

Chapter 9

Conceptualizing Ageism: From Prejudice and Discrimination to Fourth Ageism

Paul Higgs

The spectre of ageism has been an ever-present concern throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Older people are not only at more risk of contracting and dying of the virus, but nursing home residents have the highest death rates of all. In addition, older people have often found their freedoms restricted when they are included in the official lists of the vulnerable needing shielding from the rest of the population purely on the basis of their age. Politicians have even viewed the deaths of older people as necessary collateral damage: economic survival trumps social solidarity. Certainly, most organisations advocating for or studying later life have protested loudly against the ageist assumptions made by policy makers. Age studies scholar and activist Margaret Morganroth Gullette figures prominently in this campaign. In her provocative article in the left-leaning *Dissent* magazine, Gullette frames the response to the pandemic as “eldercide.” Her intervention and continued role as a public intellectual have cemented the idea of ageism as a critical concept for understanding the oppression of old age in both the humanities and the social sciences.

The realization that ageism increasingly plays a critical role in framing ageing studies motivated a special issue of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* in 2021 on *Ageism: A Health Humanities Approach*, edited by Marlene Goldman and Paul Higgs. This special issue provided an opportunity for scholars in the humanities and social sciences to address whether ageism should be considered a technical term, or whether it performs a political and polemical function (71). To this I would like to add a further consideration, specifically, whether the use of “ageism” by scholars necessarily has the quality of signifying different

things for different people, making it something of a floating concept in ageing studies and critical gerontology. This may seem a sharp comment to make about a term that was given an official definition by the World Health Organization in 2021 to underpin the same body's Global Campaign to Combat Ageism (*Global Report on Ageism*), however, as I will argue there is still considerable variation in how the term is used by different authors and it is unlikely that a consensus about its usage will emerge anytime soon .

The lack of consistency in the use of the term has not blunted the use of the term, or indeed the desire for it to describe more than the discrimination experienced by older people. As a result Gulleto's interventions on the nature of ageism have considerable significance given that she proposes a core process for ageism, namely, decline ideology. By doing so she extends the idea of ageism to a wholesale critique of society. In *Ending Ageism*, she maintains that the ageist ideology of age-related decline is pervasive in all cultural forms and social encounters. It is, moreover, profoundly oppressive, leading to both shame and trauma for older people based around a projected fear of old age. Decline ideologies are so extensive, she argues, that the term "aging" itself should be dropped from the lexicon of terms used to describe old age and the term "ageism" used in its stead (*Against Aging*). Indeed, she also asserts that age studies should replace ageing studies as the appropriate self-description of the field so as not to perpetuate another form of decline ideology. In her view, the word "ageing" in contemporary western society describes a process of unequivocal decline; thus, the word itself is an ageist concept. Ageism, like the oppressions of gender, sexuality, and race is therefore not only the source of social injustice, but also a cause of personal grief and psychic damage, demanding a politics of identity and redress.

One central argument in this chapter is that the success of Gullette's formulation of ageism may not lie in its conceptual innovation, but rather in its capacity to square a circle particular to the social and political tasks of critical gerontology and ageing (or age) studies; that is, how to treat the discrimination faced by older people as equivalent to other forms of oppression. From psychiatrist Dr. Robert Butler and activist Maggie Kuhn onwards, there has been a desire to establish the links between age, race, and gender. This has proved difficult, however, given that age groups are relational and not permanent positions occupied by individuals, which change over time as individuals mature and grow older. This relationality leads to the problem that any basis for an identity politics of age is undermined by older people themselves not wishing to be identified with the negative aspects of ageing and old age. Such aversion to old age by older people themselves may explain why ageism, it has often been claimed, is the most acceptable form of prejudice and is used by those who would demur from expressing overtly racist or sexist sentiments. It could be that by demonstrating that the concept of ageing is itself ageist, Gullette has cut through the Gordian knot that prevents age from being understood as a marker of identity and allows it to be a source of oppression akin to the markers of race, sex, gender, and class.

To disentangle the complexities of ageism as a concept, this chapter begins with an overview of ageism as is currently used by many age studies scholars with an eye to its political and ideological shifts over time. First, I take closer look at the genealogy of ageism associated with the work of Dr. Robert Butler that draws connections between physical signs of ageing and discrimination. Next, I turn to the work of activists and theorists who built on Butler's writing to argue that ageism functions not simply as a form of discrimination, but more systematically as a source of social oppression rooted in notions of vulnerability and risk. In doing so, however, I argue that their work relies on a hazy understanding of ageism that

serves as a catch-all for any and all negative outcomes for older people without offering a fuller explanation of how ageism operates within culture and society. The main argument in this chapter is therefore that to have a workable understanding of ageism, we need to address both the physical changes associated with the biological changes that occur as humans age and, equally critical, the powerful impact of subjective, social, and structural conceptions of ageing. To this end, in the final section of this essay, I review the approach I developed in collaboration with Chris Gilleard, which outlines the opposing concepts of the third and fourth ages to account for the drivers of a specific form of ageism linked to the social imaginary of the fourth age. Gullette's arguments about eldercide need to be located within this framework, rather than being seen as relating to all older people.

A Genealogy of Ageism

The use of the term "ageism" has a relatively short history beginning in the political ferment of the 1970s in America. Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins understanding of intersectionality (*Black Feminist Thought*), the sociologist Carroll Estes extended Hill's notion of the interlocking systems of oppression of race/ethnicity, gender, and class to age in her opening chapter of *Social Policy and Aging* (13). This reflected an awareness within gerontology that ageing itself was also subject to oppressive processes already identified elsewhere in American society¹. "Age-ism" as a concept was coined by the American doctor and gerontologist Robert N. Butler in his opinion piece "Age-ism: Another Form of Bigotry," published in the *Gerontologist* in 1969. According to Butler, ageism was primarily a form of prejudice against old age and older people: "Age-ism reflects a deep-seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged—a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, 'uselessness,' and death" (243). While such attitudes to older people can be found throughout history, Butler deliberately positioned

“ageism” to parallel other forms of discrimination such as race, gender, and social class, which were coming to the fore during this period. Butler’s later book *Why Survive?* (1975) saw ageism as a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people based on their age in the same way that racism and sexism accomplished by focusing on skin colour and gender (12). According to the WHO *Global Report* (2021) ageism refers to the combination of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination directed toward others or oneself based on age (xix). Significantly, it can apply to people of all ages. The WHO’s approach provides a standard template for understanding ageism in the social sciences and social policy.

We can see from its adoption by the WHO that this formulation has been particularly useful in the field of the social psychology of prejudice. Researchers have found that negative stereotypes of old age can both stigmatize and discriminate against older people in ways that can be overcome when ageist assumptions are directly challenged. Psychologist Todd Nelson helpfully identifies ageism as a prejudice against our feared future selves; Michael North and Susan Fiske offer an alternative approach. They argue that ageism is a trans-national phenomenon whose origins lie in the competition between age-cohorts for status and jobs. This type of competition manifests in negative assessments of physical markers of agedness such as grey hair and wrinkles.

Giving a critical role to stereotypes and prejudices, however, has not satisfied many working in the field who argue that the discrimination faced by older people is rooted far deeper than competition for status and jobs. In a chapter on ageism and social policy, Peter Townsend asserts that the discriminatory position faced by older people is not simply due to age but is in fact a form of what he terms structured dependency—social arrangements deliberately

created by government social policies more concerned with structuring the labour market than with safeguarding older people's wellbeing. The recognition that old age was for most older people in the twentieth century defined by a state retirement age led Townsend to argue that their standard of living was poor because of choices made by governments, and not simply due solely to their age. In his view older people were in fact placed by the government into a state of social and economic dependency. This attribution of the causal role of government policy in creating the ageism and discrimination faced by older people has become a mainstay of social gerontology, exemplified by Alan Walker, who has used the terms ageism and structured dependency interchangeably in his discussion of twenty-first century generational conflict.

From this brief overview of the use of ageism by WHO and social psychologists, it appears that ageism is a relatively simple concept to understand—a technical term that connects the intersections between stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminations based on age. Unfortunately, this definition is not sufficient by itself because it avoids addressing those aspects of what scholars including Erdman Palmore term “positive ageism” (*Ageism: Negative and Positive*), which include the statuses accorded to seniority, as well as the provision of age-related pensions to those reaching particular age transitions. Paradoxically, the discrimination faced by older people is also combined with privileges and rights not available to younger age groups—what the sociologist Anthony Giddens terms “precautionary aftercare” (182-183).

Ageism and Oppression

What then, if anything, comprises the conceptual core of ageism? Is it the negative connotations of stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination which serve as the jumping off

point for a political project addressing social injustice? There is much evidence that ageism is used to give shape to a politics of age. As I noted earlier, alongside Butler a key figure in articulating the political status of ageism was the American radical and activist Maggie Kuhn, who was instrumental in founding the Gray Panthers and who saw their work as challenging the stereotyping and discrimination of older people. As Renee Beard and John Williamson point out in their study of the internal dynamics of the senior rights movement, the Gray Panthers engaged in radical campaigns against ageism from outside the mainstream political system, highlighting the links between other disadvantaged and oppressed groups and older people, rather than acting as a purely advocacy-based organization.

Kuhn and the Gray Panthers had a powerful impact on social gerontologists such as Estes (see for example *Maggie Kuhn: Social Theorist of Radical Gerontology*). Their influence facilitated the term's shift from describing discrimination faced by older people to constituting a form of oppression equivalent to that of racism and sexism. As two leading social gerontologists, Toni Calasanti and Katherine Slevin write in their book *Gender, Social Inequalities, and Aging*:

As a form of oppression, ageism *does* touch on everyone, even those who are most advantaged and privileged in society. Ageism matters, then, as another form of oppression intersecting with previous ones. As a result, the content of each—ageism, sexism, racism, and homophobia—and the ways in which people experience each, are transformed by age relations as well. (39)

The idea that ageism can be represented as a form of oppression has been very influential in expanding the critical lens of gerontologists. This approach has been adopted by scholars in cultural studies. Significantly, it has allowed for the study of the forms in which the negative positioning of older people by society is perpetuated through language and culture. Within

cultural studies, there has been a focus on the role of the mass media including Cecile Givskov and Line Petersen's discussion of the representation of the older body as creating an oppressive and ageist cultural environment, as well as Maria Edström's study of the representation of older women over three decades are examples of this approach. Deborah Jermyn has described the role of ageism on the popular culture of celebrity in perpetuating systematic ageism by demonstrating that women celebrities are subject to the oppressive regimes of age and gender. Pointing out that not all ageist representations of older people are concerned with negative imagery, Stephen Katz and Toni Calasanti noted that positive representations of successful ageing can also be profoundly oppressive through their creation and maintenance of divisive normative constructions of old age.

The Humanities and Ageism

While most humanities scholars working in the field of ageing or age studies are familiar with or have used the term, ageism has not received, until Gullette's intervention, the same level of conceptual scrutiny as in the social sciences. Scholars in the humanities engaged in interrogating and critiquing the complex representations of later life have often been relatively cautious or outright critical about the usefulness of the term. They may note the negative implications of various forms of discrimination implicit in culture and cultural forms but not wish to locate it in particular theoretical constructs. Professor of English Kathleen Woodward points out in her *Youthfulness as a Masquerade* that "'gerontophobia' and 'ageism' both refer to prejudice against ageing and the elderly" and that she uses the terms interchangeably in her work (141). The historian Pat Thane also rarely uses the concept and tends to use the term "age discrimination" in her work about the historical development of old age (*Old Age*). Taking a more critical stance, Butler's biographer and historian, W. Andrew Achenbaum has detailed in his *A History of Ageism Since 1969* the ways in which

ageism has evolved into a myriad of different forms given the variegated nature of later life in terms of health, education, marital status, culture, and geographical location. Significantly, he asserts that it is social class that still matters: “Disenfranchised older people have less access to power, prestige, or property” (13). He does not underplay the effects of ageism, but he does not see it as a totalizing idea which can be used to explain the circumstances of old age. Thomas R. Cole, the noted humanities scholar and author of the history of ageing in America goes further. In his *Journey of Life*, he writes:

As a conceptual tool, ageism suffers from the same intellectual parochialism that plagues social gerontology generally. It is neither informed by broader social or psychological theory nor grounded in historical specificity. On the one hand, myths and stereotypes are often treated as if they were scientific hypotheses to be falsified. “Facts” and “reality” are invoked against “myths” and “fancy.” This naïve empiricism, however, cannot explain why people continue to believe such obviously false stereotypes; nor can it explain why until quite recently so much biomedical and social science reinforced and legitimated negative stereotypes. (229)

This reticence on the part of some major humanities figures studying ageing to use or develop the concept of ageism, however, has not prevented it from being used by humanities scholars to situate their work. Some have drawn on the wider understanding of ageism to see it as one of a number of intersectional dimensions of oppression. Literary scholar Linda Hess has used a queer-theoretical lens to expose the naturalized and essentialist views of old age in the form of chrononormativity present in literature and film. Addressing the possibilities of resistance to age oppression, Jen Harvie’s paper “Adversarial Ageism” examines how ageism and age-phobia have been challenged in contemporary dramas dealing with the supposed negative effects of the baby-boomer cohorts. In taking on board the need to see ageism as much more

than discrimination, these and other humanities scholars have not only integrated their thinking with critical gerontologists but have also developed a political response to the issues surrounding ageing that goes beyond purely academic concerns. This may well win plaudits with other radical scholars and activists, but it does not necessarily invalidate the criticisms about the concept of ageism made by earlier humanities scholars outlined above: that an extended concept of ageism does not help to clarify the issues around the negative status of old age and that it runs the risk of perpetuating its own “myths” and “stereotypes.” This criticism becomes even more relevant when the concept of ageism becomes understood as constituting an ideology complete with intentional or unintentional Marxist undertones.

Ageism as an Ideology

If ageism is to be understood as more than a description of the discrimination faced by older people, and if it also constitutes a part of a political project, then it becomes important to identify what exactly are the ideological features of ageism: what sets of beliefs and practices perpetuate the social structures leading to ageism? Such is the essence of the position Bill Bytheway offers in his book *Ageism*. He argues that ageism is an overarching ideology that serves to devalue older people and which functions to explain their economic, social, and cultural marginality in society. In a further work co-written with Julia Johnson (Johnson and Bytheway), he identifies three forms in which this occurs: Institutionalized ageism where age related legislative restrictions discriminate against older people; internalized ageism including negative interpersonal interactions; and lastly benevolent patronage where the old are seen as representing a passive category of person. Within this strand of approaching ageism as an ideology little theoretical engagement is present, rather the focus is on strategies to combat the negative framing of old age created by ageism. Other scholars have engaged more directly with theoretical debates in the social sciences following the ‘cultural turn’² of

the 1980s and 1990s. Following trends in post-structuralist and postmodernist thought, ageism in this approach can be understood broadly as “ageist discourse” as much as “ageist ideology,” and these terms are often used as equivalent and interchangeable concepts. For example, while the discourse analysts Nikolas and Justine Coupland describe ageist discourse as the forms of talk and meaning to which an ageist perspective is applied, Justine Coupland, also refers to ageist ideology in her work on discourses of control in skincare product marketing. This terminological overlap may be because positioning ageism as an ideology has considerable theoretical advantages in that it aligns scholars with a rich set of intellectual resources drawn from the long history of critical theory and Marxism as well as an ongoing engagement with the politics that emerged out of the cultural turn of the late twentieth century (Hawkes). Certainly, this is the view put forward in *Cultures of Ageing* (Gilleard and Higgs). A good example of the continuing appeal of Marxist thinking which tries to position ageism as part of political contestation is provided by health sociologists Brian and Charlotte Salter, who have posited an overarching ideology of ageing. They address the issues surrounding active ageing, drawing on the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci on the role of hegemony in modern society, concluding that the construction of “active ageing” constitutes a dominant or “hegemonic” project brought about by public health specialists to counter pervasive bio-medical notions of decline.

The influence of Marxism may give a radical and critical foundation to the understanding of ageism, but such counter-hegemonic positions are not confined to Marxist or Marxist (a term applied to those applying Marxist categories in their thinking rather than being fully signed up adherents of historical materialism) thinkers. Other currents in radical or new left thought are also present. These alternative approaches influenced by different shades of critical thought can be seen in two clear areas. The first develops the American philosopher

and gender theorist Judith Butler's notion of performativity, which has been used by scholars such as Linn Sandberg to queer the performance of age and sexuality as well as by Mary Louisa Cappelli in understanding forms of postfeminist sexuality. The second current can be seen in relation to age studies scholars who draw on the idea of governmentality as developed by Michel Foucault. For example, Thibault Moolaert and Simon Biggs' work on active ageing and mature subjectivity explicitly draws on Foucault's theories to explore how a new form of active ageing has been constructed by social policies, while a host of scholars have relied on Foucault's work to examine the widespread approach to risk occasioned by governments' sole use of chronological age as a predictor of vulnerability and risk created by the pandemic (Lupton; Naughton et al.; Cook et al.; Constantinou).

These theoretical resources of Marxism and new left/radical thought have provided an intellectual toolkit that has allowed for conceptual development as well as sustained critique of the nature of power. This legacy as well as its contemporary exponents has generated many insights into how ageing is being articulated in both high and low-income countries and how what has been presented as benign ultimately has negative ageist consequences. It is also noteworthy that, as observed in my work with Gilleard elsewhere, there has also been a conceptual drift towards emphasizing the discursive and representational dimensions of ageism and concomitant movement away from outlining what may be bringing them into existence (see *The Ideology of Ageism*). Critically, this drift towards a focus on the ways that ageing is represented has, I would argue, not moved the debate on ageism much further than the original formulation of ageism as stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. I now move on to suggest a potentially more useful approach to understanding ageism and the way it might operate.

From the Ideology of Ageism to the Social Imaginaries of the Fourth Age

Recognizing that the term ageism has become too extended and often fails to clarify what it is being used to explain, I now want to make the case for a more theoretically specific conception of ageism—one that is limited to the fourth age. Gilleard and I argue in “The Ideology of Ageism” that it might be better to restrict its use to examples of overt discrimination against the frailest and most dependent of older people. We have criticized the essentialist projection of ageism as an ideology given that, as noted above, it swiftly becomes an all-encompassing explanation for everything negative connected to the lives of older people. Furthermore, ageism takes on a reductionist patina when even positive age discrimination is seen as ultimately oppressive. Most significantly, we argue that treating ageism as a totalizing structure ultimately fails because unlike other ideologies, ageism does not operate behind a set of beliefs serving the interests of a particular age group; nor does it represent any specific logic underlying an external structural process leading to the oppression of old age.

Furthermore, heterogeneity within ageing is well established. The older people become, the less they have in common with other people their age given a life course of cumulative and unique experiences. Consequently, older people share little in common other than their chronological age, which identifies them as “older.” In addition, ascriptions of agedness vary from society to society and from culture to culture, forestalling any universal criteria for their categorization. For example, it may be that becoming a grandparent, regardless of age, marks the entry into agedness. It is for this reason that ageing, as Gullette insists, is a physiological feature defined by irreversibility and decline, which needs to be separated from old age—a socially constructed and malleable social status. It is important, therefore, not to confuse ageing with old age, and to avoid naturalizing them as products of biology or relativizing

them into social constructs. Ageing is not just the passing of years, as attested by the different notions of development and adulthood. Similarly, old age is not simply the ascribing of individuals to social locations (or the combination of attributes such as gender, race and ethnicity, social class, age, and others which affect a person's access to social structures and opportunities such as paid employment, housing, pensions and others) without reference to some of the bodily effects of ageing. Being older not only involves loss—physical, social, and material—but is also irreversible (Strehler). Therefore, our understanding of later life combines aspects of both the corporeal and the social.

We can see the importance of this combined approach in the profound transformation of the social relations of old age made in the last decades of the twentieth century and the early decades of the current one, predominantly through retirement becoming a social and cultural space of its own and not merely an antechamber to death (Gilleard and Higgs, *Cultures of Ageing; Contexts of Ageing*). Over this period, old age has transmuted from being a terminal destination in the life course to an agentic social space, and for which a better label is “later life.” The opening up of post-working life has been described as marking the emergence of the third age. Given that one of the drivers of third-age culture is a rejection of the residual category of old age, it is not surprising that this can also manifest itself as a rejection of the status of old age itself, both as a personal identity and as a social category (Higgs and Gilleard, “Frailty, Abjection, and the ‘Othering’ of the Fourth Age”). Seeing age as representing nothing more than a number has been a motivating factor in rejecting social exclusion and fighting negative images of those in retirement. It has also been a stimulus for distancing the “young old” (originally defined by Bernice Neugarten as ages 55 to 75) from those whose lives seem closer to the stereotypes of decline and dependency that have stigmatized “elderly people” (typically defined as people aged 65 and over) for so long.

Indeed, it is one of the virtues of ageing studies that scholars working within this field have been among the first to identify the rejection by many older people of the confining status of old age and to celebrate the potential of a more purposeful and self-directed later life.

There are many ways of attributing causality to this shift away from an institutionalized notion of old age. Whether it is the pervasiveness of youth cultures that valorize an ageless ageing, or whether it is the desire for older people to fit into a more flexible identity remains open to debate (Andrews; Vincent). What is less debatable is the recognition by many different commentators that the vicissitudes of physiological ageing, including the increasing rates of cognitive impairment evident at older ages, require a conceptual separation between different groups of older people. Peter Laslett, and Paul Baltes are two of the most notable researchers to use the idea of a fourth age to define those whose ill health and dependency betokens a terminal phase in people's lives. Less explicitly but with the same intent was Bernice Neugarten's distinction between the "young old" and the "old old," and Matilda White Riley's use of the term "oldest old" to mark off a growing segment of the older population aged above 85 whose increased risk factors for cognitive and functional decline are considered key factors in their experience of ageing regardless of their actual health status (Suzman and Riley).³ While these conceptualizations diverge on what are the salient features that necessitate treating some groups of older people as different from others, there is an underlying assumption that some distinction is necessary. Old age is not a unitary feature of society or of individuals' lives.

In our work on the fourth age, Chris Gilleard and I have seen the conceptual dichotomy between the third and the fourth ages as crucial in locating the changes that have occurred to later life (Higgs and Gilleard, *Rethinking Old Age*). The culture of the third age, we have

argued, operate under the shadow of the social imaginary of the fourth. Third age culture projects fears of an unwanted old age defined by frailty, loss, and the erosion of agency over the whole of society, members of which would rather conceive of later life as relatively unencumbered by such thoughts. The fourth age is not constructed by those participating in third age lifestyles rather it is a social imaginary coalescing around themes of decline and loss in old age that have existed throughout history (see Gilleard and Higgs “Social Imaginary”). Social imaginaries are symbolic representations of a society projected back to itself. Old age and the lifecourse have to be understood in this context. The expansion of third age possibilities has contracted the social space occupied by “real old age” (372) and symbolically re-activated the pre-modern notion of senility as a life stage (373). The fourth age operates along four main vectors: frailty; abjection; dementia and the moral imperative of care which have been summarized as “aging without agency” (Higgs and Gilleard *Rethinking Old Age*). In contemporary societies such circumstances appear as the diametric opposite of the choice and agency motivating third age culture. It is within the tension between these opposing cultural projections of ageing that the idea of ageism needs situating. The fourth age derives much of its power as a social imaginary because of the power of the third age which itself contextualizes and residualizes “real old age.” The more that retirement and later life become an arena of lifestyle choice and fulfillment, the more age-related frailty and dependency become distanced from it. It is therefore unsurprising that the nursing home and assisted living facilities become the condensed image of a rejected old age, to be resisted, if not avoided, at all costs (Gilleard and Higgs, “An Enveloping Shadow”).

The fear of the fourth age, I would argue, cannot be simply reduced to a pernicious ideology of ageism, nor, as in the case of the fear of dementia, can it be simply seen as clinical psychologist Tom Kitwood describes it, a “malignant social psychology” that undervalues the

personhood of individuals with cognitive impairment (181-186). The emphasis on health, leisure, and self-actualization already present in consumer society feeds the ever-evolving culture of the third age. This inevitably leads to a desire for differentiation and distinction by some older people from those seen to be displaying the markers of the fourth age, whether this be in the form of physical aids like walkers and hearing aids, in simple actions such as mild forgetfulness, or in age-marked products like large print books or incontinence pads.

The Emergence of Fourth Ageism in the Covid-19 Pandemic

Starting from an acknowledgement that, in the prosperous nations at least,⁴ there are two different articulations of later life operating in contemporary old age—one being the culture of the third age and the other the social imaginary of the fourth age—allows for a better understanding of the limits of the term “ageism” as well creating the circumstances for what Gilleard and I have called a “fourth ageism” (Higgs and Gilleard, “Fourth Ageism”). If this form of ageism is better understood as a complex type of discrimination rooted in the contradictions between the third and fourth age rather than an oppression or an ideology negatively affecting all older people, then the experiences of older people during the Covid-19 pandemic can be better understood. In particular, using fourth ageism allows us to understand why there was both a high age-related death rate among older people as well as a fragmentation of opinion about age-related containment policies among the retired population and organizations advocating on their behalf (Fletcher).

At a global level, there was a relatively consistent governmental response to the pandemic. Societal lockdowns, quarantines, restrictions on movement, physical distancing, the wearing of masks, and increased handwashing were policies adopted by most nation states. This resulted in a polarization of political reactions resulting in a variety of social and cultural

fractures. Ageing and old age were not immune to these fault lines. The inclusion of older people in lists of those needing to be shielded (and by implication kept separate from the rest of society) because of their perceived vulnerability provoked anger among some of those in these older age groups. The use of chronological age (typically being aged 70 or above) to demarcate those in the “normal” population from those deemed vulnerable fueled resentment and accusations of ageism (Hughes). As Gullette has noted, the age 70 appears to be as arbitrary an age as any other age-defined cutoff points. It was commonly argued that many 70+ individuals were healthier than of some of those in younger cohorts whose health status put them at greater risk of succumbing to the virus.

The lack of consultation in the implementation of these restrictions also fed into a feeling that those aged above 70 were being pushed back into the residualized status of simply being old (Vickers). Rather than seeing this as further evidence of ageism based on chronological age alone, a better argument might be that what we witnessed was a split between those defining themselves through the cultures of the third age and those caught up being defined by the tropes of the fourth age. Viewing older people *en bloc* as vulnerable and defined by ill health challenges the post-work identities that prior to the pandemic many retired people saw as relatively unproblematic. This set of circumstances may seem a failure of age solidarity, or of a recognition of the oppression of ageism (maybe even a “false consciousness”), but that is in many ways the point. There are divisions among those categorized as old, divisions that in some cases make salient the issue of chronological age and, in others, make salient other “non-age-related” characteristics such as class, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. The former issues of “decline” are often absent in discussions of ageism because they center uncomfortably on the role of the body, specifically the corporeality of the ageing body. While old age as a status or category is socially constructed, age-related bodily changes have their

own natures of being even if they occur within social contexts. These physiological changes have their own determinations that cannot be easily ignored. As biologist Leonard Hayflick observes, ageing occurs when molecules reach their limit of turnover and are no longer able to repair themselves, putting them at increased vulnerability to disease. Whether the fear of ageing has deep psychological roots or is simply the consequence of a general awareness of age and decline is outside the remit of this chapter (see Levy; Higgs and Gilleard, “Rethinking Old Age”). Still, as an integral part of the social imaginary of the fourth age, this fear needs recognition as a factor motivating the distinction between the third and fourth ages and contributing to the fracturing of a unitary idea of ageism.

The fracturing of ageism as a concept that confronts all older people seems to be especially present when issues associated with the province of “real old age” (aka. dependency and dementia) are involved. A very good example in the U.K. is the failure of governments of all political hues to come up with a set of coherent policies for nursing home care for older people (Wise). Unlike the medical and health care provided by the National Health Service (N.H.S.) which is free at the point of use, care provided by nursing homes is paid by the individuals using it, if they have assets of over £16,000. The unfairness of this situation, given the premise of the “from cradle to grave” welfare state, is acknowledged by all sides (Timmins 44-50). What is remarkable is that every commission that has come up with a solution addressing this inequity has foundered on a broad political unwillingness to initiate reform. This might seem a *prima facie* example of ageism. But a cursory examination of the reasons why there is such reluctance suggests that not only do younger cohorts of older people wish to distance themselves from a projected future they hope to avoid, but when asked to vote for such proposals, they actively resist endorsing parties who suggest it. In the U.K. General Election of 2017, the Conservative Government of Theresa May is deemed to

have lost crucial older voters because of what was termed a “death tax” proposal to fund nursing home care from the estates of older people who had spent their final months in them (Heaven). While this policy initiative may have had many flaws, and certainly did little to overcome the exclusion of older people needing nursing care from the N.H.S., what was also significant was that the issue of the health and social needs of more dependent older people was not and has not been an important political issue for any older demographic. Ageism itself does not seem to figure in the politics of older people (Gilleard and Higgs, “The Power of Silver”). Organizations representing the views of older people are not typically mass movements; rather, they are often subsections of other movements, including the retired members sections of trades unions, or parts of the infrastructure of non-governmental organizations (N.G.O.s) and charities. What this demonstrates is that the divide between the third and fourth age is not one that gives rise to an identity based on age solidarity. Moreover, it suggests that a more pernicious fourth ageism has come to the fore.

The high death rates of older people in nursing homes were one of the salient internationally reported features of the pandemic. In country after country, there is evidence that residents were exposed to the virus because of policies that did not prioritize their lives (Fallon et al.). The reasons for this vary from one government to another. In the U.K., the fear of the N.H.S. being overwhelmed led to older hospital patients being discharged to nursing homes without being tested for the virus (Iacobucci). In Sweden, a focus on giving citizens personal responsibility for taking precautions rather than implementing a mandatory lockdown contributed to Covid-19 coming into facilities for older people through care workers mingling with the population at large (Orange). In Spain, the pandemic spread so rapidly that many nursing home residents were abandoned by their paid carers; later, they were found dead by army units sent out to discover what had happened to them (Minder and Peltier). These

examples show how the impact of the pandemic was considerably worse for those defined by the fourth age. This form of “eldercide” did occur. However, it did not occur because of chronological age, which would be the explanation of a generalized ideology of ageism; instead, it was a very specific form of discrimination enacted onto a specific part of the older population—those whose health was compromised to begin with. At the beginning of the pandemic, older residents of nursing homes, in particular, constituted a much less significant category for policy makers than other groups when decisions were being made.

This lack of significance was often underpinned by arguments that their deaths were inevitable or were a distraction from fighting for the lives of those more in need of attention (Wintour). In the U.K., some G.P. (family doctor) services had policies to issue Do Not Resuscitate (D.N.R.) forms to their older and vulnerable patients, irrespective of whether such notices had been requested or not (Ryan). The U.K. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (N.I.C.E.) also initially advised against the treatment of those categorized as “frail” to limit demand for hospital beds. However, when this was also applied to younger patients, such as people with learning disabilities, rather than just older ones, it was rapidly revised (Thomas). Examples such as these point to the usefulness of a more focused notion of ageism: the fourth ageism directed at those who represent the unwanted, distasteful side of later life. This approach is very different from the issues connected to conventional or radical formulations of ageism which demand change at representational, legal, and institutional levels.

Conclusion

As Chris Gilleard and I note in *The Ideology of Ageism*, the theoretical confusion regarding the causality of ageism leads to its over-extension and a profound social constructionism

which can reduce the corporeal dimensions of ageing to discursive propositions. As I argue throughout the chapter, ageism as a concept therefore becomes more diffuse and is applied without precision or focus. In its most totalizing form, it can strike almost conspiratorial notes, leading critics to see ageism behind everything age-related without pausing to consider the nuances underpinning ageist actions. While, as I have tried to illustrate, there has been much fruitful work in the humanities and in cultural studies, this success may have come at the expense of exploring the very real connections between the embodiment of ageing and the experience of growing older. The internal divisions of those living at older ages have produced contradictory articulations of what is meant by ageism—articulations that often ignore the implicit othering that occurs when the “young old” complain about being categorized alongside those who are positioned as truly “old.” Similarly, accepting that the “oldest old” are vulnerable, but denying that old age has any connection with corporeality and decline, seems perverse and ultimately unhelpful.

This being said, understanding that a totalizing concept of ageism has many difficulties for scholars wanting to delve deeper into how ageing and old age are not simply “natural facts” does not invalidate a more sophisticated enquiry into the ontological and existential questions that go with this territory. Here I go back to the special issue of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* that I edited with Marlene Goldman and to two papers published in it. The relational aspects of individual ageing provide a key backdrop to Giljeard’s reflection on the “unrealizability” of old age in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Old Age* where he discusses the incommensurability of old age as it affects the object and subject positions present in ageing (“Ageism and the Unrealizability of Old Age”). In other words, the “unrealizability” of age as an intrinsic experience means that the “subjective” sense of becoming or being “aged” can only ever be mediated through the gaze of others. Accepting one’s identity as “old”

necessarily involves acceding to that othering, a contradiction that lies at the heart of age as identity. Accepting this contradiction might help make sense of the subjectivity of ageism. From a different angle, Susan Pickard challenges the themes of abjection present in discussions of the fourth age by examining the literary memoirs of writers Kate Millett, George Hodgman, Doris Lessing, and Phillip Roth as they write about the old age of their parents (“Ageism, Existential and Ontological”). She suggests that the social imaginary of the fourth age is not static and can change, thus mitigating some of the most feared aspects of deep old age. Gilleard’s and Pickard’s interventions represent just two examples of how a more inflected and informed grasp of the complexity of later life can help us to understand how the discrimination and the cultural positioning faced by older people can be alleviated. Equally important, these approaches can assist in attempts to provide the resources for creating a better future for all, irrespective of their age and social position. Certainly, there are more writers and scholars currently engaging with these issues and developing our thinking about old age; whether they need to use an overextended notion of ageism to anchor their work is, at the very least, debatable.

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¹ Estes returns to these themes in her recent book *Aging A-Z* where she writes that identities intersect at the level of individual experience "to reflect multiple interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the macro- social-structural level (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism)" (188).

² For a discussion of the cultural turn see Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs. "The cultural turn in gerontology."

³ The history of these distinctions can be traced back to the distinction between "a green old age" and "sad decrepitude" in early English history (Thane 4).

⁴ On the point that the third age is not confined to high income countries, see Martin Hyde and Paul Higgs' *Ageing and Globalisation*, where they discuss the growth of third age cultures across the world particularly in the fields of leisure and tourism (110-118).