

While researching age-based discrimination and prejudices, I found that many of my experiences as an adolescent aligned with those of the elderly. Surprisingly, the same themes and structures of invisibility, poor media representation, and outright dismissal affect these two ages-groups, which on paper seem wildly different. I thought about how ageism manifests in my own life, and meditated on my relationship with my extended family, headed by my grandparents, in the Philippines. Over the last few years, I feel they have looked down on my choice to leave home at the age of fourteen to attend boarding school, and have seen my serious aspirations to become an artist not in line with the traditional, entrepreneurial career path that my cousins, uncles, and aunts have followed. At the same time, however, I recognize my own internalized judgments toward my grandparents – viewing them as hyper-conservative and “too old” to understand me. Thus, I wanted to make a piece that would address my desire to reconcile these conflicting feelings between the generations of my family.

I initiated several phone conversations with my grandmother during which she shared stories about the woman she was at my age. I drew similarities between our seemingly separate adolescent experiences: primarily, feeling trapped, and the need to obey. As a result, I created an imagined version of my grandmother’s bedroom as a teenager in the 1950s, and focused on two ideas of which she spoke dearly in our conversations: her vanity dresser and the plants adorning her personal living space. Consequently, my piece is a very personal exploration of what it means to grow up, what it means to grow old, and how the two are intertwined.

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Abstract:

Does age matter? Furthermore, what happens when someone does not “act their age”? Like race and gender, it is an essential facet to our identity; and it is because of this that institutionalized and internalized age-based prejudice occurs much more than is realized. Through the lenses of existentialism, psychology, and the individual experience, I aim to expose the shared marginalized experiences between the demographics of adolescents and the elderly. Surprisingly, the same themes and structures of invisibility, lack of media representation, and outright dismissal affect these two age-groups, who on paper, seem wildly different. Ultimately, age-based prejudice prompts tensions between generations, especially in the family community. I argue that non-conformity is the most effective way to rid society of these internalized acts of discrimination. After recognizing the power that comes with age, it is essential not to conform to perceiving the stereotypes about each age-group as well as for individuals not to conform to their age-based stereotypes themselves.

“You’re Too Young”: A Personal Narrative

In my earliest memory, I rode in a car to my grandparent’s house while my mom sang to me, *O-B-E-Y, obey your mom and dad*, over and over again. Flying over the highway and amid the Manila pollution, my three-year-old self first learned the rule-of-all-rules: to listen to my parents, no matter what. Since then, that jingle has constantly run through my head. My parents, due to their age, experience, and maturity, have been my role models. I followed through with their expectations: I attended church every Sunday, wore the clothes they wanted me to wear, and did chores around the house for them. That is, until I moved to Baku, Azerbaijan in 2005.

When we first arrived, I was convinced that my family would make this ancient city our playground. We spent one evening camping, the howling wind at our backs. My dad, a former Peace Corps adventurer, told stories of filmmaking in the great outdoors, while my mom, an advocate for local NGOs, regaled us with her tales of service to low-income Filipino families. Just seven years old, I was thrilled to be sharing their spirit of adventure.

I drifted off to sleep, waking past midnight to find no one by my side. My parents couldn’t have gone far – we were only camping in our backyard. A faint blue flicker from the television gave them away; mom and dad had escaped to the comfort of our house. Disappointed, I sprinted to the master bedroom and curled up by their feet, realizing that they weren’t entirely willing to commit to the life of adventure that they had once lived. Long ago, my dad traded his Peace Corps idealism for a corporate suit; my mother’s hope for making real change in the Philippines translated to a monotonous career as a television executive. What happened to their grit and determination; their passion to change the world?

As I began to become more curious about the world beyond my backyard, I learned that their outlook on life changed after they had children. I was never allowed to have sleepovers with friends, watch the news, leave the house, take walks, or explore the great outdoors like I had read in my favorite books. Mom and dad wanted to shield my sisters and I from the “horrors of the world” -- but what exactly were those horrors?

To live the authentic adventures that I sought as a young girl, and to discover more of the real world, I realized I needed to find them myself. While still obeying the rules that my mother and father stressed on me, I started small: I joined the Girl Scouts and the rock climbing team, and learned how to make a fire and scale the walls of my elementary school gym. With my troop, I *actually* slept in a tent without my parents for the first time, and with my team, climbed higher, beating my personal best each day. As I grew older, I pushed against the protective bubble that suffocated me, even if it meant challenging my parents.

In the spring of eighth grade, I heard about a school-sponsored, week long service trip to the Stairway Foundation, a rehabilitation center for sexually abused boys from the streets of Manila. The purpose of the trip was to learn about children’s rights, but I sensed a I dreaded asking my parents to sign the permission slip, anticipating their response. The decision was unanimous:

"You're too young to be dealing with these types of issues," they said.

I disagreed. I was thirteen years old! I was mature enough to go. I met with the teachers who organized the trip and they advocated for me. Eventually and reluctantly, my parents signed the form.

At Stairway, I met twelve-year-old Antonio. As we became better friends, he shared his story – he witnessed his parents’ murder and ran away from the suspect, the scene and the rest of

his family shortly after. I struggled to comprehend his painful words, realizing that a dysfunctional side of my home country had been hidden from me. When I saw my parents next, I burst into tears, releasing the emotions I kept hidden from Antonio, both while I heard his story and realized how sheltered I was. When they told me that I was “too young” to deal with topics surrounding abuse, what did they mean? If Antonio was twelve years old and had actually experienced these events, why should I, someone of the same age, be shielded from learning about them?

As I’ve gotten older, I have learned to fight for moments like these, with my parents reluctantly allowing me to live on an edge they once so passionately embraced. At the same time, when I think about that fateful attempt to camp in Azerbaijan, I am almost thankful that they bailed. As it was the first time I resisted the age-based assumptions my parents inflicted on me, this one windy night led me to a myriad of realizations about how I had been raised. I gained a newfound awareness about my age that has since significantly impacted how I perceive the situations I am in.

Why Age Is Important

It may not be obvious initially, but age impacts us more than we think. Any written document we sign tells us to “state our age” right after stating our name. Young-looking people always asked to ‘prove their age’ when they enter most public spaces. One’s age determines who receives a senior discount, who can see an R-rated movie, who is in first grade versus who is in second grade. We take age for granted because of its fluidity: our ages change each year. My experiences growing up have taught me that age remains an integral part of one’s identity; each generation holds internalized prejudices and stereotypes against age groups other than their own. What happens when someone does not “act their age”? In this essay, I plan to explore nonconformity in relation to age through the lenses of: psychology, existentialism, and the individual experience. I hope to uncover the expectations and prejudices that come with thinking about certain age groups, as well as chart the similar experiences of two marginalized age groups in particular: adolescents and the elderly. How can age dictate the amount and type of power one holds? What does it mean to “grow up”; what does it mean to “grow old”? Does age even matter? By looking past the linear model in which age is commonly thought about, we can detach ourselves from the often-suffocating capacity age influences how we see ourselves and others.

In the Sunday Dialogue section of The New York Times, Heather Dubrow, English Professor at Fordham University, writes “Why do so many people who rightly oppose the egregious effects of racism or prejudices about social class unabashedly indulge in ageism?” The current social justice conversation has opened up to address the holy trinity: race, socioeconomic class and gender. Age is often overlooked, but as Dubrow writes, is just as crucial to address. Of these forms of categorization, age is a category that all humans share (North & Fiske). A quick search on The American Psychological Association Website yields over 8,000 entry results with the keyword “racism” and over 2,500 for “sexism,” whereas a mere 750 results appear for the keyword “ageism” (North & Fiske), thus presenting age’s under-studied and hyper-condoned nature. Age is so much an integral part of who we are that we don’t consider how it, and more specifically, age-based prejudice is widespread in society.

Ageism: Discrimination Against the Elderly

“Ageism” is a term coined by Roger Neil Butler in 1969 to describe discrimination against elders (those considered to be over 60 years old) patterned on both the systemic, institutionalized, and “day-to-day” models of sexism, racism, and classism, calling it “the neglected stepchild of the human life cycle.” Ageism can be viewed in three distinct ways: institutional (for example, age-based biases in employment), sweeping generalizations (for example, relating old people with forgetfulness), and exclusion (for example, the lack of accurate elderly representation in the media). Institutionalized ageism is rooted in the increasingly negative way the United States perceives older adults, and is “so thorough that it permeates all aspects of culture and society, and this complete separation of age groups provides fertile ground for the origin of ageism” (Nelson, 2005). In order to understand the occurrences of ageism in daily life, it is essential to grasp the historical mechanisms that have caused the rise of ageism in modern-day Western Society.

In early agrarian societies in the United States, older people were revered with importance: that with all of their experience, elders taught the young and could pass traditions down to succeeding generations. One major culprit that caused the shift in attitudes toward the elderly was the development of the printing press, which allowed for history to be saved and repeated through books, thus diminishing the power of oral histories (Nelson, 2005). The second culprit was the Industrial Revolution; this era excluded those who were not mobile. In the many jobs that became available, experience was not as revered in the many jobs became available as was the ability to adapt to the “rapid technological progresses” and “back-breaking working hours” in manual labor: (Hoppit, 2000). Furthermore, historians Thomas R. Cole and David Hackett Fischer note that at the turn of the 19th century, the idea of old age was seen as a biomedical problem; as if it was a “disease” of sorts that could be cured. For example, in the summer of 1904, American biologist Elie Metchnikoff claimed that the bacteria found in curdled milk could help “slow ageing down,” causing newspapers across the country to write stories labeling yogurt as a means to “suppress the disastrous effects of old age” (“Can We ‘Cure’ Ageing?”). Today, there are similar attitudes in play. For example, when research showed that metformin, a common diabetes drug could “extend lifespan in rodents,” scientists sought and won approval for human trials of the drug’s anti-aging properties. (“Can We ‘Cure’ Ageing?”) Like any other human issue, however, there is a philosophical dimension to consider.

From an existential standpoint, these changing attitudes have caused Western society think about old age as something “other”, thus giving rise to a widespread fear of growing old. Existentialist Simone de Beauvoir notes this in her exposé *The Coming of Age*, arguing that “Thinking of myself as an old person when I am twenty or forty means thinking of myself as someone else, as another of myself” (de Beauvoir, 5). This detached way of thinking is very much fixed to the widespread perception of age as a series of losses (for example, losing one’s youth, beauty, or physical ability) as opposed to one of achievement (for example, gaining life experience, milestone achievements, and wisdom). In accordance with de Beauvoir, novelist Marcel Proust writes, “Of all realities, old age is perhaps that which we retain a purely abstract notion longest in our lives.” Until the moment one is considered to be of old age, growing old is perceived as something that only affects other people. Furthermore, de Beauvoir attributes this fear of ageing to the natural human desire to “remain themselves, unchanged” (18). These reasons encourage people to lie about their age, to be reluctant to identify with their true age, and therefore, to dismiss a core piece of their identity. Thus, a common misprediction about age comes into view: that one’s unhappiness increases with age.

According to physician Robert Butler in his 1969 article in The Gerontologist, “Ageism: Another Form of Bigotry,” the most impactful stereotypes around ageing are those which liken growing old with the “Three Ds: disease, disability (as both functional deterioration and as the perceived capacity to lose certain abilities), and death”. Invisibility, marginalization, and social exclusion of older people is enhanced by the fact that those not of old age are treated as “the norm”. As *New York Times* reader Chloe Zerwick writes in a letter to the editor,

“I am a youthful-looking old lady who could pass, I’m told, for 20 years younger. I’ve always been blessed with an active, fun social life in my upstate community, where I had deliberately concealed my age. However, when I turned 90, I decided it was time to come out of the closet and had a 90th-birthday party attended by what I thought were my nearest and dearest. It was a lovely evening two years ago. And I haven’t been invited over by any of them ever since. I’m sure it is not deliberate. They are lovely people who just don’t want to hang out with such an elderly person. Maybe it reminds them of what’s to come.”

It is these sorts of ingrained perceptions that give rise to the systemic and internalized forms of ageism that affect the individual (as was Zerwick’s case).

Internalized ageism manifests in daily life through patronizing, stereotyped language and pseudo-positive attitudes toward elders. In The Fountain of Youth, Feminist activist Betty Friedan defined the term “compassionate ageism” as “the double-edged belief that the elder are needy and deserve special policies to help them”. In this way, people with positive attitudes toward older people often seem to communicate with them in ways based on to negative stereotypes surrounding them. One such example is through “over-accommodation,” a phenomenon in which younger individuals become overly polite, by speaking louder, slower, and with an over-simplified vocabulary to elders (Giles, Fox, Harwood, & Williams, 1994). Though the initial purpose of over-accommodation may be well-intentioned, the action is ultimately based on the stereotype that older people have reduced intellect, hearing impairments, and stagnant mental functioning, and in result, the younger individual devalues the elder’s genuine thoughts and feelings (Kite & Wagner, 2002). The result of this constant devaluation and dismissal of thoughts is both dangerous and insulting as it assumes that elders have no important thoughts or opinions to express, thus pushing them back into the margin of invisibility.

In one study, caregivers at a nursing home were found to speak slowly in short, simple sentences to the elders (Kemper, 1994). As the study progressed, the caregiver’s speech pattern did not vary as the mental or physical health of the elder changed with the cognitive state or physical health of the individual -- rather, what prompted the over-accommodating speaking manner was just the individual’s age. This indicated a strong influence of a negative stereotype of frailty and dependence influencing the caregiver’s behavior. According to Arluke and Levin (1984), over-accommodation and infantilization of the elderly produces a self-fulfilling prophecy wherein older people come to accept that they are no longer independent, valuable people. The acceptance of such a passive role in society results in the depletion of self-esteem, and thus perpetuates the vicious cycle of negative perceptions of the old.

In addition to interpersonal influences, the media is another leading factor that sways the public’s perception of ageing and perpetuates internalized stereotypes toward the old. One such

example is of the increasing emphasis on “successful ageing” by the media, such as headlines praising “the 85 year-old who ran a marathon” and the “80 year-old who climbed Mount Everest” (New York Daily News). The cornerstone of successful ageing is on physical activity and community engagement. Though this view, in part, combats the negative stereotypes about aging, it still is dependent on the youth norm; and the term “successful ageing” itself assumes that “unsuccessful ageing” is the status quo. Furthermore, the media typically reflects age-based biases in its representation. Examples are widespread, and include the portrayal of the elderly as forgetful (as is Fiona, the Alzheimers-ridden lead character in the 2007 film *Away from Her*), stubborn (as is Carl Fredricksen, the cranky and stone-faced protagonist of Disney’s *Up*), and helpless (as is the simple minded and pushover personality of Rose on NBC’s *The Golden Girls*).

Furthermore, because older people are inclined to spend much of their free time watching television, researchers have speculated that the more an they is exposed to these negative portrayals of those their age, they will develop and refine a more negative perception of aging (Davis, 1985). On a similar note, comparing certain statistics reveals that the lack of representation of the elderly is crucial. Although the number of people age 65 and older in 2005 had skyrocketed to 12.7 percent of the American population, *Senior Journal*, however, states that elder characters made up less than 2 percent of all representation on American prime-time television (Senior Journal, Aging Watch). These numbers wholly prove the invisibility of the elders in the media, which assume a world in which the elderly are not valued, let alone exist.

Ageism: Discrimination Toward The Young

Though ageism is typically seen as the discrimination toward the old, internalized and unjust treatment travels in the other direction. Today’s youth is out of control, isn’t it? In the fourth century B.C., Plato was heard to remark: “What is happening to our young people? They disrespect their elders, they disobey their parents. They ignore the law. They riot in the streets, inflamed with wild notions. Their morals are decaying. What is to become of them?” (The Guardian). Beyond Plato’s time and throughout history, the youth have been discriminated against in ways parallel to the elderly. “Ephiphobia” is a historical term defined as the fear of youth, and an ephiphobic society is one that perceives young people in judgemental, negative, and stereotyped terms in a manner very similar to ageism.

Young people increasingly live non-linear life paths, often traveling back and forth from independence and dependence on their caretakers throughout their adolescence. This trend has come into play as a result of globalization, migration, and and the emphasis of social identity in contemporary culture (Youth Citizenship). This being said, society fails to recognize this shift in lifestyle and attitude and still pigeonholes teenagers and adolescents into categories, and personalities based on stereotypes perpetuated by the mainstream media.

The adolescent demographic exhibit similar traits as time goes on. For example, for many adolescents, this time of life signifies a more conspicuous openness to a more diverse set of political and cultural beliefs and behaviors: “with increasing migrations, worldwide media disseminations, multinational corporations, tourism travel, and so forth, diverse young peoples interact with one another more than ever” (Jensen, 10). Studies show that during adolescence, teenagers tend to spend more time with their peers compared to their parents (The Guardian). Surrounding oneself with those similar in age and experiencing the universal situation of growing up subsequently causes those adolescents to be more likely to take risks (Telegraph). This is due to the asymmetrical development in parts of the teenage brain: in particular, the

prefrontal cortex, which governs reasoning and critical thinking. According to the Telegraph, “as teens seek out new sensations and new experiences, the underdeveloped prefrontal cortex means their brain has trouble controlling risk taking impulses and understanding the consequences of their actions, causing teens to respond on impulse rather than thinking practically”. While there may be a higher margin for risk-taking in this age group, most assume that these characters of judgement cause adolescents to be unable to think clearly, beginning the cycle of much-believed, age-based stereotypes against youth (Nelson). Being a teenager, there are very beautiful moments of feeling joy, of gleaming beauty, of feeling connected to your friends. In a way, some of the angst can even feel strangely good sometimes. The serious and genuine issues that teenagers deal with, however, are brushed aside simply because they are teenagers, and because society thinks that it is just a phase of “bad behavior”. Subsequently, because this so-called bad behavior is worrying to older members of society, it causes the hyper-protection of parents toward their children (Jensen). Thus, stereotypes of the youth as risk-takers, inherently troublesome and troubled, lazy, impulsive, self-absorbed, irresponsible, and lacking in judgement prevail. In addition to this, there are beliefs that young people are limited in what they can do because they can only perform certain tasks at specified ages and do not have enough life experience to do things that adults are capable of doing, hence the ever-present saying, “You’ll understand it someday, just you wait” as told to teenagers by their parents across the globe (“Seen But Not Heard”).

Compared to the presentation of the elderly in the media, the problem does not as much lie in the lack of representation, as there are plenty of programs, films and publications that depict the (often idealized) teenage experience. Historically, the media has enhanced the negative stereotypes of the youth as disobedient, reckless, and incapable of good judgement. In the advertisement for the *Viva* shower cleaning products, the announcer remarks that the product is so simple to use that “even a teenager could do it,” again alluding to the age-biased prejudices against all teenagers that they are irresponsible, lazy, and unable to accomplish this sort of task. Mainstream print also perpetuates: according to *The Independent*, studies show more than half of the stories about teenage boys in national newspapers in the past year were about crime. Words most commonly used to describe adolescent boys were “thugs” (254 times), “sick” (199 times), and “feral” (96 times), displaying the perception of the teenager as “evil” (*The Independent*). Finally, the television and film industry heavily and unfairly demonize teenagers. In order to draw their young target audience, films exhibit situations from adolescence to which teenagers may relate: high school, friendship groups, romantic relationships, and family ties. The most common themes of teenage life in film include: rebelling against schools and parents (as did the class-cutting trio in the 1986 classic *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*), losing one’s virginity (as were the storylines of the sexually active characters in Larry Clark’s cult film *Kids*), and consuming drugs and alcohol (as were the two hosts during their party in 2012’s *Project X* that eventually escalates way out of their control). In Hollywood’s eyes, these are the basis of teenage life; in reality, they are much too exaggerated to be accurate. Adults, however, don’t take this into consideration. According to a recent survey conducted by the Demos ThinkTank of more than 1,000 young people, 80% of fourteen to seventeen year-olds feel their age group is unfairly represented in the media. Additionally, 85% believe these negative stereotypes affect their ability to get a job (Demos). Age-based prejudice also affects intergenerational relationships within the family; as my father, Matthew Westfall, father of three teenage girls says:

“All teenagers are naïve to some degree, and when dealing with them, that is always taken into account. So one doles out information in bits, tries to refrain from lecturing or spoiling the moment, and tries to keep that youthful enthusiasm intact.”

Westfall, who is fifty six years-old, elaborates on how our internalized ageist views can create and affect tensions between teenagers and their parents:

“I have no doubt – I’ve heard it repeatedly from my own children – that I am viewed as a jaded, cantankerous old fogey with right-wing, hardline views that border on fascist drivel. In some ways, perhaps that’s true, in many ways, it’s a reflection of my experiences and wisdom gained over the years, and my frustration with the inability to gain traction on issues that are so deeply important to me. Frankly, I fear for the future, in ways I did not when I was a teenager.”

In terms of the teenage side of the conversation, I personally believe that the people who have known us for our whole lives, especially our parents, cannot acknowledge that we have changed and matured from who we were a few months ago, let alone a few years ago. I think that their view of who we are at this moment can stay trapped in the time they felt the closest to us: for me, it would be when Dad picked me up after soccer practice when I was six with a cold milkshake in hand, or when Mom became my math tutor freshman year when I was struggling, and told me of her tales as a young woman in the Philippines.

Nonconformity as Resistance to Ageism

Nevertheless, in basic terms, older people have a negative perception of the young, younger people have a negative perception of the old, and the middle-aged demographic seem to have it best. Now what? How can the age-based prejudices and ageist attitudes that we internalize be combatted? It is human nature to categorize ourselves -- the linear model is locked into everything we do. The way that society carries certain expectations for behaviors for people of various ages is often called “age-grading” -- defining people by age category rather than by, for example, behavior, interest, personality, character, etc. This sort of classification prompts a mental dislocation where age is to blame for each of an individual’s problems, from unemployment to acting cranky in the morning. It segregates younger and older people into an “us versus them” situation, providing the grounds for the origin of ageism (The Time of Our Lives, 18).

Of course, like with any other social justice -ism, the solution would be an envisioned, idealized world where age does not dictate what we think of others. This sort of age-blindness; the suggestion that “age doesn’t matter, and that we should ignore and look beyond age,” which is almost impossible. Age does matter -- it is intrinsically part of who we are. Why deny it? I, then, propose that the most pertinent solution involves nonconformity as a tool to resist ageism -- to subvert the status quo and the stereotypes that prevail. First, we must recognize the power that comes with age. Fortunately, both perpetrators and victims of ageism (and anyone, really) can participate in a two-fold formula of nonconformity:

1. Do not conform to perceiving the stereotypes: For the ‘perpetrators’ to think of each person situationally; on a case-by-case basis. As my father, Matthew Westfall said, “Some people stay immature for many years, far into adulthood, and live hugely irresponsible lives. Some teenage kids overwhelm me with their wisdom, intelligence and maturity. And there are people strewn across the spectrum.”
2. Do not conform to your age group because “that’s the way you should act.” Actively resist stereotypes by defying them. Act the way you want to act; how you naturally act. If you are seven years old and you want to engage in a political debate with someone older than you, do it. If you are seventy years old and want to wear a “loud” outfit, do it.

I’ve realized that it is crucial to recognize the immense power that comes with age. For me, at least, it is difficult for those within my family and from other generations to realize that everyone, including myself, changes all of the time. Their daughter getting older means that they must change the way they see me and therefore adapt to how I have matured. And it is not just them: it can be almost impossible for me to see my own parents or grandparents as real human beings who are just like me -- with feelings, lives, and hopes, and dreams. Thinking about age is 100%, wholeheartedly a two-way street, and once everyone can realize this, then, and only then, can this change in attitude occur.

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