



Perspective

Anti-aging versus positive-aging language in scientific literature: Raising questions for future research

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Abstract

Ageism is one of the most common forms of discrimination among older adults. Although applicable in regards to discrimination against all age groups, the term ageism is predominantly used in relation to the treatment of older people. Anti-aging language refers to the use of words, phrases and sentences when talking with or about older adults. Terms such as “old people,” “old age,” “elderly,” “the elderly” and “the aged” are in the form of anti-aging speaking, and it is recommended that the terms “older people”, “older adults”, “seniors” and “later life” be used instead of the latter mentioned terms, indicating there is a growing sense that emphasis on a positive perception and illustration of aging. There is a lack of evidence on the diversity, frequency, range of terms and expressions and examples of anti-aging speaking, and also the other end, positive aging. In this perspective study, we raised questions to address the existing gap, with the hope to help future researchers in the use of negative/positive semantic words or negative/positive attitudes towards the older adults and examples of anti-aging/positive aging speaking in scientific texts. Raising such research questions might be useful in capturing the spirit of the field and some of its focus, and revealing how scientists talk about aging, or whether they use or are trying to combat ageist language.

Keywords: Ageism, Anti-ageing speaking, Age discrimination, Older adults

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Ageism definition

Ageism is one of the most common forms of discrimination among older adults, which is characterized by either stereotyping or discrimination against an individual or group because of age,^{1,2} as well as the beliefs, norms and values that may be used to justify doing so.³ Based on the Ontario Human Rights Commission fact sheet, “Ageism is often a cause for individual acts of age discrimination and also discrimination that is more systemic in nature, such as in the design and implementation of services, programs and facilities”.⁴ Although applicable in regards to discrimination against all age groups, the term is predominantly used in relation to the treatment of older people. In fact, the term was coined in 1969 by Robert Neil Butler to describe discrimination against seniors.⁵ Today, discrimination against older adults has become increasingly important because of rapid and increasingly population aging all over the world, Negative attitudes toward older adults are high and widely seen in most cultures.^{6,7}

Age-based discrimination

Discrimination based on age is complex and often hidden. Age-related stereotypes are mostly disregarded and their effects are rarely noticed, because they are embedded in our lives.⁸ There is a great need to assess the cognitive, behavioural, and emotional aspects of the issue, as well as its explicit and implicit nature, and its micro-, meso-, and macro-level manifestations.⁹ At the micro-level, personal thoughts, emotions, and actions are concerned, at the meso-level groups, organizations, and social entities are considered, and at the macro-level, socio-cultural values, as a whole, are concentrated.¹⁰ Ageism at micro level is the written or spoken language and expressions of humiliating and unpleasant phrases or remarks on aging and older people, which mostly happens in interpersonal interactions in settings of everyday life (like work, community, and healthcare).¹¹ At the meso-level, an example may be the rules governing entry to and exit from an organization. For entry into a company (“too



old to be hired”) or for exit from a company (“pension age”), age is decisive in the labour market. At the macro-level, an example may be the age-related retirement regulations in societal institutions. Language reinforces the stereotypes that generate inequalities in power and social status and perpetuate discrimination in everyday life. These processes are complex and subtle and may be intentional or unintentional in the form of hostile or offensive communication.¹¹

Anti-ageing speaking in scientific literature

The language of ageism is rooted in both explicit practice and implicit attitudes.¹¹ The age differences in the use of language are evident in spoken and written language and are also found in scientific literature. Articles and scientific documents use various terms and expressions to refer to older adults, and express concepts related to aging. The use of words, concepts or phrases with a semantic load or a negative attitude or an inspiration of weakness or disability in older adults is taken to be ageist and reflect an anti-aging sentiment.

Anti-aging language refers to the use of words, phrases and sentences when talking with or about older adults. Terms such as “old people,” “old age,” “elderly,” “the elderly” and “the aged” are in the form of anti-aging speaking, and it is recommended that the terms “older people”, “older adults”, “seniors” and “later life” be used instead of the latter mentioned terms, indicating there is a growing sense that emphasis on a positive perception and illustration of aging.¹²

The concepts of words are relative in the cultural context of different societies. Occasionally in some cultures, the terms used for older adults are considered to be negative, label, and offensive. In the field of aging, the term “elderly” is a key word. This word has different meanings and definitions depending on the dictionary one uses. For example, in the Longman dictionary,¹³ elderly is used as a polite way to talk about older adults. In contrast, Macmillan’s dictionary¹⁴ states that many people think this is an offensive term and has been considered ageist. For example, a 75-year-old man says “I am not elderly, I am old and proud of it.” This term is strongly related to disability, need for care, victimization and vulnerable social groups. Using existing evidence,¹⁵ it can be shown that “elderly” is unlikely to be associated with wealth, power, or a combination of them, but is instead more likely to refer to disability, poverty, dependence, or a combination of them. Such terms and phrases that are used when talking with older people as well as the tone and the way of speaking with them are called anti-aging speaking, which is considered as disrespect by a majority of older people. Anti-aging speaking are known to be associated with communication problems, reduced communication competency, increased dependency on others, social isolation, cognitive impairment, negative

behaviors, increased need for care, and negative effects on physical and mental health of older adults.¹⁶

The term “old” in the United States is a culturally taboo. The American Psychological Association recommends the use of the term “older adults.” Among gerontologists, the use of the term “old age” is considered as a taboo, and the use of terms such as “later life” or “older age” is preferable, except that it seems as if there is a difference between talking about old age as a life period, and old people as people. It is not ageist to talk about old age, but it is somehow considered ageist to call someone in it ‘old.’ However, due to the relativity of terms, concepts and language, in different societies, the use of “old” and “old age” not only welcomed by the older adults but also promotes their social status.¹⁷

Raising questions for future research

According to the search conducted by the research team among available scientific documents, there is a lack of evidence on the diversity, frequency, range of terms and expressions and examples of anti-aging speaking, and also the other end, positive aging. Answering some questions to address the existing gap, seems to be helpful in the use of negative/positive semantic words or negative/positive attitudes towards the older adults and examples of anti-aging/positive aging speaking in scientific texts. The following questions should be answered by future research:

1. How many/much are the frequency, diversity and range of ageist and positive ageing terms/phrases used in the aging literature?
2. What are the ageist terms/phrases reported as the keywords of the papers and registered in the Medical Subjects Heading (MeSH)?
3. How is the trend of using ageist and positive ageing terms/phrases in the aging literature?
4. How the ageing scholars talk about aging in the time period of interest (Is there any definite pattern in their mode of talking about ageing)?
5. Whether the ageing scholars use or try to combat ageist language?
6. Whether the term/phrases used in the literature are context-specific?
7. How the application of term/phrases used in the articles might be judged?

Conclusion

Despite the rapid growth of scientific literature on aging, and the number of specialized journals and articles, less attention has been paid to the use of terms in this field in scientific documents. In this regard, one may ask that what is it that we are asking of the literature, and why is it important to examine? As answers to such questions, because the language of scholars who study aging might reflect larger cultural ideas, and they, as aging scholars,

are also potential agents in changing larger cultural ideas and leading social change in how we talk about aging. Although advocacy organizations, like American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) in the United States, are actively trying to change the images of and conversation about aging, scholars of aging are needed to be particularly influential, as they are the core references to provide such organizations with clear and concise information on the issue. Raising such above-mentioned research questions might be useful in capturing the spirit of the field and some of its focus, and revealing how scientists talk about aging, or whether they use or are trying to combat ageist language. Research on this issue, can not only evaluate frequency of using anti-aging and positive aging language in scientific literature, but also provide a crucial instruction to reach common language for writing scientific articles in the field of gerontology and geriatrics.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Ethical Approval

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