Impact of an Undergraduate Level Course on Student Perception of Ageism: Evidence From the Analyses of Student Post-Course Reflections

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Abstract

Ageism is a growing issue that affects all nations, though it receives limited attention in higher education curricula. The purpose of this qualitative study was to utilize post-course student reflections to examine the benefits of participating in a 1-credit course focused on ageism. The course pedagogy provided education on normal aging and intergenerational contact, elements shown to reduce negative aging stereotypes and reduce ageist perspectives in college students. Participants included 20 undergraduate students from various disciplines. Analysis of narrative data revealed students had a greater awareness of discrimination, prejudice, and implicit bias associated with aging resulting from the course. Proposed methods for reducing or eliminating ageism were reported within four different categories including education, greater intergenerational contact, personal actions, and legislation. This study provides evidence related to the benefits of combining accurate information about aging and exposing students to quality intergenerational experiences with older adults as ways to address ageism.

Keywords: Aging; ageism; implicit bias; higher education; post-course reflections; qualitative analysis.

1. Introduction

According to the National Poll on Healthy Aging (2020), ageism is a serious concern as 82% of older adults reported experiencing one or more forms of everyday ageism, and 40% experienced three or more forms such as in their interpersonal interactions, or hearing, seeing or reading suggestions that aging is undesirable. Negative stereotypes on age not only have a negative

effect upon quality of life, but are recognized as a public health issue (World Health Organization, 2015). Prejudice against older people is also one of the most common types of prejudice, likely because it is often overlooked or publicly accepted. It is important to recognize that ageism can affect individuals of any age, but older adults are most negatively impacted, affecting cognition (Lamont et al., 2015), mental health (Wurm & Benyamini, 2014), increased diseased state (Allen, 2015), and length of recovery (Levy et al., 2012). Also, ageism can cause older adults to feel excluded or isolated from society (Wethington et al., 2016).

According to Iversen et al (2009), ageism includes three dimensions: stereotypes, the cognitive dimension (e.g. *I think older adults are a burden to society*); prejudice, the emotional dimension (e.g. *I do not enjoy conversations with older adults*); and discrimination, the behavioral dimension (e.g. *I try not to interact with older adults*). Additionally, stereotypes on aging can be either positive (e.g. Older adults are beneficial to society) or negative (e.g. Older adults are irrelevant) and can be either explicit or implicit (Levy & Banaji, 2002). Levy and Banaji (2002) assert that implicit ageism is unique in that there is not an explicit hatred against people of a different age, however a common acceptance of negative attitudes and beliefs towards older adults emphasize the importance of improving knowledge on aging and improving attitudes towards aging.

While controversial topics including discussion around stereotypes is not uncommon in higher education, ageism, the discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping of people based upon age (Ayalon et al., 2019), is rarely adequately addressed and often neglected leaving many students unaware of its harmful effects and how to address it. While anyone can express ageist attitudes, young adults, specifically traditionally-aged college students, may be more likely to express negative attitudes toward older adults (Guest, et. al., 2021; Wurtele & Maryuma, 2013) compared to other age groups (Berger, 2017; Gutiérrez & Mayordomo, 2019).

Recently, a study was conducted on the benefits of an elective course focused on ageism (Beach et al., 2024). The findings of this study demonstrated the feasibility of improving undergraduate student perspectives on aging in a low stakes 1-credit honors course by teaching accurate information about aging and providing quality experiences to interact with older adults inside and outside of the classroom. The overall purpose of the present study was to examine these students' implicit biases through their qualitative reflections following this 1 credit seminar course on ageism.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study context and design

This study focuses on the analyses of qualitative reflections submitted by undergraduate students following a 1 credit seminar course on ageism at a medium-sized public liberal arts

university in New York State. Following the completion of the course at the end of the spring 2022 semester, students were asked to reflect on the impact of the course on their perception of older adults and whether or not the course changed their views on ageism. In addition, students reflected on ways to reduce or eliminate ageism both in their academic institution and in society at large. Separately, demographic information including student age, gender, and year in college were collected to provide context for the data obtained.

2.2. Research questions

The research questions examined in the student post-course reflections can be summarized as follows:

1. What is the impact of the course on your perception of ageism – including perspectives on aging, age discrimination, and attitudes toward older adults?
2. What are some ways to reduce or eliminate ageism?

2.3. Study participants

A broader description of the overall methods used in the study as well as the full demographic information of the participants have been published elsewhere (Beach et al., 2024). Briefly, a total of 22 students (21 undergraduate students and one older adult auditor) self-selected for the course. Nearly all students (n=20) submitted a post-reflection at the end of the course. The student participants represented different academic disciplines and majors on campus. This study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

2.4. Data analysis

Transcripts from student post-reflections were analyzed by two authors using qualitative description methodology (Sandelowski, 2010). The authors read the transcripts independently and then summarized the information into categories that represent similar meanings in relation to the research questions. Following their independent analysis of the post-cost reflection transcripts, the authors met to compare their analysis results. Areas of disagreement were discussed by the authors until final consensus was reached on the final themes or major findings from the study. Specifically, this methodological approach enabled the generation of themes relating to the impact of the course on student perception of ageism, as well as ideas on ways to reduce ageism at academic institutions and society at large.

2.5 Study rigor

To ensure the rigor of the study, the researchers noted and discussed their biases as part of the data analyses process. Hence, the emergent themes and their descriptions were close to how the students described them in their post-course reflections. In addition, the setting of the study in

a liberal arts university in New York State helps to improve the applicability of the findings to similar educational institutions in the United States, thereby increasing transferability of the findings. Further, an audit trail of all decisions related to student participation in the course, post-course reflections, researchers' meetings, analyses, and writing was kept and are available for auditing. Finally, confirmability was achieved since the study's findings are traceable to the perspectives of the undergraduate students as described in their post-course reflections at the conclusion of the course (Lietz & Zayas, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

3. Results

A brief demographic profile of the students who enrolled in the course is presented in Table 1. A more detailed profile has been previously published (Beach et al., 2024). Of the 22 students who enrolled in the course, 20 students submitted the post-course reflection. Table 2 summarizes the major themes derived from the analysis of the post-course reflections submitted by these students.

Table 1. Participant demographic profile

Variable	Number (n)	Percent (%)
Gender		
Female	14	63.6
Male	8	36.4
Nonbinary	0	0.0
Class (year in university)		
Seniors	4	18.2
Juniors	2	9.1
Sophomores	10	45.4
First Years	6	27.3
Ethnicity		
White	17	77.3
Hispanic	0	0.0
Asian	1	4.5
Black	0	0.0
American Indian	0	0.0
Not identified	4	18.2

Table 2. Themes from student post reflections

Research Question (RQ)	Themes	Supporting quotes
RQ1: ***Impact of the course***	Greater awareness of age-based discrimination	"I would say that my key takeaway is a greater awareness of age-based discrimination in all contexts and settings. With each class, I was introduced to more and more forms that ageism may take that I had not noticed before. Whether it is through birthday cards, advertising, or blatant neglect, I've learned that older adults are mistreated all around us."
		I started this semester having no idea what ageism was. I had never heard of discrimination based on age, and had never even thought of it as a possibility. Now that I've taken this course, however, I see ageism all around me; in the things my friends and family say, the things I used to do, the workplace, public spaces, educational settings, everywhere."
	Implicit bias awareness and better preparation to combat all types of discrimination	"Sometimes I would ask or offer someone help with moving something or completing a task, even though they were perfectly capable of doing it. At the time I thought I was just being nice, but now I see that I only did it toward older adults, and they may have seen it as me thinking that they were incapable of doing it themselves. This class has allowed me to self-reflect on my attitudes towards those around me and hopefully help me become a better person"
		I went to buy a birthday card for my boyfriend, and I was reading some of the cards. I started reading some of retirement and 60s and 70s birthdays

		because I remembered talking about those in class. I was reading them with a whole new perspective and didn't find them funny like I may have in the past.
	Change in personal attitude towards aging and ageism	"*The biggest takeaway I can think of from this class is my perception of age changing. As previously said, I thought that "old" was anyone over 65. However, after seeing more and more cases (both outside and inside the class) people in their 60s and 70s were fit and intelligent, sometimes way more than me!*"
		"*I used to be afraid of getting old and becoming lonely or sad because my quality of life would decrease. Now, I'm more excited to grow into a more complete and wise version of myself.*"
RQ2: *Ways to reduce/eliminate ageism*	Education and/or training	"*Education and training are important not only for those working with the older generation, but also the older adults themselves so they can recognize if they are victims of ageist behavior and defend themselves and/or report it*"
	More intergenerational contact	"*I think mixing generations is such an important aspect of fighting ageism. Once people see that older adults do have their own interests and personalities, rather than lumping them into a category, empathy can be gained, and even friendships across generations.*"

	Personal actions	*It is important to be able to recognize ageism when it is happening and call it out as one would with any other kind of discrimination.*
		"This can be done by addressing older populations with the right language. Use older, or older adult instead of weak and frail."
	Legislation	*"Perhaps the greatest change could be brought through stronger legislation concerning age-based discrimination. While some laws do exist that forbid this kind of judgement during the hiring process, they are easily avoided and hardly enforced."*

4. Discussion

Qualitative analysis of post-course reflections revealed that students had a greater awareness of discrimination and prejudice associated with aging. Importantly, students described ageism being present in many aspects of society including the workplace, healthcare, marketing, and more. Many described being unaware of this serious issue until enrolling in this course. Results also indicate the course impacted students' attitudes and subsequent behavior toward older adults due to a greater awareness of their implicit biases (Levy and Banaji, 2002). Several students described a classroom lecture identifying examples of birthday cards that perpetuate negative aging stereotypes and how this awareness resulted in being more selective in purchasing these types of cards for aging family members. Other students described applying their knowledge about ageism to point out and correct ageist remarks made by family and friends. Students also reported having improved personal attitudes toward aging. Specifically, that aging is not a time of loss, nor decreased functional ability that is universal. This provides further evidence that course design which incorporates accurate information about the aging process (Allan & Johnson, 2009; Levy, 2016) and the promotion of positive intergenerational learning opportunities (Lytle & Levy, 2019), can contribute to improved knowledge and attitudes related to aging.

Identification of ways to reduce or eliminate ageism were reported within four different categories including education, greater intergenerational contact, personal actions, and legislation. Suggestions related to education ranged from workshops and course content infused into high school and undergraduate curricula, to more generalized public education to the larger population, especially older adults who may not realize the ageism they experience. Greater intergenerational contact, achieved through course assignments and an older adult participating in the course, was recommended by many students as they described being able to dispel myths of aging by developing positive relationships. Several participants described the importance of developing mentoring programs and engaging older adults who are active and positive role models for aging. A large number of students described the importance of taking personal actions for combatting ageism. This was often described as speaking up when someone makes an ageist comment, and taking personal responsibility to educate others about how their language negatively affects others and promotes ageist behavior. Language is indeed a major contributing factor toward ageism and large-scale campaigns are working to address this (National Center to Reframe Aging, 2024; World Health Organization, 2021). For the final category, some students described using legislation to enforce violations of age-based discrimination. Others described legislation within the context of education to mandate training about ageism in schools and universities.

One limitation to consider when interpreting these results is the students who participated in this study self-selected by registering for a course titled, "Ageism". Students interested in working in an aging-related field, or having had previous positive experiences with older adults may have been more likely to register for this class. While this self-selection may have impacted attitudes toward older populations prior to the course, the insightful post-course reflection responses highlight a new awareness of their perspectives and attitudes toward older adults. Another factor to consider was the presence of one older adult auditor enrolled in this course, a female in her late 80s. This older adult registered for the course as part of the university's lifelong learning initiative (Dauenhauer, Heffernan, & Cesnales, 2018; Hazzan, Dauenhauer, & Heffernan, 2021; Heffernan, Hazzan, & Dauenhauer, 2022). Her outgoing nature and engagement with many students in the class may have contributed to students' growth by providing a consistent opportunity for intergenerational contact with a healthy, engaged, community-dwelling older adult. It should also be noted that the sample of students is disproportionately white and this may pose a limitation to generalizability. Lastly, it is important to note that while most student reflections demonstrated improvement in knowledge and attitudes toward aging and the issue of ageism, there was one student who dismissed much of the information and interactions within the course, especially the topic of implicit bias and the seriousness of ageism. This underscores the reality that ageism education, similar to other forms of bias and discrimination (e.g., racism, sexism, etc.), presents challenges to try to educate those who are not yet able to consider, or

believe, that these issues exist, or think that collective action is needed to address these systemic issues.

In conclusion, the post-reflections from this this course, in addition to the information provided from the larger study by Beach, et. al., (2024) provides further evidence related to the benefits of combining accurate information about aging and exposing students to quality intergenerational experiences with older adults. It also provides educators an example of how a 1-credit course offering can have a positive impact on ageism in a higher education setting.

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