

The Stereotype Content Model Approach to the Study of Ageism in History

The term “ageism” was first coined in 1969 to describe discrimination resulting from prejudice against one age group by another¹. Although the original definition encompasses discrimination and prejudice experienced by all age groups, scientific research has established an understanding of ageism as a specific form of discrimination experienced by older people² on the basis of actual (objective) or perceived (subjective) age.³ Such a conceptual narrowing is already evident in Butler’s 1975 definition, where he defines ageism as “the process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old.”⁴ Although the concept of ageism is relatively recent, the phenomenon itself is much older and exists in all societies where there is an implicit ranking of age groups into higher and lower classes.⁵ It refers to a form of oppression that occurs in all societies and historical periods, whereby individuals are discriminated against on the basis of the assumption that age is an indicator of competence and worth.⁶ The

1 Butler, Robert, N.: “Age-ism: Another form of Bigotry”. *The Gerontologist*, 9, 1969, 4/1, 243–246.

2 Gerdina, Otto, Kurdija, Slavko: “Ageism in Slovenia: Assessing Differences between 2008 and 2022”. *Annales: Series historia et sociologia*, 34, 2024, 1, 45–58.

3 Marcus, Justin: Age Discrimination. In: *Encyclopedia of Geropsychology* (Pachana, Nancy A., ed.). Singapore: Springer, 2015.

4 Butler, Robert. N.: *Why Survive? Being Old in America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, 12.

5 Palmore, Erdman: *Ageism: Negative and Positive*. 2nd ed. New York: Springer, 1999.

6 Thompson, Sue: Aging and Ageism. In: *Handbook of the Sociology of Death, Grief, and Bereavement: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (Thompson, Neil, Cox, Gerry R., eds.). London: Routledge, 2017, 210–223.

very notion that older individuals are distinct from their younger counterparts and possess unique characteristics renders it more readily acceptable for society to treat them unequally or at the very least, differently.⁷ Ageism encompasses both the societal perceptions of and attitudes towards older people, as well as specific instances of discrimination that limit the number of opportunities for individuals to participate in society or exclude them from society in their final years of life.

Ageism consists of three dimensions:

- dimension of perception/cognition, which communicates how older people are understood/perceived;
- the emotional dimension, which tells us how people feel about older people and how they evaluate them;
- the behaviour dimension, which describes how people actually behave towards older people.⁸

The first dimension is associated with stereotypes, the second with prejudice and the third with discrimination.⁹

Stereotypes play a key role in the dissemination and perpetuation of pre-conceived ways of thinking about (old) age.¹⁰ They can be defined as “cognitive structures that store our beliefs and expectations about the characteristics of members of social groups”.¹¹ Stereotypes can be either true or false, but they do influence our behaviour in a number of ways. They often determine what information we seek, what we pay attention to and what we remember. The term ‘stereotyping’ is used to describe “the process of applying stereotypical information”.¹² The act of stereotyping is rooted

7 Gerdina, Otto: Starizem in starostni stereotipi. In: *Homo senescens: dolgoživost in izobraževanje starejših* (Ličen, Nives, Mezgec, Maja, eds.). Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2022, 85–97.

8 Tornstam, Lars: “The Complexity of Ageism: A Proposed Typology”. *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, 1, 2006, 1, 43–68.

9 Cuddy, Amy J., Fiske, Susan T.: Doddering but Dear: Process, Content, and Function in Stereotyping of Older Persons. In: *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice against Older Persons* (Nelson, Todd, ed.). Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002, 3–26.

10 Marcus, Age Discrimination, 11.

11 Cuddy and Fiske, Doddering but Dear, 4.

12 *Ibid.*

in our innate tendency to “assign objects, events and people to meaningful classes, about which we have established beliefs and expectations”.¹³ Stereotyped ideas tend to obscure the nuances of individual differences between people, instead emphasising their affiliation with a specific social group.¹⁴

Prejudices are defined as negative attitudes towards older people and the process of ageing.¹⁵ They are the most persistent micro-ideologies of the everyday world, evading conscious control and succumbing to spontaneous and automatic responses to social situations.¹⁶ While older people are occasionally perceived in a positive light, for example as active members of the community, good-hearted, loyal and reliable, they are more frequently regarded in a negative manner. This includes perceptions of them as being unwell, mentally slow, forgetful, sexually inactive and unproductive.¹⁷ Consequently, old age increases the probability of being seen through the lens of negative age-related stereotypes and prejudices, thereby increasing the risk of discriminatory treatment.¹⁸

Age stereotypes and prejudices are a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the labelling of certain behaviours as ageist.¹⁹ As will be demonstrated subsequently, an understanding of age-related stereotypes and prejudices can be employed to anticipate people’s predisposition to behave towards older people in an ageist way.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Lippman, Walter: *Public Opinion*. New York: Macmillan, 1922.

15 Palmore, *Ageism*.

16 Ule Nastran, Mirjana (ed.): *Predsodki in diskriminacije: Izbrane socialno-psihološke študije*. Ljubljana: Znanstveno in publicistično središče, 1999.

17 Palmore, *Ageism*.

18 Swift, Hannah, J., Steeden, Ben: *Exploring Representations of Old Age and Ageing*. Canterbury: Centre for Ageing Better, 2020.

19 Voss, Peggy et al.: “A World of Difference? Domain-Specific Views on Aging in China, the US, and Germany”. *Psychology and Aging*, 33, 2018, 4, 595–606.

Stereotype content model

The stereotype content model²⁰ integrates cognitive and emotional elements inherent to stereotyping. The model is predicated on the assumption that social groups of people are classified along two axes, namely those of warmth and competence. In this context, the relative social status of a group predicts whether the group will be stereotyped as competent or incompetent, or its willingness to cooperate whether it will be stereotyped as warm or cold. The concept of competence encompasses attributes such as independence, skill, self-confidence and competence, while the notion of warmth encompasses qualities such as benevolence, trustworthiness, honesty and friendliness. A social group is more likely to be stereotyped as cold if it is perceived as a rival. A social group is perceived as warm if it is regarded as an ally.

The stereotype content model has been previously employed to evaluate the stereotype content of disparate social groups, including women,²¹ individuals of lower socioeconomic status,²² migrants,²³ members of various racial and ethnic minorities,²⁴ people with disabilities,²⁵ and older individuals. With regard to the latter, empirical research on the model has demonstrated that older individuals are predominantly perceived as warm

20 Cuddy and Fiske, *Doddering but Dear*. See also: Fiske, Susan. T. Cuddy, Amy. J., Glick, Peter, and Xu, Juan: "A Model of (often Mixed) Stereotype Content: Competence and Warmth Respectively Follow from Perceived Status and Competition". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 2002, 6, 878–902.

21 Eckes, Thomas: "Paternalistic and Envious Gender Stereotypes: Testing predictions from the stereotype content model". *Sex Roles*, 47, 2002, 99–114.

22 Durante, Federica, Tablante, Courtney Beams, Fiske, Susan. T.: "Poor but Warm, Rich but Cold (And Competent): Social Classes in the Stereotype Content Model". *Journal of Social Issues*, 73, 2017, 1, 138–157.

23 Lee, Tiane, Fiske, Susan T.: "Not an outgroup, not yet an ingroup: Immigrants in the Stereotype Content Model." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 30, 2006, 6, 751–768.

24 Durante, Federica, Volpato, Chiara, Fiske, Susan. T.: "Using the Stereotype Content Model to Examine Group Depictions in Fascism: An Archival Approach". *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 40, 2010, 3, 465–483.

25 Canton, Emily, Hedley, Darren, Spoor, Jennifer. R.: "The Stereotype Content Model and Disabilities". *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 163, 2023, 4, 480–500.

but less competent.²⁶ Phalet and Poppe²⁷ found, in a study of European national stereotypes, that older people were perceived as less competent, less ambitious and less responsible than younger people. However, they were also perceived as friendlier and warmer. The prejudices revealed by Fiske and colleagues²⁸ showed that patronising attitudes (pity and sympathy) predominate in attitudes towards older people, and that respondents felt less envy and jealousy towards them compared to other social groups. These perceptions give rise to feelings of sympathy, and less frequently, envy, pride or contempt.²⁹

The stereotype content model was subjected to empirical investigation in a variety of cultural settings and contexts. To illustrate, Cuddy and colleagues³⁰ evaluated the model in seven European individualistic and three East Asian collectivistic cultures, thereby substantiating its cultural universality. Despite the model's widespread use in contemporary societies, to the best of the authors' knowledge, the stereotype content model has only been employed in one historical study of different social groups in fascist Italy. In this study, Durante, Volpato and Fiske³¹ conducted an analysis of the content of the Italian fascist magazine *La Difesa della Razza*. Their findings indicated that the members of the ingroup (Italians and Aryans) were depicted with positive attributes, such as competence and warmth, which led to the formation of admiration prejudice. Conversely, outgroups were depicted with envious (Jews and English) and contemptuous (Blacks and mixed heritage) prejudices. The Jewish and English populations were depicted as competent, yet lacking in warmth. They were

26 Cuddy and Fiske, *Doddering but Dear*; Swift and Steeden, *Exploring Representations of Old Age and Ageing*.

27 Phalet, Karen, Poppe, Edwin: "Competence and Morality Dimensions of National and Ethnic Stereotypes: A Study in Six Eastern-European Countries". *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 27, 1997, 703–723.

28 Fiske, Susan T., Xu, Juan, Cuddy, Amy. C., Glick, Peter: "(Dis)Respecting Versus (Dis)Liking: Status and Interdependence Predict Ambivalent Stereotypes of Competence and Warmth". *Journal of Social Issues*, 55, 1999, 3, 473–489.

29 Ayalon, Lyat, Tesch-Römer, Clemens: Introduction to the Section: Ageism – Concept and Origins. In: *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism* (Ayalon, Lyat, Tesch-Römer, Clemens, eds.). New York: Springer, 2018, 1–10.

30 Cuddy, Amy J. et al.: "Stereotype Content Model Across Cultures: Towards Universal Similarities and Some Differences". *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 48, 2009, 1, 1–33.

31 Durante et al.: "Using the Stereotype Content Model."

portrayed as powerful, manipulative, and dangerous, reflecting the Fascist narrative of a Jewish conspiracy. Those of African and mixed heritage were depicted as lacking both competence and warmth. Such portrayals depicted these groups with negative physical attributes and as socially inferior. In contrast with the predictions of the stereotype content model, no evidence of paternalistic prejudice was found. This absence was attributed to the Fascist regime's lack of positive interdependence with any outgroups, as well as its focus on racial purity and superiority. Notwithstanding the specific findings regarding in-group and out-group stereotypes in the Fascist era, this study effectively demonstrated the applicability of the stereotype content model in historical research. Nevertheless, as this is the sole study to employ the stereotype content model in a historical context, the utilisation of this approach in historical analysis remains in its infancy.

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how the stereotype content model can be applied in the historical study of ageism. This will be achieved in three steps. First, this chapter examines the attitudes of dominant groups in historical societies towards older people. Second, it outlines the generally prevalent stereotype content associated with old age. Third, it hypothesises the most probable widely shared type of ageism in a given era based on presented historical evidence. To this end, existing typologies of ageism are briefly presented and conceptually related to the Stereotype Content Model.

Typologies of ageism

A number of different forms of ageism have been identified in the literature. The majority of research distinguishes between individual and institutional ageism.³² The first refers to biases and discriminatory behaviour expressed in everyday interactions with older people, often shaping their own self-perceptions through internalisation.³³ Individual ageism encom-

32 For example, Butler, *Why Survive*. See also: Ayalon, Lyat, Tesch-Römer, Clemens: Introduction to the Section: On the Manifestations and Consequences of Ageism. In: *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism* (Ayalon, Lyat, Tesch-Römer, Clemens eds.). New York: Springer, 2018, 109–114.

33 Levy, Becca: "Stereotype Embodiment: A Psychosocial Approach to Aging." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18, 2009, 6, 332–336.

passes behaviours such as avoiding contact with older people, denying the reality of old age, telling inappropriate jokes, accepting old age stereotypes and displaying negative attitudes towards older people.³⁴ Institutional ageism, by contrast, is woven into organisational policies and social structures. It is reflected in regulations, norms, and professional routines that, intentionally or not, curtail opportunities for older individuals.³⁵ Consequently, older individuals are subjected to disparate treatment in various domains, which is frequently justified by the erroneous assumption that their needs and preferences diverge from those of the broader community.³⁶ This also implies that ageism can occur even in the absence of an explicit intention to discriminate. As Thompson and Cox³⁷ note, “policies, structures and institutional practices can be experienced as oppressive even when the staff carrying them out are acting entirely in good faith.”

In his seminal report, *Ageism in America*,³⁸ Butler distinguishes between two interrelated forms of ageism: intentional and unintentional. Intentional ageism can be defined as ideas, attitudes, rules or practices that are consciously or unconsciously biased against individuals or groups on the basis of their age. It occurs when a particular social group, typically the dominant one, exercises its power to oppress, exploit, silence, or simply ignore individuals who are younger or older than them.³⁹ Unintentional ageism, by contrast, operates more subtly, through taken-for-granted ideas, everyday rules, and habitual practices that reproduce bias without conscious awareness. As Butler notes, such acts often proceed without the perpetrator’s awareness that they are biased against persons or groups based on their older age.”⁴⁰

34 Gerdina, Starizem in starostni stereotipi, 89.

35 Voss et al., “A World of Difference?”.

36 Thompson, Ageing and Ageism.

37 Thompson, Neil, Cox, Gerry R.: Understanding Ageism. In: *Age and Dignity* (Thompson, Neil, Cox, Gerry R. eds.). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024, 8–32, 15.

38 Butler, Robert N.: *Ageism in America*. New York: International Longevity Center – USA, 2006.

39 Applewhite, Ashton: *Lepota let: manifest proti starizma*. Nova Gorica: Eno, 2017.

40 Butler, *Ageism in America*, 26.

While explicit ageism is the most visible form of ageism, Levy and Banaji point out the existence of implicit ageism.⁴¹ Implicit ageism encompasses ideas, attitudes, rules, and practices that are not consciously biased against individuals or groups on the basis of their age. Implicit ageism consists of automatic or unconscious stereotypes that comprise “thoughts about the attributes and behaviours of the elderly that exist and operate without conscious awareness, intention, or control”.⁴²

Prior to 1990, typologies of ageism exclusively encompassed negative forms of ageism. Erdman Palmore was the first to posit that ageism can also manifest in a positive form.⁴³ In his seminal work, he defined ageism as any negative or positive prejudice or discrimination against any age group.⁴⁴ The presence of positive and negative prejudice and stereotyping towards older people has since been confirmed by a substantial corpus of research, as evidenced by studies such as those conducted by Cuddy and Fiske,⁴⁵ Fiske, Cuddy, Glick and Xu;⁴⁶ Kite, Stockdale, Whitley and Johnson;⁴⁷ and Meisner,⁴⁸ which have underscored the necessity for more nuanced typologies of ageism.

In this paper, I will draw on a typology that was developed by Tornstam,⁴⁹ who identified four types of ageist attitudes toward older people based on empirical findings from Sweden in 1984 and 2002: pitying positive, the no fuzz, the consistently negative and the consistently positive attitude.

- Consistently negative attitude is characterised by negative views of older people in society combined with negative beliefs about the role

41 Levy, Becca, Banaji, Mahzarin, R.: *Implicit Ageism*. In: *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice against Older Persons* (Nelson, Todd D., ed.). Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002, 49–76, 51.

42 *Ibid.*, 51.

43 Marcus, Age Discrimination.

44 Palmore, *Ageism*.

45 Cuddy and Fiske, *Doddering but Dear*.

46 Fiske, Cuddy, Glick and Xu, “A Model of (often Mixed) Stereotype Content”.

47 Kite, Mary E. et al.: “Attitudes toward Younger and Older Adults: An Updated Meta-Analytic Review”. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61, 2005, 2, 241–266.

48 Meisner, Brad A.: “A Meta-Analysis of Positive and Negative Age Stereotype Priming Effects on Behaviour among Older Adults”. *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 67, 2012, 1, 13–17.

49 Tornstam, “The Complexity of Ageism”.

older people should play in society.⁵⁰ If it includes aggressive and drastic attitudes and behaviours that reflect intergenerational tensions in society, it can also be conceptualised as hostile ageism.⁵¹

- Consistently positive attitude implies positive perceptions of older people and positive attitudes towards their social participation.⁵² The attitude can be related to the term positive ageism, which is understood as the projection of traditionally virtuous traits, such as wisdom and frugality, onto older people.⁵³ It is thus the attribution of certain virtues to older individuals simply because of their age, which can reinforce stereotypes and influence how older adults are perceived and treated in society.⁵⁴
- No fuzz or the jealously negative attitude combines the belief that older people are doing well in society and a negative attitude towards their relatively good social position.⁵⁵ In this chapter, I will use the term envious ageism to refer to this form of ageism.
- Pitying positive attitude is characterised by the belief that older people have a bad position in society and the desire to improve it.⁵⁶ Although seemingly benevolent, this stance has been described as compassionate ageism, a mode of thinking, based on one or more ageist assumptions,⁵⁷ namely that older people are frail and deserving individuals who merit protection and sympathy.⁵⁸ Compassionate ageism involves “the attribution of the same characteristics, status, and just deserts

50 *Ibid.*

51 See Cary, Lindsey, A., Chasteen, Alison L., Remedios, Jessica: “The Ambivalent Ageism Scale: Developing and Validating a Scale to Measure Benevolent and Hostile Ageism”. *The Gerontologist*, 57, 2017, 2, 27–36; Chen, Zizhuo, Zhang, Xin: “We Were All Once Young: Reducing Hostile Ageism from Younger Adults’ Perspective”. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 2022.

52 Tornstam, “The Complexity of Ageism”.

53 Palmore, *Ageism*.

54 *Ibid.*

55 Tornstam, “The Complexity of Ageism”.

56 *Ibid.*

57 Vervaecke, Deanna, Meisner, Brad: “Caremongering and Assumptions of Need: The Spread of Compassionate Ageism during COVID-19”. *The Gerontologist*, 61, 2021, 2, 159–165.

58 See for example: Binstock, Robert H.: “‘The Oldest Old:’ A Fresh Perspective or Compassionate Ageism Revisited?”. *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly. Health and Society*, 1985, 420–451; Binstock, Robert H.: “From Compassionate Ageism to Intergenerational Conflict?”. *The Gerontologist*, 50, 2010, 5, 574–585; Chen and Zhang, “We Were All Once Young”.

to a heterogeneous group of “the aged” that tend to be stereotyped as poor, frail, dependent, objects of discrimination, and above all “deserving.”⁵⁹

The following section will present the typology in the context of the stereotype content model. As already noted, this model elucidates the cognitive processes by which individuals form impressions and judgements about social groups on the basis of two fundamental dimensions: warmth and competence.⁶⁰ The dimension of warmth assesses the extent to which a group is perceived as friendly, trustworthy, and benevolent. It is influenced by the perceived intention of the group to help or harm the perceiver. The competence dimension assesses the perceived competence, intelligence, and skills of the group in question. The perceived status of the group and its ability to act have a significant influence on this dimension.

A stereotype content model and the associated forms of ageism

The stereotype content model classifies social groups into four quadrants according to their perceived warmth and competence (see Table 1). The model identifies four distinct ideal-typical combinations of warmth and competence.

- A combination of high warmth and high competence in older people will result in admiration and respect.
- Those of an older generation who display a combination of high warmth and low competence may be subjected to patronising stereotypes that evoke feelings of pity.
- Those of an older generation who display a combination of low warmth and high competence are likely to be regarded with disdain and viewed as potential competitors for limited social resources.

⁵⁹ Binstock, “From Compassionate Ageism to Intergenerational Conflict?”, 575.

⁶⁰ Fiske et al., “A Model of (often Mixed) Stereotype Content”.

- A combination of low warmth and low competence in older people will result in their despising and marginalisation.

Table 1: Stereotype content model and the attributed type of ageism

The content of stereotypes:	high warmth and high competence	high warmth and low competence
Type of ageism:	positive ageism	compassionate ageism
The content of stereotypes:	low warmth and high competence	low warmth and low competence
Type of ageism:	envious ageism	hostile ageism

The four combinations of stereotype content can be linked to the four types of ageism:

- When older people are characterised by a combination of high warmth and high competence, they will be seen as allies and will usually enjoy a high social status, so this combination of stereotypes can be linked to positive ageism.
- When older people are characterised by a combination of high warmth and low competence, they will receive sympathy based on one or more ageist assumptions, so this combination of stereotypes can be linked to compassionate ageism.
- When older people are characterised by a combination of low warmth and high competence, older people will be respected but disliked, so this combination of stereotypes can be linked to envious ageism.
- When older people are characterised by a combination of low warmth and low competence, they will not be perceived as either friendly or competent and are likely to provoke an immediate negative response, so this combination of stereotypes can be linked to hostile ageism.

The experience of envy, pride, or contempt may emerge in relation to older individuals when specific social conditions are met. North and Fiske⁶¹ cite two such cases:

- When older people prevent young people from accessing resources, for example, by not stepping down from their positions, they encourage feelings of envy in young people.
- When older people are seen as the main consumers of society's resources, the stereotype of warmth is reduced (due to perceived selfishness) and the stereotype of low competence is deepened (due to perceived burden of dependency).

Prior research has demonstrated that admiration engenders facilitation behaviours, whereas contempt and envy give rise to active harm, which may manifest in the form of aggressive policies and actions.⁶² With regard to ageism, this implies that positive or compassionate ageism may evolve into hostile or envious ageism. This shift is aligned with the proposition that competition for limited social resources can precipitate negative sentiments between members of in- and out-groups.⁶³ In a context of what is termed 'realistic intergroup conflict', members of the in-group begin to develop negative sentiments towards the out-group, ascribing negative characteristics to them (for example, they are no longer perceived as trustworthy or as having benevolent intentions). As North and Fiske⁶⁴ posit, a comparable response is observed when the dominant group perceives that the marginalised group has transgressed a boundary. As long as older individuals accept condescending pity and remain in their perceived position of inferiority, they are subject to what is known as compassionate ageism. Should they transgress the boundaries of acceptable conduct by, for instance, demanding greater rights, they will engender resentment among the dominant group and further risk the transformation of their compassionate ageism into a hostile ageism.

61 North, Michael S., Fiske, Susan T.: "An Inconvenienced Youth? Ageism and its Potential Intergenerational Roots". *Psychological Bulletin*, 138, 2012, 5, 982–1009.

62 Durante et al, "Using the Stereotype Content Model."

63 Sherif, Muzafer: *Common Predicament: Social Psychology of Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation: The Robbers' Cave Experiment*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Book Exchange, 1966.

64 North and Fiske, "An Inconvenienced Youth?".

Historical societies' attitudes towards older people through the Stereotype Content Model

In the following section, I provide a brief summary of the attitudes of historical societies towards older people,⁶⁵ with reference to the stereotype content model. It should first be noted that I am not a historian, and that this discussion relies on the interpretations and syntheses of authors who have studied these periods in greater depth. Consequently, I do not evaluate their accounts in terms of historical accuracy or methodological rigour. Rather, my perspective is that of a sociologist interested in how historical evidence can be mobilised to illustrate changing patterns of age-related attitudes. The purpose of this section, therefore, is not to produce a historical analysis in the strict sense, but to demonstrate the potential of the Stereotype Content Model for identifying predominant forms of ageism in different historical contexts.

Throughout much of the written history, older people have not been the focus of social attention, with the exception of exceptional individuals such as rulers or popes. As a consequence of the lack of attention they received, older individuals have been subjected to stereotypical treatment.⁶⁶ In regimes where property was legally protected, older individuals with significant assets were accorded greater respect, as their status was based on their property rights rather than on their personal capabilities. In periods when property ownership was institutionalised, the ruling class respected owners. Age was not a disqualification, and the accumulation of property over the life course – comprising real estate, goods and money – ensured that older people, if they were rich, enjoyed a high standing in public and private life.⁶⁷

Historically, the elevated status accorded to the older people was largely contingent upon their control over material resources, a privilege that did

65 It is not intended to provide an exhaustive or fully substantiated social history of ageism. In this review, the focus is on attitudes towards older people living in urban settings. Given the limitations of this single chapter, a consideration of attitudes towards older people in both urban and rural settings is beyond the scope of this study.

66 De Beauvoir, Simone: *Old Age*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972, 183.

67 *Ibid.*, 249.

not extend to those who endured extreme poverty.⁶⁸ Similarly, Dannefer⁶⁹ warns that the perception of respect accorded to older individuals in historical contexts may be largely shaped by the interplay between wealth and advanced age. This phenomenon tends to obscure the experiences of numerous older individuals who may have lacked status or resources. It is therefore important to approach historical attitudes toward old age with caution and, wherever possible, to take into account the different experiences of older people from both the upper and lower social strata. This is also pertinent to the identification of ageism in different social periods, given that the stereotype content model posits that the status of a social group predicts how competent the group will be perceived.⁷⁰ This, in turn, determines the form of ageism that they are likely to experience.

Antiquity

In antiquity, advanced age was frequently regarded as a virtue, conferring a certain degree of prestige and respect. For example, Simmons⁷¹ observed that older adults were more well-respected in ancient societies because old age was rare and older members often served as a repository of local traditions and knowledge. In various ancient Greek oligarchies, Sparta and Rome until the second century BC, older people were entitled to a *seneschal*, representative position (for example, they could form an assembly of old men to advise rulers). Plato⁷² posited that the role of the older generation was to rule, whereas the younger generation was to submit. This indicates that in these societies, older individuals from the upper social classes were distinguished by a combination of high competence and low warmth. However, the existence of these social arrangements that privilege and favour old age should not be taken as evidence of a general ‘golden age’

68 *Ibid.*, see also Čeč, Dragica: Podobe starosti v zgodnjem 19. stoletju. In: *Starost – izzivi historičnega raziskovanja* (Šorn, Mojca, ed.). Ljubljana: Založba INZ, 2017, 11–34.

69 Dannefer, Dale: *Age and the Reach of Sociological Imagination: Power, Ideology and the Life Course*. New York: Routledge, 2022, 63–101.

70 Cuddy and Fiske, Doddering but Dear.

71 Simmons, Leo W: “Attitudes toward Aging and the Aged; Primitive Societies”. *Journal of Gerontology*, 1, 1946, 72–95.

72 Plato: *The Republic*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975.

of old age, as argued by Cowgill and Holmes⁷³ in their theory of modernisation.⁷⁴ The example is the analysis of the social status of older people in ancient Greece showing that not all older individuals were treated equally. In city-states like Athens, the contributions made to the community and the level of social participation were the basis of citizenship. Those who were no longer able to contribute fully were the subject of ridicule and were seen as a reminder of the sad end of life.⁷⁵ In light of these circumstances, it is not possible to speak of a stereotype of high competence. It seems more probable that, with the exception of the wealthy, older people were characterised by a combination of low competence and low warmth. Once they were no longer able to contribute to the community, they were regarded as inferior citizens.⁷⁶

The Middle Ages

In the early Middle Ages, European cities were sparsely populated, technology and engineering were in decline, and the middle class had disappeared.⁷⁷ The physical demands of labour were excessively strenuous for older individuals, resulting in their near-total exclusion from public life. Within the feudal societies of the early Middle Ages, the influence of older individuals was minimal across all social strata.⁷⁸ As older individuals became increasingly unable to care for themselves, they were viewed as burdensome. This perception was underpinned by stereotypes that associated them with low competence and low warmth.

The historical understanding of old age in the Middle Ages is also evident in the depiction of the life course as a sequence of steps. The middle years

73 Cowgill, Donald O., Holmes Lowell. D. (eds.): *Aging and Modernization*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1972.

74 This theory has been largely refuted by contemporary social gerontology. See, for example, Laslett, Peter: *The World We Have Lost*. 2nd edition. London: Methuen, 1972.

75 Fiore, Giulietta: "Decay and Reverence: Conceptions of Old Age in Ancient Greece and China". *Hirundo*, 13, 2014, 74–84.

76 *Ibid.*

77 De Beauvoir, *Old Age*.

78 *Ibid.*

were regarded as the pinnacle of life, whereas youth and old age were distinguished from middle age in different ways. De Beauvoir⁷⁹ provides the example of Dante's account in *Il Convivio* (The Banquet), in which he compares the life course to a curve that begins on earth, reaches a peak in the sky around the age of thirty-five, and then returns to earth again. The concept of life as a series of stages facilitates the formation of an image of old age as a decline. A similar perspective on old age is also evident in medieval medical thought. The interpretation of age differences is based on the four principles of humoral medicine, which is a system of medicine that focuses on the balance of bodily fluids. The humoral tradition of medicine associates advanced age with the different somatic states of cold, heat, dampness and dryness. The perception of age is dichotomised, with the older individuals being regarded as either cold and dry⁸⁰ or cold and wet.⁸¹ Older individuals, particularly those facing economic adversity, most likely elicited sentiments of disdain.

If we take medieval medical views of old age as a reflection of broader social attitudes, the prevailing perception of older people was one of limited competence and diminished bodily integrity, often accompanied by a degree of disgust. In the High Middle Ages, however, the resurgence of urban life and the expansion of commerce and banking created a small group of older individuals, who were able to accumulate and retain significant wealth. Attitudes toward these older persons were more ambivalent: while they were still viewed with suspicion—especially those who profited from lending practices considered exploitative—they were also attributed a higher degree of competence. This combination of high competence and low warmth aligns with established stereotype patterns and likely generated feelings of envy among the wider population.

79 *Ibid.*

80 Bratož, Urška: "Podobe starosti v ljudski in uradni medicini 19. stoletja". *Glasnik Slovenskega etnološkega društva*, 63, 2023, 2, 22–30.

81 Katz, *Disciplining Old Age*.

The Renaissance

The Renaissance, which flourished between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, introduced into the European cultural imaginary the ideals of eternal beauty embodied in youth, an aesthetic shift that simultaneously cast old age as its undesirable and deteriorating counterpart. One example of this reinforced revulsion against disease associated with old age can be found in painting *Portrait of an Old Man and a Young Boy* by Ghirlandaio, where a grandfather with rhinophyma and a blemished face looks affectionately at the golden child.⁸² The negative perception of old age was marked by the external physical and psychological deformation of the individual, which was the result of the intensity of work and the harsh living conditions in which people, with the exception of the upper classes, spent the majority of their lives. Old age was generally still associated with poverty, unproductivity and, subsequently, deviancy and marginality, as well as with physical decrepitude and weakness.⁸³ The concentration of older residents in almshouses further contributed to positioning older people as a group dependent on charity and public relief.⁸⁴ During this period, poor older people were often characterised as lacking competence and warmth, due to their association with poverty, dependency, inability to work, unproductivity, and a lack of productive activities.

In the middle and upper classes, particularly in the later phases of the Renaissance, and in regions where Puritanism was gaining influence, such as Britain, a distinct approach to the concept of old age and older people emerged. Puritanism reinterpreted Christian morality in the context of emerging market relations and growing competition, framing ageing less as a spiritual culmination and more as a test of personal discipline, productivity and moral worth. As de Beauvoir⁸⁵ notes, “the best way of praying was working; work was a kind of sacrament and profit was a mark of divine selection”. In the middle classes, where Puritanism was most firmly established, a new value was ascribed to old age. The family unit and

82 Mully, Graham: “Myths of Ageing”. *Clinical Medicine*, 7, 2007, 68–72, 68.

83 De Beauvoir, *Old Age*; see also Katz, *Disciplining Old Age*.

84 Katz, *Disciplining Old Age*.

85 De Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 201.

the grandfather figure, in particular, were held in high regard. The ascetic lifestyle, strongly advocated by Puritanism, was idealised as an attainable state for those who had reached old age, having freed themselves from the passions of youth. The older generation came to serve as a model for others to emulate. Accordingly, the Puritans held older individuals in high regard.⁸⁶ Adults perceived old age as a period of happiness and exemplary behaviour. The value attributed to old age was based on the assumption that it was a period free from the turbulence of passionate emotions and characterised by peace and wisdom. The absence of desire was considered to be of greater value than the pleasure derived from wealth and possessions. A harmonious equilibrium between the various aspects of life of older people resulted in economic independence and a cheerful mood.⁸⁷ Members of the aristocracy even made an effort to appear older than they truly were. The attire worn by men accentuated the posture and physique of older people. Narrow and rounded shoulders, wide hips and waists, and the backs of coats were designed in a way that created the illusion of a bent spine, a consequence of the weight of many years.⁸⁸ Wigs were dusted with white powder to give the appearance of advanced age.⁸⁹

Older individuals were frequently regarded as valuable contributors to the workforce.⁹⁰ At that time, society was guided by “a prevailing notion that the old were seasoned veterans of productivity, whose advice and participation enhanced prospects for a successfully accomplishing many tasks.”⁹¹ A significant number of trades required the input of skilled craftsmen who were able to adhere to strict routines, necessitating precision and endurance in order to produce useful goods in an efficient manner. Given that “such skills take time to develop and are sharpened and refined with experience, and hence with age, the economic engagement of [older people]

86 *Ibid.*

87 *Ibid.*

88 Dannefer, *Age and the Reach of Sociological Imagination*.

89 Fisher, David Hackett: *Growing Old in America: The Bland-Lee Lectures Delivered at Clark University*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

90 Dannefer, *Age and the Reach of Sociological Imagination*, 70.

91 Achenbaum, W. Andrew: Past as Prologue: Toward a Global History of Ageing. In: *The Sage Handbook of Social Gerontology* (Dannefer, Dale, Phillipson, Chris, eds.). London: Sage, 1978, 20–31, 19.

was integral to the production process”.⁹² The members of the family business were closely linked by a common set of interests, with the grandfather serving as a unifying figure. He occupied the position of head of the family, exercised control over the family’s assets and enjoyed a high social status until his demise.⁹³ The ageing process did not result in a decline in the social need for the skills and productive engagement of older individuals, nor was it consistently accompanied by the pervasive stigmatisation of old age.⁹⁴ This indicates that attitudes towards older people, particularly within the middle and upper classes, were shaped by a combination of high competence and warmth, fostering a sense of pride in the individual.

The long 19th century

The long 19th century⁹⁵ marked a gradual erosion of the hierarchical world-view in which authority and wisdom had traditionally been associated with old age. The egalitarian ideals of the French Revolution challenged age-based privilege, recasting the social order around principles of individual autonomy and progress. Concurrently with the advent of industrial progress, the older person was increasingly regarded as a fixed entity within an increasingly dynamic and rapidly evolving world.⁹⁶ The skilled hand of the old craftsman was “rendered obsolete by machines, that dictated specialized repetitive actions of the human worker, and thereby are more suited to less costly young workers who bring more raw strength and endurance to the physically demanding, albeit less skilled, work demanded by industrial machinery”.⁹⁷ When such changes entail the rapid introduction of new technologies, their introduction favours the young, who are easier

92 Dannefer, *Age and the Reach of Sociological Imagination*, 71.

93 De Beauvoir, *Old Age*.

94 Dannefer, *Age and the Reach of Sociological Imagination*, 90–91.

95 Since its currents, ideas and bourgeois ideals transcend the chronological frameworks of the 19th century we consider the period between 1789 and 1918 as the long 19th century (Remec, “Živeti dolgo”).

96 De Beauvoir, *Old Age*.

97 Dannefer, *Age and the Reach of Sociological Imagination*, 72.

to train, while at the same time the skills of mature and old workers become obsolete and useless.⁹⁸

The latter half of the nineteenth century provides further evidence to support the notion that knowledge does not accumulate with the passage of time, but rather becomes obsolete.⁹⁹ To illustrate, an examination of the Corpus of Historical American English, an archival database comprising over 400 million words of printed texts, revealed a shift in age stereotypes from a slight positive bias to a neutral stance and subsequently a negative one around the year 1880.¹⁰⁰ During the Industrial Revolution, workers who had reached old age encountered difficulties in maintaining the pace of work, resulting in a perception of reduced competence due to lower productivity. In the event of losing their employment, they were frequently condemned to a life of poverty. Negative portrayals of old age are also evident in late nineteenth-century fairy tale fiction, where old age is often associated with poverty, declining health, diminished vitality, sexual incapacity, and loss of social status.¹⁰¹ This negative image of old age was avoided to a certain extent and only among the few members of the middle and upper classes who had accumulated property, goods, or money over their lifetime. They were esteemed for their economic influence, experience, and extensive social networks.¹⁰² Even in their sixties, they engaged in social activities, attended theatrical performances, and participated in salons. As a result of their capacity for recollection, they were esteemed and appreciated as conversational partners.¹⁰³ Within this social milieu, affluent older individuals tended to be perceived as both competent and warm, while those without comparable wealth were perceived as less competent but still warm.

98 Branco, Kenneth J., Williamson, John B: Stereotyping and the Life Cycle: Views of Aging and the Aged. In: *In the Eye of Beholder: Contemporary Issues in Stereotyping* (Miller G., Arthur, ed.). New York: Praeger, 1982, 364–410.

99 De Beauvoir, *Old Age*.

100 Ng, Reuben et al.: "Increasing Negativity of Age Stereotypes across 200 years: Evidence from a Database of 400 Million Words". *PloS one*, 10, 2015, 2.

101 Ramšak, Mojca: Starost in staranje v pohorski pravljичni prozi. In: *Starost - izzivi historičnega raziskovanja* (Šorn, Mojca, ed.). Ljubljana: Založba INZ, 2017, 35–44.

102 Čeč, Dragica: "Izkusiti starost v 19. stoletju: Strategije, identitete in družbeni status". *Glasnik Slovenskega etnološkega društva*. 63, 2023, 2, 5–6.

103 De Beauvoir, *Old Age*.

During the course of the 19th century, another significant transformation occurred that served to reinforce the perception of older people as less competent, yet warm, across all social strata: the attitude towards ageing underwent a process of medicalisation and pathologisation.¹⁰⁴ The advent of modern medicine has resulted in the emergence of age-based, medically oriented knowledge about the human body. The process of ageing is increasingly defined by the presence of age-related diseases, which cause a series of unpleasant physical and anatomical changes. Consequently, the older body is both regarded as normal and viewed as pathological, representing the physiological processes that lead to death. The medical profession has begun to interpret diseases through symptoms, with the older body becoming an indicator of precisely identifiable pathologies hidden inside the body:¹⁰⁵ “Doctors predominantly conceptualised ageing as an inevitable pathological process, as a disease with discernible symptoms such as slowed digestion, deterioration of organs, shrinking bones and teeth, hair loss, loss of muscle mass, and others, which unambiguously indicated the body’s inevitable decline”.¹⁰⁶

The stereotype that equates old age with pathology has been reinforced by the view that old age is a consequence of tissue degeneration and progressive cell deterioration.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the diminished capacity associated with old age is no longer seen as a personal trait but rather as an inevitable consequence of the ageing process. The perception¹⁰⁸ of older people shifted from viewing them as wise and knowledgeable individuals to seeing them as childlike and incapable of self-care.¹⁰⁹

104 Cole, Thomas. R.: *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Ageing in America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

105 Katz, *Disciplining Old Age*.

106 Remec, Meta: “Živeti dolgo ali živeti srečno?” Cristoph Wilhelm Hefeland in njegov vpliv na dožemanje starosti in staranja v dolgem 19. stoletju”. *Glasnik Slovenskega etnološkega društva*, 63, 2023, 2, 7–20, 17.

107 Ng et al., “Increasing Negativity of Age Stereotypes”.

108 This perception did not extend to all contexts. In certain professions, such as medicine, old age was still regarded as a marker of high status (Bratož, “Podobe starosti”).

109 Cole, *The Journey of Life*, 103.

At this time, a current of feeling and sentiment¹¹⁰ swept through the European thought, imposing on the newly created states a duty of care for all those who could not support themselves by their labour, including the helpless older people. Despite the waning authority and influence of older people, public opinion demanded at least “outward signs of respect and the assurance of a dignified end of life”.¹¹¹ The latter can be seen, for example, in the writings on old age of the Italian neurologist and physiologist Paolo Mantegazza, who wrote that an older person can inspire sympathy and respect - sympathy for his frailty and respect for his many experiences.¹¹² Conversely, Mantegazza’s reflections on old age include the observation that older individuals are frequently subjected to contempt and that their vulnerabilities are exploited as a means of eliciting guilt.¹¹³ The above two accounts demonstrate that attitudes towards old age at the end of the nineteenth century were characterised by a certain degree of ambivalence, wherein expressions of respect coexisted with an enduring contempt for old age. The ambivalence can be attributed to the conflict between humanist values and those that prioritise health, productivity and independence.

Despite the predominance of low-competence, high-warmth stereotypes of old age at the end of the nineteenth century, a competing view also emerged that cast older people as both less competent and cold. These harsher judgements, however, were rarely voiced explicitly, in part because the rise of humanist thought constrained the open expression of such negative sentiments.

First half of the 20th century

The social imaginary of old age increasingly took on pathological and dependent overtones as the combined effects of demographic ageing, industrialisation, and the economic collapse of the Great Depression reinforced

110 De Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 204.

111 *Ibid.*, 235.

112 Mantegazza, Paolo: *Elogio della vecchiaia*. Milano: Fratelli Treves, 1895, 11.

113 Mantegazza, *Elogio della vecchiaia*, 5.

the idea that older people constituted a population both in need of, and entitled to, social assistance.¹¹⁴ As previously stated, stereotypes associated with old age at the turn of the 20th century (which coincides with the conclusion of the long 19th century) are typified by a combination of low competence and high warmth. The latter is evident, for example, in newspapers and magazines that in the early 20th century try to help people in their forties by advising them to avoid looking old, old-fashioned or unemployable by dyeing their hair, wearing corsets, applying face creams and similar means of concealing the signs of ageing.¹¹⁵ This combination of stereotypes gives rise to the necessity for the implementation of a comprehensive state protection scheme for the older people.¹¹⁶

The development of pension schemes coincided with the process of bureaucratisation of the newly emerging states in the latter half of the eighteenth century. However, these schemes were not yet universal in scope. In the name of efficiency, states first began to implement pension programs for specific demographic groups, typically civil servants, as a social consensus emerged that individuals were no longer capable of maintaining employment at the age of sixty or seventy.¹¹⁷ In the aftermath of the Great Depression, older workers were the first to become unemployed and the most severely affected by the prevailing economic conditions, which were characterised by mass unemployment and intense competition for jobs. The stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent economic recession of the 1930s revealed the inherent deficiencies of the economic system, which was characterised by individualistic orientation.¹¹⁸ This led to the legitimisation of state intervention and the initial formulation of social policies within the context of the emerging welfare state.¹¹⁹ In the United States,

114 Katz, *Disciplining Old Age*.

115 Haber, Carole, Gratton, Brian: *Old Age and the Search for Security: An American Social History*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993.

116 *Ibid.*

117 Thane, Pat: "Social Histories of Old Age and Aging". *Journal of Social History*, 37, 2003, 1, 93–111.

118 Macnicol, John: *Poverty and Dependency: America, 1950s to the Present*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020.

119 Charleski, Elisabeth. E.: Reflections on Ageism: Perspective of a Septuagenarian on the Avoidance of Burdenhood. In: *Nobody's Burden: Lessons from the Great Depression on the Struggle for Old-Age Security* (Ray, Ruth E., Calasanti, Toni, eds.). Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011, 273–292.

for instance, the Roosevelt administration introduced insurance for the unemployed, the disabled, and the older people as part of the New Deal.¹²⁰

The rationale behind state aid for the older people can be traced back to debates that emphasised the necessity to address the deprivations experienced by this demographic, particularly in relation to social isolation and neglect,¹²¹ poverty and ill-health.¹²² The welfare state was tasked with providing assistance to vulnerable and often dependent groups, a significant proportion of whom were older people. This assistance took the form of health and social welfare services, as well as pensions. For example, in an influential 1942 report, the founding father of the welfare state in Britain, Beveridge, put forth a plan of universal protection against want, disease, ignorance, poverty, and idleness. This included comprehensive healthcare, assistance to families, and the right to a minimum of social protection for the older people, the unemployed, the sick and people with disabilities.¹²³ The provision of care for the older people was regarded as a form of fair compensation for their contributions and past achievements,¹²⁴ as well as a means of addressing the uncertainty and suffering associated with the last phase of the life course.¹²⁵

In the initial decades of the twentieth century, attitudes towards the older people were significantly influenced by a complex interplay of stereotypes, which portrayed them as lacking competence but exhibiting warmth. This combination of characteristics helped justify the provision of state support for the older people, as it reinforced the association between old age

120 Previously, it was anticipated that older individuals would rely on their own resources for as long as they could (after losing their source of income, such as through renting out spare rooms, providing domestic services, or sewing), and ultimately would become dependent on children, who were legally obligated to provide care for their parents (Ray, Ruth E., Calasanti, Toni, (eds.): *Nobody's Burden: Lessons from the Great Depression on the Struggle for Old-Age Security*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011).

121 Santos, Daniel Kerry D., Lago, Mara, Coelho de Souza: "The Dispositif of Age, the Historical Production of the Old Age, and Regimes of Subjectification: A Genealogical Tracking". *Psicologia USP*, 27, 2016, 133–144.

122 Binstock, "From Compassionate Ageism to Intergenerational Conflict".

123 Blair, Tony: Beveridge Revisited: A Welfare State for the 21st Century. In: *Ending Child Poverty* (Walker, Robert, ed.). Bristol: Bristol University Press, Policy Press, 1999, 7–18; Benassi, David: "'Father of the Welfare State?' Beveridge and the Emergence of the Welfare State". *Sociologica*, 4, 2010, 3, 1–21.

124 Phillipson, Chris: *Ageing*. Cambridge: John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

125 Judd, Tony: *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2005.

and poor living conditions, illness, and a lack of productivity.¹²⁶ Despite the prevalence of prejudice and age discrimination, which were based on “the perception that older adults were no longer useful to society,”¹²⁷ old age-related risks (e.g. poverty, debilitation, exclusion) led to the perception of older people as a social group in need of, and deserving of, state assistance.¹²⁸

Second half of the 20th century

In the two decades since the Second World War, the institution of retirement has helped to shape a new identity of old age, one that is associated with a well-deserved rest, withdrawal from the active working population and separation from society.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, the new identity remained predominantly shaped by stereotypes of dependency and powerlessness. Consequently, social gerontologists began to advocate “the radical deconstruction and displacement of negative images of ageing”.¹³⁰ They observed that, in contrast to the negative stereotypes associated with old age, a significant proportion of older individuals have become healthier, wealthier, and more socially engaged.¹³¹ Consequently, there was a growing emphasis on promoting images of older people that emphasise vitality, creativity, empowerment, resourcefulness, and the positive qualities that can be acquired in later life. This is evidenced in the gerontological literature as an assault on the notion of a uniform concept of old age, predominantly characterised by illness.¹³² Since the 1960s, the social construction of middle-

126 Santos and Lago, “The The Dispositif of Age”.

127 Chu, Li, Lay, Jennifer, C., Tsang, Vivian, Hiu, Ling, Fung Helene H.: “Attitudes toward Aging: A Glance Back at Research Developments over the Past 75 Years”. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 75, 2020, 6, 1125–1129, 1126.

128 Binstock, “From Compassionate Ageism to Intergenerational Conflict?”.

129 Lessenich, Stephan: From Retirement to Active Aging: Changing Images of ‘Old Age’ in the Late Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries. In: *Challenges of Aging* (Torp, Cornelius, ed.). London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 165–177.

130 Featherstone, Mike, Hepworth, Mike: Images of Positive Ageing: A Case Study of Retirement Choice Magazine. In: *Images of Ageing: Cultural Representations of Later Life* (Featherstone, Mike, Wernick, Andrew, eds.). London: Routledge, 1995, 27–47, 31.

131 Chu et al., “Attitudes toward Aging”, 1126.

132 Featherstone and Hepworth, *Images of Positive Ageing*.

and upper-class older people has shifted “from the representation of social isolation, structured dependency, lack of roles and passivity, to a portrayal of later life as a time of opportunity, continued productivity, self-fulfilment and self-reliance”.¹³³ The advent of positive portrayals of advanced age and the tangible advancements of the middle and upper classes in the mid-1970s could have culminated in a convergence of high competence and high warmth stereotypes had it not been for the neo-liberal political right’s orchestration of an assault on the notion of old age as a protected phase of life.¹³⁴

From the mid-1970s to the end of the 20th century, an analysis of the costs of public pension programmes established old age as a threat to social life.¹³⁵ In particular, neoliberal ideology situated old-age policies in the context of a zero-sum game,¹³⁶ according to which such policies are only possible if social policies aimed at younger groups are reduced. Concurrently, as Macnicol¹³⁷ notes, the discourse on intergenerational justice was predicated on the irrefutable distressing circumstances faced by the younger demographic in the 1970s and 1980s. Improvements in the quality of life of the older people, particularly in terms of health and material security, have been used as a rationale for curbing the social rights of this demographic.¹³⁸ With the exception of the poorest and sickest, older people were beginning to be depicted as one of the more affluent and politically influential social groups, while simultaneously being criticised for the burden of maintaining their “privileges,” primarily the cost of pensions. The perception of the burden that health and social care costs impose on society¹³⁹ defined

133 Rudman, Laliberte, Debbie: “Shaping the Active, Autonomous and Responsible Modern Retiree: An Analysis of Discursive Technologies and Their Links with Neo-Liberal Political Rationality”. *Ageing & Society*, 26, 2006, 2, 181–201, 183.

134 Macnicol, John: *Age Discrimination: An Historical and Contemporary Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

135 Santos and Lago, “The Dispositif of Age”.

136 Thurow, Lester C.: *The Zero-Sum Society: Distribution and the Possibilities for Economic Change*. New York: Basic books, 1980.

137 Macnicol, John: *Neoliberalising Old Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

138 *Ibid.*

139 Macnicol, *Neoliberalising Old Age*; see also Phillipson, Ageing; Pickard, Susan: “Age War as the New Class War? Contemporary Representations of Intergenerational Inequity”. *Journal of Social Policy*, 48, 2019, 2, 369–386.

old age through a combination of stereotypes of high competence and low warmth. The more affluent part of the older population was often held responsible for a range of social issues,¹⁴⁰ with this perception influencing public discourse through the concept of intergenerational injustice.¹⁴¹ Towards the end of the twentieth century older people in the middle and upper classes were increasingly stereotyped as a confident, wealthy, hedonistic and selfish social group that inspires envy rather than pity or pride. In contrast, only poor and sick older people, defined as they were at the beginning of the century by a combination of low competence and high warmth, were able to avoid this neoliberal onslaught.

In this section, I have conducted a brief review of the literature on the attitudes of historical societies towards older people. I have deliberately set aside the specificities of each historical period and have instead employed a stereotype content model to elucidate the attitudes towards old age in broader historical contexts. In the following section, I build on this overview and put forward some preliminary, theoretically based hypotheses about the manifestations of ageism throughout history.

Manifestations of ageism throughout history

The application of the stereotype content model to the attitudes of dominant social strata in historical societies towards older people allows the derivation of six working hypotheses.

Antiquity

In antiquity, the older people of the upper classes were held in high esteem and regarded with envy due to their distinctive combination of high competence and low warmth stereotypes, which is characteristic of envious ageism. In a slave-owning society where physical strength was not a prerequisite for survival, older people from the upper classes enjoyed a high

140 Binstock, Robert H.: "The Aged as Scapegoat: The Donald P. Kent Memorial Lecture". *Gerontologist*, 23, 1983, 2, 136–143.

141 Binstock, "From Compassionate Ageism to Intergenerational Conflict?".

status.¹⁴² In contrast, the combination of low competence and low warmth that characterises hostile ageism was prevalent among poorer older people.

H1: In antiquity, envious ageism and hostile ageism coexisted.

The Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, a period marked by heightened challenges to survival, all those unable to work were effectively marginalised from public life.¹⁴³ In a divided, threatened, broken and combative society, the weak, the sick and the older people in all social classes were subjected to negative stereotyping, which positioned them as lacking competence and warmth. Older individuals were regarded as less competent and cold, in part due to the association between advanced age and physical decline and poverty. This contributed to the emergence of hostile ageism. Attitudes towards wealthy older people were, from the High Middle Ages on, somewhat more favourable as a consequence of urbanisation and economic change, which once again made it possible to accumulate wealth in ways that did not require physical strength. Those of advanced age who were wealthy were regarded as competent, but they were perceived as lacking warmth, which probably made them the subjects of envious ageism.

H2: In the Middle Ages, hostile and envious ageism coexisted.

The Renaissance

During the Renaissance, the ideals of eternal beauty associated with youth contributed to the reinforcement of negative perceptions of old age, particularly among economically disadvantaged older individuals, who were subjected to discriminatory attitudes and stereotyping. These perceptions were often accompanied by the suggestion that such individuals were less capable and cold. Consequently, this suggests that they were subject to hostile ageism. In contrast, the middle and upper classes held the view that

142 De Beauvoir, *Old Age*.

143 De Beauvoir, *Old Age*.

older individuals possessed abilities and were engaged in productive pursuits,¹⁴⁴ indicating that ageing did not inevitably result in stigmatisation. Instead, older people in these classes were more likely treated with a sense of pride, characterised by perceptions of high competence and warmth, which facilitated the emergence of positive ageism.

H3: During Renaissance, hostile and positive ageism coexisted.

The Long 19th Century

During the long nineteenth century, the process of industrialisation resulted in an increasingly challenging environment for older individuals. It became increasingly difficult for them to meet the demands of the workforce, leading to a perception of old age as a period of reduced competence. As a consequence of the perception of older people as victims of technological progress, the stereotype of warmth persisted. This suggests that they were likely victims of compassionate ageism. Only those of a higher socio-economic status, belonging to the middle or upper classes, were able to maintain a positive image due to their economic power, experience and social networks, which enabled them to remain socially active and valued.¹⁴⁵ Such individuals were likely distinguished by a combination of high competence and warmth, which is characteristic of positive ageism.

H4: During the long 19th century, compassionate ageism and positive ageism coexisted.

First Half of the 20th Century

In the first half of the 20th century, attitudes towards the older people were strongly marked by a combination of stereotypes of low competence and warmth, which helped to legitimise state assistance to the older people. The advent of the Welfare State and the universal pension system contributed to the institutionalisation of a division between active and passive

144 Dannefer, *Age and the Reach of Sociological Imagination*.

145 De Beauvoir, *Old Age*.

populations, which in turn served to reinforce the construct of compassionate ageism.¹⁴⁶ This is corroborated by Gilleard and Higgs,¹⁴⁷ who posit that post-war social policies for the older people have institutionalised old age as a social security issue or a problem of illness and fragility.

H5: During the first half of the 20th century, the most prevalent form of ageism was compassionate ageism.

The efforts of social gerontologists in the 1950s and 1960s to challenge negative age stereotypes have contributed to an evolving perception of old age in middle- and upper-class contexts. The late 20th century discourse often depicted this phase of life as one of opportunity, productivity, self-fulfillment, and self-reliance.¹⁴⁸ However, proponents of neoliberalism employed these very concepts to challenge the idea of a protected special period for older individuals, arguing that it is instead a time of vulnerability requiring state support. This led to a conceptual transition from compassionate ageism, which until the mid-1970s portrayed older people as poor, fragile, dependent, objects of discrimination and, above all, as deserving of help, to envious ageism, which has been on the rise. Since the 1980s, envious ageism has been fuelled by a neoliberal set of stereotypes that portray older people as happy, enjoying a high quality of life, politically powerful and selfish consumers of society's limited resources. This has resulted in the combination of high competence and low warmth stereotypes being applied to middle- and upper-class older people. In contrast, those who are impoverished and unwell are still characterised by a combination of low competence and high warmth.

H6: During the second half of the 20th century, compassionate and envious ageism coexisted.

146 Binstock, "From Compassionate Ageism to Intergenerational Conflict?", 575.

147 Gilleard, Chris, Higgs, Paul: "Aging without Agency: Theorizing the Fourth Age". *Aging & Mental Health*, 14, 2010, 2, 121–128, 124.

148 Rudman, "Shaping the Active, Autonomous and Responsible Modern Retiree".

Conclusion

From a sociological, macro-historical perspective, historical societies' attitudes towards older people were largely determined by the social status that older people occupied and by the socio-cultural context. For the majority of history, the status of older people differed according to the class to which they belonged.¹⁴⁹ According to the stereotype content model, social status determines the assessment of the competence of a social group.¹⁵⁰ The socio-cultural context, on the other hand, strongly influenced the assessment of warmth. In historical periods when older people were regarded as allies, they were perceived as warm in accordance with the stereotype content model. Conversely, when they were viewed as rivals, they were attributed a certain degree of coldness. This chapter has illustrated the utility of the stereotype content model for identifying the salient types of ageism in historical research. It has developed a theoretical model in which each combination of competence and warmth predicts one of four types of ageism: positive ageism (high competence and high warmth), compassionate ageism (low competence and high warmth), envious ageism (high competence and low warmth), and hostile ageism (low competence and low warmth). This indicates that, in the event of sufficient evidence pointing towards a particularly salient combination of stereotype content within a given historical period, the theoretical model presented here may be employed to predict the ageism experienced by older individuals within a specific social class. The hypotheses presented in this chapter provide a framework for future empirical historical research, which could map the broader spectrum of perceptions of old age in particular contexts and further clarify where historical realities converge with or diverge from the model.

149 De Beauvoir, *Old Age*.

150 Cuddy and Fiske, *Doddering but Dear*.

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