

Predictors of attitudes to age across Europe

By Dominic Abrams, Christin-Melanie Vauclair and Hannah Swift

Background

As the population of the European region ages, governments and policy makers are grappling with the question of how to change people's perceptions and expectations about ageing in order for societies to adapt to these changes. Understanding where ageist expectations and misconceptions arise can inform appropriate strategies and policies for an ageing population.

This research is the first to consider simultaneously how both differences between countries and differences between individuals in the European region each relate to people's attitudes to ageing and their experiences of ageism. Across groups or countries, patterns of data observed at the individual level (e.g. a positive relationship between wealth and longevity) might actually be a result of patterns at a higher level (e.g. that wealthier countries have better health care systems). Therefore, disentangling the impact of individual factors from that of country-level factors is very important, and is a central focus of this research.

Differences between individuals (e.g. gender) and countries (e.g. economic performance) were examined to see how they related to views and experiences of the following seven issues:

- age categorisation and identification;
- perceived status of people over 70;
- perceived threat from people over 70;
- perceptions of stereotypes about people over 70;
- direct prejudice towards people over 70;
- personal experiences of ageism; and
- friendships with people over 70.

Key findings

- Regardless of their own age, respondents in countries with a higher proportion of older people were more positive, suggesting that societal attitudes shift as a population ages. Older people's status was perceived to be higher in countries that had later state pension ages.
- Age discrimination was personally experienced by about one third of all respondents, with the UK placed just below the average for all ESS countries. Across all ESS countries just under half of the respondents, including those from the UK, regarded age discrimination to be a serious or very serious issue.
- Age discrimination was affected by a variety of individual characteristics: with ageism being experienced more by younger people, those who were less well educated, felt poorer, were not in paid employment or were living in urban areas.
- Across all ESS countries the stereotypes of older people as friendly and competent were consistently affected by age, education and residential area, with the UK placed above average for friendliness and below average for competence for all ESS countries. The gap between these two stereotypes is therefore notably larger in the UK. At the country-level, countries with higher unemployment rates and a lower proportion of people aged over 65, stereotyped older people as less competent.
- At the country-level older people being seen as a threat to the economy was influenced by economy-related characteristics, whereas, older people being seen as a threat to health services was affected by state pension age for men, i.e. a policy-related variable.

Methodology

The research for this study was conducted using the European Social Survey (ESS) 2008/09 data, which provides representative samples from 28 countries belonging to the European region. The survey methodology was based on interviews with samples in each country of between 1,215 and 2,576 people aged 15 years and over in 2008 and 2009.

Research findings

A distinctive feature of this research has been to show, using the statistical technique of multilevel modelling, how differences between individuals and differences between countries each feed into social attitudes towards ageing. This illuminates whether individual or country-level factors have a larger impact in changing attitudes.

Age categorisation and identification

Age categorisation is the process of classifying people as belonging to a certain age group.

Older people, women, those who were in paid work or living in rural areas perceived the end of youth as later than did younger people, men, those not in paid work or those living in urban areas, respectively.

Older people, women and those living in urban areas believed old age starts later. Better educated respondents (with more advanced education), those who felt wealthier and those who were not members of ethnic minorities perceived the start of old age to be later.

Individual circumstances also affected how people felt about their age group. Men, older people, those who were better educated, in paid employment, felt wealthier or living in urban areas had a weaker sense of belonging to their age group.

Perceived status of people over 70

Perceived status was assessed both using a general question about the status of people aged over 70 and by asking how comfortable people would feel with a boss aged over 70.

Perceived status was rather low across the European region (28 ESS countries). However, there was variation between countries. The status of older people was regarded least highly in Bulgaria and most highly in Cyprus. The UK falls in the middle of the range.

Older people, women, those who were better educated, felt subjectively poorer or living in urban areas, perceived the status of those over 70 to be relatively lower. Women and those in paid employment were more likely to say that having a boss over 70 is less acceptable.

The perceived status of people over 70 was higher in countries with higher state pension ages, or where there was a cultural emphasis on personal autonomy. Perceived status was also higher in countries with higher levels of income inequality.

Perceived threat from people over 70

Threat is measured both in terms of the potential threat to the economy and potential threat to health services.

There was variation between ESS countries in the perceived burden people over 70 place on health services. They were viewed as a substantial burden by people in the Czech Republic but not in other countries (including Turkey or Bulgaria, or indeed the UK). The perceived economic threat was relatively low across all ESS countries.

Younger people, men, people who felt poorer, those living in urban areas, and those who did not belong to an ethnic minority group, perceived that people over 70 make a smaller contribution to the economy. Older people, those who were better educated or not in paid employment were more likely to think that people over 70 place a burden on health services.

Respondents in countries with lower Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, in countries that had greater income equality, or that placed less value on personal autonomy also perceived that people over 70 make a smaller contribution to their economy. Respondents in countries that had a higher state pension age (for men) perceived the threat to health services from people aged over 70 to be lower.

It is notable that, between countries, it is economy-related characteristics that affected perceptions of economic threat, but a policy-related variable (state pension age for men) that affected perceived threat to health services.

Perceptions of stereotypes about people over 70

Items asked respondents whether people aged over 70 are stereotyped as friendly and as competent, two core elements of most social stereotypes.

Across all ESS countries people aged over 70 were stereotyped as relatively friendly. The UK average was above that for all 28 ESS countries showing that people in the UK were relatively more likely to stereotype older people as friendly. On competence the UK average was below that for all 28 ESS countries showing that people in the UK stereotyped older people as less competent.

Across countries, stereotypes were consistently affected by people's age, education and residential area.

People aged over 70 were seen as stereotypically less friendly by women, respondents who were younger or felt poorer. People who were better educated or living in urban areas viewed those over 70 as stereotypically less friendly and also less competent.

In countries with higher unemployment rates and a lower proportion of older people, people aged over 70 were stereotyped as less competent.

Direct prejudice towards people over 70

Items asked how negative or positive respondents felt towards people aged over 70.

On average people expressed positive feelings towards people aged over 70 and there was little variation between countries. This is consistent with the idea that elderly stereotypes emphasise older people's warmth, but this should be taken in the context of perceived lower status and competence of older people – as discussed earlier – which do differ between countries.

Across countries, older people, women, those who were better educated, in paid employment, living in rural areas, or who felt wealthier felt more positive towards people aged over 70.

Regardless of their own age, respondents in countries with a higher proportion of older people were more positive, suggesting that societal attitudes shift as a population ages.

Personal experiences of ageism

Items asked how often respondents had experienced age discrimination in the past year and about the seriousness of age discrimination in society.

Age discrimination was personally experienced by about one third of all respondents, with the UK placed just below the average for all ESS countries. Across all ESS countries just under half of the respondents, including those from the UK, regarded age discrimination to be a serious or very serious issue.

Ageism was experienced more by younger people, those who were less well educated, felt poorer, were not in paid employment or were living in urban areas. Yet, as well as those who feel poorer, it was women, those who were better educated, or in paid employment who were more likely to regard ageism as a serious issue.

People experienced ageism against themselves more in countries that had a lower proportion of people aged over 65 and in countries that placed less value on autonomy.

Friendships with people over 70

Measures of cross-group friendship provide insight into the extent to which groups are likely to have accurate mutual understanding.

The average for ESS countries (and the UK average) reflects that people typically have one friend aged over 70. People in Portugal reported the highest number of friendships with people aged over 70, whereas people in Russia reported the fewest.

Not surprisingly, older people had more friends aged over 70 but even after accounting for people's own age, women, people who felt poorer, were in paid employment or living in urban areas had fewer friendships with others aged over 70.

In countries with relatively higher GDP, with a higher proportion of people aged over 65, or with a lower level of urbanisation (i.e. lower proportion of people living in cities), respondents were more likely to have friends aged over 70.

Conclusions

Ageism is a problem across Europe just as it is in the UK. It is a problem for young and old alike, not least because young people can expect to become old, but also because a lack of mutual connection and respect across the age range is likely to foster ageist stereotypes, misperceptions and discrimination.

This report shows that people's perceptions, stereotypes and views about age are affected both by country-level factors, such as a country's wealth, income distribution, or overarching values, and by individual factors, such as gender, subjective poverty and age. Within any particular country, such as the UK, there is scope to promote strategies that will increase the inclusion of, and opportunities for, older people. Tackling negative age stereotypes will not just reduce prejudice but will create better outcomes for older people.

The findings highlight that strategies to reduce ageism and mitigate its effects may be developed effectively at both the individual and the country or institutional levels. For example if a societal goal is to encourage employment of older workers, it would be useful at the individual level to enhance the perceived social status of older workers by addressing people's stereotypes and assumptions about age. At the country or institutional levels, evidence that a country's state pension age affects attitudes to age suggests that changes in policy, legislation, and their interpretation as well as wider norms, can facilitate changes in expectations and assumptions about work and retirement.

This report highlights that it is important to be aware of and monitor the potential impact of changes in both individual circumstances and in society (such as, levels of unemployment, inequality and other factors), on ageism. This will help to prevent and counter forms of age discrimination that are sometimes subtle and that are widely perceived to be serious.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to Age UK for sponsoring the development work for the survey, to our colleagues in the European Research Group on Attitudes to Age and to the European Social Survey Central Coordinating Team at City University, for their contribution to the survey design and its implementation. A report of the descriptive findings from the survey will be published by AgeUK in 2011 (Abrams, Russell, Vauclair and Swift, forthcoming).

© Crown copyright 2011.

You may re-use this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/> or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 961 1. Research Report 735. May 2011).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

Other report summaries in the research series are also available from the website above.

If you would like to subscribe to our email list to receive future summaries and alerts as reports are published please contact:

Kate Callow, Commercial Support and Knowledge Management Team, Upper Ground Floor, Steel City House, West Street, Sheffield S1 2GQ. Email: Kate.Callow1@dwp.gsi.gov.uk.