

# Doddery but dear?

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Examining age-  
related stereotypes

March 2020





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## Centre for Ageing Better

The UK's population is undergoing a massive age shift. In less than 20 years, one in four people will be over 65.

The fact that many of us are living longer is a great achievement. But unless radical action is taken by government, business and others in society, millions of us risk missing out on enjoying those extra years.

At the Centre for Ageing Better we want everyone to enjoy later life. We create change in policy and practice informed by evidence and work with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities.

We are a charitable foundation, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, and part of the government's What Works Network.



# Introduction

**The age profile of our society is rapidly changing. The number of people aged 65 and over will increase by more than 40% within 20 years, and the number of households where the oldest person is 85 and over is increasing faster than any other age group (Office for National Statistics, 2017). Despite these profound changes to the age structure of our society, ageism is still rife. One in three people within the UK report experiencing age prejudice or age discrimination (Abrams, Eilola & Swift, 2009; Abrams et al, 2011; Abrams, Swift & Houston, 2018).**

Ageism is a combination of how we think about age (stereotypes), how we feel about age (prejudice) and how we behave in relation to age (discrimination). Not only can it affect how we think and feel about others we perceive as 'old' or 'young', it can also affect how we feel about our own ageing process

(Swift et al, 2019). These attitudes are often reflected in and created by the language we use about age and ageing.

Ageism has broad and far reaching negative consequences. It can have a negative impact on physical and mental health and it can influence whether older patients receive treatment, as well as the duration, frequency and appropriateness of that treatment (Chang et al, 2020).

This paper is based on a literature review conducted by Dr Hannah J Swift and Ben Steeden, School of Psychology, the University of Kent, summarising what existing research tells us about the role and impact of language and stereotypes in framing old age and ageing in the UK. Broadly speaking when we use the term 'old age' or 'older person' we are referring to those aged 50 and over. However the notion of who is old is a contested idea, which is reflected by the fact that many of the studies referenced throughout this report use differing age bands when talking about 'older people'.

# Stereotypes of age and ageing



**Personal characteristics such as age can be used as a proxy for similarity, leading to assumptions that those who are of a similar age are like each other in other respects too.**

Research shows that people have a tendency to see those who are of a similar age to themselves as more alike and are likely to feel more comfortable interacting with members of same age groups (Naegele, De Tavernier & Hess, 2018; Abrams et al, 2011). However, sometimes we develop negative attitudes towards those we see as different to ourselves, a process that is often called ‘othering’. As figure 1 shows, most people see those of different ages as distinct groups.

Difference can also be perceived across multiple personal characteristics; for example, an older man may be viewed and spoken about differently to an older woman, or a

heterosexual older person differently to a homosexual older person. The influence of multiple group characteristics is known as ‘intersectionality’. Thus, age combines with other identities resulting in a ‘double jeopardy’ whereby members of already marginalised groups are further stigmatised as they age – a good example of which is how women’s ageing is often seen more negatively than men’s ageing (Bugental & Hehman, 2007). However, research exploring the intersection between age and other group identities is still limited and further work is needed to disentangle the complexity of these.

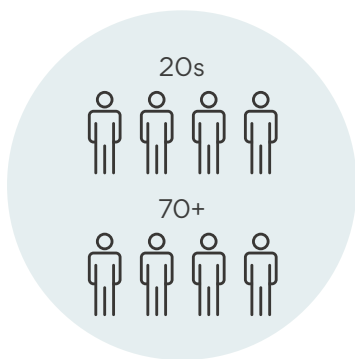
The process of othering results in stereotypes, with stereotypes of older people in the UK tending to be more negative than positive (Swift et al, 2017; Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Stereotypes can broadly be split into two different types: descriptive and prescriptive.

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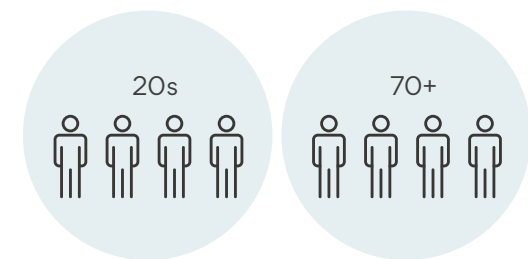
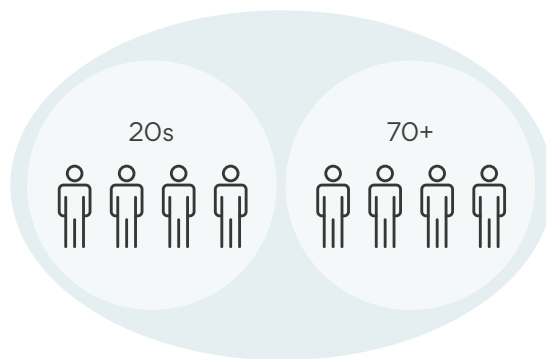


Figure 1. Perceived similarity of younger and older age groups. (Abrams & Swift, 2012)

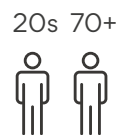
12% of respondents saw people in their 20s and 70s as one group



46% of respondents saw people in their 20s and 70s as two separate groups within the same community



11% of respondents saw people in their 20s and 70s as two separate groups who were not part of the same community



31% of respondents saw people in their 20s and people in their 70s as individuals rather than as groups

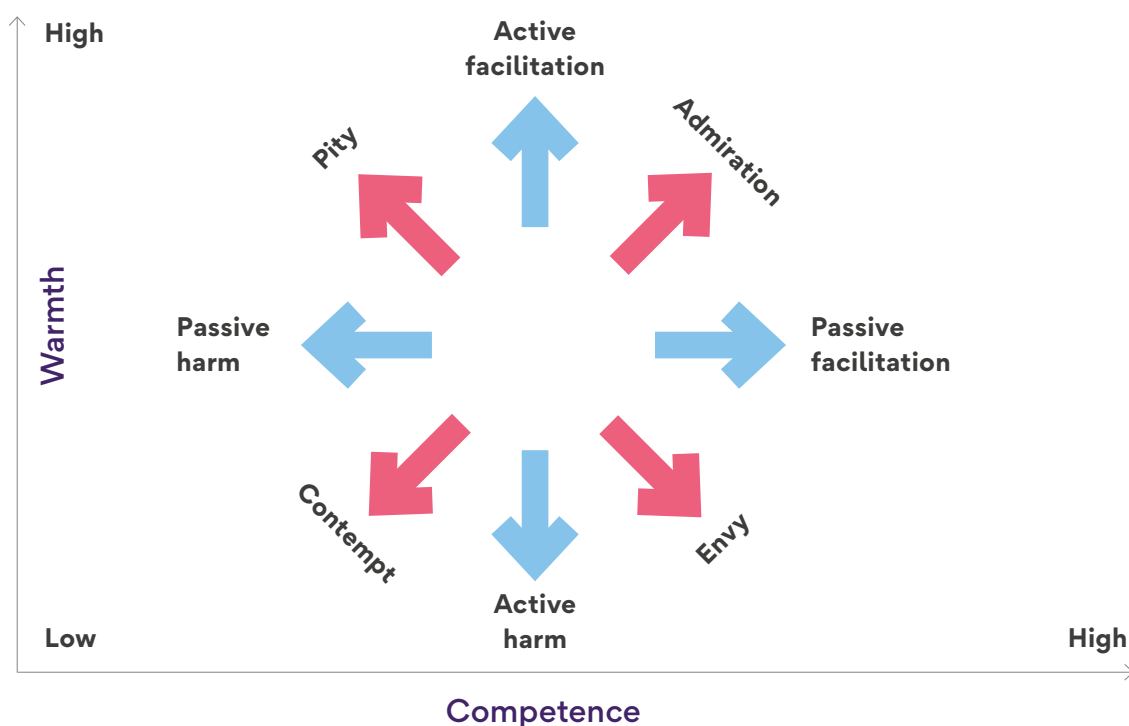
**Descriptive stereotypes** represent assumptions about what we think certain groups and individuals are like. In the context of later life these can be positive things such as politeness, being moral and/or having an ability to understand others (Abrams, Drury & Swift, 2016). They can also be negative things such as older people being less attractive and physically able (Kite, Stockdale, Whitley & Johnson, 2005). Sometimes they are a mixture of negative and positive stereotypes; for example, older voices being seen as ‘less powerful but wiser’ (Monteparte et al, 2014). Importantly, research suggests that how we think and feel towards older adults can influence how we behave towards and interact with older adults. For instance, older adults are seen as having ‘high warmth’ but ‘low competence’ which can lead to feelings of pity (Cuddy, Norton & Fiske, 2005) and encourage passively harming behaviours such as neglect and exclusion (Cuddy et al, 2007;

Cuddy et al, 2005) (see figure 2). It may also lead to helping behaviours that don’t seem harmful on the surface but can be quite patronising (Bugental & Hehman, 2007).

Societal attitudes towards older people have been described by some as ‘benign indifference’ (Abrams et al, 2015). This means ageism tends to manifest more indirectly, as a lack of respect, rather than directly. This is supported by European Social Survey data showing that just over 41% of respondents reported that they were disrespected for their age whereas only 23% were insulted or abused due to their age (Abrams et al, 2012).

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**Figure 2. Representation of the emotions and behaviours elicited from competence and warmth stereotypes. Emotions are represented by red arrows. Behaviours are represented by blue arrows. Cuddy et al., (2007).**



**Prescriptive stereotypes** are assumptions about how we think certain groups of people should or shouldn't act or behave. Common examples of prescriptive stereotypes include the notion that older people must pass on power to younger people, that older people shouldn't consume too many resources, and that older people should not engage in activities that are seen as traditionally for 'younger' people (North & Fiske, 2013). When older people go against these prescriptive stereotypes, they can face criticism or 'backlash' (North & Fiske, 2013) which can lead to social exclusion (North & Fiske, 2016).

Both descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes can become self-fulfilling prophecies, as they can affect how older people view themselves, their own capabilities and therefore the kinds of tasks and activities they engage with (Ng & Feldman, 2012; Swift et al, 2017).

### Representations in other areas of life

Age stereotypes can vary according to different contexts, but stereotypes about older people are almost always more negative than they are positive.

In work positive stereotypes include older workers being perceived to be more dependable, loyal and reliable (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). But these are outweighed by negative stereotypes, including older workers being perceived as having lower levels of performance, less ability to learn, and being more costly than younger workers (Posthuma & Campion, 2009; Harper et al., 2010; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Taylor & Earl, 2015).

In health and social care stereotypes tend to be even more negative, focusing on death, physical and cognitive decline (Chrisler et al., 2016). Getting old is often seen as a process of increasingly bad health (Sarkisian, Hays, & Mangione, 2002; Kydd & Fleming, 2015) and this can lead to over- or under-medication for pain management. Assumptions about people's lifestyles in later life can also result in lower likelihood of being screened for sexually transmitted diseases or substance abuse (Correa-de-Araujo, 2006; Gullette, 2004; Durvasula, 2014; Van Egeren, 2004; reviewed in Chrisler et al., 2016).



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**Kernel of truth**

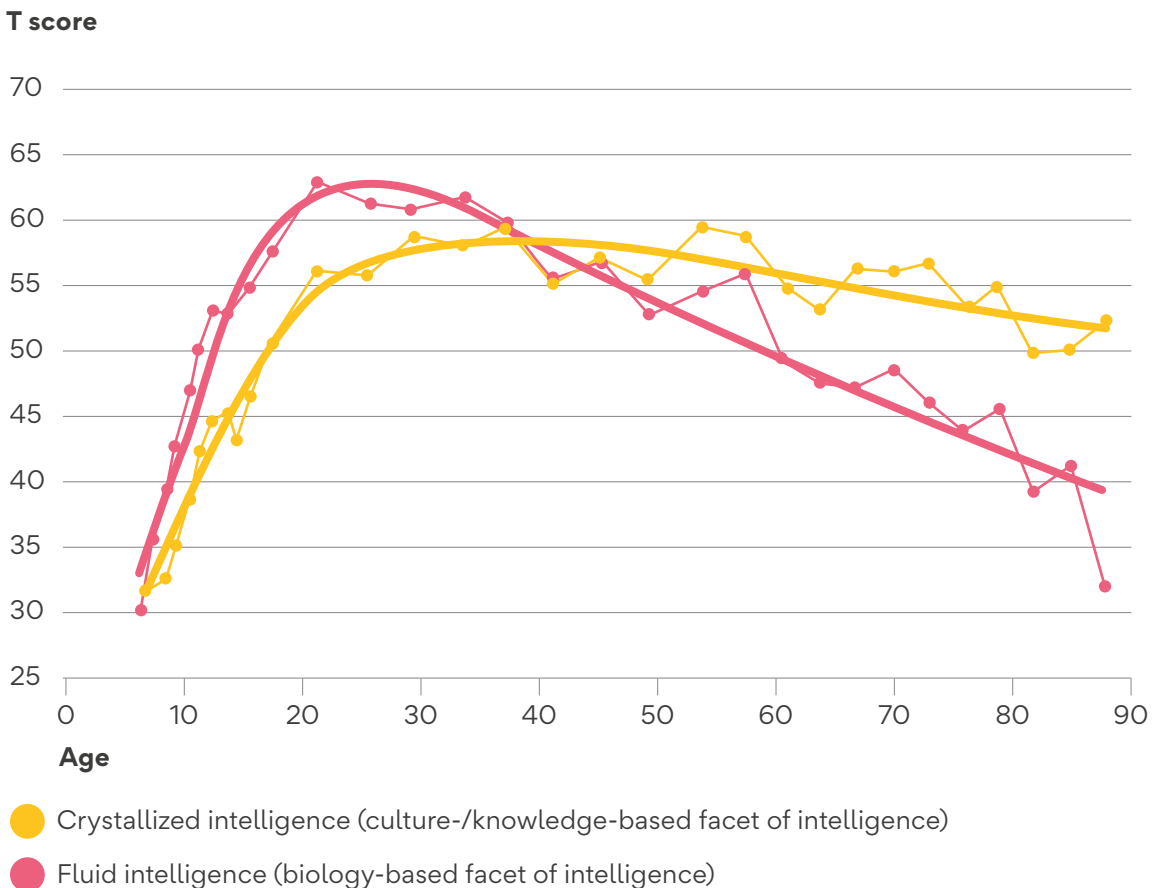
Some stereotypes contain an element of truth. For example, we cannot ignore that health issues become more prevalent with age or that functional abilities change over time. However, the problem is that stereotypes ignore the variation between people of the same age, because of the tendency to see people of the same age as more similar to one another.

They also over exaggerate differences between age groups. This means that wrong assumptions could be made about a person based on their age, despite them not being true of the individual. One example of this can be seen in a widely held misunderstanding of how intelligence changes over the lifecourse.

In general fluid intelligence (the ability to solve unfamiliar problems) begins to decline from age 30 onwards, and crystallised intelligence (the ability to use existing knowledge or skills) begins to decline more slowly from the age of 40 (see figure 3). However, it is often assumed that the decline in fluid intelligence as we age happens far later and far faster than evidence suggests, leading to stereotypes of older people being poor performers and unable to learn new skills (Big Window, 2017).

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**Figure 3. Crystallized and fluid intelligence ability by age. T-scores are standardised scores that facilitate the interpretation and allow for comparison between different measures (Voelkle & Lindenberger, 2014; adapted from Li et al., 2004)**







# Ageist language, images and behaviours



The ways in which we speak to older people are important because it can affect their behaviour. For example, using patronising and infantilising language towards older people can encourage them to conform to negative stereotypes of old age (e.g. low competence and high dependence) (Coudin & Alexopoulos, 2010).

Acceptability of language is often determined by the context in which it is used or who is using it. For example, patronising language in which older people are spoken to more slowly and simply tends to be regarded as more unacceptable if used by younger, than older people (Horhota, Chasteen, & Crumley-Branyon, 2019; Nussbaum et al., 2005).

## In the media

Media representations tend to draw more on negative stereotypes, reflecting a traditional 'deficit' narrative of ageing being associated with inevitable decline (reviewed in Bugental & Hehman, 2007; Kesby, 2017). Within print media, older people are represented as being more of a burden than benefit, with a huge dearth of positive images of older people (Bai, 2014; Martin, Williams, & O'Neill, 2009; Rozanova, 2010). Metaphors such as 'grey tsunami', 'demographic cliff' and 'demographic timebomb' present old age in terms of crisis, reflecting a perception of old age and the 'baby boomer' generation as a societal burden (Sweetland et al, 2017; Kesby, 2017) and encouraging negative feelings toward the older population. This language

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also contributes to the process of ‘othering’ and can stoke perceptions of conflict between generations, apparent at a personal level when older people are dehumanised by terms such as ‘hags’ and ‘fossils’ (Jonson, 2013).

In entertainment media, for example television, representations tend to seem more positive but often constitute a denial of old age rather than a positive representation. A study from Germany found that older people tend to be far less commonly seen on television, and when they are, it is in an exaggeratedly positive light (Kessler, 2004). There are similar patterns within magazine and advertising, with the older people who appear often portrayed in a youthful, idealised way that is unrealistic to achieve for many (Milner et al, 2012; Bai 2014; Ylänne, 2015; Zhang et al, 2006).

A study by Williams, Wadleigh, and Ylänne (2010) reviewed images of older people in UK magazine advertising. It found that there are four common portrayals of older people that draw on both positive and negative stereotypes. They are:

1. Portrayals of older people as frail and vulnerable (negative)
2. Portrayals of older people as mentors who are wise and experienced (positive)
3. Portrayals of older people as happy and affluent (positive but often exaggerated and unrealistic)
4. Portrayals of older people as active and leisure-oriented (positive but often exaggerated and unrealistic)

These representations fail to reflect the diversity of experiences and circumstances experienced by people as they age. Sometimes, as with portrayals three and four, these representations put pressure on older individuals to achieve idealised lives that are not particularly realistic.

In media the intended or target audience is also very important in terms of how language, imagery and stereotypes shape representations of ageing of older people. For instance, advertising aimed at younger adults often relies on negative stereotypes and takes a mocking tone (Ylänne, 2015). On the other hand, magazines targeting older people tend to emphasise images of successful ageing, glamorising a lifestyle that is financially out of reach for many (Milner et al, 2012)

Finally, social media may provide an opportunity to challenge stereotypes and redefine ageing. For example, through people blogging about their own experiences of ageing. Although research has shown that blogs enable more diverse and individualised perspective on ageing – therefore challenging stereotypes – there is also evidence of the internalisation of negative stereotypes when you analyse language used in the blogs (Lazar et al, 2017). For example, someone might blog about a recent birthday of theirs and draw upon negative stereotypes of being ‘over the hill’.

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### **Policy contexts**

Both positive and negative representations of ageing are present in policy contexts. In the UK we have seen emerging conflicting narratives of intergenerational conflict, in which older people are depicted as hostile “villains” unfairly consuming too many of society’s resources (Kesby, 2017).

There are also some seemingly more positive portrayals of ageing and old age in the policy context; for example, ideas around healthy and active ageing, which challenges the traditional narrative around deficit and decline

and emphasise the possibility of older people remaining active and productive for society (Coole, 2012). The narrative of active ageing can also be seen as reflecting a perceived need to reframe traditional notions of old age as sedentary and dependent, so that people can remain active and productive for longer for the mutual economic benefit of wider society (Kesby, 2017; Coole, 2012).

However, active ageing narratives can be criticised for exacerbating inequalities by excluding and stigmatising those older people who cannot achieve the active ageing model (Stephens, 2017; Rozanova, 2010).

# Conclusion

**It is clear from this review of the evidence that stereotypes and attitudes towards ageing and older people tend to be more negative than positive.**

These can be damaging to individuals in two ways: First, when these result in prejudice and discrimination, which can be experienced both directly and indirectly; Second, when they shape the way we think and feel about age and our own ageing. These stereotypes and attitudes are shaped, reflected and reproduced in the language that we use, both in terms of our everyday lives and in a range of different contexts such as the media and policy.

Narratives that promote later life as a period of inevitable decline, an ageing society as a crisis, and set generations against each other in a battle over resources and power are likely to exacerbate these issues.

We need to challenge this. Later life needs to be recognised as much a time of diversity as any other age. One of the ways to do this is to readdress the balance and encourage more realistic depictions of ageing in traditional media, social media and policy-making circles.

This summary literature review fits into a broader programme of work the Centre for Ageing Better are conducting looking at how we can help shift the narrative on age and ageing in order to combat ageism.



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