

ARTICLE

# Ageism: the importance of the linguistic concept for the construction of the experience

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## Abstract

This study investigated if people are acquainted with the term ‘ageism’, and to what extent acquaintance with this term corresponds with reports of discrimination, due to age. The study included an online survey, answered by 1,025 Israeli respondents. The questionnaire began by asking the respondents to define ‘What is ageism?’ (*gilanut* in Hebrew) and then to mark ‘If and what types of discrimination they experienced in the last year’. Subsequently, we defined and demonstrated the term ageism and asked participants to share experiences of this phenomenon; 457 (45%) participants were not familiar with the term. In the group that was unfamiliar with the term, only 46 (10%) reported that they had such experiences. In the group that was acquainted with the term, 208 (30%) reported that they had experienced ageism. In contrast, once the term, ageism, was defined and demonstrated in the survey, 638 (62%) respondents shared experiences of ageism in their lives. Of those who shared their experiences of ageism, 202 (31%) were initially unfamiliar with the term. The study’s results show that there is an association between the linguistic representation of the phenomenon of ageism and reports of ageism. In the wider sense, the study shows that language and words have the power to help people understand and interpret social and human experiences.

**Keywords:** ageism; terminology; language; discrimination

## Introduction

When scientific investigation is undertaken on a social phenomenon, there is a need for consensus regarding its definition and its meaning (Ellison, 1983). Indeed, the academic literature teaches us that the definitions of concepts often change and develop over time. This is also true of the phenomenon of ageism. Over time, researchers have widened or clarified the previous definition/s and have chosen to highlight new aspects. We chose seven main definitions that illustrate the variety that exists in the literature, and present them according to the chronology of development of the term. This is done to highlight the dynamic nature of the term ageism and its evolving nature.

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The term, ageism, was first coined by Professor Robert Butler (1969), a physician and gerontologist, and one of the pioneers in the field of ageing. In his classic article, 'Age-ism: another form of bigotry', Butler asserted that discrimination, on the basis of age, is a result of prejudices that one age group has towards another age group. Even though he did not define a certain age group, in his article, he emphasised that systematic discrimination is expressed in approach, behaviours, practices and institutional legislation that especially discriminate against older people.

Fifteen years after, Palmore (1990) stressed that ageism is the third type of discrimination against people (after racism and sexism), when he differentiated this 'ism' from the previous ones. The researcher asserted that ageism is the best representative example of negative prejudices against people as the other kinds of discrimination only cause harm in specific circumstances and target certain people, whereas ageism can harm everyone, as there is no one that has no age.

The concept of ageism underwent an additional elaboration in 2011, when Levy explained that ageism is reflected in three main ways: stereotypes (a cognitive component), prejudices (an emotional component) and discrimination (a behavioural component) (Levy, 2001). Furthermore, the researcher identified and defined implicit ageism – society's ongoing and unconscious internalisation of the negative thoughts, emotions and behaviours, mainly held by older people themselves.

Five years later, Angus and Reeve (2006) defined ageism as a prejudice or as discrimination against or in favour of a certain age. That is, in addition to the emphasis on the positive and negative aspects of this phenomenon, the innovation in their definition was that ageism exists towards children and adolescents. They explained that older people and children suffer more than others from ageism, as these are considered dependent and non-productive age groups.

Iversen *et al.* (2012) contributed to the definition of ageism by proposing an integrative and comprehensive summary of varied aspects of ageism. According to them, ageism is defined as negative and positive stereotypes, prejudices or discrimination against or in favour of older people, on the basis of their chronological age or on the basis of the perception that they are old. Ageism can be latent or manifest, explicit or implicit, and can be expressed on various levels: the micro level, the meso level or the macro level.

In 2017, Ayalon and Tesch-Römer defined ageism as a complex social phenomenon that can be positive or negative, explicit or implicit that includes cognitive, behavioural and emotional expressions (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer, 2017). By their definition, ageism is reflected on the personal level and on the social level. The researchers emphasised the social source of the phenomenon, its negative influence and its dominance in the context of the older population and the process of ageing.

The World Health Organization (WHO) proposed a theoretical understanding of ageism in 2018 that emphasised two aspects. Firstly, the negative perceptions concerning age exist in different societies throughout the world and are not limited to a specific social or ethnic group. Secondly, ageism is a phenomenon that is more comprehensive and widespread than discrimination based on sex or race (Officer and de la Fuente-Núñez, 2018).

The literature review demonstrated that the conceptualisation of the term, ageism, has been dynamic and changed over time, subject to the theoretical contribution of various researchers. Moreover, to date, within the scientific community

there is no consensus regarding the way/s in which ageism should be defined and conceptually understood (Snellman, 2016). However, the aim of this study is not to present the development of ageism in the academic arena, but rather to examine if and to what extent people are acquainted with the term ageism and, hence, are aware of the social phenomenon it describes. Moreover, we examined if there is a relationship between the degree of acquaintance with the term and people's subjective reports about the experience of ageism. Answers to these questions are very important as they can teach us if prior knowledge of the term influences people's experiences and subjective perceptions of this social phenomenon.

Taking into consideration the argument that every country has its unique characteristics in the field of ageism (Doron *et al.*, 2011), the current study was undertaken in Israel. Whereas the term 'ageism' has existed in English since 1969, The Academy of the Hebrew Language (the official Israeli body that coins Hebrew terms for words from other languages) translated the word into Hebrew in 2016. Thus, this is a relatively 'young' term, from both a scientific aspect (North and Fiske, 2013) and from a Hebrew linguistic aspect (The Academy of the Hebrew Language, 2016). The conceptualisation of the term in English, and its translation into Hebrew, are important steps in the struggle against ageism in Israel, because a lack of terminology might lead to situations in which problems are not identified (Snellman, 2016). Based on prior research conducted in relation to other 'isms', whose definition has resulted in greater public awareness to and acknowledgement of them (*e.g.* Strkalj, 2009; Willis and Jozkowski, 2020), we hypothesise that knowledge of the concept is essential for people to further define their experiences accordingly, as without a proper term for ageism, people may not be able to portray their experiences as such.

## Methods

In order to examine the extent to which the Israeli public is acquainted with the phenomenon of ageism, we undertook an online survey. The survey was prepared using Qualtrics software. The survey was posted online during the summer of 2020, relying on social media, emails and not-for-profit organisations that work in the field of ageing. In the introduction to the online survey, we proposed to the general Israeli public to participate in an academic survey that addresses social issues. This article focuses on the analysis of three questions from this online survey:

- Q1 examined Israelis' familiarisation with the term '*gilanut*' (The terminology that describes ageism in Hebrew). This was a qualitative question that asked: 'What is ageism? (If you do not know, proceed to the next question)'.
- Q2 examined the perceived exposure of the survey respondents to ageism. This quantitative question included two parts:
  - Q2.1 examined the perceived exposure to discrimination: 'Have you felt discriminated against in the last 12 months?' The respondents were asked to mark either 'yes' or 'no'. The respondents who answered 'yes' were sent to the next part.
  - Q2.2 examined the exposure to ageism in relation to other kinds of discrimination: 'What was the background to the discrimination?' The respondents were asked to mark one or more possible answers: race/ethnicity, gender, age or other.

- Q3, the last question at the end of the survey, asked: ‘In sum, do you have something important to tell us concerning the phenomenon of ageism?’ This qualitative question asked the respondents to document their experiences of ageism only after we defined the term ageism using the following definition: ageism refers to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) directed towards others or oneself based on age (WHO, 2018; Officer *et al.*, 2020).

### **Data analysis**

The data analysis was both quantitative and qualitative. The analysis of responses to the closed-ended questions (Q2.1 and Q2.2) about perceived discrimination relied on descriptive statistics. The analysis of the answers to the open-ended questions – ‘what is ageism?’ (Q1) and ‘the experiences of ageism’ (Q3) – was carried out using Atlas.ti8 following the principles of thematic analysis (TA). TA is a qualitative, analytical method widely used in social psychology. As is accepted in this method (Braun and Clarke, 2019), the analysis focused on the identification of the main themes (categories) and sub-themes (sub-categories) that arose from the data. In other words, we concentrated on finding the most discernible, relevant and important units of meaning for answering the research question.

The TA began as an analytical process of undertaking a deep reading of the data and writing down ideas concerning the meaning of the responses (as suggested by Braun and Clarke, 2019). For example, during this first reading it became clear that many survey respondents related to the open questions concerning the importance and justification for combating ageism, and added a detailed explanation concerning the suitable ways to engage in such a process even though they were not asked about this. These data had led us to create a new category, termed ‘ways of eliminating ageism’. Although we did not expect to find this theme when we began the TA, because of its dominance, it became a central finding.

During the second reading, we moved on to identification, arrangement and categorisation. Furthermore, we undertook narrowing, widening and focusing of the themes (Braun and Clarke, 2019). For example, initially, we found four reasons for justifying a fight against ageism (the four sub-categories: values, social reasons, economic reasons and employment reasons); after reflecting on the data, we decided that because these sub-categories were overlapping, we would conflate them into two main categories: ‘moral–social justification’ and ‘economic–employment justification’. Moreover, during the TA process, we also deliberated about the category and sub-category names. The question was raised if it was worthwhile to name the findings by using quotes from the answers or by adopting the names presented in the WHO’s report. For example, should we call the sub-theme that reflected elimination of self-ageism ‘respecting age’ (a quote from the responses) or ‘inner work’? Should we name the sub-theme ‘media’ (from the responses) or ‘campaigns’, from the WHO report? We eventually decided to combine both possibilities in a way that would most clearly and comprehensibly reflect the respondents’ answers.

It is also important to note that the analysis was undertaken as a joint investigation of two researchers: one researcher first undertook the analysis and

interpretation and then sent it to the second researcher, who examined what had been done and added her interpretation of the responses (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

## Results

Out of 1,143 surveys, 1,025 respondents were between the ages of 40 and 95: about half were men and half were women; 769 (75%) were 65 or older; 549 (53%) were married, 199 (19.4%) were divorced; 358 (35%) reported that they managed easily and 337 (30%) respondents reported that they had great difficulties from a financial standpoint; and 354 (34.5%) respondents said they were retired and 249 (24.3%) said they were working part time (for additional demographic information, see Table 1). Reasons for non-inclusion of 118 respondents out of the original 1,143 surveys were: 29 were under 40 years old, 42 responded to the questionnaire only after the analysis was completed, and 47 forms were incomplete or duplicate. The qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data led to three main findings: the familiarisation of the Israeli public with the term that describes ageism, perceived exposure to ageism in relation to other kinds of discrimination and the experiences of ageism. Note that values may not add to 100% as some participants did not fully answer certain questions.

### *The familiarisation of the Israeli public with the term that describes ageism*

Respondents' answers to the question 'What is ageism?' was divided into three kinds of answers, representing three levels of acquaintance with this social phenomenon. The first group 'skipped' the question about the definition of ageism in the survey, while answering all other questions. Therefore, we hypothesise that these respondents skipped the question because they did not know the meaning of the phenomenon. The second group 'guessed': they provided partial or erroneous answers about the definition of the phenomenon. We hypothesise that they guessed, based on the linguistic tone of the word or the context in which the survey was undertaken. The third group 'answered correctly': they either provided a correct or nearly exact definition of the term. We hypothesise that they did so because they were acquainted with the phenomenon and the term, before taking the survey.

The three groups presented below (those who skipped the question, those who guessed and those who answered correctly though only partially), demonstrated that there is a certain ambiguity in Israeli society about the meaning of the term, ageism. As a result, it is possible that there would be uncertainty about the deeper understanding of the problematic aspects of this social phenomenon.

### *The group that 'skipped' the question*

There were 376 respondents (37% of the entire sample) who chose not to answer the question, 'What is ageism?', even though they answered all the other survey questions. We do not know why some participants decided not to answer this question, or take a guess, but we hypothesise that those who did not answer did not know the meaning of the term.

**Table 1.** Demographic data of the 1,025 survey respondents

Variable	N (%)
Age:	
40–64	256 (25)
65–90	769 (75)
Gender:	
Women	460 (45)
Men	407 (40)
Family status:	
Married	549 (53)
Single	43 (4.2)
Divorced	199 (19.4)
Widowed	70 (6.8)
Education:	
High school (12 years or less)	131 (13)
Academic (over 12 years)	727 (71)
Economic status:	
Manages very easily	153 (15)
Manages fairly easily	358 (35)
Manages with difficulty	307 (30)
Barely manages	39 (3)
Employment status: <sup>1</sup>	
Retired	354 (34.5)
Works part time	249 (24.3)
Works full time	132 (13)
Volunteers	123 (12)
Unemployed/looking for work	110 (10.7)
Unpaid leave	51 (5)
Homemaker	24 (2.3)

Note: 1. In the question about employment status, a person could mark more than one response.

### *The group that 'guessed'*

There were 203 respondents (20% of the entire sample) who appeared to guess their answers. Out of the 203, 81 (40%) made an incorrect guess and 122 (60%) made a correct or partially correct guess. When we analysed the answers, we found that the respondents neither knew what the phenomenon of ageism was, before they took the survey, nor its term in Hebrew. We assume that the people in this group guessed what the definition of ageism was – either correctly or partially – because of the topic of the survey or because the word ageism in Hebrew contains the term 'age'.

The element of guessing was reflected in the common use of expressions and punctuation marks that signal hesitation, evaluation or a hypothesis, such as: 'I think it is discrimination because of age.' 'The study of age?! In my estimation: coping with unusual situations at an advanced age.' 'It sounds like it is connected to age.' 'Based on the word itself, it seems that it is something connected to age. Discrimination based on age?' One person wrote:

*I assume that it is an activity of the social sciences on the topics of the impacts of the age on partnerships in the different circles of life, family, work, etc. and in the legal, sociological and health approaches to the field.*

Other responses included: 'In my opinion, this is not treating people well who are a certain age.' 'Awareness or dealing with age???' 'Hebrew is not my strong language...' 'I suppose that it's connected to age.' 'I guess that this is a stigma and discrimination of adults...' 'In my opinion, this is something connected to the biological age of the person.' 'Maybe like racism?' 'Probably discrimination of age.' In this group, there were also participants who thought that ageism is the person's chronological age and, therefore, succinctly wrote 'I am 75', 'I am 66', 'I am old', etc. This also reflects a lack of clarity concerning the concept, which participants correctly associated with age, but were unaware of its discriminatory and stereotypical aspects.

In this group, there were also respondents who related to the definition of the term 'age'. However, they did not identify aspects of discrimination or stigma, based on age. For example, participants wrote that ageism is: 'the science of age'; 'reaching an old age'; 'an age group'; 'a feeling of old age'; 'the theory of age'; 'our age'; 'the science of ageing'. Other respondents wrote: 'Its meaning ... it comes with time ... it turns out that there are dependent on age. Today, there is already a new concept, which is the fourth age.' 'A period in life that is called the third age.' 'Writing that emphasises a certain age.'

### *The group that 'answered correctly'*

This group had 446 respondents (43% of the entire sample) who defined the concept in an exact or nearly exact manner. In other words, this sub-theme highlights people who included relevant expressions in their definitions, such as stereotypes, racism, prejudice, judgement, labelling, categorisation or criteria, derived from a person's age. Nevertheless, most of the correct answers were short, succinct and partial. That is, they presented only certain aspects of ageism and did not express all the dimensions of the phenomenon.

On the one hand, there were respondents who only related to the topic of discrimination and asserted that ageism is 'discrimination based on age', 'invalidation of a person on the sole basis of age' or 'deprivation and discrimination based on age'. On the other hand, there were respondents who only related to the topic of stereotypes and prejudices. They asserted that ageism happens when: 'people judge people, based on their age and not according to their lifestyle'; as 'an attempt to rank the abilities of a person, solely on the basis of his chronological age'; 'relating to people on the basis of their age, and not on the basis of their talents and their contribution to the environment'. Respondents also wrote 'prejudice against a

person that is derived from the age of the person without relating to the personal traits of the person' or that it is 'judgement, based on age'.

A few people wrote out-of-the-ordinary answers, whose definitions of ageism included aspects of stereotypes and discrimination. For example, one of the respondents (72, woman) wrote that ageism is: 'Expressing an opinion about a person on the basis of his age and not on the basis of his abilities. This leads to the creation of a stereotype and, in the end, to discrimination.' A 77-year-old male respondent wrote: 'Ageism is discrimination on the basis of age. It is usually connected to prejudices.' Two female respondents noted the name of the term in English. For example, one wrote, '*Gilanut* is Ageism – a social phenomenon that relates to old ages as irrelevant...'

While most of the respondents in this group defined ageism as stigma or discrimination towards the older adults, a few respondents emphasised that the word relates to a phenomenon directed against people of all ages. For example, people wrote: 'Ageism is defining a person according to his age ... this is about all of the entire population. From toddlers to old age'; 'It is a point of view, a baseless prejudice of old or young.' Similarly, there were a few respondents, who noted that, while ageism connects to discrimination or stigma of every age, it is especially common against older people. For example, people wrote: 'It is judging people based on their age. It usually relates to people of advanced age'; 'It is a negative way to relate to older adults'; 'It is usually discrimination of men and women who are 50 or older'; 'It is preference of a younger age or negation of the old body.'

Moreover, a few people related to the positive or negative aspects of the term ageism, and when they did relate to this aspect, they usually only presented the negative aspect of the phenomenon. For example, 'This is a negative stigma that an older person is not capable, when the complete opposite is true!' In a similar fashion, only a few respondents mentioned in their definitions that ageism is similar to other kinds of discrimination. For example, one respondent (68, man) wrote:

I understand this concept as an imprint of a stigma on people solely because they are a certain age and to attribute to them, automatically, abilities without understanding that each person is different. That is, ageism is about age, like racism is about race: generalisation (or worse than that, nullification) of a large and diverse group of people solely because of one characteristic, out of many.

### **Perceived exposure to ageism in relation to other kinds of discrimination**

The subjective perception of ageism was examined via a quantitative question, where the participants were asked to mark if and what kind of discrimination they had experienced in the previous year. It is important to note that this question appeared after the question about the definition of ageism, but before we explained the concept to people who were not acquainted with the term, or who wrote an incorrect definition. The respondents' answers to this question were unequivocal: 294 people (29% of the sample) shared that they had experienced some type of discrimination in the previous year. Out of them, approximately 257 (87%) experienced discrimination based on age. In other words, ageism was more widespread than discrimination based on gender or race/ethnicity.

An additional finding from our analysis was that out of the respondents who knew what ageism is (the 566 people who answered the question correctly – both those who knew what the term meant and those who guessed correctly), 208 (30%) also reported that they had experienced discrimination, based on age, in the previous year. Furthermore, out of the group that did not know ahead of time what ageism was (456 who skipped the question that asked for the definition, or incorrectly guessed what ageism is), only 46 (10%) reported that they had experienced discrimination, due to age, in the previous year. In other words, those who were acquainted with the term, understood it or concluded what the term meant were more likely to report that they had experienced ageism than those who did not. To test this association, we used a chi-square test. The results indicated a significant difference between those who indicated knowledge about ageism and subsequently reported the experience of ageism and those who did not know what ageism was and therefore did not report it ( $\chi^2(1) = 94.97, p < 0.01$ ).

### **The experiences of ageism**

In the last part of the survey, after we defined and explained ‘ageism’, we asked the respondents to share experiences of ageism from their lives. Even though the respondents could have skipped this open question, 638 people (62% of the entire sample) shared experiences. More specifically, from the group of respondents who knew what ageism was before they took the survey (the 566 respondents who provided a correct definition of ageism at the beginning of the survey), 436 respondents (78.5%) also answered the open question concerning experiences of ageism in their lives. More importantly, from the group that did not know what ageism was (the 456 respondents who skipped the question of definition, or incorrectly guessed), 202 (44%) shared experiences of ageism in their lives at the end of the questionnaire. To examine this association, we calculated a chi-square analysis. The results indicated a significant difference between those who did not know what ageism was and did not report exposure to ageism initially and those who acknowledged its presence in their lives following a definition provided by the research team ( $\chi^2(1) = 219.5, p < 0.01$ ).

Except for one participant, who related to negative ageism against young people, respondents chose to document in their answer’s expressions of negative ageism against older adults in four main areas: employment, the health system, public service and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For example, experiences of ageism in employment were expressed in the following reports: ‘The boss called me to a meeting and told me that in the future we will need to separate ... and of course within a few weeks, I was fired. There was no professional reason for me being fired’ (68, woman). ‘I was a salesman for 40 years. I have been retired since age 70, who doesn’t get work in sales [despite] my great experience’ (74, man).

Additional negative ageist experiences were documented in connection to the health system. For example, one of the participants (40, woman) talked about the negative ageism she saw when she worked in the health system in Israel:

I work in an area connected to Parkinson’s. In my work, I see different publications for the sick population, and most of the publications use pictures of people

with grey hair, who are bent over and wrinkled. This is even though we know that there are more and more young patients who are diagnosed with Parkinson's.

Other negative ageism experiences were tied to receiving public services. For example, one 77-year-old man wrote: 'I feel like the service representatives in all of the businesses treat me like a nudnick pest or like an old man who can easily be tricked.' A 73-year-old woman said: 'The service providers doubt my digital abilities and my memory. They tell me – Do you remember your code?? What, you use Bit?? It's insulting.'

Although a few respondents emphasised expressions of solidarity with older people during the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the experiences that were documented in relation to this period reflected negative ageism. For example, a 69-year-old woman said:

I am having a hard time during this period in which, in the media, they are talking about 'safeguarding grandpa and grandma'. From my perspective, the meaning is being locked up or isolation or separation.

A 65-year-old woman said:

I am an active woman, who volunteers, exercises and travels abroad, as much as I can, and all of a sudden in the Corona [period], I'm defined as being in the risk group – that is way too much!

An example that summarises the experiences of ageism, reported in the survey, was the 'poetic' answer of a 71-year-old woman:

- A bad feeling that I'm not invited to work interviews.
- A bad feeling that I'm unemployed.
- A bad feeling that I'm alone.
- A good feeling that I look good. I receive compliments.
- A good feeling that I am physically fit. That I am physically active, climb 20 flights of stairs, Pilates, hikes, dancing.
- A good feeling that I have social ties.
- A good feeling that I have my own house and everything I need.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was not to present the development of ageism in the academic arena, but rather to examine if and to what extent people are acquainted with the concept of ageism and, hence, are aware of the social phenomenon it describes. The study's results prove that there is an association between the linguistic representation of the phenomenon of ageism and the ability of people to acknowledge experiences concerning discrimination, due to age. In the wider sense, the study shows that language and words help people to understand more in depth and interpret social situations.

The first conclusion of the study is that although The Academy of the Hebrew Language (2016) coined the word '*gilanut*' to describe the phenomenon of ageism,

the Israeli public is still unfamiliar with the term. While there were respondents who correctly provided the definition of the Hebrew term, many participants did not know the word and, as a result, they either made a mistake when defining it or skipped the question. It turns out that the concept is not only hidden from the local public eye, but also unfamiliar to Israeli social organisations. For instance, the Israeli Association for Civil Rights (<https://www.acri.org.il>) does not use the term 'ageism', either in Hebrew or in English. The main problem with not being familiar with the term that represents ageism is that this reflects the lack of social awareness of the phenomenon and limited recognition of its existence.

The importance of familiarity with the term ageism can be learned by looking at the history of the conceptualisation of ageism in the United States of America (USA). In the 1950s, racism was the most well-known type of discrimination: it was the most documented and reported on in the public and academic discourse. Afterwards, feminism, sexism and heterosexism became topics in social discussions and research studies. Despite its great relevance for the entire population (Palmore, 2015), ageism remained out of the limelight. The first significant change that began with reports of ageist discrimination began in 1969, when Butler coined the term 'ageism'. Thus, he took an important and necessary step towards bringing age discrimination into public awareness in the USA (Palmore, 2015).

Moreover, even though the scientific discourse on the phenomenon of ageism has grown over time, for many years the term was neither translated nor disseminated to other languages (Palmore, 2015). As a result, acquaintance with this kind of social phenomenon solely remained the 'property' of English speakers. That is, although the concept had been in the English language for over 50 years, the phenomenon of ageism was unavailable in varied languages. The significance of this is that while coining the term was important, its meaning has to be shared by the public.

The second conclusion is that public awareness of the phenomenon of ageism and, as a result, the number of reports about its prevalence, are related to individuals' familiarity with the linguistic term that describes the phenomenon. Those respondents who were familiar with the term before they took the survey also more easily reported its existence than those who were not: the respondents who were unfamiliar with the term before completing the questionnaire rarely reported ageist experiences. In contrast, at the end of the survey, after the term had been described and defined, many more respondents chose to share extensively experiences of ageism that either they or others had in their lives.

The possible impact of familiarisation with the term that represents the phenomenon on reports of its prevalence can be learnt also from additional kinds of social discrimination, *e.g.* racism. According to Shenav (2017), the first step in eradicating racism is acknowledging its existence and calling it by its name. This message was conveyed also in the report submitted by the government Committee for the Eradication of Racism in the Israeli Health System, which stated that there was a need to increase public awareness of the problem of racism by frequent use of the term that describes it. The report's authors asserted that use of the term could decrease expressions of discrimination or, at least, increase reports of discrimination (due to greater awareness) (Israeli Ministry of Health, 2018).

In general, terms that describe social phenomenon are very significant. One of the best examples of this is the change that organisations that focus on inclusion,

generalisation and integration are leading in relation to the community of people with disabilities (that are either visible or invisible to the eye). Groups and organisations that work in these fields believe that the desired change depends on the use of respectful, egalitarian and empowering terminology. They assert that the terms that were popular in the past – blind, deaf, handicapped, retarded, autistic or a person with special needs – labelled people according to their disabilities; thus, the stigmas remained, and they harmed people's status and potential. As a result, they work to adopt and spread the term 'a person with a disability', terminology which emphasises the 'people' and relates to the disability as secondary or marginal (Access Israel, 2015).

Another example of this is the desired change in the way in which people discuss and write about dementia. Studies have shown that the choice of words in this field influences the feelings of people with dementia and the people who care for them, because it shapes their moods, self-esteem, and feeling of happiness or depression (Alzheimer's Society, 2018). As a result, the demand is to say and write 'a person with dementia' instead of using the hurtful expressions: dementia patient or dementia sufferer. The argument is that the linguistic change can change the way in which people think about dementia and increase the likelihood that a person with dementia will not experience stigma or discrimination. The Alzheimer's Society in the United Kingdom, for example, perceived the topic of terminology as being of the highest importance. As a result, they produced an online handbook that explains to the public the positive words they should be using when speaking or writing about people with dementia, because their goal is to bring about ongoing social change (for more information, see the *Positive Language Guide* of the Alzheimer's Society, 2018).

Previous studies on ageism in Israel have suggested diverse ways to combat ageism. For example, the development of community intergenerational programmes (Vitman *et al.*, 2014) or the use of public spaces to advance intergenerational contact and positive images of ageing (Fruhauf *et al.*, 2020). However, the present study suggests that a prior essential step is an extensive public familiarity with the local linguistic concept that represents ageism. Linguistic changes of this kind, which can be identified in the framework of actions that work to eradicate discrimination based on race, skin colour, sex, gender or age, are derived from the understanding that terminology in speaking and writing greatly influences perceptions and attitude change in the public sphere (Gendron *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, the recommendation today is to take corrective action and use inclusive language. In other words, it is recommended to avoid using slurs, derogatory terms or harmful words connected to ageing and, instead, use words that are more acceptable and respectful, such as: ageing persons; older adults; people over X age; seniors (see the guides to using inclusive language: American Geriatrics Society, 2019; Rider University, 2021). Moreover, it can be assumed that if all the survey respondents had been familiar with the Hebrew term that describes ageism then the number of reports of experiences of ageism would have increased. Therefore, after people begin using the term that describes ageism on a regular basis, it will be important to continue delving into measurements of the phenomenon to potentially evaluate the increase in reports that can be attributed to increased awareness of the concept.

Even though it is a newly translated term in Hebrew, the term ageism itself is perhaps not sufficient to account for all age-related experiences of people. For instance, concepts such as subjective age and age expectations can fall under the general term ageism but may also reflect somewhat different constructs of views of ageing. In the process of trying to improve knowledge and terminology about ageism, Snellman (2016) offers to continue identifying accurate definitions, but also acknowledge the opportunities that follow from an epistemological openness towards ageism. According to him, there will always be elements that researchers will not be able to account for in succinct definitions of the term. It is argued that we need constitutive theoretical contributions in order to understand ageism as a concept in a broad sense. This reinforces the claim that language is power (Gendron *et al.*, 2016). The way that we use language is extremely important given that the lexicon conveys levels of meaning that are embedded far deeper than the words themselves. Language is the basis through which we communicate with each other. Through language, we share our thoughts, ideas and emotions (Gendron *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, when researchers and scientists identify a social phenomenon that repeats itself, they obviously create a theoretical-linguistic term that describes and represents the phenomenon, but they must also take care to spread the term in public.

Before concluding, it is important to emphasise that only Israelis with a good level of digital literacy completed the online survey. Most of the respondents were also connected to not-for-profits, which aim to improve adult welfare. In addition, even though the Arab sector in Israel expresses lower levels of ageism and ageing anxieties (Bergman *et al.*, 2013), the study did not examine the phenomenon among Arabs, but instead was limited only to the Jewish population. The sample is not a representative one, both in terms of its ability to project its conclusions from what is happening in Israel to other countries in the world and in terms of its representativeness of the Israeli population. Future research will benefit from examining the effects of language on ageism in diverse sub-cultures. As about two-thirds of our sample were over the age of 65, it is possible that their experiences of ageism were coloured by their chronological age. A different age composition of the sample might have resulted in somewhat different findings.

Another limitation stems from the fact that in our analysis, we considered the group that skipped the question about ageism as being unfamiliar with the term. However, we never evaluated this directly and these individuals might have skipped the question for varied other reasons. Hence, results should be interpreted with caution. It also is important to note that we never assessed respondents' familiarity with the terms sexism and racism. Hence, it is possible that their responses concerning the experiences of these phenomena also were coloured by their familiarity/lack of familiarity with these terms.

Palmore (2015: 874) stated that one of the first steps for decreasing ageism needs to be the increase of awareness of its existence: 'Notice when your associates, friends, or relatives engage in ageist behavior assumptions. Try pointing out to them the prejudice reflected in such behaviors or assumptions.' Considering our findings, we wish to add to Palmore's recommendation and propose that increase of awareness of the phenomenon of ageism, which leads to an increase in reports of its presence, must include teaching and spreading the terminology that describes it.

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