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## Ageism: perception and beliefs towards elderly people in India

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### **Abstract**

*Growing into old is a natural phenomenon but the attitudes, expectations; prejudices and stereotypes related to it have their own defining definition for it. Ageism, a prejudiced attitude, includes not only beliefs about another group but also the feelings and dispositions directed toward that group and its members. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the influence of gender and age on perception and belief towards elderly in a culturally diverse country like India. There were 300 participants ranging in age from 25-35, 45-65 and 65+ who took part in the study. It was hypothesized that a) In comparison to men women score lower on ageism. b) In comparison to older individuals younger individuals are more ageists. A survey method was used in this study and participants were required to complete the ageism scale to assess the perception and beliefs towards elderly people.*

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**Key words:** *ageism, gender and age*

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### **Introduction**

Old age is the closing period in the life span. Aging also refers to the processes of accruing maturity with passage of time". Aristotle described "old age as a time of disengagement and uncertainty". Growing into old is a natural phenomenon but the attitudes, expectations; prejudices and stereotypes related to it have their own defining definition for it.

The phenomenon of aging and the perception about population of older or elderly people varies. These terms are to some extent based on chronological criteria, but more importantly they refer to individual differences in social, psychological, and biological functioning. In fact, each of us differs somewhat in the way we perceive and define old age.

Ageism is different from other "isms" (sexism, racism etc.) for primarily two reasons: age classifications are not static and everybody experience ageism unless he/she dies at any early age, secondly one can be "ageist" with respect to both others and oneself. There have been a number of studies documenting ageist attitudes (e.g. Cameron, 1972; Britton & Britton, 1970; Ivester & king, 1977; McTavish, 1971; Tuckman and Lorge, 1953) among a variety of age groups. The results have been contradictory. Kilty & Feld (1976) found that the attitudes towards the aged may be more complex than just being ageist or non-ageist.

It is in human nature to categories people as per their convenience and as per they believe their perceptions to be the best fit for that particular category. From childhood alone we begin to understand the „category“ difference between the young and the old, starting the formations of stereotypes towards them, ignited and supported by the society we live in. As stated by Stein [7], age stereotypes are acquired early in life, and become so well ingrained that they may be automatically activated upon the mere presence of a category member. Age stereotypes are different from ageism because stereotypes can be both positive and negative beliefs and ageism

is generally considered to be negative. Stereotypes reflect beliefs held by an individual about the characteristics of a group of people [8]. Ageism, a prejudiced attitude, includes not only beliefs about another group but also the feelings and dispositions directed toward that group and its members [9].

Ageist attitudes are perpetuated in many ways. Consider for example, the lack of positive images of the elderly in advertisements and on TV programs, and the widespread use of demeaning language about old age that can be noticed frequently now days. These attitudes contain myths and stereotypes about old age which are deeply entrenched in all the societies who claim themselves modern. Even those who would not say that they are ageist probably have some ageist attitudes based on distorted or inadequate information. As Robert Butler has noted, **“the tragedy of old age is not that each of us must grow old and die, but that the processes of doing so has been made unnecessarily and at times excruciatingly, painful, humiliating, debilitating, and isolating”**.

Based upon such logic two hypotheses are formulated on the basis of gender and age related difference and tested in the present study. These are:

**H1: In comparison to men women score lower on ageism.**

**H2: In comparison to older individuals younger individuals are more ageist.**

## **METHOD**

### **Design**

The sample was divided into six groups by using the two classificatory variables of respondent's sex (male and female) and age (25 to 35 years, 45 to 65 years and 65+ years). All other variables were then examined as dependent variable through 2x3 ANOVAs to assess if significant variations exist among the groups due to sex and age.

### **Sample**

A purposive sample of 300 respondents living in Lucknow was used for the present study. Half of these were males, the other half, females. Inclusion criteria consisted of having completed education till at least graduation, not being diagnosed with any illness at the time of the study and belonging to the middle socioeconomic status. The male and the female respondents were further subdivided into four age groups of 25-35 years, 45-65 years, and 65 years and above. In male sample 75% were graduate, 50% were post graduate and 25% were doing some professional courses whereas in female sample 95% were graduate, 45% were postgraduate and 10% were doing some professional courses. All of them were married and employed and their income lies between 10,000 to 30,000

### **Variables and Measures**

Two sets of variables were used in the present study. The first set consisted of the classificatory variables of sex (males vs. females) and age (25-35 years, 45-65 years and 65+ years). ). These two variables together led to a division of the sample into six subgroups of 'young', 'middle-aged', and 'old' males and females.

Ageism is often referred to as the third great *ism* of our society (following racism and sexism) as well as the ultimate prejudice, the last discrimination, and cruelest rejection.

In the present study the Farboni Scale of Ageism (FSA) is used. FSA consists of 29 statements arranged in a likert format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) designed to assess both cognitive and affective components of ageism.

FSA items are designed to measure three levels of prejudice as related to ageism: Antilocution, Avoidance and Discrimination.

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted by Farboni et al. (1990) on FSA scores in an attempt to validate the three-factor model suggested by them earlier (Farboni et.al (1990). Factor 1 consisted of 10 items that describe beliefs about older persons as a group. This factor appears to measure the cognitive component of ageism and is most similar to Farboni et al's Antilocution factor. It was relabeled *Stereotypes*.

Factor 2 and factor 3 appeared to measure ageism's affective component. Factor 2 which appears to be most similar with Farboni et al's Avoidance factor, consists of 10 items, which primarily assess individual's desire to separate themselves from older people. Hence, this factor was relabeled *Separation*.

Factor 3 seemed to primarily measures attitudes toward the aged. However, rather than being merely factual (Cognitive), these items have an affective tone. Therefore, this factor was relabeled *Affective Attitudes*.

### Procedure

The questionnaires were constructed consisting of a demographic data sheet besides the 18 items from the contextual age index. A Hindi version of contextual age index was prepared using the back translation method. Data were collected by administering the questionnaire in face-to-face personal interviews with the respondents. Initial part of the interview consisted of briefing the participants about the purpose of the study. Participants were requested to fill up a consent form to indicate an understanding that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they can pull out at any time should they wish to do so. Participants were given sufficient time to complete the questionnaires and their questions were answered by the researcher. The questionnaires were collected upon completion and the same were screened to evaluate their usability in the study. Response rate was 72%. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 11.

### Results

The below four tables contain findings regarding **Ageism**. Three aspects of ageism are assessed in the present study besides ageism total. These are stereotype, separation from elderly and affective feelings toward elderly.

**Table 4.39 Ageism – Stereotype**

**A. Means and SDs**

Age		Male	Female	Total
25-35 years	M	24.00	20.32	22.16
	SD	2.040	1.731	2.639
45-65 years	M	37.24	35.80	36.52
	SD	6.883	2.983	5.327
65 & above	M	35.80	40.80	38.30
	SD	2.983	1.654	3.474

Total	M	32.35	33.31	32.33
	SD	7.436	9.018	8.251

### B. Summary ANOVA

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	P
Age	15662.587	2	7831.293	625.992	-
Sex	.120	1	.120	.010	<.001**
Age x Sex	1015.280	2	507.640	40.578	-

### C. Graphical presentations of Means

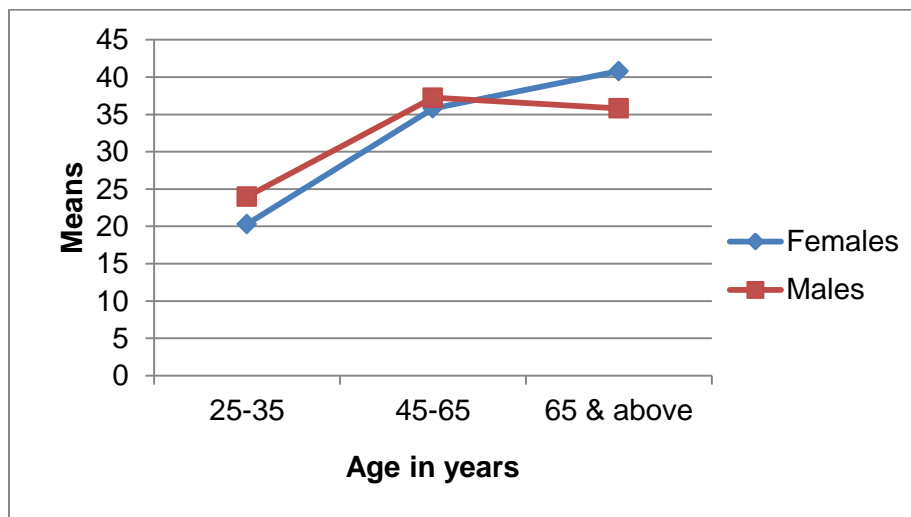


Table 4.39 contains findings regarding the first aspect of **ageism – stereotypes**. The main effect of age is significant with respect to this dimension. Means for older respondents are higher than middle and younger respondents (means = 38.30, 36.52 and 22.16,  $F = .625.992$ ,  $P < .001$ ). It indicates that older respondents are more stereotypes toward old people than are younger and middle age respondents.

The interaction effect of age and sex is also significant ( $F=40.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Remarkable gender differences are seen among respondents aged 65 years and above. In this age group females score more than males which suggests that females have more stereotypes than males.

**Table 4.40 Ageism – Separation**

#### A. Means and SDs

Age		Male	Female	Total
25-35 years	M	22.00	21.60	21.80
	SD	2.060	1.807	1.938

45-65 years	M	22.42	22.42	22.42
	SD	3.575	3.575	3.575
65 & above	M	30.86	27.46	29.16
	SD	1.841	1.297	2.330
Total	M	25.09	23.83	24.46
	SD	4.846	3.548	4.287

## B. Summary ANOVA

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	P
Age	3332.720	2	1666.360	262.152	-
Sex	120.333	1	120.333	18.931	-
Age x Sex	172.667	2	86.333	13.582	-

## C. Graphical presentations of Means

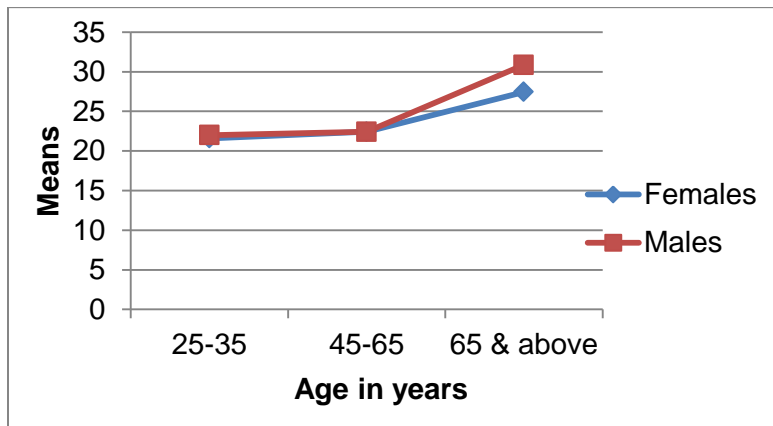


Table 4.40 contains details corresponding to the second dimension of **ageism – separation** which refers to a tendency to keep one separate and distant from elderly. On this dimension, a significant main effect of age and sex is found. Means for older respondents are greater than that for younger and middle age respondents. A significant main effect of sex indicates that males have higher tendency to keep them separate and distant from elderly than are females.

The interaction effect of age and sex is also significant ( $F=13.582$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Significant gender differences are seen among respondents aged 65 years and above. In this age group males score more than females which suggests that males are more separated from elderly than are females.

**Table 4.41 Ageism – Affective (3)**

### A. Means and SDs

Age		Male	Female	Total
25-35 years	M	13.42	15.82	14.62

	SD	1.401	1.289	3.470
45-65 years	M	19.76	10.22	14.99
	SD	3.600	1.266	9.116
65 & above	M	10.44	10.34	10.39
	SD	1.981	1.272	3.295
Total	M	14.54	12.13	13.33
	SD	4.626	2.911	10.221

### B. Summary ANOVA

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	P
Age	1306.327	2	653.163	165.144	-
Sex	436.813	1	436.813	110.443	-
Age x Sex	1982.727	2	991.363	250.654	-

### C. Graphical presentations of Means

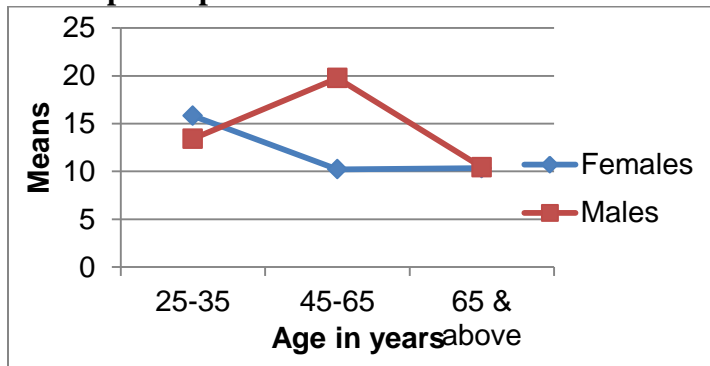


Table 4.41 contains findings regarding the third aspect of **ageism** – **affective** feelings toward elderly. The first part of this table shows that main effect of age and sex is significant on this dimension. Mean of middle aged respondents is greater than younger and older respondents. It indicates that middle aged respondents show more affective feelings toward elderly than do younger and older respondents. A significant effect of sex shows that males scored higher than females on affective feelings toward elderly.

The interaction effect of age and sex is also significant with respect to this dimension ( $F=250.654, p<.001$ ). Remarkable gender differences are seen among respondents aged 45 to 65 years. In this age group males score more than females which suggests that males have more negative feelings toward elderly than do females

**Table 4.42 Ageism (Total)**

#### A. Means and SDs

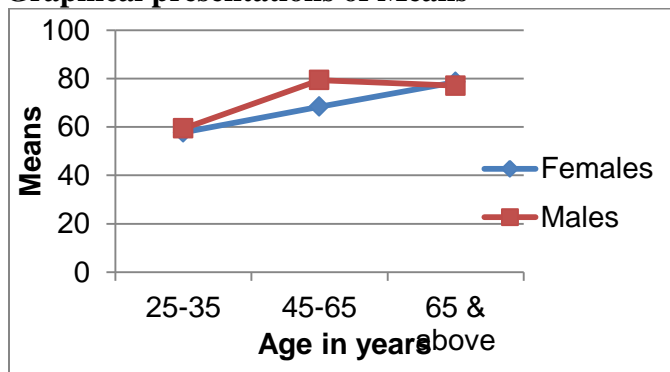
Age		Male	Female	Total
25-35 years	M	59.42	57.74	58.58

	SD	3.665	3.076	3.470
45-65 years	M	79.42	68.44	73.93
	SD	9.556	3.882	9.116
65 & above	M	77.10	78.60	77.85
	SD	3.748	2.595	3.295
Total	M	71.98	68.26	70.12
	SD	10.926	9.127	10.221

## B. Summary ANOVA

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	P
Age	20744.060	2	10372.030	414.723	-
Sex	1037.880	1	1037.880	41.499	-
Age x Sex	2102.940	2	1051.470	42.043	-

## C. Graphical presentations of Means



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Table 4.42 presents details of **ageism total**. The part B of the table shows that sex as well as age related differences were again significant with respect to ageism total. Part B of the table indicates that “old” group (above 65 years) showed more overall ageism as compared to the younger and middle generation. This is surprising as the old themselves are found to have negative attitude about aging. A significant main effect of sex indicates that males are more ageists as compared to females.

The interaction effect of age and sex is also significant with respect to this dimension ( $F=42.043$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Remarkable gender differences are seen among respondents aged 45 to 65 years. In this age group males score more than females on ageist stereotypes.

## Discussion

### Gender related difference

#### H1: In comparison to men women score lower on ageism.

Ageism refers to stereotypical and negative ways of looking at elderly. Several studies have shown that men are more ageist than women. A survey of the studies in the past two decades generally provides support for this claim. Although the evidence supporting a gender effect on ageism score is limited, past research does suggest the possibility of a trend for males to be more

ageist than females (Forboni et al, 1990; Kalavar, 2001). Some researchers have indicated that on an average, women may be more empathic than men. For instance, studies have consistently found females to possess higher scores on the personality dimension of expressiveness (e.g., Warmth, Caring, Empathy), while men typically have higher instrumentality scores (Deaux, 1985). Kalavar (2001) argues that such an effect may be the result of life-span developmental processes, as well as greater experience with and exposure to older people.

As compared to males, females in the present study scored lower on ageism. The 2x3 ANOVA revealed that in comparison to men women scored lower on overall ageism (Mean 68.26 and 71.98,  $F= 41.499$ ,  $p< .01$ ).

Thus the fourth hypothesis which stated that “In comparison to men women score lower on ageism” gets supported by the findings of the present study.

This hypothesis was formulated in the light of studies that showed that women engage more in nurturing and caring roles and thus may have greater exposure to elderly. Although women experience more caregiving burden as compared to men, they are not as stressed and hence they are fewer ageists as compared to men. Women’s assessment of aging are found to be somewhat different. This could be because women believe that old age is considered to be normal and natural part of human’s life span.

In the present study women were found to demonstrate different levels of ageism. The cultural devaluation of age thus appears to influence the women. It has however been argued that the social and psychological consequences of aging are greater for women. In the magazine article that popularized the double standards of aging hypothesis, Sontag (1972) made the case for attributes that most highly valued in men- competence, autonomy, and earning potential. These increase over the middle decades of life. Attributes that are most highly valued in women- physical attractiveness, and sexual availability to men, however decline with age. The cultural equation linking women’s social value to their sexual reproductive potential may be linked with the observed gender difference in age identity; women tend to maintain more youthful identities than men of the same chronological age (Pinquart and Sorensen, 2001). Considering this pattern from the point of view of socially situated self (Goffman, 1959), women may have greater incentives than men to present and maintain youthful appearances enabling them to protect their valued identities as ‘young women’. Consistent with this claim, signs of aging are viewed more negatively in women than in men (Harris, 1994). Older women are viewed as unworthy of attention, respect and other considerations (Arber and Ginn 1991). The double standard of aging, posits a connection between gender inequality and the greater devaluation of age in women than in men. In short, aging is viewed as a more negative experience for women as a result of the cultural preference for youth and constructions of gender that define women primarily in terms of their attractiveness to men and their reproductive potential. As a result of their greater devaluation with age, women make efforts to hold youthful identities as they age as a means of enhancing the self (Rosenberg, 1979), avoiding spoiled identities (Goffman, 1963), and identifying with valued social groups (Taylor and Maghaddam, 1994). Moreover, because of their much practice of nurturant roles women show less stereotypic behaviors towards old age.

A different line of argument focusing on sex differentiated socialization suggests that women are more involved in expressing, nurturing roles, and, are more expected to shoulder caregiving burden as a natural enlargement of their expressive roles. This argument leads to women being fewer ageists than men. This could be so because old age is considered to be normal and natural



part of human's life span. When thinking about aging and old people the emotions of women are mostly, at least apparently, not negative. They sense the inevitability of time and some are even able to note that old age is a period where there is more time for oneself and the family.

### **Age related difference**

#### **H2: In comparison to older individuals younger individuals are more ageist.**

Age differences in the context of ageism in the past studies are shown to be more among younger respondents than among their older counterparts. Perhaps this is because of manifestation of out group derogation suggesting that individuals are biased in their evaluations, attributions, and expectations of those considered being the "Out Group" members. It is also likely that young people only infrequently interact with the aged.

They are rather primarily exposed to others of similar ages. This can lead to a confined view of older individuals, particularly given their relatively rare contact with the elderly and often low status portrayal of elderly in books and the media (Whitbourne & Hulicka, 1990). Another reason for this is that individuals are motivated to see their own group more positively than other groups.

As compared to younger individuals, older generations in the present study were found to be more ageists. The 2x3 ANOVA results revealed that in comparison to younger and middle aged respondents older respondents scored highest on overall ageism (Mean=77.85, 73.93 and 58.58,  $F=414.723$ ,  $p<.01$ ) as well as in the two aspect of ageism- stereotype and separation.

Thus, the seventh hypothesis which stated that "In comparison to older individuals, younger individuals are more ageists" is not supported by the findings of the present study.

There are the common myths or prejudice against older people which are similar for all males and females of all age groups. Age is a basic social cognitive category (e.g., Kunda, 1999). When studies provided only age, we expected participants to rely on their general attitudes and beliefs about older and younger adults while reporting their evaluations. A number of studies have examined that older people are more unfavorable toward old age than are younger respondents (Bell and Stanfield, 1973; Rothbaum, 1983). The main reason for this difference is because of the stereotypic beliefs about the elderly person which are widespread in our society. As Nelson (2002) states "age prejudice is one of the most condoned, institutionalized form of prejudice in the world today".

Most old people believe that old age is synonymous with sickness and disability. Young centered culture is another factor due to which older people did not accept their aging process gracefully (Traxler, 1980). Persons who are dependent on physical appearance and youth for their identity are likely to experience loss of self esteem with age (Block, Davidson and Grumbs, 1981). Palmore (1990) identifies four common responses of elders to these prescriptions and expectations: acceptance, denial, avoidance or reform. All of these responses can harmful effects on the individuals for example, an elderly persons who 'Accepts' the negative image may 'act old' even though this may be out of keeping with their personality or previous habits. This may mean that they stop or reduce social activities, do not seek appropriate medical treatment, or accept poverty. In essence, this internalization of a negative image can result in the elderly person becoming prejudiced against them, resulting in loss of self-esteem, self-hatred, shame, depression, and/or suicide in extreme cases.

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