



Are Australians ageist?

Research Snapshot

Context

Australia's population is ageing, raising concerns that there will not be enough taxpayers in the decades ahead to maintain the services needed by an increasingly older society.

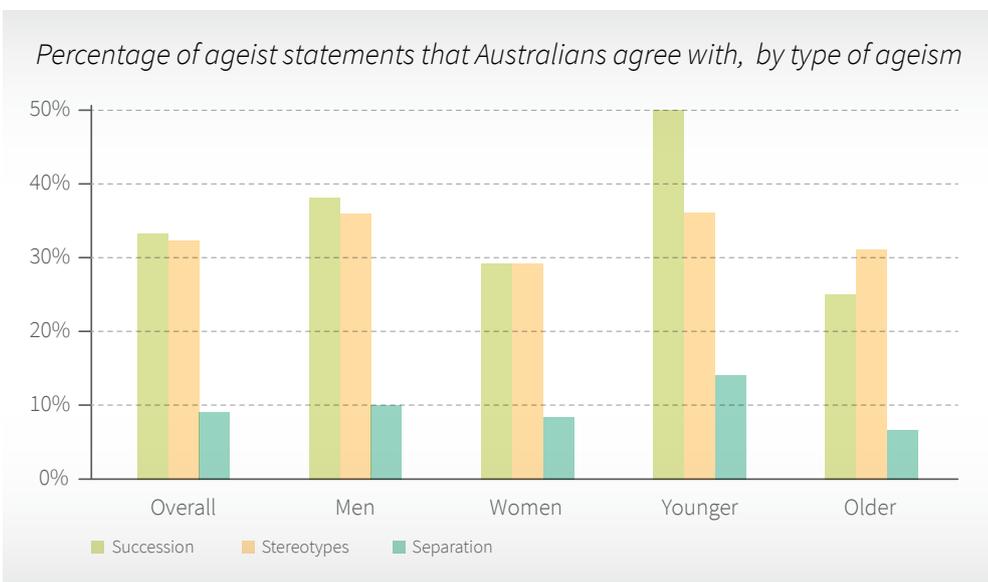
Older employment rates have begun to rise as Australian governments encourage workers to delay their retirement, but the prospect of 'working for longer' is not yet universally accepted. Workers of all ages have resisted attempts to prolong careers, for quite different reasons, and many employers still seem to hold unfavourable views of older workers' abilities.

Survey

University of Melbourne researchers conducted a representative, population-level survey of ageism in Australia.

Aims:

- *Short term:* To better understand how widespread ageism is, what forms it takes, and which population groups are most likely to be ageist.
- *Long term:* To improve information about the drivers of the discrimination that continues to adversely affect older people, particularly (but not only) in the workforce.



Interpreting the numbers: On average, Australians agree with 33 per cent of statements in the Succession scale of ageism, and 9 per cent of statements in the Separation scale of ageism.

Methodology:

Researchers conducted the survey using two established ageism scales – Fraboni Scale of Ageism (FSA) and Succession, Identity and Consumption (SIC).

They surveyed 1,000 participants, aged 18-70 years, who are representative of the whole Australian population.

‘Ageism’ takes different forms. It can be directed at both younger and older individuals but, in this study, the researchers focused on negative attitudes that are directed at older people because of their age.

The questions were designed to capture perceptions both of what older people are seen to be like (known as ‘descriptive’ ageism) and of what older people *should* be or do (‘prescriptive’ ageism).

The survey results provide population-level evidence to answer the questions:

- How prevalent are ageist attitudes in Australia?
- Which forms of ageism are more pronounced?
- How do attitudes differ across the population?

Findings

The most common type of ageism in Australia stems from beliefs about ‘succession’. Put simply, this view says that things of value should be actively passed on from one group to another at an appropriate time. Older people are seen negatively, in this view, when they fail to actively ‘make way’ for others and instead are seen to unfairly hold on to positions of status and power.

This study is the first to show how common such succession-based views of older people are in Australian society.

The second most common type of ageism in Australia involves ‘stereotyping’ older people. This occurs when attitudes are formed out of incomplete, obsolete, or even completely mistaken beliefs; for example, the belief that older people ‘live in the past’. Unfortunately, stereotypes are often maintained despite being untrue – indeed, that is why they often lead to discriminatory behaviour.

Ageism in Australia is *least-often* driven by a preference to keep a physical or emotional distance from older people (the concept of ‘separation’). Australians do not generally wish to cut themselves off from having contact with older people. Instead, ageism is a more complex process, informed by stereotypical views and strong norms of succession.

Very few Australians are resolutely ageist. The results show that less than ten per cent agree with the majority of the negative statements about older people presented in the survey.

Men are significantly more likely to be ageist than women, irrespective of how ageism is measured. This result persists after taking account of other sex differences in age, education level, and place of residence. The survey does not pinpoint why men are more prone to ageism, but this result is consistent with previous research and requires further investigation.

Controlling for differences in sex, young people are generally more likely to be ageist than older people. This difference is most accentuated for succession-based ageism, with those under 30 years being twice as likely as those over 50 years to agree with succession-based statements about access to resources and status. This result points to an underlying ‘intergenerational tension’ in views about how wealth and power are currently divided between the different generations in Australia. This situation should be of concern in a society that is only getting older.

Why is this important?

Ageism has a range of potentially negative effects, at different levels. It is clearly a problem for older individuals, who are being judged without reference to their own abilities and qualities. Assumptions are being made about them because they are seen to be part of a particular group, much like the biased assumptions sometimes made based on race and sex. Beyond its personal consequences, ageism is a social problem. Prejudice is divisive even if the reasons for the negative attitudes are inaccurate. Finally, ageism is a pressing economic issue. An ageing society, such as Australia’s, cannot afford to neglect or undervalue the contributions of its older citizens, who represent a growing share of the population.

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