

And What About Self-Ageism? “Inner Work” as a Fifth Strategy for the Eradication of Ageism

Sarit Okun & Liat Ayalon

To cite this article: Sarit Okun & Liat Ayalon (29 Jun 2023): And What About Self-Ageism? “Inner Work” as a Fifth Strategy for the Eradication of Ageism, Journal of Aging & Social Policy, DOI: [10.1080/08959420.2023.2226294](https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2023.2226294)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2023.2226294>



Published online: 29 Jun 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 228



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)



And What About Self-Ageism? “Inner Work” as a Fifth Strategy for the Eradication of Ageism

Sarit Okun Ph.D.  and Liat Ayalon Ph.D.

Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

ABSTRACT

In response to the World Health Organization Report on ageism and the spread of ageism during the COVID-19 pandemic, varied actions to combat ageism have taken place, worldwide. To examine what older people think about combating ageism, 731 Israelis, ages 60–85, responded to an online survey. Thematic analysis of their responses identified that the two main reasons for combating ageism rely on “moral-social justification” and “financial-employment justification.” Respondents suggested various strategies to combat ageism including, “changes in law and adjudication,” “inter-generational ties,” “educational activities,” and “campaigns.” Respondents also identified “inner work” as the fifth and most important way to eliminate self-ageism. The results of this qualitative study contribute to the global campaign to combat ageism because of the emphasis on “inner work” of older people as a strategy in and of itself. Moreover, the study demonstrates the importance of including older adults in all stages of the global campaign to reduce and eliminate ageism.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 July 2022
Accepted 17 December 2022

KEYWORDS

Ageism; eradication; fight; older adults; self-ageism; WHO

Introduction

Ageism is defined as stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination against people because of their age. It is consciously or unconsciously used against people of different age groups, but mostly toward older people (Ayalon, 2021; Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2017). As people are exposed from a young age to negative stereotypes and prejudice about aging (other-directed ageism), when they become older, ageist stereotypes and prejudice become increasingly visible and self-directed. Thus, ageism may be directed toward other people or toward oneself or one’s own age group (self-ageism) (Levy, 2009).

In 2016, the World Health Organization (WHO) received a mandate to combat ageism (Officer et al., 2016). Five years later, they published a report entitled, *Global Report on Ageism*, in which they presented ageism as a serious social, economic and health problem (WHO, 2021). Based on approximately 500 studies that were undertaken in over 50 countries, the report determined that stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination, on the

basis of age, exact a heavy price in terms of physical and psychological health of older people, and even harm the economic state of many countries (WHO, 2021). The report was based on studies that showed that ageism accelerates the cognitive deterioration of older people, slows their recovery from illness, surgeries and disabilities and even decreases their life expectancy (e.g., Ayalon et al., 2019; Chang et al., 2020; Levy et al., 2012). Moreover, it was found that ageism upsets social ties, contributes to loneliness and social isolation among older people and, because of this, allows for violence and abuse toward older people (e.g., Ayalon & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011; Barg et al., 2006; Cacioppo et al., 2006; Courtin & Knapp, 2017). Furthermore, the studies on which this report was based stated that ageism has negative economic effects on society through its impact on health and employment and that ageism can contribute to the poverty of the older population (e.g., Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010, 2015; Lain, 2011; Levy et al., 2020; McDonald, 2013; Wilson, 2020).

The report focused on four proposed strategies for increasing public awareness concerning the negative effects of ageism and for decreasing, and perhaps, even eliminating the phenomenon. The first is via “policy and law.” That is, enforcement of existing laws to provide age equality and rights, such as the legislation of new laws in the field. The second strategy is “educational interventions” – teaching interventions for the decrease of ageism in all levels, from elementary school through university-level studies, as well as in formal and informal educational contexts. The third strategy is “intergenerational contact,” which represents the nurturance and strengthening of the interactions between people of different generations. The fourth and newest strategy is the “global campaign to combat ageism,” which will be comprised of pragmatic campaigns and missions in each country. This strategy’s goal is to change the negative narratives that exist in the public discourse surrounding age and aging. It is important to note that while the contribution of the first three strategies for decreasing ageism has already been supported by research, social campaigns have more limited empirical support (WHO, 2021).

This global report emphasized that everybody can and must take action to put an end to this phenomenon (WHO, 2021). Therefore, “a world for all ages” is a universal vision that can become a reality via a joint worldwide recruitment of governments, policymakers, social organizations, academic research institutions, business enterprises, the private sector and civil society (Ayalon, 2020; WHO, 2021).

The purpose of the present case study

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the pandemic of ageism, characterized by age-biased thoughts, feelings and behaviors which intensify the tension between the generations (e.g., Albarracin & Jung, 2021; Ayalon et al., 2021;

Ihara et al., 2021, Meisner, 2021). In response, varied actions to reduce ageism took place during the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide (Okun & Ayalon, 2022). Considering the WHO global report and the growing realization that ageism must be addressed, we aimed to examine what older adults themselves think about combating ageism, and what their perceived reasons for this are.

“Involving citizens” is considered essential in the case of “disadvantaged populations” (Hofmann et al., 2020; Spiel et al., 2020). The ideal is to involve excluded groups in the processes of change. This means not only relating to them as passive recipients in need of assistance, but rather as active populations that advance and facilitate change (Almog, 2018; Doron, 2006). Specifically, involving older members of society in activities that can eliminate ageism is a process in which all sides, which share a vested interest in eliminating the phenomenon, should be involved including mapping the points of distress, making decisions, and engaging in actions of change (Rabinovich, 2017). Therefore, the present study was based on the well-known expression: “Nothing about us without us.”

Method

Following the WHO report on ageism (WHO, 2021), the increasing presence of ageism during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ayalon, 2020) and in line with the notion of “public involvement” (Almog, 2018, Doron, 2006; Rabinovich, 2017), an **online survey** was conducted among older Israelis to explore their perceptions, using both open-ended questions and quantitative closed-ended survey items. This study is focused on the open-ended section. Thus, represents a qualitative inquiry via an online survey (Braun et al., 2021).

Data collection

After receiving an ethical approval from the PI’s institution (#072004), we prepared an online survey via the Qualtrics software program. To recruit as many participants as possible, and due to the pandemic limitations, the survey was distributed through social networks, mailing lists, and digital newsletters. Most recruitment sources were specifically related to aging or aging services. For example, one of the organizations that helped in the distribution of the survey was Vehadarta – The Third Strength, a social not-for-profit organization that works to strengthen and empower the population of older adults in Israel.

Prior to embarking on the survey, all respondents received a detailed explanation about the purpose of the study, and possible gains and risks associated with the study. Respondents were informed that they can leave the study at any point and are not obligated to respond to any of the questions. No financial compensation was provided to respondents.

Contact information was provided to allow further questions and comments about the study. In this online survey, participants were asked a variety of questions related to age, aging and ageism. However, this paper is limited to the analysis of the last two open-ended questions, “What do you think about combating ageism? Why”? Although writing a research report based on two open-ended questions is not common in the literature, there is a growing realization that this method can provide valuable in-depth information (Braun et al., 2021). The detailed responses provided by respondents were rich and informative and we believe they provide valuable information that should be acknowledged.

Study sample

In total, 1024 participants completed the online survey. Of these, 731 were older adults aged 60–85 who answered the last open-ended questions. Of those over the age of 60, 397 (54%) were women, 334 (46%) were men, 467 (64%) were married, 175 (24%) were divorced and 540 (74%) more than 12 years of education. In total, 292 (40%) reported that they are comfortable financially and 264 (36%) reported that their financial status is problematic, 329 (45%) respondents reported that they are pensioners and 216 (30%) reported that they work part-time. See additional demographic information in [Table 1](#) and note that values may not add to 100% as some participants did not fully respond to all socio-demographic questions.

It is important to consider that this convenience sample only included people who live in Israel, speak Hebrew, and are comfortable to respond to an online survey. Respondents who do not have electronic devices, or do not know how to use them, were excluded from the sample, because they did not have the means to answer the online questionnaire. Hence, the sample does not represent the entire Israeli population.

Data analysis

The open-ended responses ranged from short answers (1–5 words) to long answers (50–70 words), in such a way that the average word count was 21. To understand the themes and meanings arising from the respondents’ answers, we used Atlas.ti8 relying on Thematic Analysis (TA). TA is a qualitative analytical method that is widely used in social psychology (Clarke & Braun, 2017). As an accepted practice, TA is centered on identifying the main themes (categories) and sub-themes (sub-categories) that are discerned in the data. TA was undertaken as a joint investigation of two researchers: the first author first undertook the TA and then sent the analysis to the second researcher, who examined the analysis against responses provided by respondents and added her interpretation. Finally,

Table 1. Demographic data of the 731 survey respondents.

Variable	N (%)
Age	
60–69	414(57%)
70–79	293 (40%)
80–85	24(3%)
Gender	
Women	397 (54%)
Men	334 (46%)
Family Status	
Married	467(64%)
Single	31 (4%)
Divorced	175 (24%)
Widowed	58 (8%)
Education	
High School [12 years or less]	91 (12%)
Academic [over 12 years]	540 (74%)
Economic Status	
Manages Very Easily	139 (19%)
Manages Fairly Easily	292 (40%)
Manages with Difficulty	264 (36%)
Barely Manages	31 (4%)
Employment Status*	
Retired	329 (45%)
Works Part Time	216 (30%)
Works Full Time	95 (13%)
Volunteers	119 (16%)
Unemployed/Looking for Work	96 (13%)
Unpaid Leave	45 (6%)
Homemaker	18 (3%)

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

the researchers discussed, searched, and selected collaboratively the most relevant and important units of meaning to answer the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Both authors are highly experienced in qualitative analysis, though they represent different disciplinary backgrounds: media, psychology, and gerontology.

In our analysis, we realized that the survey respondents did not only relate to the importance/lack of importance of combatting ageism, but also added their own opinion on the ways to combat ageism. Thus, although we did not ask them directly about this, these data had led us to create a new category, termed “ways of combating ageism.” During the TA, we deliberated the categories and sub-categories names. Specifically, we considered the options of using direct quotes from responses provided by respondents vs. the terms presented in the WHO’s report. For example, we debated whether we should name the sub-theme “media” (based on the responses) or “campaigns,” based on the WHO report. Following deliberation, it was decided to combine both possibilities in a way that would most clearly and comprehensibly reflect the respondents’ answers against already known strategies identified by the WHO.

Results

In this online survey, 731 Israeli older adults explain in their own words what they think about the fight against ageism, and what their reasons for that are. About 595 (81%) survey participants expressed strong support for eliminating or at least reducing ageism. The expressions of support for attempts to eliminate ageism were short and decisive. For example, people wrote: “The fight is extremely important,” “The fight is very much needed,” “This is a necessary step, like no other,” “This is a worthy fight,” or “We need to root out the phenomenon of ageism.”

Reasons for combating ageism

About 405 (68%) survey participants not only expressed a brief verbal support for the fight against ageism, but also gave two, central noticeable justifications for eradicating ageism: “moral-social justifications” and “financial-employment justifications.”

Moral-social justifications

These justifications concern explanations about values associated with preventing inequality due to age between people. Egalitarian justifications are generally characterized by the idea that all humans are equal in terms of fundamental worth or moral status. In general, egalitarian explanations motivate many modern social movements and ideas, including the Enlightenment, feminism, civil rights, and international human rights. Indeed, about 232 (32%) survey participants addressed moral-social problems created by ageism as a rationale for combating ageism. Among other things, the people who gave this explanation wrote that, “Discrimination on the basis of age is unethical!” (a 66-year-old man); “Negative stigmas about older people need to be changed” (a 75-year-old woman), “There’s a sense that society neglects the older generation. A feeling that we’ve taken for granted,” “Society no longer likes older people” (80, m), “Don’t reject me in my old age” (77, w), or “Giving thanks to older adults is the cultural foundation in an intact society” (68, w).

There were many respondents who stressed the importance of eradicating ageism, as part of a public action that demands the elimination of all forms of discrimination in society. For example, respondents wrote: “Ageism needs to be fought like all kinds of discrimination!” (72, w), “I believe that every person is entitled to equal treatment, regardless of religion, race, sex or age . . . ” (74, w), “Equality and respect are important values in every area” (85, m) and “For the same reason that we need to fight racism, sexism, xenophobia, hating the different and all hatred . . . ” (69, w).

Financial-employment justifications

These justifications address economic problems created by age-based inequality in the labor market. Indeed, about 303 (41%) addressed the financial-employment problems created by ageism. Possibly, this justification was emphasized in their answers because the Retirement Age Law (2004), which embeds the mandatory retirement regime under Israeli law, led to an employment crisis for some older people who are forced to retire, even if they are not interested in doing so (The “law in the service of the elderly” association, 2013). The Retirement Age Law also has negative economic consequences to the entire public (Rozin, 2022). Among other things, research participants wrote: “Today, people over the age of 40, and even younger, are considered to be unequal in workplaces” (66, w), “Because of ageism, we eliminate a large sector of the public from the workforce that could help support society” (73, w), “It’s important that society be helped by the wisdom and employment experience of older people” (77, w), “The retired have a lot more to give the world” (69, m), “The ^{sector} of older people in society is growing and, therefore, we need to provide them with employment solutions” (68, w).

Ways of eliminating ageism

Even though the survey respondents were not directly asked to propose ways for eliminating ageism, about 462 (63%) referred briefly or extensively to one strategy or more that they found helpful for decreasing and/or eliminating ageism. The main ways that they proposed were as follows:

Law and adjudication

Policies and law can be used to reduce ageism toward any age group. They can address age discrimination, inequality and human rights laws (WHO, 2021). Indeed, about 97 survey respondents (21% of those who suggested a strategy) proposed to eliminate ageism by undertaking legal, constitutional changes, mainly around employment. For example, an 80-year-old man wrote: “we should not relate to the age of the employee, but rather to his productivity level, his efficiency, and his economic contribution.” Other respondents wrote: “There is a need for essential changes and improvements concerning the opportunities that older people have for finding work by legislation where it is needed” (75, m) or: “In the era of a saturated market, the present-day situation will lead to the firing of workers before retirement age. The phenomenon is felt today during the Corona crisis and will get worse with the deepening of the move to the digital era, that, progressively will destroy some of the professions and jobs . . . ” (73, w).

Inter-generational ties

According to respondents, investments should also be made in fostering intergenerational contact, which aims to establish interactions between people of different generations. Such contact can reduce intergroup prejudice and stereotypes. Intergenerational contact interventions are among the most effective interventions to reduce ageism against older people, and they also show promise for reducing ageism against younger people (WHO, 2021). Indeed, about 113 survey respondents (24% of those who suggested a strategy) recommended eliminating ageism by fostering intergenerational spaces for employment, leisure activities and residence. For example, a 70-year-old man said: “There’s a need today to develop economic initiatives that will also integrate older people. This is a highly complex challenge in our bureaucratic environment, which is a country that works according to a bookkeeping strategy and not an economic strategy.”

Other examples were: “The most important thing is that in one’s city, there will be arts and crafts classes, games that require thinking and sport activities that are tailored for people of all ages (77, w)” or “We need to find as many connections as possible like combination of kindergartens in assisted living” (66, w). In this matter, a 69-year-old survey respondent wrote: “I think that the environment has a great impact on the things that a person sees around him, and therefore, children need to socialize near old people.”

Educational activities

Educational interventions to reduce ageism should be included across all levels and types of educational programs, from primary school to university, and in formal and non-formal educational contexts. Educational activities help enhance empathy, dispel misconceptions about different age groups and reduce prejudice and discrimination by providing accurate information and counter-stereotypical example (WHO, 2021). Indeed, about 89 survey respondents (19% of those who discussed a strategy) focused on educational interventions. For example, a 66-year-old woman wrote: “There’s a need to teach the young generation that one day they, too, will get to this age and therefore there is a need to treat old people in a respectful manner.” Another survey respondent wrote (78, w): “This is a moral subject whose solution needs to come from education in a long-term process. Like the educational process about conserving wildflowers, and it began about 50 years ago and today we see its results . . . and, therefore, I’m in favor of nice initiatives that schools have on the topic.

Media campaigns

Engaging in media campaigns to change the negative narratives surrounding age and aging (Okun & Ayalon, 2022) also has promise. Indeed, alongside the legislative changes in the labor market, inter-generational ties, and educational

activities, about 35 older people (7% of those who discussed a strategy to combat ageism) wrote that the way to eliminate ageism is through positive advertisement of the period of old age and the aging process. While no participant actually wrote the word “campaign,” the descriptions of documentation and repeated mentioning in the media were noted as efficient strategies. For example, a 71-year-old man wrote: “There’s not enough knowledge that is accessible and available in the media about the processes of aging. Today, the feeling is that growing old is awful, that you need to avoid it as much as possible. The way to change this is by raising awareness to the topic of aging in the media . . . that’s the only way the image will improve.”

A 68-year-old woman offered the following idea for combating ageism: “Information is important. There’s a need to explain and inform the public that, in our time, older people are people who have more physical and cognitive ability than ever before. People who were active in their past can always contribute and not disappear from belonging or being active in any group that interests them.”

Inner work

Inner Work concerns the ways individuals consciously know, understand, and improve their own character, feelings, motives, and desires to address self- and other-directed ageism. Indeed, about 172 survey respondents (37% of all respondents who discussed possible ways to combat ageism) reflected in their answers the belief that the source of the problem is older adults’ dissatisfaction with their own age and aging process. Therefore, they emphasized the strategy of encouraging self-esteem among older people, to successfully address self-ageism. Based on the responses provided by participants, we decided to term this technique – inner work, as it reflects the need for a change from within.

One of the respondents (77, m) explained it in this way: “We transmit insecurity in our age, status and presence . . . Actually we need to deal with the changes with dignity, to respect the age and the way we look, and mainly to discover the added value in this age.” A similar perception was also found in the response given by a 66-year-old woman: “we [older adults] need to believe that every person is a whole world in himself, and therefore, he can be a young person who doesn’t contribute anything to society or an older person, who does a lot for society.” These quotes reflect a recommendation to accept and embrace the changes that come with age and to acknowledge the benefits that aging might bring with it. Hence, these statements can be contrasted with an emphasis on positive aspects of aging reported by other respondents as a technique to address self-ageism.

Another central aspect noted by older adults concerning the elimination of ageism was acceptance and satisfaction with the external changes that occur in old age. One of the respondents (73, w) asserted: “It all depends

on how the person, himself, feels and what he transmits to the environment . . . An older person mustn't neglect his outer appearance, since this affects the person's soul . . . He needs to exercise, spend time, and enjoy life." This strategy was also emphasized by a 71-year-old woman: "Taking care of the outer appearance can do wonders at an older age. The outer appearance can greatly enhance the closeness of older people to the people near them. In my opinion, we don't think enough about how important the outer appearance can be for changing and improving stigmas and atmosphere." In contrast to the strategies of acceptance and acknowledgment discussed above, these quotes emphasize an attempt to change and fight the aging process to reduce ageism directed by society. Common to both strategies, however, is the internal locus of control which guides the proposed response to ageism.

Discussion

It appears as if the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated global attempts to combat ageism (Okun & Ayalon, 2022). In this study, we sought to examine in-depth what older Israelis think about the fight against ageism. Their responses have raised several insights concerning the involvement of older people in the fight against ageism. This study is particularly timely in the context of the global campaign against ageism.

Two main reasons were provided by respondents for the need to eliminate ageism. The first one is mortal-social in nature and the second has financial-employment aspects. This means that Israeli older adults believe that ageism harms the person and society, mainly due to its ethical, employment and financial impacts, which are connected to the aspiration for justice and equality in society.

Reflecting on the findings, we tried to understand why health justifications were absent from respondents' answers, and why they did not address the negative effects of ageism on health as a reason for combating ageism. There are probably several explanations for this: First, while the academic literature has strongly emphasized the harmful consequences of ageism on mental and physical health, and on the entire health system (e.g., Chang et al., 2020; Levy et al., 2020; Wyman et al., 2018), the Israeli public remains unaware of the health risks associated with ageism. Secondly, this could be attributed to the fact that most of the work to eradicate ageism in Israel has focused on its employment and economic consequences, and there is less emphasis on the health damage that this phenomenon creates (Okun & Ayalon, 2022). In addition, the reason for this may be related to the fact that most of the sample included relatively healthy older persons who did not experience health issues associated with ageism. Therefore, they did not report it. Another explanation may

simply be that referring to health issues in old age – may seem as one form of ageism – a feature that within the context of this study may have been inappropriate to voice.

Even though we did not explicitly ask about ways to combat ageism, participants expressed and explained their opinions about varied ways to combat ageism. Therefore, the findings also reflect a social change and a notion of the growth of “political identity” among older persons. Previous studies have suggested that one of the main reasons for the failure to advance the human rights movement of older persons, so far, is the lack of “political identity” of older adults as a distinct social group (e.g., Doron, 2020; Yishai, 2021). Unlike women or persons with disabilities – who have been acutely aware of their unique political identity as a social group, hence successful in promoting their human rights at the national and international arenas (Doron, 2020; Yishai, 2021) – older persons tend to refrain from identifying themselves as “older persons” (Doron, 2020; Okun & Ayalon, 2022; Yishai, 2021). In other words, this finding is important and reflects an ability of the participants to view themselves as a group which deserves social justice (on the moral side) and of need for action toward social change (on the activism side). Either way, the participants’ choice to delineate ways to combat ageism without being asked about it, indicates high levels of involvement and motivation that should be utilized in the fight against ageism.

The responses identified in this study matched the four strategies identified by the WHO (2021) in their global report. Based on the analysis of the responses, older Israelis see the judicial and educational systems, intergenerational contact, and media campaigns as means to reduce ageism. The overlap between the four strategies proposed by the WHO and those proposed by our survey respondents reinforces the cultural validity of these proposed strategies to eliminate the phenomenon. The fact that these strategies were identified by a sample that was not necessarily aware of the global report on ageism and certainly was not involved in the preparation of the report further supports the report’s external validity and stresses the cultural relevance of the strategies proposed by the WHO to Israeli society.

Despite the slow progress in legislation concerning older people, in Israel and in other parts of the world (Doron et al., 2018), the survey’s respondents advocated for a legal change. What stood out was their demand for a judicial intervention in the context of employment and retirement. Doron et al. (2018) explained that judicial authorities have difficulty dealing with problems connected to the protection of the rights of older people, because legislations that prohibit discrimination against older people represent a relatively new phenomenon. Therefore, the basic step that needs to be taken, when engaged in this strategy, is to raise the awareness of policymakers, to ensure that they understand that limiting people, solely due to their age, may lead to deep intergenerational tensions (Swift & Chasteen, 2021).

The educational strategy is directed at activities that take place in formal and informal educational frameworks, throughout the person's life course, including pre-school, school, youth movement, after-school program, and university-level studies. Therefore, Del Carmen Requena et al. (2018) stressed the responsibility of academic institutions to train professionals to avoid age-base stereotypes, and to advance intergenerational experiences in all educational environments. Likewise, it was found that intergenerational activities called for joint involvement of all age groups, in all spheres of life throughout the life course. Vervaecke et al. (2021) asserted that it is worthwhile to create more activities that emphasize the mutual benefits for all age groups. Nonetheless, at the present time, there is plenty of research to suggest that our life course is still divided based on chronological age, thus, resulting in limited opportunities for intergenerational contact (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005).

Very few respondents addressed the strategy of "employing the media" (which is equivalent to "campaigns" in the WHO report). This may indicate that the public underestimates the strength of the media in determining attitudes and stereotypes based on age. Perhaps this will change in the coming years, because researchers have called for a more balanced representation of older people in the media, which brings the diversity and complexity associated with aging and old age, on its losses and benefits (Okun & Ayalon, 2022). Moreover, the media could also benefit from constructing a code of conduct that includes age as a recognized protected characteristic that should be monitored and addressed sensitively (e.g, Swift & Chasteen, 2021; Vervaecke & Meisner; Vervaecke et al., 2021).

We believe that the most important finding of this study is the fifth strategy to eradicate ageism – "inner work" - which was identified by respondents. This strategy was not explicitly mentioned in the WHO Global Report. While the first four strategies deal mainly with decreasing ageism against older people directed by society, the fifth strategy represents a fight against self-ageism. Self-ageism, as mentioned before, is a widespread phenomenon that results from the internalization of negative age stereotypes, attitudes, and prejudices throughout the life course. In old age, these negative age stereotypes become self-relevant and older people operate according to these stereotypes (Bodner, 2009; Carstensen & Hershfield, 2021; Levy, 2009). As research has shown, the main problem with self-ageism is that this phenomenon negatively impacts older people's health and wellbeing later in life (Levy, 2009). Therefore, it is certainly important to address it.

Moreover, the thematic analysis showed that the survey respondents found "inner work" to be highly valuable given the high percentage of respondents who identified this as an important strategy to combat ageism. This finding is especially surprising because older people are not always aware that they engage in self-ageism (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2017). Because the survey

respondents chose to address the “enemy from within,” and to identify “inner work” as an important strategy to combat ageism, it is possible to conclude that older adults are aware of the damages that self-ageism can cause and the importance of eliminating the phenomenon, as part of a worldwide battle against ageism. This approach of inner work also corresponds with Levy’s (2001) approach to ageism as the “enemy from within,” and points to the importance of undergoing an inner-conscious change, as a necessary basis for successfully combatting ageism.

Above all else, this finding led us to wonder how and why this strategy was not explicitly proposed in the last WHO report (2021) as one of the recommended strategies for eliminating ageism. Perhaps, the reason is because the report’s writers see inner work as a strategy that is addressed by the other strategies. However, considering the present findings, we assert that there is a need to also focus on inner work as a conspicuous, separate, and significant strategy for combatting self-ageism.

Limitations and further research and policy

When interpreting the results, it is important to acknowledge that this qualitative study is not free of limitations. Because the survey was distributed via various mailing lists, our sample does not represent the entire population. It is possible that those who selected to respond to this survey are more engaged in the field of aging and old age. To provide a fuller and more representative picture of needed strategies for combating ageism, it is recommended to rely on a representative sample and to collect data using different methods in order not to exclude those who are digitally challenged. Moreover, our question might have led respondents to respond in certain ways and a more neutral open-ended question would have been preferable. To provide a fuller and more representative picture of needed strategies for the elimination of ageism, it is worthwhile to include additional samples from different parts of the world and different population groups.

Conclusion

Our study offers several conclusions and policy recommendations. To begin with, it stresses the importance of involving the public in efforts to address social problems. Our findings not only validate existing knowledge and strategies proposed by the WHO, but also add information that has not received much attention. Given the general notion of “nothing about us without us,” the present study provides a possible gold standard for the validation of future interventions to reduce ageism. Our research demonstrates that many older people have ideas about ways to engage in the fight against ageism and that their involvement in different strategies can possibly contribute to reducing

ageism. We believe that the involvement of lay people in the construction and implementation of different strategies will lead to a more inclusive, generalizable, and ethical social process, which is culturally relevant. Secondly, based on the results of the analysis, we propose adding “inner work” as a fifth strategy for the elimination of ageism. Clearly, older adults understand that ageism is a social phenomenon that is highly affected by their own self-perceptions and self-images of old age and aging. The success of the other strategies is dependent upon the prevention of the constant and unconscious internalization of negative age stereotypes and the direction of these stereotypes toward the self. Therefore, it is important to relate to “inner work” as a separate strategy that can result in the acceptance of old age and aging by older people themselves. Future interventions to reduce ageism could possibly rely on the four strategies proposed by the WHO report on ageism, but it is important to ensure that ageism is addressed not only as the negative social construction of old age directed by society toward older people, but also as stereotypes and prejudice directed by older people toward themselves.

Key Points

- Older adults call for engaging in action against ageism.
- The “inner work” of older people addressed self-ageism.
- Inner work should be a strategy in and of itself.
- It is important to include older people in all stages of the global campaign to combat ageism.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by a grant from the Impact Center for the Study of Ageism and Old Age in Israel, an interdisciplinary center supported by Mrs. Gabi Weisfeld.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

ORCID

Sarit Okun Ph.D.  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5474-9223>

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

The study received the ethical approval of the ethics committee in the school of social work at Bar Ilan University.

References

- Albarracin, D., & Jung, H. (2021). A research agenda for the postCOVID-19 world: Theory and research in social psychology. *Asian journal of social psychology*, 24(1), 10–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajsp.12469>
- Almog, N. (2018). “Everyone is normal, and everyone has a disability”: Narratives of University students with visual impairment. *Social Inclusion*, 6(4), 218–229. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v6i4.1697>
- Australian Human Rights Commission. (2010). *Age discrimination – exposing the hidden barrier for mature age workers*. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/publications/age-discrimination-exposing-hidden-barrier-mature-age>
- Australian Human Rights Commission. (2015). *National prevalence survey of age discrimination in the workplace: Report*. <https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/AgePrevalenceReport2015.pdf>
- Ayalon, L. (2020). Life in a world for all ages: From a utopic idea to a reality. *Journal of Elder Policy*, 1(1), 39–67. <https://doi.org/10.18278/jep.1.1.3>
- Ayalon, L. (2021). Successful ageing and ageism: a bi-directional influence. In C. Tesch-Römer, H. W. Wahl, S. I. S. Rattan, & L. Ayalon (Eds.), *Successful ageing: ambition and ambivalence*. Oxford University Press.
- Ayalon, L., Dolberg, P., Mikulionienė, S., Perek-Białas, J., Rapolienė, G., Stypinska, J., Willińska, M., & de la FuenteNúñez, V. (2019). A systematic review of existing ageism scales. *Ageing research reviews*, 54, 100919. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.arr.2019.100919>
- Ayalon, L., & Shiovitz-Ezra, S. (2011). The relationship between loneliness and passive death wishes in the second half of life. *Int Psychogeriatric*, 23(10), 1677–1685. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1041610211001384>
- Ayalon, L., & Tesch-Römer, C. (2017). Taking a closer look at ageism: Self- and other-directed ageist attitudes and discrimination. *European Journal of Ageing*, 14(1), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-016-0409-9>
- Barg, F. K., Huss-Ashmore, R., Wittink, M. N., Murray, G. F., Bogner, H. R., & Gallo, J. J. A. (2006). Mixed-methods approach to understanding loneliness and depression in older adults. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B, Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 61(6), S329–S339. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/61.6.s329>
- Bodner, E. (2009). On the origins of ageism among older and younger adults. *Int Psychogeriatric*, 21(6), 1003–1014. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S104161020999055X>
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., Boulton, E., Davey, L., & McEvoy, C. (2021). The online survey as a qualitative research tool. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 24(6), 641–654. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1805550>
- Cacioppo, J. T., Hughes, M. E., Waite, L. J., Hawkey, L. C., & Thisted, R. A. (2006). Loneliness as a specific risk factor for depressive symptoms: Cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses. *Psychology and Aging*, 21(1), 140–151. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0882-7974.21.1.140>
- Carstensen, L. L., & Hershfield, H. E. (2021). Beyond stereotypes: Using socioemotional selectivity theory to improve messaging to older adults. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 30(4), 327–334. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09637214211011468>

- Chang, E. S., Kanno, S., Levy, S., Wang, S. Y., Lee, J. E., Levy, B. R., & Bayer, A. (2020). Global reach of ageism on older persons' health: A systematic review. *PLoS One*, 15(1), e0220857. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0220857>
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), 297–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>
- Courtin, E., & Knapp, M. (2017). Social isolation, loneliness and health in old age: A scoping review. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 25(3), 799–812. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12311>
- Del Carmen Requena, M., Swift, H. J., Naegle, L., Zwamborn, M., Metz, M., Bosems, W. P. H., & van Hoof, J. (2018). Educational methods using intergenerational interaction to fight ageism. In L. In: Ayalon & C. Tesch-Römer (Eds.), *Contemporary perspectives on ageism* (pp. 383–402). International Perspectives on Aging, 19. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73820-8_23
- Doron, I. (2006). Elder law: Current issues and future frontiers. *European Journal of Ageing*, 3(1), 60–66.
- Doron, I., Numhauser-Henning, A., Spanier, B., Georgantzi, N., & Mantovani, E. (2018). Ageism and anti-ageism in the legal system: A review of key themes. In L. Ayalon & C. Tesch-Römer Eds., *Contemporary perspectives on ageism* (pp. 303–319). Springer International Publishing. International Perspectives on Aging, 19. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73820-8_19
- Hagestad, G. O., & Uhlenberg, P. (2005). The social separation of old and young: A root of ageism. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61(2), 343–360. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00409.x>
- Hofmann, M., Kasnitz, D., Mankoff, J., & Bennett, C. L. (2020). Living disability theory: Reflections on access, research, and design. In the 22nd international ACM SIGACCESS conference on computers and accessibility (ASSETS '20). *Association for computing machinery*, 4, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3373625.3416996>
- Ihara, E., Tompkins, C., Inoue, M., & Barrett, K. (2021). Creative arts interventions as a way to combat ageism and increase student interest in gerontology. *Innovation in Aging*, 5(1), 400–401. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igab046.1549>
- Lain, D. (2011). Helping the poorest help themselves? Encouraging employment past 65 in England and the USA. *Journal of Social Policy*, 40(3), 493–512. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279410000942>
- Law in the Service of the Elderly. (8 May, 2013). Discrimination against older adults in the job market. LSE. https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/unit/retirement_age_committee/he/Vaadot_ahchud_RetirementAgeCommittee_Tzibur_Curts.pdf (In Hebrew).
- Levy, B. R. (2001). Eradication of ageism requires addressing the enemy within. *Gerontologist*, 41(5), 578–579. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/41.5.578>
- Levy, B. R. (2009). Stereotype embodiment: A psychosocial approach to aging. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18(6), 332–336. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2009.01662.x>
- Levy, B. R., Slade, M. D., Chang, E. S., Kanno, S., Wang, S. Y., & Meeks, S. (2020). Ageism amplifies cost and prevalence of health conditions. *The Gerontologist*, 60(1), 174–181. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gny131>
- Levy, B. R., Slade, M. D., Murphy, T. E., & Gill, T. M. (2012). Association between positive age stereotypes and recovery from disability in older persons. *JAMA*, 308(19), 1972–1973. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2012.14541>
- McDonald, L. (2013). The evolution of retirement as systematic ageism. In P. Bronwell & J. Kelly (Eds.), *Ageism and mistreatment of older workers: Current reality, future solutions* (pp. 69–90). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-5521-5_5

- Meisner, B.A. (2021). Are you ok, boomer? Intensification of ageism and intergenerational tensions on social media amid COVID-19. *Leisure Sciences*, 43(1), 56–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2020.1773983>
- Officer, A., Schneiders, M. L., Wu, D., Nash, P., Thiyagarajan, J. A., & Beard, J. (2016). Valuing older people: Time for a global campaign to combat ageism. *Bulletin of the World Health Organisation*, 94(10), 710–710A. <https://doi.org/10.2471/BLT.16.184960>
- Okun, S. & Ayalon, L. (2022). Eradicating ageism through social campaigns: An Israeli case study in the shadow of COVID-19. *Journal of Social Issues*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12540>
- Rabinovich, M. (2017). *The older adult's population in the processes of urban renewal*. The Israel Affordable Housing Center (IAHC). Faculty of Law, Tel Aviv University. (Hebrew). https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/976b1a_45f34bb963714c0fb14d34c7218f8e51.pdf
- Rozin, K. (2022). The Israeli Pension Law is no longer relevant. *Calcalist* 6. 5 (in Hebrew) https://www.calcalist.co.il/local_news/article/r11lzakl5
- Spiel, K., Gerling, K., Bennett, C. L., Brulé, E., Williams, R. M., Rode, J., & Mankoff, J. (2020). Nothing about us without us: Investigating the role of critical disability studies in HCI. In Extended abstracts of the 2020 CHI conference on human factors in computing systems (CHI EA '20). *Association for computing machinery*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3334480.3375150>
- Swift, H. J., & Chasteen, A. L. (2021). Ageism in the time of COVID-19. *Group Process Intergroup Relate*, 24(2), 246–252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220983452>
- Vervaecke, D., Meisner, B. A., & Meeks, S. (2021). Care mongering and assumptions of need: The spread of compassionate ageism during COVID-19. *The Gerontologist*, 61(2), 159–165. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnaa131>
- Wilson, D. C. (2020). The price of age discrimination: When older workers face discrimination, everybody loses. *Gallup Business Journal*. <https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/23164/price-age-discrimination.aspx>
- World Health Organization. (2021). Global report on ageism. *WHO*. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240016866>
- Wyman, M. F., Shiovitz-Ezra, S., & Bengel, J. (2018). Ageism in the health care system: Providers, patients, and systems. In L. Ayalon & C. Tesch-Römer Eds., *Contemporary perspectives on ageism* (pp: pp. 193–212). *International Perspectives on Aging*, 19. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73820-8_13
- Yishai, Y. (2021). Marginalized groups in Israel: They are seen, but not all are heard. *Iyunim*, 35, 34–60. (In Hebrew).