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The persistent problem of ageism in the cause of inclusive ageing

Professor Philip Taylor

Abstract

Ageism is often expressed as a phenomenon of older adults, but it can also apply to younger people. Stereotypes of older adults have emerged in the quest to overcome ageist attitudes. These include pronouncements about characteristics of older adults such as wisdom, reliability, and being more productive. However, the evidence does not support these claims. The issues are more complex and intersectoral and are less about age and more about other characteristics. To counter the current discourse, five interrelated principles are proposed for the basis of an evidence-based advocacy on ageing and work.

Keywords: age discrimination, age stereotypes, older workers

Introduction

In many nations much public policy and advocacy is presently focused on prolonging working lives in response to ageing populations. While older people's employment has not solely been considered through an age discrimination lens this issue has received much attention. Reports regularly conclude that age discrimination is commonplace, and the phenomenon is primarily associated with older ages.

In Australia, advocacy has emerged in the cause of overcoming age discrimination but much of this is ageist. To illustrate, in a speech titled *The Economic Impacts of Ageism* given by **Emma Dawson** of social policy think tank Per Capita at an event organised by leading Australian advocacy organisation Council on the Ageing in 2019, she refers to ageism as being an “entrenched and widespread prejudice”, stating that the ‘root of the problem can be found in the dominant narrative in our political and social discourse that frames ageing as almost entirely a negative experience’. She explains that ‘many older people want to keep working but are shut out of the labour market due to ageism in the workforce’. Yet, she claims elsewhere in her speech that “repeated studies, both here [Australia] and overseas, have shown that older workers are more productive (they are less likely to spend time at work on Facebook!), more reliable, less likely to leave their jobs every two to five years, and bring experience and complex problem solving abilities to the workforce that have taken years to develop”.

In evaluating these comments, it is important to consider critiques of research and advocacy concerning issues of age and work. Firstly, the logic of *age equality* would seem to preclude an especial focus on older people and standard definitions consider that ageism can be experienced at any age. From such a standpoint the age advocacy outlined above might be considered overtly ageist. Furthermore, disregarding experiences of age discrimination or arguing that it is widespread may be considered ageist if contradicted by the evidence. And research indicates that the health of those experiencing ageism or age discrimination may be adversely affected. So, what does the evidence have to say about older workers’ productivity, experiences of ageism and how best to make the case for their employment?

Are older workers more productive?

Puzzlingly, age stereotypes are often presented as facts about older workers' capabilities. So-called business cases for older workers promoted by advocates regularly make reference to their supposed greater loyalty, reliability and experience compared to younger people. But commentators have warned against lessening the impact of diversity messaging by legitimising the use of age stereotypes.

Also, such arguments do not have a solid basis in evidence. Research indicates that the relationship between age and job performance is complex. Further and perversely, it seems that the very arguments put forward for employing older workers - that they are more committed, loyal and experienced - may risk confirming manager perceptions that they are unsuited to modern workplaces. Consequently, even disregarding the ageist overtones of present 'age' advocacy, articulating a business case for older workers is not easy.

Are older workers vulnerable?

Is age discrimination widespread and ongoing? It seems not. Advocates often quote from a survey commissioned by the [Australian Human Rights Commission \(AHRC\)](#) which found that approximately a quarter of older people report experiences of age discrimination (but notably not that three quarters do not) but other national surveys have found that the incidence of perceived age discrimination against older workers is lower than this and perhaps declining.

What of the notion that age discrimination is a phenomenon only or mostly experienced by older people? Again, evidence suggests

otherwise. Research indicates that while older jobseekers are more likely to experience age discrimination, it is younger people who are more likely to experience it in the course of their employment.

Why does this matter?

In recent times in Australia a fake age advocacy has emerged that makes unsupported claims in the face of contradictory evidence, uses empirical research selectively and lacks sound conceptual underpinnings. Its intentions appear ideological rather than to accurately inform public debate and as such might be considered to be akin to a form of propaganda. In such advocacy ageism and age discrimination are narrowly conceived, misunderstood and inaccurately described, operating to the detriment of both younger and older people.

What can be done about it?

Five interrelated principles should form the basis of an evidence-based advocacy on ageing and work. The first concerns the role of advocacy in informing public understanding. To illustrate, inflated claims regarding the prevalence of age discrimination may have seeped into the public consciousness, perversely to the detriment of efforts to prolong working lives. For instance, according to research perceptions of ageism in society are a commonly reported reason for retirement.

Second, instead of drawing on stereotypes a more effective advocacy may be constructed on a foundation of age neutrality, that questions the relevance of age for employment decisions, overcoming the problem of advocacy being open to accusations of ageism, and consequently of muddling the public discourse. The

present advocacy standpoint also risks older people being mistrusted, considered irrelevant and deemed only suitable for roles requiring 'traditional' skills.

Third, whatever a person's age, it is how the multiple aspects of their identity intersect that impacts on how they experience inclusion and exclusion at work. Age discrimination, thus, may be experienced differently by workers of the same age depending on the context. To meaningfully address age-related issues a range of other factors must also be taken into account.

Fourth, older and younger workers are more accurately viewed as complements than competitors but there is a popular view that lowering unemployment among younger people will be achieved by older people getting out of the way, even among the latter's advocates. Thus, according to older people's advocacy organisation National Seniors Australia recently in response to the economic downturn caused by the global pandemic, early retirement 'would potentially free up some of the jobs that could go to younger workers or workers in their 50s struggling to find employment. Maybe even reduce the official unemployment figures, at a time when it's heading skyward!'. Yet, according to economists, in terms of jobs there is no pie that must be equitably distributed. Labour markets do not work like that.

Fifth is the discarding of the traditional three phase notion of the lifecycle (education, work and retirement) instead encouraging a more diversified, flexible and dynamic life pattern. Such an approach would move beyond policies centred on certain phases of life or certain age groups, by introducing a global approach, offering individuals rights and resources that make them the authors of their own life courses.

In acknowledging that age inclusivity is an issue for people of all ages, not only for older people, a better approach might involve commencing a generational dialogue concerning the causes of ageism and how it can be overcome. This is particularly important during a period of unprecedented economic and social upheaval, when rates of youth unemployment rose dramatically in many countries in 2020 and there is considerable current public debate concerning the societal value of older people. At this time, it is critical that age advocates get their messages straight. For more information on Philip Taylor's work see, "The enduring myth of endemic age discrimination in the Australian labour market". [doi:10.1017/S0144686X21001112](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X21001112).

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