

## Educational Models against ageism in higher education

Requena, Carmen<sup>a</sup>; Álvarez-Merino, Paula<sup>a</sup> and Plaza-Carmona, María<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Development and Education psychology , University of León, Spain, <sup>b</sup>Chair of Aging at all ages, University of León, Spain.

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### **Abstract**

*There have always been old persons, but their number has unprecedentedly grown and it is expected to overtake any other age group in contemporary developed societies. Instead of taking this process as a success of mankind, ageism grows on a par with ageing. It is well documented how standard educational models fail to correct implicit ageistic stereotypes, thus new emerging theoretical models such as generational intelligence and identity in old age put forward experiential methodologies designed to educate both explicit and implicit ageistic stereotypes. Both theoretical models incorporate the subjective first-person perspective on ageing, which complements the standard university curriculum for ageing-related professionals in health, social or educational sectors. The practical implementation of these educational models involve experiential methodologies such as life stories. A crucial educational element in the practical success of this methodology lies in understanding intergenerational education not only as a gathering of generations, but as the intentional production and evaluation of educational ends. Moreover, the paper focuses on life stories as an experiential methodology applying the theoretical models previously described in this work.*

**Keywords:** Higher education, Ageism, Life stories, Generational intelligence, Identity.

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## **1. Introduction**

The following syllogistic argument vividly illustrates the deep connections between ageism and education. The sources of ageism are double. A first source is located in our knowledge about ageing phenomena and constitutes the *epistemic* origin of ageism. A second source lies in our negative disposition towards ageing and constitutes the *attitudinal* origin of ageism. Now, both knowledge acquisition and attitude change are precisely the two main intervention areas and goals of education. Therefore, educational tools are in principle properly suited and can be extremely useful in facing ageism but also can contribute to maintaining ageist behaviors and beliefs.

Ageism has an epistemic source in outdated but still influential paradigms which define old age in terms of decay. The linear decline of certain cognitive and physical measures with chronological time (Salthouse, 2016) does not warrant the identification of ageing and decay, since human development is not necessarily monotonic in all dimensions. Only a small percentage of functional cognitive variance among older persons is explained in terms of chronological age (Ritchie et al., 2016). Moreover, the emotional behavior during the old age is more refined and complex than in other adult stages, even if the interest in cognitive development decreases (Cadar, 2017). Both the socioemotional selective theory of ageing and its conceptual alternatives identify nonmonotonic relations between cognition and emotion in ageing. In any case, it is necessary to dismantle certain modes of being old, fossilised by beliefs, negative stereotypes, myths and prototypes about ageing phenomena, which combine with the Pygmalion effect and perpetuate ageism against the older age. Consider for example the different social treatment given to ‘forgetting the keys’ in the case of a young person in contrast with an old one. The young person is justified with expressions such as ‘what was in her mind’, while the same fact in the older person case may worry the family and the older person with the fear ‘she is losing her mind’ or requiring medical attention.

Another root of ageism is not conceptual but attitudinal, as it is present either manifested in explicit stereotypes or implied in ageistic dispositions. For example, studies on the professional preferences among higher education students of degrees such as medicine, social work or education show that they prefer to work with children or young persons, while the practice with older persons is generally neglected to the last ordinal preference (Chonody, 2015). This lack of interest is related not only with false beliefs and myths about age, but also with the professional practice young students observe during their training. For example, students observe how accurate diagnoses are relaxed for older persons, how the consultation time is less than other age groups, how treatments for older persons are preferably pharmacological and not psychological, and finally observe how older persons are placed in the last positions for surgical interventions. All these observations generate anxiety towards ageing specially among students in the fields of social and health sciences.

Often, educative institutions program intergenerational activities to eradicate ageism. However, the mere contact and mutual acquaintance between generations does not imply the reduction of negative prejudices and a positive change in perceptions and attitudes for each group to the other. An illustrative study in this kind of setting was developed by Argentinian psychology students, whose ageist attitudes were evaluated following several standardised instruments measuring explicit and implicit attitudes towards older persons. During the experiment, the students contacted older persons in programmed and spontaneous activities which gave them the chance to know these persons in certain depth, interact with and listen to them and share their mutual perceptions. The researchers found that the students' explicit attitudes and beliefs were modified, but not their implicit attitudes and beliefs, which resisted any change and remained invariable in the medium term (Greenwald & Nosek, 2006). Similar results were found in other cultural contexts (Kahana, Slone, Kahana, Langendoerfer, & Reynolds, 2017). The ageist attitudes are rooted in essentialist categories, and the values suggest that neither mere instruction nor contact between generations is enough. Several studies have focused on cultural sources of ageism, namely historical factors imposing (or retrieving) sense and relevance to patterns of interaction implied in the ways younger persons interact with older adults, and also older adults with each other. For example, it has been confirmed that in China attitudes towards older adults tend to be, on average, more positive than those found among the Latin-American population, whose attitudes towards aged persons are better than those of the English-speaking population. In these results, it seems relatives play a role as promoter of respect and veneration towards older persons in the family in contrast to intergenerational groups linked by purely educational bonds (Luo, Zhou, Jin, Newman, & Liang, 2013).

The objective of this research is to identify theoretical frames and their corresponding methodologies which can be implemented in higher education context to effectively contribute to eradicate ageistic stereotypes. These methodologies are characterized by a definition of ageing as development which highlights the affective dimension in social relations among cohorts. The methods identified go beyond the classical "inter-group contact hypothesis" (Pettigrew, 1998), which argues that persons change their negative attitudes to other groups when they interact with them under certain conditions including the establishment of friendship relations, as it has been later partially confirmed (Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011).

## **2. Educative models facing ageism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Educational research and experience during the last decades helps to delineate basic features of successful educational methods against ageism. A first wave of research during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century demonstrated the usefulness of the following three

essential features: development of intergenerational activities (contact theory), experiential learning and training, design of evaluable and measurable interventions. Current trends in educational research point to new additional features we describe in this section, namely: generational intelligence, age identity and first-person approach.

We present two educational models based on a subjective vision of ageing which complements without contradicting the objective physiological and psychological facts about ageing. The subjective focus is meant to confront implicit stereotypes through activities in which different generations participate with a first-person involvement. These models predict the eradication of stereotypes through the knowledge of vital experiences narrated in the first person. Moreover, these methods are easily incorporated into the factual curriculum of higher education studies in health, education and social realms.

### ***2.1. Generational Intelligence***

The social classification of people according to age influences the expectations of the roles played by citizens at different ages: children play, young people study, adults work and the elderly rest. However, the real plurality of significant roles played by older persons (such as support for the family, caring for their grandchildren and support for the community through volunteering) goes beyond the tripartite social structure education-work-pension (Miles, 2012).

The emerging educational model called "generational intelligence" offers a conceptual frame and its corresponding practical tools to face and interpret the complex and multidimensional issue of intergenerational relations (Biggs & Lowenstein, 2013). This educational model works in the perspective of incoming demographic change and its method consists in anticipating new cultural demands in the life cycle of individuals, families and social systems. Generational intelligence is defined as the capacity to reflect and act towards the comprehension of oneself and others as members of an age group, of a cohort, and of a family living in a present social and cultural context. Ageing is a relational phenomenon in the following sense: while chronological time is common to all ages, functions and roles are divergent in different generations. For example, the older persons were in the past the holders of wisdom while currently young persons have a better access to knowledge. In the past, the tripartite social role structure education-work-pension was significantly less dependent on chronological age. Work was distributed in terms of family needs, not in chronological terms when children had to leave school to work and help at home. Therefore, in contemporary societies there are several temporal contexts sharing the same chronological time. Educating the ability to understand the temporal context of others is an essential feature of generational intelligence. This model does not search for a neutral age and does not presuppose that age is irrelevant, but rather the model focuses on creating spaces where age is distinctive from several generational points of view that must be taken

into account within a pragmatic negotiation process (Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2018).

## **2.2. Old Age Identity**

Personal identity does not only concern adolescence, as some life-cycle theories once considered. Identity is rather a perdurable process, present during the whole adult life, including old age (Panagakis, 2015). This continuous and flexible perspective on personal identity processes contributes to minimising ageist attitudes and beliefs which tend to conceive ageing apart from other life periods. While traditional conceptions of personal identity based on the alleged psychological-physical continuity of persons across time have received crucial objections in the current literature (McCarthy & Heraty, 2017), the trends which preserve personal identity across time are abstract and complex events such as interests, values, meanings and plans which permeate the entire life. Personal identity is conceived as a balance between flexibility and continuity. Flexibility makes it possible to integrate new experiences even if they bring substantial changes. It also eases the exploration of genuine alternatives. In some periods of life commitment prevails while in others exploration predominates.

The theory of identity (Sneed, Whitbourne, Schwartz, & Huang, 2012) is particularly adequate for adulthood and old age. Three processes are defined regarding identity: identity assimilation, identity accommodation and identity balance. Assimilation concerns the selfconscious preservation of the self, which implies selecting and interpreting information in a consistent way with respect to self-schemes, together with the selection and interpretation of information on individual bases. Accommodation refers to identity changes as an answer to new experiences. Finally, identity balance refers to the flexible use of the two previous styles. This flexibility makes it possible for the self to adapt and integrate changes related to age, while preserving the sense of consistency and internal stability (Kogan & Schoenfeld-Tacher, 2017).

## **3. Life stories: Experiential methodologies to confront ageism in higher education**

How can we generate knowledge, attitude change and professional good practices regarding ageing? Several investigations on pedagogical practices in pre-graduate, graduate and postgraduate studies favour a model in which students receive exhaustive information on ageing plus direct exposure to old persons in real life situations (Requena, Swift, Naegele, & Bosems, 2018). Experiential methodologies combine the knowledge in the classroom with real world experience, which obliges students to train their communication skills in the generational context. Experiential training is present in several forms of practical learning,

such as service learning, which is known to correct stereotypical ageist behavior, beliefs, vocabulary and expressions (such as “at my age...”) (McCarthy & Heraty, 2017). In order to avoid also implicit ageistic stereotypes it is useful to qualify experiential learning with a first-person approach to the knowledge of human development at a personal and at a generational cohort levels (Boswell, 2015). This is precisely the methodological objective of life stories as an educational method.

The social element in life stories refers not only to the context where the interaction takes place, but also to the intentional evocation of personal memories as a social act, which presupposes some form of empathy of and from the receiver of the narrative. Empathy implies a minimal degree of 'emotional atonement' present when we are able to understand what is being intelligibly communicated, including feelings and affections. Therefore, occasionally the function of sharing personal memories is trying to bring about understanding from other persons and get them to 'emotionally attune' with us (Sneed et al., 2012). From an educational viewpoint, the autobiographical approach characterizing life stories offers discents of all ages the chance to capture the most subjective qualities of ageing, namely what Kenyon and Randall call "the interior of ageing" (Randall & Kenyon, 2001). This subjective perspective crucially complements the theoretical approach of cycle life psychology which usually works from an objective perspective and is driven by quantitative data. Several solid experimental works demonstrate the efficiency of life stories as a didactical and therapeutical tool (Kogan & Schoenfeld-Tacher, 2017).

In the context of ageing research, identity processes such as structure updating and openness to change can be studied with the help of life stories. A study on retirement in times of cultural change has found that some individuals are more prone than others to incorporate cultural change into their own life narrations, and this propensity was directly related with the way in which they interpret their own ageing (Sheilds et al., 2015). Persons who locate themselves in an open horizon are also eager to explore new possibilities in the present, while they maintain less erroneous beliefs and myths on ageing. At the same time, those who stick to the past are more prone to understand the old age as a continuation or an epilogue of past life. These persons adopt a narrative foreclosure at the end of their lives, namely the premature conviction that the story of one's own life has finished and it is not possible to add any new chapters to it (O'Hora & Roberto, 2018). Narratively foreclosed persons do not consider new intelligible experiences, interpretations and commitments in their own life. This ageist attitude stands against selfing, which is an untold or unfinished narrative process open to new challenges and responsibilities, where the normal all-ages open narrative has not stopped. Older persons with ageist identity usually have not developed their own identity in their lives; they are not committed to social values and are convinced that it is impossible or too late to make any essential transformation. These persons can feel a strong wish to rewrite the past or change the direction of their life, but at

the same time they realize they do not know how to do it (Robinson & Murphy-Nugen, 2018).

In order to achieve a better understanding of experiential methodologies based on life stories, the following are useful documentary examples from the visual arts: “The Remains of the Day” (1993) directed by James Ivory; the Japanese movie ‘Ikiru’ (1956), by Akira Kurosawa; or the Icelandic film ‘Eldfjall’, by Rúnar Rúnarsson (2011). The following written document is also useful: (Villar, 2006).

#### 4. Conclusions

The subjective or first-person perspective on ageing phenomena is an essential contribution of experiential learning to higher education. New theoretical models face mutual intergenerational comprehension beyond inter-group theories. To fight against implicit and explicit ageism in educational contexts, the generational intelligence model unifies a transversal or simultaneous view of two or more generations with a longitudinal perspective which includes several temporal horizons. Age matters: it is not an empty variable, but the learnable modal capacity to understand other generations. On the other hand, age-related identity is demystified from its adscription to adolescence. Identity is not restricted to any chronological period, since it is never late to add new stories to our own identity. Finally, life-stories are proposed as an experiential learning methodology based on mutual interdependent structured interviews. Success in anti-ageistic education requires combining the subjective experiential perspective with the traditional objectified view of the life cycle.

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