo' individualistic and meritocratic because it frequently seems that concerns about *what individuals merit* are secondary to advancing capital's bottom line. As one widely cited piece explains, 'we need older employees to remain in the workforce longer to facilitate economic growth' (Posthuma & Campion, 2009, p. 159).

If more researchers were concerned with what older individuals merit, one would expect more discussion of those who deserve *to retire* securely rather than work indefinitely. What are the ageist obstacles – whether psychological or structural – preventing people from retiring when they want to?[9] And why do some older individuals *refuse* to retire (or just work less) when they should? The preoccupation with excluding older workers seems especially misplaced given that older people already work much more than before. In 1987, about 1 in 10 Americans over 65 were working; by 2023, that share grew close to 1 in 5 (Fry & Braga, 2023). Meanwhile, employment rates for every US age group *under 55* have declined since peaking in 2000 (Statista.com, 2024). Globally, the trends are much the same, and projected to continue. Instead of focusing on how best to 'empower older workers' (Root et al., 2023), researchers might interrogate the systems of power coercing older people to keep working, and the power older workers exercise over others.

Granted, not all ageism research is about employment. A great deal is about health. Even in this context, investigation into what is variously called 'active aging,' 'successful aging,' or even 'productive aging' often betrays an underlying Protestant Work Ethic (Weber, 2012). Too often, the evident goal is to extract as much output from older individuals as possible – and to find ever more things to sell them in the relentless efforts to *fight aging*, conceal bodily changes, eradicate impairments, and beat back death (e.g. Calasanti et al., 2021; Estes & DiCarlo, 2019). Many strands of anti-ageism health research thus make the ageist (and ableist) assumptions that aging and age-related bodily changes and impairments are so bad as to demand resistance at great costs.

Where does all this ageism come from? Nelson's leading compendium is replete with hypotheses about the sources of anti-old biases, citing

associations of aging with death (Greenberg et al., 2002), negative media portrayals of aging and old people, and reductions in intergenerational contact as children grow up farther from grandparents (Nelson, 2002, p. xi). Strikingly, however, across all twelve volume chapters and over 350 pages, there is precisely *one sentence* about the possible role of *power* in driving hostility to the old – and note the scare quotes: 'there is concern over the "disproportionate" share of political power this age group possesses due to their increasing numbers' (Wilkinson & Ferraro, 2002, p. 341).[10] This offhand dismissal of what strikes many of us as a legitimate concern for intergenerational injustice exemplifies the troubling biases that won't budge *within* ageism research.

To be fair, some ageism researchers *have* called for more attention to power and social relations. 'Critical' gerontologists resist the capitalist and ableist ideologies apparent in ageism research (Estes & DiCarlo, 2019). They are to be commended for attending to intersectional specificities, highlighting how some old people are systematically more disadvantaged than others (Madva, in preparation). There is even a tradition of activism, embodied in organizations like the Gray Panthers, promoting intergenerational coalitions to resist the marginalization of *both* the old and the young. But critical gerontologists largely continue to assume that the relevant oppressive social relations consist in the young and middle-aged dominating the old, and that the project to prioritize is to 'value old age' and 'imbue dignity to old lives' (Calasanti et al., 2021, pp. 1824, 1825). Anti-young injustices remain underexamined.[11] Or so, at least, it seemed up until about 2016.

Youngism

Fortunately, the fog over anti-young injustices is lifting. In a series of path-breaking studies on 'youngism,' Stéphane Francioli, Michael North, and colleagues argue that 'the nature and content of ageism vary across the life span' (Francioli & North, 2021, p. 15). On the one hand (see Section "What Even Is Ageism?"). People often harbor negative attitudes toward *aging*; they don't want to *be old*. Neither, I'd add, do people typically want to *look old*, nor do they prefer *to look at* old rather than young bodies. This anti-old bias 'revolves around fear or discomfort with older adults' late *life stage*' – the condition of being old (Francioli & North, 2021, p. 3, original emphasis).

But there are other age-based ways of thinking about people, for example in terms of 'generational clusters' (Francioli & North, 2021, p. 3), a framing marked by narratives of decline. We admire the 'Greatest Generation,' but we love to complain about *these kids today*. Why don't they respect their elders 'like we did when we were kids,' and why do they play their infernal rock 'n' roll music so darn loud? While people want to *be young*, they don't like *today's young people*. The contrast is well-encapsulated in the saying 'youth is wasted

on the young.'[12] The condition of youth is good, but it is wasted on the concrete individuals who occupy that condition. We pity, ridicule, and condemn these kids today for not knowing how good they have it.

This distinction threatens to upend much of what social scientists thought they knew about ageism. Recall that on Project Implicit's feeling thermometers, people reliably report more warmth toward 'young people' than 'old people.' Francioli and North found that with a slight tweak of wording, people report *less* warmth toward 'today's young adults.' Shifting attention from the conditions of being young to the concrete particulars who occupy those conditions, collective preferences flip. Indeed, participants hold a decidedly mixed set of stereotypes about today's young people:

> On the one hand, young adults are praised for their perceived resourcefulness . . . On the other hand, they are depicted as ungrateful: an overly protected group (coddled) . . . that inappropriately challenges older generations (disrespectful), cherished norms, and established authority (radically progressive). (Francioli & North, 2021, p. 6)

Francioli et al. (2024) confirmed that Americans report the most antipathy toward people in their 20s, followed by those in their 30s, then 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s. 90-year-olds are the most popular group, even among young and left-leaning participants. Other labs find that participants believe 20-year-olds are less moral than either 40-year-olds or 60-year-olds, regardless whether participants are Australian, British, Canadian, Polish, or the Burusho of Pakistan or the Dani of Papua (Sorokowski et al., 2023; see also Chu & Grühn, 2018).

Do you find these results surprising? I encourage readers to reflect on the casual conversations they have about today's younger generation (perhaps including contrasts between their own students and prior ones, and 'what it was like when I was in school'). In fact, Francioli, North, and Shakeri asked further sets of participants to predict how most people would fill out the feeling thermometers about age cohorts. Laypeople accurately predicted the study's results. But a sample of 241 social scientists expected the opposite pattern, incorrectly predicting anti-old bias. 'In fact, the more expertise in ageism scientists had, the more biased their forecasts' (Francioli et al., 2024, p. 1). There may be no clearer evidence of ageist biases among social scientists than this.

Why should we care about youngism? Consequences in politics and beyond

Evidence for youngism goes beyond self-report. In one study, Francioli and North offered to donate a small but real sum on behalf of study participants to two of several charities. Participants who perceived today's young to be

ungrateful were less likely to donate money to 'New York University's Student Debt Fund' than to 'New York University's Historic Preservation Fund . . . [to] finance the preservation and restoration of its historical buildings' (Francioli & North, 2021, p. 15). In another study, participants who endorsed anti-young stereotypes were less willing to support political candidates who vowed to 'address youth unemployment, reduce student debt and act proactively to increase the engagement of young Americans in the societal and political life of their country' (Francioli & North, 2021, p. 14). A burgeoning area of research thus explores the *political consequences* of ageist biases.

The dominant question here has been how the ages of voters and candidates influence voting decisions. Early studies found that age effects on voting were stronger than effects of race or gender (e.g. Sigelman & Sigelman, 1982). Subsequent findings have been complicated and mixed (Madva, in preparation). Other things equal, people prefer similar-age candidates, but this preference can be swamped by other factors, like party affiliation (e.g. Eshima & Smith, 2022; Roberts & Wolak, 2023; Webster & Pierce, 2019). Still, the political consequences of ageism aren't restricted to voting. Age biases can shape support in the earliest stages of a campaign, and willingness to participate in politics at all (e.g. Angelucci et al., 2024).

In this context, Adam Bonica and Jacob Grumbach (2024) explored how preferences for similar-age candidates lead to systematic advantages for older politicians. They found that the emergence of American gerontocracy – political rule by the old – is not driven by a general preference for old politicians, nor by simple demographic changes, nor by the oddness of US voting structures like the Electoral College. It's driven by campaign financing. Campaigns depend on private donations, the private money is in older people's hands, and they spend it on older politicians: 'The most well-represented cohorts in the campaign finance system are individuals between the ages of 70 and 80, who donate approximately 200–300 times more per capita than the youngest cohort' (Bonica & Grumbach, 2024, pp. 14–15). Compared with other OECD nations, the US has much older representatives and distributes more of its wealth to older individuals, through healthcare, pensions, and homeowner tax breaks. The outsized role of old money in US politics makes this problem especially acute, but gerontocracy is going global. Around the world, political leaders are *on average* over 60 while voters are on average around 44 (Magni-Berton & Panel, 2021, p. 2). Older leaders enact different policies, too, e.g. through shorter-term benefits to older constituents.

Even ageism researchers widely acknowledge that young people *report* suffering more discrimination of all kinds, including ageism, in the workplace, politics, and beyond (de la fuente-Núñez et al., 2021). And guess who most discriminates against them? Older people. While the automatic preference for young faces on the IAT is much the same

for participants under 20 and over 55, on other measures older participants are more biased – and discriminatory – against young people and against members of other marginalized groups (e.g. Charlesworth & Banaji, 2022; Sorokowski et al., 2023). Given that old people are more likely to dominate political processes and to act in discriminatory ways, might some negative perceptions of them be … justified? One oft-cited meta-analysis documented prevailing stereotypes about older workers (e.g. as less motivated, trusting, and healthy), and made a compelling case that these workplace stereotypes are largely false (T. W. H. Ng & Feldman, 2012). But some generalizations about age are true: old and young people are often far apart on political issues. Differing values can lead old and young people to vote for different parties, and intensify divisions *within* parties over priorities (Nadeem, 2019). According to Grumbach (2024), 'the untold story of conflict over democracy and institutions right now is age polarization. We have never in American political history … seen anything like this.'

Young people are targeted by false stereotypes, too. Despite widespread accusations that ageism led to the abandonment of older people during the COVID-19 crisis, and despite well-documented stereotypes of young people as flouting COVID-19 regulations (Werner et al., 2022), young adults took the pandemic more seriously than older ones (Reicher, 2020). (Recall the u-shaped curve: both young and old suffered from the pandemic and our collective responses to it.) With data like this in mind, we might even ask why young people aren't *angrier* at today's old people. 20-year-olds prefer today's 90-year-olds over other cohorts, including their own.

Putting the data together

The mixed evidence surveyed in this essay, of discrimination both *in favor* of and *against* old people, cries out for explanation. Are old people beloved or stigmatized? There is, however, no whiff of paradox once we make some distinctions. The mandate is to start incorporating these distinctions into how we measure, understand, and combat ageism and intergenerational injustices in all their manifestations.

First, we need more specificity than 'old' versus 'young.' We must study how age biases target people differently based on their race, gender, religion, abilities, occupations, leadership status, and more. Relatedly, we must think more about *subtypes*. Before Project Implicit's paradigm became dominant, social psychologists investigated perceptions of older-age subtypes, including the 'grandmother,' the 'elder statesman,' and the 'shrew/curmudgeon' (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002, p. 7). We can't understand ageism – even in its anti-old forms – without such distinctions. The emergence of research into linguistic corpora is invaluable here. For example, R. Ng and Indran (2022) found that

references to old people in terms of their age ('elderly, old people, senior citizen') grew more negative over a 210-year span than did references to them as grandparents (see also Charlesworth, Ghate, et al., 2024).

But even taking more age-related intersections, subtypes, cohorts, and social roles into account, researchers must pay greater attention to the *dimensions*, *framings*, or *modes of presentation* under which age is considered. Evidence suggests that people don't want to *be*, to *look*, or *look at* the, old; but people feel most warmly toward today's old people and expect older leaders to be wiser. Anti-old discrimination is stronger when it is about appearance (Kite et al., 2005), but anti-young discrimination is stronger when it is about experience. In experimental studies, Ramzi Fatfouta and Amir Ghoniem (2022) found that looking old was a disadvantage for older applicants, but perceived experience was an advantage, leading to overall null effects of age on hireability. We have to understand *how age is perceived and cognized* to understand how age biases contribute to injustice.

Importantly, appearance-based age biases are not simply reflections of culturally arbitrary beauty norms. At work is a kind of ableism: taking visibly older age and perceived bodily deficiencies as a sign that someone is not competent or capable. Michèle Kaufmann et al. (2016) found a disadvantage for 50-year-old job applicants when their photo was included but not when their mere chronological age was listed. Participants who saw the photos ranked older candidates as less 'mentally' and 'physically fit,' and these 'fitness impressions' in turn predicted hireability ratings.

No wonder people don't want to be old! According to Becca Levy's influential 'stereotype embodiment theory,' young people internalize negative impressions of old age, and think about themselves in those negative terms as they grow older. This internalized ageism predicts worse health outcomes (e.g. Levy et al., 2020). But of course it doesn't follow from the fact that people don't want to be old that they'll act in ways that disadvantage or discriminate against old people. To the extent that people perceive the condition of being old as worse than being young, they may direct more collective resources to people 'suffering' from oldness, e.g. through more generous healthcare and pensions, or through stiffer penalties for transgressions against older people (e.g. Bratt et al., 2020; Chu & Grühn, 2018).

One final, related, and messy cluster of distinctions may help reconcile the disparate findings around ageism: roughly, between thinking about *categories* of people and responding to *exemplars* of those categories (e.g. Gawronski, 2019, pp. 579–580). The contrast is intuitive enough in Devorah Blachor's (2019) satirical headline: 'I don't hate women candidates – I just hated Hillary and coincidentally I'm starting to hate Elizabeth Warren.' At what we might call the 'explicit' level, the speaker denies harboring negative sentiments to the category of women candidates as such. At what we might call the 'implicit' level, however, this person just 'coincidentally' and

repeatedly finds themselves averse to *particular* prominent women candidates. They *know* they don't like these women, but they deny that gender bias plays a role in their evaluation.

My hypothesis is that part of what's driving the result that 'young people' are, across time and space, viewed positively while 'today's young people' are viewed negatively is that the former primes participants to think about categories while the latter directs them to think about exemplars. Neighboring, potentially applicable distinctions include those between universals and concrete particulars, groups and individuals, etc. Of course, 'today's young people' is itself a category, just as 'young people' is.[13] There is no immaculate cognition of token individuals apart from the properties they bear, and can share with others. My claim is that we must *begin* thinking about these different framings to make headway on understanding age-based bias and discrimination.

With these distinctions in view, I return to Project Implicit's findings (ection Findings from Project Implicit and Friends). What are they even measuring?

What even is the (Age) IAT measuring?

Overwhelmingly, explicit measures are focused on whole categories or groups, asking 'How do you feel about old people?' in an unspecific, decontextualized way. Given this lack of specificity, negative evaluations of the category 'old people' could reflect any number of factors: that participants perceive being old as worse than being young, perceive old people as less beautiful or capable, etc. Perhaps 21st-century declines in explicit ageism reflect that people have come to think that 'being old' in itself is not so bad – even as they continue to prefer looking and feeling young, and having and looking at younger bodies.

Most implicit measures, by contrast, assess responses to exemplars: images of body parts (typically faces!) or names associated with certain groups. On Project Implicit, many of the IATs measure automatic tendencies to sort these exemplars with valenced words. Questions remain, then, about what to make of the persistently low correlations between implicit and explicit measures (for age bias and everything else). How much of the difference between these measures reflects processing conditions (e.g. one measure being rushed and harder to control, the other more deliberative) and how much reflects lack of correspondence between the stimuli (Gawronski, 2019, pp. 579–580)?

To the extent that low correlations between implicit and explicit measures *are* driven by distinct cognitive processes, it could be constructive to think about the difference in terms of Gabrielle Johnson's (2020) important distinction between biases that are explicitly represented in a cognitive system (such as Donald Trump declaring 'I love Hispanics!' while enjoying a taco bowl at the Trump Tower Grill) (BBC News 2016) and what Johnson calls 'truly

implicit biases,' manifest in participants' patterns of responses but nowhere explicitly represented. Take, for example, Charlesworth, Morehouse, et al.'s (2024) finding that the biased patterns in linguistic corpora correlate more with implicit than explicit measures. These analyses typically don't distinguish between generic references to categories ('I love Hispanics!') versus to exemplars (e.g. 'I've been treated very unfairly by this judge' *named Gonzalo P. Curiel*) (Wolf, 2018). But Bo Wang et al. (2024) may have uncovered corpora-based evidence capturing just this distinction. They found more positivity in large bodies of text toward stigmatized social groups when they were labeled in terms of categories ('African Americans,' 'Black people') but more negativity around Black-sounding names. Moreover, sentiments toward categories correlated more with explicit evaluations whereas sentiments toward names correlated more with implicit evaluations. We must, then, look more carefully *within* corpora to see which specific patterns within them correlate better with which ways of framing and thinking about social groups, and in turn correlate with which social-scientific measures and real-world phenomena.

What, then, to make of the Age IAT in particular? In fact, what we *call* the Age IAT features exemplars of young and old men and women who are *exclusively white*. The Age IAT purportedly reveals a blanket (persistent, pervasive) preference for young versus old, but it's measuring an automatic preference for *young white faces* over *old white faces*. We might predict this more specific preference to be pronounced in predominantly white countries, a prediction which invites us to consider how useful the Age IAT is for international measurement.[14] An unscientific eyeballing of Charlesworth, Navon, et al.'s (2023) findings suggests that the more ageist countries are predominantly white, while many of the less ageist countries are not.

By analogy, researchers would never make unqualified generalizations about global levels of implicit ageism using an Age IAT featuring exclusively *Black* young-versus-old exemplars. But here, for whatever reason, they assume that whiteness is an irrelevant part of the stimulus, meaningless 'background' to abstract away from. As long observed in other domains, privileged categories (whiteness, able-bodiedness, etc.) are being treated as 'unmarked.' Observations about that subgroup serve as the basis for generalizations about the whole. This renders less-prototypical group members 'invisible,' both in terms of individual psychology and in terms of systematic inattention in social science, humanistic inquiry, and political action (e.g. Gasdaglis & Madva, 2020; Madva et al., 2023; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Similarly, what we *call* the Race IAT exclusively features white-or-Black faces who are exclusively *young*.

Why am I confident researchers wouldn't use an exclusively-Black Age IAT to generalize about implicit ageism? Because we already have evidence that age biases are affected by race (and gender). While both young and old adults respond more positively to the faces of young white men than old white men,

they respond more positively to the faces of *old Black men than young Black men* (e.g. Kang & Chasteen, 2009). When focusing specifically on Black male targets, automatic age preferences flip. It may be that young Black men are distinctively likely to be perceived as threatening – an anti-young, anti-Black, anti-masculine bias.[15]

These limitations are fixable. Even if researchers won't budge from their search for non-intersectional 'pure-age' effects, they can make implicit and explicit measures more correspondent with each other, and better mapped onto the multifarious framings of age. Age IATs could use terms like '20-year-olds' instead of faces, or display a diverse *group* of similar-age faces together (compare Cooley & Payne, 2017). Conversely, self-report questions could be made more correspondent with Age IATs, e.g. 'How warm or cold do you feel toward this face? Which face do you prefer to look at?' I predict these adjustments would strengthen implicit-explicit correlations. I further predict that IATs tailored to direct attention to generational cohorts, e.g. *today's* 20-year-olds, would uncover youngism. As would Age-Stereotype IATs using cohort-relevant terms like 'ungrateful' and 'coddled' instead of decontextualized evaluative terms like 'bothersome' and 'rotten.'

Recall how few studies assess the Age IAT's predictive power. One exception found that the Age IAT correlated with state-level health outcomes and with larger gaps between people's chronological and felt age, i.e. people reporting feeling younger than they are (Giasson & Chopik, 2020). Both correlations are consistent with the IAT measuring a preference not to *be old*. It is tempting to interpret correlations between Age IATs and health outcomes as evidence that anti-old biases lead healthcare professionals to treat old people worse. But it could also be that people don't want to *be old* in states with bad healthcare! It remains unclear what ageism measures are measuring.[16] It remains unclear why and how researchers are, and should be, concerned about age discrimination and injustice at all.

Concluding remarks

Is the problem that 'these kids today' don't care about old people and roll their eyes saying 'OK Boomer?' Or is the real bias that won't budge against these kids today? Complaints about the young echo across time. There's the 1942 opinion piece declaring 'Modern School Kids Are Too Soft,' with the byline 'Bitsy Grant Says Youngsters Spend Too Much Time Smoking and Dancing in Juke Joints.'[17] There's Thomas Barnes' (1624) *The VVise-Man's Forecast Against the Evill Time* declaring, 'Youth were never more sawcie, yea never more savagely sawcie … the ancient are scorned, the honorable are contemned.' Then there's Aristotle in the 4th century BCE:

> All [young people's] mistakes are in the direction of doing things excessively and vehemently . . . they love too much and hate too much, and the same thing with everything else. They think they know everything, and are always quite sure about it; this, in fact, is why they overdo everything. (Aristotle, 2004, Book II, Chapter 12)

With these ceaseless censures of the savagely saucy youth before us, perhaps we should reassess the truism that kids today don't respect their elders like they used to. Did they ever? Perhaps the young have consistently resented their elders' authoritarian power. (And when, we might ask, have their elders respected them?) Or perhaps the young don't resent the old *enough*. After all, even today's young adults prefer members of older generations. More shared anger around a cohort-based social identity might stir the young to act collectively against the climate crisis and other intergenerational injustices (Sabherwal et al., 2021).[18]

I by no means intend to minimize anti-old biases and discrimination, wherever they arise, in the workplace, living facilities, beauty norms, etc. But these anti-old biases are just a few pieces of a much larger and more complex ageist puzzle. In the US, around 10% of the roughly 62 million people over 65 live in poverty (Ochieng et al., 2024). That comes to about 6 to 8 million people. We owe them better (and we don't just owe them the chance to keep working indefinitely). But the poverty rate is higher (12%) among adults aged 19–64 and *much higher* (16%) among those 18 and under (Williams & Rudowitz, 2024). There are about 12 million American kids in poverty. One countervailing force against elderly poverty is a collective, unbudging commitment to redistribute wealth to aging populations: the overwhelming number of US adults over 65 will receive a Social Security pension for the rest of their lives. (The outsized role of *old money* in politics makes the US somewhat of an outlier in its redistributions to older populations (Bonica & Grumbach, 2024), but European nations including Austria, Greece, and Italy are close behind (Hammer et al., 2023).) Benefits to the young are more meager, and filtered through unjust systems of power. While the US guarantees older adults high-quality healthcare, most children and many young adults depend for healthcare on their parents, and their parents depend for healthcare on their employers.

What are the psychological and structural factors shaping and shaped in turn by these macro phenomena? Too many causes, forms, and effects of ageist bias and injustice remain shrouded in darkness. Scientific investigation has taught us a great deal about the social reality of age, but it's illuminated

certain regions of that reality much more than others. It doesn't have to be this way. And intergenerational justice is too important to remain in the dark.

Notes

1. Important work on anti-young biases has been predominantly qualitative, grounded in small case studies, and overlooked by quantitative research with larger samples (de la fuente-Núñez et al., 2021).
2. See, e.g. Brownstein et al. (2020); Gawronski (2019); Machery (2022); and Krosnick et al. (2025).
3. Since participants *choose* to go to Project Implicit to test their attitudes (or are sent there by instructors, like me), the sample is 'neither random nor representative' of the US population (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019, p. 17). They weight the data to control for this limitation and cite concordant findings from representative social surveys and analyses of large language corpora, some of which I describe below. But doubts remain that enough is being done to control for this limitation (e.g. Primbs et al., 2023).
4. The low correlation between implicit and explicit ageism seems robust, appearing with maximized conceptual correspondence between implicit and explicit measures (Kornadt et al., 2016) and across different implicit measures (de Paula Couto et al., 2022; Huang & Rothermund, 2023). But see section "What Even Is the (Age) IAT Measuring?".
5. I say more about these corpora studies in Madva (in preparation), and compare and contrast the distinction between manifest and latent dimensions of stereotype content with Sally Haslanger's (2012) distinction between the 'manifest concepts' that people think they're using and the 'operative concepts' that actually guide usage.
6. Also of note, particularly for IAT skeptics: Zaniboni and colleagues found that the Age IAT had incremental predictive validity over and above explicit measures, and that the best predictions of ageist discrimination resulted from combining both measures. For more on the relationship between standard evaluative IATs and Stereotype IATs, see Madva and Brownstein (2018) and Kurdi et al. (2019).
7. This passage remained almost verbatim unchanged in the volume's 2017 second edition, which added exactly one paragraph on 'Youth-Focused Ageism' (North & Fiske, 2017, pp. 88–89).
8. In fairness, Ng and Indran consider hardships for young attorneys in the Discussion section.
9. There is much less research on such questions, but see, e.g. Palmore et al. (1982) and Man and Man (2019).
10. Supporting Wilkinson and Ferraro's conjecture, some research finds that US Millennials (people born between 1981 and 1996) 'fear that Baby Boomers's delayed transmission of power hampers their life prospects,' see Francioli et al. (2023), p. 1). They also found that Baby Boomers perceive Millennials as a threat 'to traditional American values.'
11. As I noted in n.1, this generalization about patterns of inattention is primarily true of well-funded, large-sample quantitative rather than qualitative research. There are exceptions to this generalization, but they tend to note that they're

exceptional, such as research on 'reverse ageism' (e.g. Raymer et al., 2017) and 'adultism,' the power of adults over children (e.g. Fletcher & McDermott, 2024).

12. A version of this sentiment was attributed to George Barnard Shaw in 1931, but it doesn't appear in his writings (Quote Investigator 2015).
13. Thus another hypothesis to test, perhaps in tension with mine: maybe generation-based or cohort-based frames prime people to think about the young *as a group* rather than as individuals-bearing-the-desirable-property-of-youth.
14. This limitation is explicitly raised by Ackerman and Chopik (2021), p. 963), who found that more collectivistic countries exhibited less anti-old implicit and explicit bias than more individualistic countries. Of course, it's well-known that individualistic countries tend to be whiter. Notably, Ackerman and Chopik found that the correlations between individualism and ageism were weaker and less consistent on some explicit measures (e.g. feelings toward 'old people' versus the white-faces-only IAT). Why not generate Age IATs for international use that rely on faces drawn from those specific countries, in just the same way that, e.g. Italian IATs use Italian words?
15. But see, e.g. Andrew Todd and colleagues' findings that Black boys, girls, women, and old men are, on some measures, automatically perceived as more threatening than their white counterparts (e.g. Lundberg et al., 2018).
16. Surprisingly, Giasson and Chopik found that higher state-level anti-old *explicit* biases predicted *better* health outcomes, which invites further investigation into implicit-explicit correlations, etc. Note that I'm not supposing that ageist biases are not a causal factor in healthcare outcomes. Ageist biases could lead policymakers to do less to support aging adults. Take, for example, Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick's call in the very first month of the COVID-19 pandemic to reopen all businesses and for old people to be 'willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren' (Sonmez, 2020).
17. These examples are drawn from social media threads documenting adults' transhistorical complaints about younger generations (History Hustle, 2023; paulisci], 2022a, 2022b). Thanks to Martina Rosola for bringing the History Hustle video to my attention.
18. Envisioning how best to build a cohort-based movement around increased anger, or at least decreased positivity, is a fraught task. For more on the value of anger and social identity to social change, see, e.g. Lorde (1981); Brownstein et al. (2025); and Gasdaglis (2025).

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