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Not Your Grandmother's Ageism: Ageism Across the Life Course

Sometimes we learn the most through teaching. I regularly teach an age studies course to college students, most recently titled “Aging, Ageism, and Embodiment.” My goals in this course are to introduce students to basic age studies concepts and to craft them into savvy cultural age critics. Students write a significant research paper addressing an aspect of aging. A few years ago, I had a student who wrote about “Ageism Against the Youth.” Her starting premise was that prominent American age critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette – a few excerpts of whose work we had read – was ageist because she focused only on ageism against older people. The student’s paper called out all of age studies more generally – and my course in particular – for talking about ageism but only including the older population. She wrote about her own experiences with ageism in her mid-twenties, as she has had 10 hip surgeries and two total hip replacements, leaving her with an invisible disability that constrains her from functioning fully in her work as a nurse, but these constraints are often dismissed by her co-workers who tell her she is “too young” to have hip pain.

Not only did her essay make me think about ageism as a force operating on the young or all along the life course, but it also made me reflect on why I had not previously thought or taught *more* about ageism as a factor across the life course. In trying to help students understand the mechanisms of ageism, I regularly ask them to identify moments when they have been stereotyped based on their age, told they were “too young” for something. Additionally, as I focus much of my class on America’s anti-aging culture – the consumer aspects of which focus on people beginning in their 30s or even late 20s – I make it clear that negative associations of age begin long before any chronologically recognized category of “old age.” But until my student called me out, I had never considered the idea of ageism against young people as meriting any *real* attention, in my teaching or in my scholarship.

In this essay, I explore how ageism functions in other parts of the life course – particularly as experienced by young adults and children. While my sources are international, nearly all of my examples come from the national context of the United States, and I suggest that national context is important in terms of how juvenile ageism in particular plays out. I argue that age studies should be attending to ageism across the life course, even though ageism as experienced at the poles of the life course are not fully equivalent in structure or conse-

quence. In my conclusion, I speak to some of the possible gains to come from approaching ageism as a life course concern if we want to more effectively combat ageism – old or otherwise.

Defining Ageism

In 1969, when gerontologist Robert Butler coined the term *ageism*, he defined it as “prejudice by one age group toward other age groups.” (1969, 243) This initial formulation, what Bill Bytheway calls “the broader definition” of ageism, allows for any age group to be “oppressed by [...] dominant expectations about age [...] that dictate how we behave and relate to each other.” (2005, 338) However, Butler’s further formulations of the term draw a more narrow definition, in which ageism pertains to later life and is analogous to other forms of oppression: “Ageism can be seen as a systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people *because they are old*, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender.” (1989, 138 [emphasis mine]) This focus on ageism as affecting only older people – paralleling our understanding of racism as affecting non-whites, and sexism affecting women and non cisgender individuals – is certainly the most common formulation of ageism. As one example, the 2005 *Encyclopedia of Ageism* does not include *any* entries that address juvenile ageism or middle-ageism (Palmore et al. 2005).

When the categories of children or young adults are acknowledged as possible targets of ageism, the tendency is to dismiss these categories as less important or irrelevant. Consider a chapter in the 2002 social psychology volume *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice Against Older Persons*. Authors Jeff Greenberg, Jeff Schimel, and Andy Martens explain:

Ageism can most simply be defined as negative attitudes or behaviors toward an individual solely based on that person’s age. Defined this way, negative attitudes toward people because they are young would qualify as ageism. However, throughout this chapter and consistent with the spirit of this book, we will use the term ageism to refer specifically to negative attitudes and behavior toward the elderly, focusing exclusively on *this most troubling and consequential form* of ageism. (2002, 27 [emphasis mine])

Like social psychology, gerontology and age studies have both tended to focus almost wholly on ageism as it affects older adults.

There are, of course, exceptions to this focus, perhaps the most notable of which within age studies is Gullette’s early focus on mid-life. Gullette coined the term “middle-ageism,” describing it in her 1997 book *Declining to Decline* as the “anticipatory fear of midlife aging” inspired by culture (1997, 6). This

fear, the decline narrative of aging, is experienced by adolescents and young adults as readily as older age categories. In contrast to my student's claims, Gullette studies the effects of ageism across the life spectrum, though to be fair, her focus is almost wholly on ageism as prejudice-against-growing-older rather than ageism as prejudice-against-being-young.

In this essay, I will explore what ageism looks like when youth – being “too young” – is its focus. How such ageism works, how prevalent it is, and what its consequences are vary depending on whether we are talking about young adults or about children, so I will address these two age groups in turn.

Young Adult Ageism

What is meant by “young adult” – particularly within formal studies of ageism – varies significantly, sometimes including adolescents, sometimes expanding into the 30s. “Young” and “old” are relative terms and vary significantly depending on context and company. Young and old adults alike are often branded generationally; within the United States especially, the generational labels “Millennial” and “Boomer” have been used as stand-ins for conflicting young and old generations, even though Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) might already be in their late 30s and Boomers (born 1946–1964) might be only in their late 50s (Dimock 2019). 2019 saw the rise of the “OK Boomer” and “OK Millennial” social media memes. “OK Boomer” is a way to dismiss the older generation for being out of touch and establishing or eliminating policies to build their own wealth at the expense of future generations; “OK Millennial” is a way to dismiss the younger generation as uninformed, over-coddled, and unwilling to work hard (Anima-shaun 2019). Together, such aspersions illustrate that we are equally likely to group and stereotype young adults as we are older people. They also point to how representations of ageism frequently pit the young against the old and vice-versa, leaving middle-aged people out of the picture.

Often referred to as *reverse ageism*, age-based prejudice against young adults manifests as ageist ideology (negative stereotypes, beliefs, and attitudes) and age discrimination (“behaviors that exclude certain people and/or disadvantage them relative to others solely due to their age”) (Raymer et al. 2017, 152). Ageism – experienced by both young and old – “can manifest in hostile forms (e. g., neglect, abuse or mistreatment), but also in more benevolent, subtle ways (e. g., patronizing, simplified and slow communication).” (Bratt et al. 2018, 168) Ageism against young adults, according to psychologists Jessica Hehman and Daphne Bugental, stems from young adults being “assigned low status in our society,” as are older people, “but of a different type; stereotypically, they are seen as

‘not yet ready’ for the responsibilities of adulthood.” (2013, 1397) On the younger end of the young adult spectrum, Hehman and Bugental argue that “[i]n response to this perception [of young adults as ‘not yet ready’ for adult responsibilities], practices have been implemented that serve to regulate their behaviors in ways not applied to full adults.” (2013, 1397) For example, young adults have fewer rights – in the United States, they cannot buy cigarettes or drink alcohol until 21, or rent a car until 25. Hehman and Bugental suggest that stereotypes of young adults as rebellious, imprudently willing to take risks, and irresponsible make it more likely that young adults are “stigmatized in social situations that require moral reasoning and decision making.” (2013, 1397) Whether or not behaviors such as risk-taking are part of a still-developing brain, the ascription of such characteristics to *all* young adults makes them stereotypes. Laws that dissuade young adults from engaging in possibly dangerous activities such as drinking and smoking may provide an acceptable level of paternalistic protection. However, the belief that such behaviors will translate into all aspects of young adults’ lives make the stereotypes problematic.

Prevalence of Young Adult Ageism

Recent data suggest that perceived age discrimination – i.e., discrimination that people report experiencing based on their age – may be an equal, if not greater, concern for younger people than it is for older people. A 2007 study in the United States by sociologists Gilbert Gee, Eliza Pavalko, and J. Scott Long used longitudinal data on women to examine self-reports of age discrimination in the workplace among different age cohorts. Even across cohorts that entered adulthood in significantly different cultural moments, they found a consistent pattern: the percent of women in their early to mid-20s reporting age discrimination in the workplace was relatively high, but dropped as these women moved into their 30s, and peaked in their 50s before somewhat declining again. Thus, ageism was reported most by young adults and those in mid-life or late mid-life. These findings are similar to a 2005 cross-sectional study by social scientists Teri Garstka, Mary Lee Hummert, and Nyla Branscombe – again within the United States, but this time studying both women and men – that queried participants about being “deprived of opportunities that are available to others because of my age.” (2005, 328) Their study revealed the highest levels of perceived age discrimination among young (18–26) and old (61–92) adults in comparison with middle-aged adults.

More recently, a 2017 study by psychologists Christopher Bratt et al. based on data collected in 29 European countries found higher levels of self-reported age

discrimination among younger people than among older people, with significant variation between these countries. The survey asked participants how often anyone has shown prejudice against them or treated them unfairly because of their age, with two additional questions querying the frequency of experiencing hostile forms of ageism (someone “insulting you, abusing you, or refusing you services”) and benevolent forms of ageism (someone “ignoring or patronizing you”) (Bratt et al. 2017, 169). In 14 countries, they found high levels of age discrimination among young adults that decreased steadily with age. In most of the other 15 countries, perceived age discrimination was highest among both young and old resulting in a u-shaped distribution with lowest reported levels at mid-life; however, levels were highest among younger respondents. In only five of 29 countries – Cypress, the Czech Republic, Greece, Russia, Ukraine – was reported age discrimination higher among older than other age groups. Bratt et al. do caution that it is “uncertain to what extent differences in subjective experiences of age discrimination reflect actual differences in age discrimination,” as negative attitudes are not always expressed overtly, or younger people might be more inclined to attribute conflicts or rejections to age discrimination (2017, 177).

Consequences of Young Adult Ageism

The arena in which ageism faced by young adults is perceived to be the most consequential is the workplace. A 2017 study summarizes the literature on reverse ageism: “young employees are viewed less favorably in general [...] as well as in terms of important work-related attributes, such as leadership ability [...] and accountability. [...] [C]ontrary to popular belief, young employees experience age discrimination at levels that are as high as, or even higher than, those reported by old employees.” (Raymer et al. 2017, 149) The link between ageist ideology and age discrimination bears more research support, but young adult workers do face difficulties within the workplace “when establishing their work careers, including rules favoring workers with seniority and employer preferences for workers with prior job experience.” (Gee et al. 2007, 282) Young adults are more likely to be unemployed than all older age groups and more likely to be laid off (Raymer et al. 2017; Indiviglio 2009).

This area of workplace ageism is one where national context almost certainly comes into play: “In Europe, all age cohorts are protected by law [against age discrimination in the workplace], unlike in the United States, where the law addresses only people forty years of age or older.” (Mercat-Bruns 2016, 211) As management scholars Colin Duncan and Wendy Loretto have suggested, the inclusiveness of European law may make it – in comparison to other workplace

discrimination laws – more difficult to enforce, “as everyone is of an age and therefore prone to age discrimination, [making] it [...] difficult to distinguish oppressor from oppressed.” (2004, 97) On the other hand, American law makes workplace ageism experiences of younger adults structurally invisible and impossible to redress.

Another area where ageist perceptions of young adults – particularly perceptions about their moral reasoning and responsibility – may have negative consequences involves activism. Hava Rachel Gordon, in a sociological study of adolescent activists, argues that age-stereotypical perceptions affect young people’s ability to effect social change: “most examinations of age as a social inequality [...] tend to leave out young people’s voices and agency. This serves to inadvertently reify young people’s political passivity and silence, and portrays them as social objects unaware of social problems rather than as active subjects.” (Gordon 2007, 635) Such age-based dismissal is evident in the United States’ government’s responses to teenage activists. For example, in January of 2020 Treasury Secretary Stephen Mnuchin dismissed climate activist Greta Thunberg by suggesting, “[a]fter she goes and studies economics in college, she can go back and explain that to us.” (Hodgson 2020) Similarly, in March of 2018, former senator Rick Santorum told the teenagers advocating for gun control in response to school shootings through the “March for Our Lives” protest and “Never Again” movement to take CPR classes instead, implying they should be in classrooms, not marching in Washington demanding change from lawmakers (Hodgson 2020). Such dismissals are a clear attempt to use age to discredit ideas that challenge the status quo.

Juvenile Ageism

The above discussions of workplace discrimination or dismissal from political activism do not readily apply to ageism against children. Likewise, children are almost uniformly not included in studies that ask participants about their perceived experiences of age discrimination. Juvenile ageism – both as it manifests and in how we study it – is significantly different from ageism against young adults.

First referred to as “adultism” in the early twentieth century, prejudice against children has been more widely explored under the terms *childism* (particularly by psychoanalyst and philosopher Elisabeth Young-Bruehl), and *juvenile ageism* (whose most prolific proponent for the past two decades has been psychiatrist Jack C. Westman). For the purposes of this argument, I use their preferred terms when discussing Young-Bruehl or Westman, but I prefer Westman’s

nomenclature; it offers more possibilities if we want to specify age cohorts within the category of ageism; old ageism, middle ageism, young adult ageism, and juvenile ageism seem clearer to me than possibilities like elderism or middle adulthood, particularly as adulthood has previously meant prejudice *in favor of* adults (Young-Bruehl 2012, 8).

In his 2019 book *Dealing with Child Abuse and Neglect as Public Health Problems* – a volume whose key focus is describing and combating juvenile ageism – Westman explains juvenile ageism through parallels to other forms of prejudice. For example, he offers George Bernard Shaw's quote "Youth is a wonderful thing. What a crime to waste it on children!" and argues: "However, if the words Jews, Blacks, or gays are substituted for children, prejudice is instantly apparent. The fact that we do not take offense at this slur against children illustrates how ingrained our hidden prejudice is against them." (Westman 2019, 39) The nature of such hidden prejudice is not about the stigma of being "too young" as we see with young adult ageism, but is rather about being regarded as inferior on the basis of age: "Neglecting the interests of children because they are less important than and are inferior to adults is the same as neglecting the interests of persons whose race or gender is seen as relegating them to an inferior status." (Westman 2019, 79) Westman clarifies, however, that "unlike racial and gender groups, children usually are inferior in mental and physical abilities [...]. Juvenile ageism cannot be invoked simply because children are treated differently due to their immaturity. However, the comparison of old ageism and juvenile ageism with racism and sexism holds up when equality means equality in rights and opportunities." (2019, 46–47) Thus, to recognize juvenile ageism most clearly, we need to pay special attention to structural conditions and social policies rather than looking at individual experiences.

It is at this level of the structural and social that Young-Bruehl seeks to initially illustrate childism, which she defines quite simply as prejudice against children, by pointing to the "shameful fact" that "America incarcerates more of its children than any country in the world." (2012, 2) The United States, she points out, is the only country besides Somalia that has not ratified the 1989 U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child which forbids child imprisonment (Young-Bruehl 2012, 3). America's high levels of incarceration are one manifestation of widely held anti-child views, such as that children should be removed from sight, that children are dangerous and burdensome to society, that children should serve adults, that they are property, and that they are rebellious and adults' key responsibility to them is to discipline them (Young-Bruehl 2012, 3–4). To these views, Westman would add that cultural devaluation of parenthood is also central to juvenile ageism, particularly within the United States which "[u]nlike other Western nations [...] does not recognize the economic

value of parenthood.” (Westman 2019, 84) In support of this claim, Westman points to the American cultural emphasis on paid employment and the cultural and economic devaluation of caregiving and homemaking, the lack of social supports like paid family leave or universal childcare that make children costly liabilities instead of economic assets, our emphasis on individualism and adult rights that leads us to regard children as the property of their parents, and our hands-off approach to competent parenting wherein our society doesn’t articulate clear expectations for parents nor does it intervene until children are damaged by neglect or abuse (2019, 83–88).

There are both benevolent and hostile forms of this prejudice against children, according to Westman. Benevolent juvenile ageism, he argues, lies behind a “pro-children rhetoric” that allows adults to feel good while they make decisions that may be in their own economic or other best interests rather than those of children. For example, he argues that benevolent ageism – both old and juvenile – justifies age segregation and institutionalization more broadly: “Benevolent ageism [...] allows us to believe that the elderly are better off receiving special care away from their families and that children are better off in educational environments away from their families,” enabling parents or family members to evade responsibilities for caretaking (Westman 2019, 43). Westman suggests that more hostile forms of ageism come in the way we treat children as property, for example in divorce proceedings, or when we make childcare and work arrangements for the convenience of parents rather than in the developmental interests of the child.

Because it takes so many forms, and because we must seek its existence in structural and social arrangements because the children who experience it often cannot name it, juvenile ageism may be harder to recognize. “When childism pervades a society,” Young-Bruehl suggests, “even people who genuinely want to make the world better for children may find it hard to realize that it exists.” (2012, 4) Prejudice against children “is built into the very way children are imagined.” (Young-Bruehl 2012, 5)

Prevalence of Juvenile Ageism

As gathering reports of self-perceived ageism – the most common measure for ageism among other age groups – poses difficulties when the subjects are children, it is more challenging to determine the prevalence of juvenile ageism. One measure we can clearly speak to is the prevalence of child abuse. Westman points out that “elder abuse and neglect have been readily identified as reflecting ageism, whereas childhood abuse and neglect have not.” (2019, 41) The

World Health Organization suggests that while elder abuse is a significant problem experienced globally by 1 in 6 people over 60, child abuse rates are even higher, experienced by 1 in 4 children (2020b, 2020a). Abuse and neglect can lead to child fatalities. Within the United States, the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) reports that in 2019, an estimated 1,840 children died from abuse and neglect, a rate of 2.50 per 100,000 children in the population (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services 2021, ii). Focusing on all forms of abuse, Young-Bruehl claims that “America has the highest rates of child abuse in the world.” (2012, 16) Not all child maltreatment is a result of juvenile ageism, Westman acknowledges; it might, for example, be the result of incompetence, ignorance, or simply meanness. He suggests that “juvenile ageism exists when adults use their superior power to mistreat children as inferior persons in order to further their own needs and desires.” (Westman 2019, 46) While abuse is certainly the most pointed to manifestation of juvenile ageism, Young-Bruehl argues that “when childism is prevalent in a society *all* children are hurt, not just those classified as ‘the abused’.” (2012, 15)

Consequences of Juvenile Ageism

In addition to abuse and neglect, Young-Bruehl suggests there are many behaviors and actions that we should recognize as examples of stereotyping children and childhood: “child imprisonment, child exploitation and abuse, substandard schooling, high infant mortality rates, fetal alcohol syndrome, the reckless prescription of antipsychotic drugs to children, child pornography, and all other behaviors or policies that are not in the best interests of children.” (2012, 7) American Studies scholar Claire Greslé-Favier argues we should view abstinence-only sex education as a form of juvenile ageism as it ultimately frames children as the property of their parents and of the state (2013, 723). To this list, we should also add the policies and practices that devalue children and parenting or caregiving more broadly. Despite the pro-child rhetoric in the United States around fetal rights, for example, the U.S. consistently fails to address childhood poverty and remains one of the few developed nations that does not provide parental leave or universal early child care for its citizens, failing to recognize healthy child development as essential to maintenance of the state (Lubrano 2019; Mongeau 2016). In terms of parental leave, the American federal government provides only FMLA, the Family and Medical Leave Act, which ensures that one’s job remains available to them for only 12 weeks of *unpaid* leave for any family caregiving needs, including childbirth (Mongeau 2016). Daycare and preschool – which provide “critical preparation for a successful school and adult life” –

are, except for the poorest of children who qualify for federally- or state-funded programs, wholly the burden of parents (Mongeau 2016).

Our devaluation of children and parenting also manifests in the low salaries and low prestige of professionals who work with children, such as day care workers and elementary education teachers (Bailey and Meltzoff 2001; Westman 1991). Mark Bailey and Nancy Meltzoff describe the low status traditionally accorded to early childhood educators – such as perceptions that the job is not challenging or that there is little legitimate teaching that takes place – and how this interpersonal and interprofessional disregard plays out monetarily: “Our society does not support paying a preschool teacher the same amount [as a high school teacher] regardless of whether the teachers at each age level are equally qualified, a case of juvenile ageism as ingrained economic policy.” (2001, 50) Larger surveys show that “Childcare Workers” and “Personal Care Aides” are among the lowest paying occupations in the U.S. (McGrew 2016). Further, these industries are heavily dominated by women, a situation that has troubling consequences for gender equality (McGrew 2016).

Consider the strong parallels here to old ageism: long-term care workers, both within institutions and within home settings, face low salaries, lack of prestige, and experience high turnover. A *Vox* exposé by Alexia Fernández Campbell of personal care and home health aides who care for older adults within the United States revealed the employment inequities faced by this population. On average, home health aides – a population anticipated to grow from 2.9 million in 2016 to 4.1 million in 2026 – earn \$11.57 an hour – less than janitors, cooks, and farmworkers. These positions are typically excluded from U.S. labor laws. Live-in caregivers or caregivers who spend less than 20 percent of their work time helping clients with basic tasks are not entitled to minimum wage or overtime pay under federal law. They are also not protected from racial discrimination or sexual harassment, and they lack collective bargaining rights (Campbell 2019). Even considering the health care occupation with the highest salaries (physicians), in a country like the United States where medical salaries vary significantly by specialty, the care specialties related to children and older adults are the least lucrative: geriatricians, pediatricians, and family practice physicians are at the bottom of the list (Salary.com 2020). That we comparatively so devalue caregiving and nurturing work related to both the young and the old suggests ageism – inherently valuing children and old people less than not-old adults – is at play.

Another key consequence of juvenile ageism comes in the political arena. “Young children don’t vote, and because of this, they have a minimal amount of power to affect public policy,” argue Bailey and Meltzoff (2001, 47–48). This lack of representation contributes to further structural inequalities; for example,

“government-funded programs for children such as public schooling [...] are continually underfunded in relation to the programs of older students” or other age groups (Bailey and Meltzoff 2001, 48). There is particular irony here in that, while children in the United States can't vote until age 18 when they reach “legal adulthood,” children of 14 and above are regularly tried as adults in criminal hearings for certain violent crimes, a disturbing form of structural juvenile ageism. This political disenfranchisement is arguably not experienced by older adults.

Ultimately, Westman argues, we need to recognize discrimination in juvenile ageism as “violations of civil rights that would be regarded as rejection, segregation, harassment, oppression, violence, torture, and murder if they targeted an adult. Lumping together all these egregious offences under child abuse and neglect – less evocative terms – demeans children.” (2019, 50) We also need to take into account how adverse childhood events may have long-term consequences that echo throughout an individual's lifespan. Considering those long-term effects of child maltreatment, Westman sums up the consequences of juvenile ageism within the United States:

[...] a political system that fails to create safe environments for children, a commercial system that exploits the young, social services that are overwhelmed by child neglect and abuse cases, an impaired workforce, and a fragile economy. It has resulted in staggering costs from violence, habitual crime, and welfare dependency [...] the ultimate products of child neglect and abuse. (2019, 79–80)

Comparing Ageisms

If we conclude that ageism is an issue at other points of the life course, particularly within the first two to three decades, the question remains of whether this ageism merits equal attention to ageism at the end of the life course, whether the consequences of juvenile ageism and young adult ageism are as serious as those faced by older persons. The structural devaluing of caregiving positions for both children and older adults are equally concerning. And if we attribute any amount of child abuse to juvenile ageism, then we must respond yes to the above question in relation to children. Child abuse and neglect are among many other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that have been shown to manifest problematically in adulthood outcomes such as poor physical and mental health, substance abuse, risky behaviors, and toxic stress, and these effects may be passed on to their own children (“Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences”). Thus, Westman argues that “[f]rom society's point of view, juvenile ageism is a

more serious problem than older ageism, because children constitute the next generation.” (1991, 253)

For young adults, the answer is less clear. The research is full of conditional statements, like this one by Bratt et al.: “Young people *might* experience age discrimination and it is *quite possible* that the consequences of age-based discrimination against younger people [...] *may be* as serious for their material and psychological well-being, or even their physical health, as has been found among older adults.” (2018, 168 [emphasis mine]) One reason for such uncertainty about the seriousness of young adult ageism may lie in the possibility that age-related stigma as experienced by young adults is less damaging or less internalized than that experienced by older adults. A study by psychologists Hehman and Bugental compared the performance of older (62–92) and younger (17–22) adults on a task when exposed to messages that suggested either an age-related advantage for one group or that invoked stereotype threat. They found that older adults performed more poorly when told the task would favor speed and current knowledge (seen as youth advantages), a stereotype confirmation effect. However, in the equivalent condition where younger adults were told the task would require wisdom and life-experience (an age advantage), they actually performed *better* than under the youth advantage condition, a stereotype challenge effect. Hehman and Bugental suggest that one key difference in stigma experienced by younger versus older adults concerns the permanence of their group memberships. Young adults will grow past the stigma of “too young,” but for older adults, “too old” is a permanent status. It may be that the temporary nature of young adults’ group status protects them from the negative consequences of age-related stigma. Thus, it may be reasonable to conclude that the consequences of ageism for young adults are less pressing than those of old ageism. The same argument likely does not hold true for juvenile ageism, however, if we consider the potential lifelong consequences of our underfunding of education and caregiving, and the prevalence of child abuse and neglect.

Acknowledging Ageism Across the Life Course

The field of age studies needs to explore the parallels and disjunctures between old ageism, young adult ageism, and juvenile ageism. I initially approached the prospect of ageism against the young with reservations; I see “young” as a far more culturally privileged identity than “old,” so it seems troubling to suggest age studies should focus more on youth. But there are practical benefits to be found in focusing on ageism across the life course.

Teaching – the activity that led me down this path in the first place – is one example where a life course approach to ageism may reap benefits. Many people have pointed to the need to teach about old ageism to students of all ages. Ideas about old age are formed when we are quite young: “Humans internalize age stereotypes about the same time as they do race and gender stereotypes, around four to six years of age, and their prejudices strengthen with age.” (Marshall 2008/2009, 57) Thus, greater knowledge about aging, early in human lives, may be one route to addressing many issues of ageism. Teaching children about ageism *as it affects them* could be an important part of combatting juvenile ageism. Westman suggests that addressing juvenile ageism “requires a civil rights approach [...]. This means sensitizing the public to the existence of juvenile ageism and to the developmental requirements of childhood and adolescence.” (2019, 80) Curriculum that helps children recognize that they have rights and that helps them identify behaviors and policies that threaten those rights may help children and parents alike be more willing to name maltreatment when they see it and may help increase parents’ and others’ willingness to invest in education and caregiving.

Certainly, teaching about ageism across the life course may have benefits when educating young adults about ageism. Presenting the arguments for juvenile ageism and young adult ageism can increase students’ interest and show them their stake in the topic more directly than the message that they should care because they will someday be old. In teaching about ageism, one of my challenges is to help my traditional age college students recognize their own ageist thoughts and behaviors. This approach positions the students as perpetrators of ageism. In fall of 2019 while teaching my aging course, I adjusted my strategy to include readings that dealt with juvenile ageism and young adult ageism alongside my typical readings on old ageism and asked my students whether they felt these additional forms of ageism were more, less, or equally important to focus on as old ageism. While the majority indicated that all forms of ageism are equally important, there were students who advocated for the greater importance of each category of ageism. The resulting discussion was quite vigorous, and while I have only anecdotal memories to support this claim, my impression was that they were more comfortable debating ageism than were previous cohorts of students. The ability to see oneself as both perpetrator *and* victim of ageism seemed to help students more readily accept the widespread and under-acknowledged existence of ageism, and to more readily identify it as a problem in need of addressing.

In addition to its practical utility in teaching, I see another one of the key benefits of exploring ageism across the life course as the opportunity to create more intergenerational solidarity and to oppose the ways our media and our pol-

icies often pit “old against young.” Westman sees key opportunities for political coalition between old and young: “The increasing vitality of the elderly may well enable grandparents, in particular, to devote time and energy to addressing juvenile ageism. In this way, the politically-represented segment of the population subjected to ageism could speak for the politically-unrepresented children who also are the victims of ageism.” (1991, 253) Too often, policies or actions that benefit the old or the young are presented as coming at the expense of the opposing age group: “Kids vs. canes [...] makes great headlines.” (Applewhite 2016, 22) Ageism activist Ashton Applewhite points out that the young and old are “least likely to be economically ‘productive’ in a capitalist system” and thus “ageism pits the disenfranchised against each other in order to maintain the power of the ruling class.” (2016, 22) However, addressing the policies that devalue and disenfranchise those who care for the young and old is a project that, ostensibly, people of all ages could support, as “adults” are often the cohort that bears the time and financial burden of caregiving, educating, etc. Perhaps seeing ageism as a force across the life course may help us distort the perceived divides between Boomers and Millennials.

Unsettling “young” as a privileged term over “old” may help us think more critically about all age identities. Pushing for more respect for *all* parts of the life course, including childhood, would positively contribute to lessening all forms of ageism by decreasing adolescent desire to rush into the category of adulthood and generating less fear of leaving middle-adulthood behind. By considering ageism across the life course, we might increase the interest of both young and old in addressing the stigma and structural consequences of all forms of ageism.

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