

## “The Elderly”: A discriminatory term that is misunderstood

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*Older people in Aotearoa New Zealand too often experience negative attitudes or behaviours towards them based on their age. A pertinent example of this is the term “the elderly.” The objective of this research was to understand how stereotypes of “the elderly” are portrayed in the online arena in social and public spaces. Within Aotearoa New Zealand, 155 online media items using terms like “the elderly” and “elderly” were tracked, recorded and analysed during 2019 to determine stereotypical meanings of “the elderly.” Results revealed use of the term “the elderly” reflected various stereotyping and ageist discourses in the message. Labelling older people as “the elderly” may perpetuate social exclusion and discrimination faced by older people. As educators, we have a responsibility to create opportunities for meaningful intergenerational exchanges and relationship building within our teaching and learning activities.*

**Keywords:** elderly, older adults, ageism, online media, age stereotypes

### Introduction

In my work as a lecturer at the University of Waikato in the field of adult development and adult learning, I work hard to research and teach students about critically important issues of our time. Using education as a vehicle, my core work is to advocate for the centrality, dignity and value of older adults so that their voices can be heard and acted upon. Our world’s population is ageing; virtually every country in the world is experiencing growth in the number and proportion of older people in their population (United Nations, 2019). Alongside Covid-19 and climate change, population ageing is one of the most significant human developments this century.

Much of my motivation for researching discrimination against older adults comes from my own family experiences. My fiftieth birthday was one of life’s turning points. In her late seventies at the time, my mother, fit, well and with an energetic appetite for life, took me to a café for a special lunch. It was the first time I became aware of how completely invisible she was to others. Servers ignored her totally, the waiter turned to me to see if I needed to translate everything she was saying for them. Ironically, not long after, when I took my 20-year old daughter out for a coffee, this time I was the completely invisible old lady, servers’ eye contact and communication solely through my daughter. Some readers might say we need to frequent new cafés! However, awakened by the work of anti-ageism activist Ashton Applewhite (2019), I began to research and speak up about the discrimination of older people.

Reflecting further, I realised that I had been surrounded by older people from a much younger age. Tauranga Moana, where I grew up and also work presently, is well-known in Aotearoa New Zealand for being a retirement mecca. In the 1970s and 1980s my father frequently commented, with a sense of authority in his voice, “The elderly retire to the Bay, it’s ideal for the elderly.” Even then I wondered, who are “the elderly”? I formed a childhood image in my mind of “the elderly” – utterly disconnected from any older people such as grandparents and neighbours whom I knew in my own life. The image

I formed was of “other” people, partially created from stereotypes used on the radio, in the newspaper, pictures in magazines, films, and television advertisements. I began wondering about the pictures and words depicting the elderly in today’s online media context. It was time to turn my curiosity into formal research.

### **The research process**

A review of the literature and research showed that people labelled as “the elderly” experience a host of negative stereotypes applied by the non-elderly (Greenberg, et al., 2020), being labelled as incompetent, helpless, lonely, dependent, physically weak, a burden, aggressive, mentally slow, inferior, unable to work, “past it,” frail, vulnerable, and more. All these stereotypes engender pity and dislike among the non-elderly. Worse, age intersects with other identities resulting in a ‘double jeopardy’ so that members of already marginalised groups are further stigmatised as they age.

At the same time, a curious phenomenon exists around centenarians (aged 100 or more) being held up in an exaggeratedly positive light. They hold an almost celebrity-like fascination to the non-elderly because they seem especially skilled at dodging risk factors for death. Positive old age stereotypes attributed to centenarians and “the elderly” include wise, cute, warm, happy, healthy/well, patriotic/war-survivors, resilient, tough, and holding secrets to either nutrition or the key to life. While examples of elderly as exceptional older adults may play a role in altering societal stereotypes by inspiring those in younger cohorts, they have a tendency to very differently affect older adults closer to their own peer group, producing feelings of guilt and anxiety amongst those who cannot or do not want to meet that standard.

The objective of my research was to understand how stereotypes of the elderly are portrayed in public and social online media spaces in anticipation of progressing understanding of how ageist attitudes in relation to ageing are perpetuated through use of the term “the elderly.” I used a qualitative research method – Bowen’s (2009) document analysis technique – to analyse over 155 online items including newspaper articles, television clips, news blogs, radio podcasts and transcripts, online magazines, and advertising.

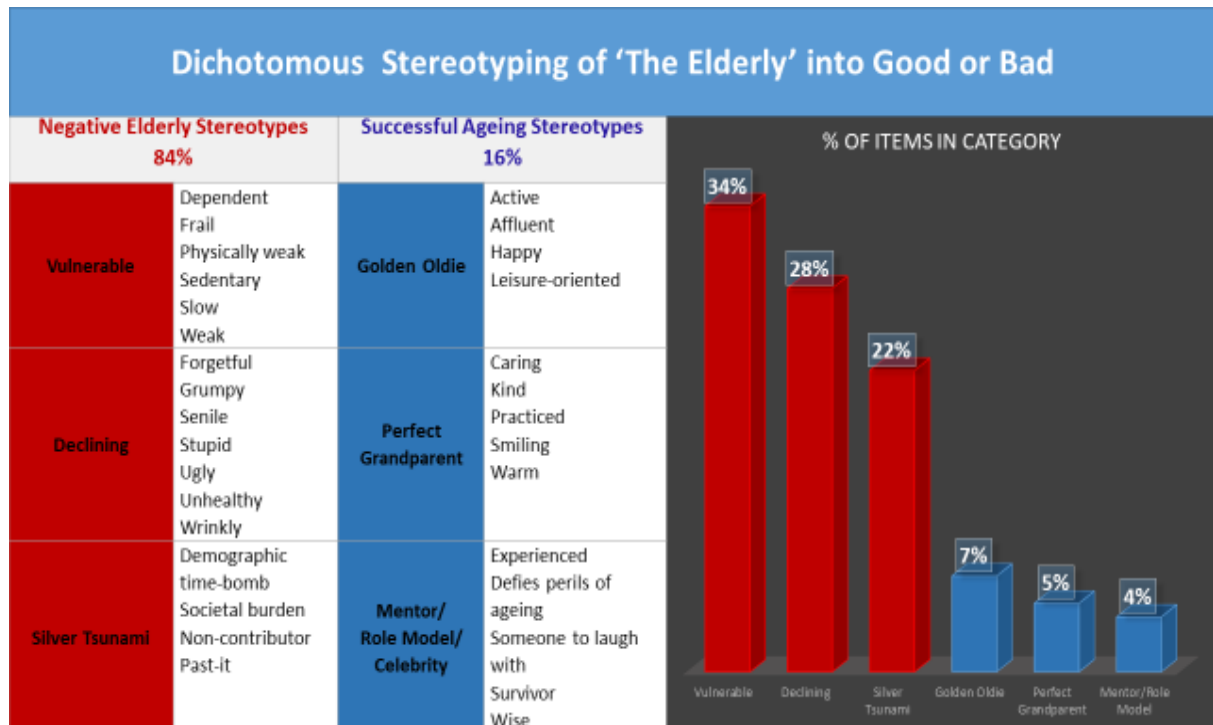
My search terms included older adults but predominantly focused on the terms “the elderly” and “elderly.” I systematically collected, recorded and analysed these items using Bowen’s analytical principles throughout 2019. The sample included media items readily accessible to the New Zealand public, published by national and international sources. I focused on items individually and collectively to determine stereotypical meanings of “the elderly.

### **The research findings**

What did I find? Dichotomous stereotyping into positive and negative representations of the elderly was evident, as shown in Table 1. Data consolidated into three key themes of negative elderly stereotypes: “Vulnerable,” “Declining,” and “Silver Tsunami” accounted for close to 84% of the items I analysed. 16% of items consolidated into three key theme areas of successful ageing stereotypes: “Golden Oldie,” “The Perfect Grandparent,” and the “Mentor | Role Model | Celebrity,” portraying older adults as beneficial to society by using seemingly positive attributes to depict the elderly.

Table 1

*Dichotomous stereotyping of “The Elderly” into positive or negative*



The term “the elderly” was a bit like a Trojan horse, appearing to be used out of respect, yet often being used to undermine and undervalue older people. Negative stereotypes focused on frailty, dependency, decline, and non-contributors. Narratives were common of growing numbers of elderly as a demographic crisis – the root cause of society’s economic burden.

The target audience and media form also impacted which representation of the elderly was used. For younger audiences, there was a tendency towards negative old age stereotypes. However, for older audiences, images and patterns of successful or positive ageing were prevalent, sometimes representing a glamorisation of successful ageing beyond the financial reach of most. Online advertising reflected and reinforced traditional gender role stereotypes of the elderly. Firstly, there was a notable lack of images of older people compared with younger people in general, but particularly older women. This was consistent with other studies of traditional print media found in the literature. Secondly, online advertisements revealed that gender role stereotypical representations of the elderly became more marked with age. Women were commonly depicted as “caring older women,” while men were portrayed as “powerful older men,” perpetrating a culture of denial of old age and presenting a youthful, idealised view of ageing hardly possible for most to achieve. This notion has been picked up by others who criticise the Positive Ageing or Successful Ageing discourses (Katz & Calasanti, 2015).

Three notable outlying phenomena arose. Curiously, numerous images (n=47) depicted “the elderly” by showing hands – folded in a lap, grasping a walker, or clawed over a walking stick. More research is needed to explore this finding. However, there might be some commonalities between the portrayals of older adults and the portrayals of women in media imagery where the practice of fragmenting and reducing an individual to their physical bodies (hands or larger segments) dehumanises and removes identity and voice (both signified by a face). (See the Headless Women of Hollywood Project)

The second curious finding which I have begun to explore in a follow-on study is the large volume of items that linked “young children and the elderly” and “the elderly and the disabled,” portraying *both* population groups as vulnerable and inferior. This is being investigated as part of the next phase of my research using a big data approach to research thousands of online news media articles in order to specifically understand online news media positioning of older adults.

Thirdly, the online social media space, while clearly acting as a conduit for perpetrating negative stereotypes and discrimination of older adults, simultaneously presents possibilities for challenging stereotypes of the elderly and even redefining ageing. Although not specifically included in this study as part of the analysis, some data suggested that older adults use blogs to share their own experiences and situation in a bid to reconstruct old age identities. But this is an area for future research as to how more diverse and individualised perspectives on old age can be drawn from online communities.

### **Discussion: Is “the elderly” a discriminatory term?**

The term “elderly” is a misunderstood term and a form of prejudice shaping public perceptions which tend to diminish, and negatively and inaccurately stereotype older adults as a homogenous group. Anti-ageism activist Ashton Applewhite (2019) explains that prejudice relies on “othering” – seeing a group of people as “other” than ourselves. The peculiar thing about ageism is that the “other” is us! It is our future self. In this regard, ageism differs from many of the other ‘isms, such as racism, sexism, and ableism where an individual commonly belongs to one group and not usually to the other group. For instance, it is less likely for someone who identifies as a New Zealand European to change that identity at some point in their life to a New Zealand Māori. Yet it is far more likely that someone who is a youth, or a middle-aged adult, will evolve their self-identity as an older adult. (That said, gender identity fluidity is increasing, as is multi-racial identity, which could arguably counter this point).

Since the theoretical framework underpinning this research was based on social constructionism, it is worth noting here, like racism, sexism, ableism and homophobia, age and ageism are socially constructed ideas. Society, made up of each one of us individually and as a group, constructs these ‘isms. That is a powerful idea because it could be taken to mean that society, or each one of us individually and as a group, can take action to deconstruct or change these ‘isms over time or even quite quickly. In other words, stereotypes of ageing are social constructs that are culturally, politically, and historically situated, as well as individually interpreted.

Language is an important vehicle for the social construction of age and ageing. Labelling older people as “the elderly” may perpetuate social exclusion and discrimination faced by older people. In light of the ageing population both internationally and in Aotearoa New Zealand, “the elderly” is a discriminatory term that needs to be challenged if we seek to enhance the wellbeing of older persons, their organisations, and communities. Stereotypes start influencing our thoughts from childhood. Negative messages, images and language used in the media can bombard us at every turn – “wrinkles are ugly,” “it’s sad to be old,” “old people are frail,” “the elderly and the disabled.” Sometimes older adults are the most ageist of all, having had a lifetime to internalise these messages because there was never any thought of challenging them. The findings of this research challenge each of us to become more aware of our internalised biases. A good place to start is the conscious choice of our language by avoiding the term “the elderly” when discussing older adults.

### **The research (in) conclusion**

When I began my research at the start of 2019, it was a completely different context than today's "new normal" Covid-19 environment. I had planned to finish data collection at the end of 2019, but in the context of Covid-19, it seemed more pertinent than ever to continue this research. Public and social media responses to the Covid-19 crisis have thrown up serious questions about the way we think and talk about older people and highlight what an impact those attitudes can have on the lived experiences of older adults themselves.

Some stereotypes could contain elements of truth. For example, we cannot ignore that health issues become more prevalent with age, or that functional abilities change and sometimes decline over time. (Although, recent research suggests that ill-health and disability in old age are more a product of life-long inequalities). However, we also cannot ignore that older people are more at risk of hospitalisation and death from the Covid-19 pandemic. The point of the present study is not to minimise the severity of consequences for older adults if they come into contact with the Covid-19 virus. Instead, this research emphasises the problem of the Covid-19 context seriously fuelling negative stereotypes of older adults portrayed as vulnerable, dependent, frail and non-contributors to our society. Like any other form of prejudice, ageism has a profound effect on self-esteem, wellbeing and the way daily life is experienced. Fundamentally, ageism undermines older peoples' participation in society and contributes to greater isolation and loneliness.

Here, I return to my introduction as an educator working hard to research and teach students about critically important issues of our time. The research suggests three possible courses of action to reduce ageist attitudes, prejudices, and prevailing negative stereotypes. These are: 1. Conscious use of respectful language; 2. Promoting anti-ageism through education; and 3. Creating opportunities for intergenerational contact. Education is a key means to advocate for and promote the centrality, dignity, and value of older adults. As educators, we have a responsibility to create opportunities for meaningful intergenerational exchanges and relationship building within our teaching and learning activities. That process involves synthesising knowledge and values to provide a foundation from which non-ageist principles and practices can be developed – values such as personhood, citizenship, and celebration. Celebration is a value base that acknowledges attaining old age is noteworthy, both for the individual and for society. Through acknowledgment and quiet validation of diversity among older people, educators can play a significant role in helping society and individuals accept that old age is an authentic period of life to be valued in its own right.

A pre-Covid-19 airplane trip memory:

In my pre-Covid-19 life, the last time I travelled on a plane, I sat next to a Victoria University student as I flew to Wellington. We began chatting and then he asked what I did. I answered, "I study the term 'the elderly.'" He looked at me for a moment with an incredulous expression, and then said, "Well, you don't look that old!" I replied, "So how old do you think that old is?" He returned, "You said 'the elderly,' so you mean the old and decrepit eighty-year olds and stuff, right?" He was waving his hands to the left of him to indicate the elderly were someone else, not him, not even me, an "other." Momentarily I thought, do I get into this? Should I bother replying? Before I could help myself, out popped, "No, no, not them. They're the chronologically gifted!"

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