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Whose ageism? The reinvigoration and definitions of an elusive concept

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Abstract

This article deals with a critical conceptual understanding of ageism. It does so foremost by problematizing some of the inadequacies in a previously published article that introduces a new definition of the concept ageism. Attention is devoted to (i) the *prima facie* that the ageism concept is repeatedly underscored as a concept for older people exclusively and the “us-them” distinction; (ii) what the concept ageism means and different ways of defining ageism; and, (iii) different ways in which we desire to study ageism. The article finishes with a simple example in which ageism is compared to a box of chocolates. The example is used to illuminate how we can carry out anti-ageist work more effectively in society. That is, to help us understand and sometimes avoid the different and relative inferiorities that follow with different ages, in order to come to grips with the different and relative inferiorities that is often assumed to come with old age.

Keywords: ageism; concept; definition; critical; “us-them”

1. Introduction

In an important contribution to the study of ageism, Iversen, Larsen and Solem (ILS) call for a “radical conceptual discussion of ageism” (2009, p. 20). This article is a response to this request. In the article, attention is devoted to problematizing that the concept of ageism is often treated as a concept for older people exclusively, and that this creates an us–them distinction, a distinction that is also apparent in definitions of ageism. This article deals with different ways of defining and understanding ageism and attempts to highlight definitions that are not commonly used in research, but demonstrate useful theoretical potential. Furthermore, different ways of carrying out ageism research, related to different theories of science, is addressed in order to display the wide range of possibilities available to the scientific community. The expectation is that this will help facilitate more research on ageism, with a wide variety of approaches, in the future. As a result of the COST Action IS1402 network on ageism (COST, 2015), research about the phenomenon is now better established on the European research agenda and we will likely see an increased number of scientific publications during the next years.

When researchers write about ageism and when individuals in society talk about ageism, we can mean very different things (cf. Bytheway, 1995). My apprehension of the concept of ageism is

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as constitutive practices which are permeated with our experiences of the chronological, social, biological and psychological life course. We utilize age – or some other adjacent terminology that signifies age – in a myriad of different ways to organize our own and other people's lives and to make our social worlds intelligible. These constitutive practices may be prejudiced and stereotypical and can lead to both desired and undesired consequences for all of us, but the practices are ongoing irrespective of our efforts to dress them in such consequential terms. This understanding can be equated with a constitutive working definition of ageism. However, like many other statements made about ageism, it leaves some aspects unarticulated.

Within the scientific community, there is little consensus of the way in which ageism should be defined and conceptually understood (cf. Tornstam, 2010). Wilkinson and Ferraro (2002) suggest that the most accepted definition is prejudice and discrimination against older people, whereas Andersson (2008) suggests ageism is prejudice or stereotypes that emanates from the age of a human being and can lead to discrimination, and, Kite and Smith Wagner (2002), that ageist attitudes is best understood as a constellation of affective (feelings), cognitive (stereotypes) and behavioural components. Subsequently, the definition of ageism is often accompanied by the descriptors "prejudice", "stereotypes" and "discrimination", which thereby can be viewed as a traditional way of defining ageism. These three components were suggested in a recent review by ILS (2009) as well. However, there are also, as I will show, other non-traditional definitions and approaches that deserve to be taken into account. The unspecific meaning of ageism is useful and unfortunate at the same time. It is useful within everyday discourse where blurry labels and ideological justifications are needed (Krieger, 1999), which can be attached to many different experiences in life. It is unfortunate in situations where definitions of concepts that can be operationalized are needed in order to advance research.

There are two main strands of understanding ageism relating to moral and normative positions. On the one hand, some researchers seem to suggest that ageism should be understood as an issue concerning and affecting older people only (cf. Butler, 1969; Minichiello, Browne & Kendig, 2000; Calasanti, 2003), whereas other researchers (e.g. Bytheway & Johnson, 1990; Palmore, 1999) argue that we should understand ageism as an issue that concerns and affects people of all ages (Bytheway & Johnson, 1990; Andersson, 2008). The current article is no exception, and in it I follow the latter argument and will explain why.

The first researcher who coined and defined ageism was the gerontologist and psychiatrist Butler (1969). He defined ageism as:

the systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin colour and gender. Old people are categorized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old fashioned in morality and skills.../ ageism allows the younger generation to see older people as different from themselves; thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings.

Four interrelated concerns will be discussed under four different headings in this article. First, I summarize what ILS wrote in their review article and how the database search was carried out. Second, I show how ILS suggested another us–them definition despite not intending to. Third, additional ways of defining and understanding ageism are introduced. Finally, I discuss the ambitions in research to study ageism and the different ways in which we try to do this. This article advocates a wider range of ageism definitions than that offered by ILS.

The discussion is inspired by Howarth and his description of Laclau and Mouffes' radical discourse-theoretical reasoning which,

aim is [thus] to affirm the meaningfulness of all objects and practices; to show that all social meaning is contingent, contextual and relational; and to argue that any system of meaning relies upon a discursive exterior that partially constitutes it. (Howarth, 2000, pp. 112–113)

The text “any system of meaning” here implies that the prerequisites for research on ageism are explicitly discussed and critically examined. A narrative type of review is applied.

2. The review article by ILS

In a review article titled “A Conceptual Analysis of Ageism”, ILS identified 27 different definitions of ageism. Their main objective was “to make a conceptual clarification of ageism in order to be able to present a clear and limited definition of the concept” (2009, p. 5). ILS propose a new definition of ageism; meritoriously discuss the need for problematizing previous definitions of ageism; systemize and discuss different definitions of ageism and categorize definitions into twelve types; discuss four key dimensions along which definitions of ageism are categorized; reveal expectations that the results in the review article will lead to higher reliability and validity in future studies about ageism, and that it might become easier to test and retest ageism theories if other researchers use the knowledge put forth.

The conceptual analysis and reasoning by ILS started with a search in the PsycINFO and AgeLine databases. Based on their own database search using the criteria “concept of ageism” and “definitions of ageism”, ILS claim that virtually no research has been carried out. Despite the above-mentioned lack of research on the concept of ageism, ILS are able to point to a range of different definitions of ageism. Irrespective of the identified lack of knowledge, there are, in other words, a substantial number of scientific contributions out there. As a reader, I would have wished to gain more insight into the preceding research as well as a greater transparency as to how the process was carried out. As readers, we are left with a sense that a systematic review of the available literature was carried out. Even if other researchers had liked to repeat and validate the overview, it would not have been possible. The literature review that was carried out, however, was perhaps merely aimed at finding the incentive for studying the conceptual issues of ageism more thoroughly. This, of course, has consequences for what can be argued about the concept of ageism. One consequence is that the reader is not introduced to a range of definitions that is comprehensive enough, and fundamental theoretical contributions that could have assisted in understanding ageism as a concept are not laid out.

3. Another we–them definition

ILS found that the “us–them” distinction is applied in many definitions of ageism. As I read their article, their exemplary aim is to curb such tendencies. ILS state, for instance, that “Butler also uses the term ‘the elderly’ in his definition to distinguish elderly people from the rest of us” (ILS, 2009, p. 7), and go on to point out that the previous definition by Butler “does not solve the ‘us and them’ distinction” (2009, p. 8). It is, for ILS, high time to solve the us–them issue. Certainly, it is easy to agree with their ambitions and, like other researchers, I have grappled with this challenge. Surprisingly, considering their declared ambitions, however, they offer a new definition:

... negative or positive stereotypes, prejudice and/or discrimination against (or to the advantage of) elderly people on the basis of their chronological age or on the basis of a

perception of them as being “old” or “elderly”. Ageism can be implicit or explicit and can be expressed on a micro-, meso- or macro-level. (ILS, 2009, p. 15)

Does this definition solve the us–them distinction? We can remind ourselves of Bytheway and Johnson’s reasoning when they state that “this conceptualisation of ageism maintains a dangerous distinction between ‘society’ and ‘elderly people’ and unambiguously attaches some blame to the latter” (1990, p. 35).

ILS’ definition is still explicitly based on the constitution (or construction) of an out-group (Tajfel, 1978). Despite my best efforts, I cannot see why we repeatedly fail to break down the us–them distinction in alternative definitions of ageism. The undesired distinction is once again made evident by the use of words such as “elderly”, “their” and “them”. That is, the social group “the elderly” is reconstructed by ILS in the very definition of ageism itself, despite intentions not to. These words are not innocent, they clearly signal underlying and meaningful values. They show us how, in ILS view, we should describe, interpret and value ageism as a social phenomenon (Howarth, 2000). These types of words were emphasized by ILS themselves, and can be interpreted as signifiers of everyday ageism (Snellman, 2009; Snellman, Johansson & Kalman, 2012). Ageism signifiers can demarcate what target group is in focus and can blur our understanding of the ways in which otherness in society is unintentionally – and – easily accomplished. These signifiers, or following Nikander, “recurrent discursive device[s]” (2009, p. 869), still unfortunately “do the work of distinction” (Tilly, 1998, p. 72). Influential psychologists have recently acknowledged that “language plays an important role in the transmission of stereotypes” (Dovidio et al., 2010, p. 8) about social groups. Even though researchers are aware of the risks and consequences of recreating us–them distinctions, and clearly have ambitions to curb such tendencies, we are sometimes not sufficiently mindful of the seductive pitfall of words such as “elderly”. Why is that? Partially, one reason can be found in an unreflexive use of language. Given their ambitions to solve the us–them distinction, why did ILS not define ageism as:

negative or positive stereotypes, prejudice and/or discrimination against (or to the advantage of)/.../people on the basis of/.../chronological age or on the basis of a perception of/.../ [us] as being “old[er]” or “elderly”. Ageism can be implicit or explicit and can be expressed on a micro-, meso- or macro-level. (2009, p. 15, [ageism signifiers omitted])

Additionally, ILS focus on ageism in late adulthood (2009, p. 4) and I would not dispute that, as Andersson (2008) has shown, older people are those most affected by ageism. However, if the aim is a conceptual definition of ageism that also solves the us–them distinction, it should not identify “victims”. Everyone are potential victims, and perpetrators of ageist thinking and behaviour.

Thinking about and following through on one of the most important aspects of all that is to include ourselves in the target group upon which a conceptual definition is imposed, is often forgotten. Researchers are themselves products of the community in which they live and work (Schaie, 1993; cf. Wilkinson & Ferraro, 2002). Sometimes we showcase “benevolent ageism” (cf. Dovidio et al., 2010): the view that younger people cherish and value older people and are protected by the rest of society. Coupland and Coupland remark:

... there is a problem of setting boundaries to discourses of anti-ageism, so as to distinguish them from ageist ideologies themselves. Because clearly enough, within the anti-ageist tradition, there is a seductive if simplistic morality of protecting the weak and oppressed minority. (1993, p. 283)

This problem should be recognized in the ways in which we define and understand ageism.

However, there might be reasons for suggesting target group-specific definitions and for excluding ourselves, but communicating those reasons and reflecting upon the consequences our decisions will have is often forgotten. Sometimes arguments which delimit studies to late adulthood are provided, like ILS did, and that is considered self-explanatory and sufficient. Such a delimitation is, however, not justification enough when dealing with the conceptual definition of ageism. In displaying a conceptual definition of ageism that is limited to a certain target group, at least something should be said about other conceptual definitions outside the chosen limits. Thus, the character of the new ageism definition by ILS can be seen as a consequence of the study delimitation to late adulthood, an imaginary group of people (Krekula, 2009) for whom there is no definition either. Research can benefit from being informed by how a new ageism definition relates to other existing conceptualizations of ageism.

Defining and understanding ageism in its core essence as a concern for people of all ages – for us – does not prevent us from subsequently carrying out useful empirical studies limited to a certain group of people. Researchers can certainly continue to advance research *with* older people in order to find out what aspects of our lives are affected by ageism, but that cannot be done in an appropriate way by departing from a concept that is constructed *for* them. Well-meaning initiatives that depart from definitions of ageism in which for instance “elderly” people are the centre of attention, always, to some extent, end up in showcases of benevolent ageism, or compassionate ageism as it has also been termed (Binstock, 1983, 2010).

4. Additional and non-traditional ways of defining and understanding ageism

ILS delimited their investigation to articles in which either of the terms “concept of ageism” or “definition of ageism” is used explicitly within PsycINFO and AgeLine databases. This will have excluded other contributions (e.g. the term “concept of ageism” in the EBSCO database generates 203 peer-reviewed hits between the years 1958–2008). Many other, partly overlapping, definitions of ageism have been proposed (e.g. Comfort, 1977; Schonfield, 1982; Bodily, 1991; Laws, 1993, 1995; Schaie, 1993; Bytheway, 1995; Andrews, 1999; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001, 2006; Loewy, 2005; Macionis & Plummer, 2005; Nelson, 2005; Thompson, 2005, 2006; Angus & Reeve, 2006; Calasanti, Slevin & King, 2006; Macnicol, 2006; Bytheway et al., 2007; Ward & Bytheway, 2008; Gullette, 2011). Some of these definitions differ from definitions identified by ILS. Adding these definitions to those identified by ILS does, however, not make the list exhaustive. ILS state that the definitions they have selected “only contains [*sic*] theories that offer a definition of ageism” (2009, p. 19). However, there is no clear boundary between the additional references mentioned here and the so-called theory-based definitions identified by ILS. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the chosen definitions are not made explicit. The uncertainty might lie in what different researchers consider qualifies as theory, an issue I will return to.

I will now mention three definitions of ageism to allow comparison with the one provided by ILS. First, Laws has described ageism as “an ideology that ascribes certain attributes and abilities to people, young or old, simply because of their age” (1993, p. 673). Even though this is not a commonly used definition of ageism, it is available to the scientific community and important in describing ageism as an ideology. Second, Schaie has suggested a conceptual definition of ageism that is not listed by ILS. It makes no reference to any specific age group:

Ageism may be defined as a form of culturally based age bias that involves (a) restrictiveness of behaviour or opportunities based on age, age-based stereotyping, and distorted perception in the service of maintaining such stereotypes, positive or negative; (b) a cultural belief that age is a significant dimension by definition and that it defines a person's social position, psychological characteristics, or individual experience; or (c) the untested assumption that data from one age group generalize to others, or conversely that age is always relevant to variables studied by psychologists. (Schaie, 1993, p. 49)

Third, another conceptual kind of definition is noteworthy. Instead of being focused on a certain target group and from a discourse theoretical point of view, the following definition to some extent encapsulates the phenomenon itself. The definition below pinpoints that we are all to some extent involved in the social construction of ageism in ongoing constitutive processes.

everyday ageism does not exist as single events but as a complex of cumulative practices. Specific instances acquire meaning only in relation to the accumulating total of other experiences of everyday ageism. It involves ageist practices that infiltrate everyday life and are part of what is popularly seen as "normal". Analogous to everyday life, everyday ageism is heterogeneous in its manifestations but, at the same time, unified by the constant repetition of particular practices. (Bytheway et al., 2007, p. 94).

Note that none of these definitions (Laws, 1993; Schaie, 1993; Bytheway et al., 2007) identify a specific age group in their definitions. Traditional definitions of ageism, that is those that emphasize prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination, are to some extent disconnected from what the phenomenon encompasses and how it is understood in everyday life. If the aim is to understand the relationship between traditional ways of defining ageism and age-related experiences in everyday life, other theoretical concepts are needed, and that is why research should also look at other types of ageism definitions. Given that Laws' and Schaie's definitions were published in 1993 and Bytheway and colleagues' in 2007, we might have expected other types of definitions to be included by ILS in 2009. Specially the types of definitions that already solved the us–them distinction.

One aspect is that ILS (2009) were unsuccessful in identifying one important article that already problematized the definition of ageism some 20 years ago. Bytheway and Johnson (1990), acknowledging the definitional problems and specifically the we–them issue, pushed for a more rigorous definition of the term. They argued "that a radical critique which only conceives of ageism as a conflict between 'society' and 'elderly people' is inadequate" (Bytheway & Johnson, 1990, p. 27), and that "it may be more appropriate to think of ageism as being any unwarranted response to any age" (*ibid.*, p. 32). That is, not to conceive of ageism as a problem which only relates to older people. In focusing on institutional ageism, Bytheway and Johnson refer to political economists (Estes, Swann & Gerard, 1982; Phillipson, 1982; Walker, 1986) who have made important contributions to the field of gerontology. The common denominator in these contributions, according to Bytheway and Johnson, is that "national retirement policies have constructed a social group of people termed 'the elderly' who have systematically been denied certain rights and privileges ..." (1990, p. 29).

Thus, in addition to definitions that focus on later life and older people, there are alternatives that suggest that ageism concerns and affects people of all ages. Both approaches deserve to be acknowledged and considered when we try to make intelligible what ageism is and what it means. Especially, in explaining what makes us decide on one particular definition. Returning to the pioneer in the field, Robert Butler later acknowledged that when he coined and first defined ageism he, was just as concerned with older peoples negativism against young individuals as

the reverse (Butler, 1989). No researcher (to my knowledge) has referred to this article in their discussion of the concept of ageism. Here, Butler is clearly stating that in the late 1980s, he was thinking of a more elaborate concept and definition of ageism. It is important that we recognize the significance of these self-reflective concerns.

5. Addressing questions of how we study ageism

We have important things to learn from how ageism is understood and researched within different scientific practices. Previous research has attempted to measure ageism in ways that are reliable and valid, dealing with the psychometric properties of scales they have developed. Fraboni, Saltstone and Hughes (1990) have previously developed the Fraboni scale of ageism. Rupp, Vodanovich and Credé (2005) have validated the Fraboni scale and provide us with an overview of different instruments that have been used previously. Empirical studies have also analysed implicit components of ageism (e.g. Perdue & Gurtman, 1990; Greenwald, McGhee & Schwartz, 1998), and show that implicit (unaware) attitudes can be measured. Scales of explicit and implicit ageism exist and can be tested, retested and improved. ILS (2009) point towards four essential key dimensions of ageism: (i) the tripartite component (affective, cognitive, behavioural); (ii) the positive and negative; (iii) the conscious and unconscious; and, (iv) the typological macro, meso and micro levels. In other words, previous research has already to some extent operationalized the four dimensions of ageism as identified by ILS, which indicates that it is reasonable to use their definition. New scales that correspond to some dimension of ageism can be developed from here on – or existing ones modified – by using ILS definition of ageism.

Consider a recent example. Bal et al. (2011) do not use the new definition of ageism, but they do use their work to delimit their investigation to “the cognitive perceptual component of ageism” (2011, p. 687) and to positive and negative perceptions. The knowledge by ILS is successfully used for conceptually delimiting empirical studies to two dimensions of ageism. However, again us–them distinctions reappear in Bal et al.’s article, who write “if only a small percentage of *these older adults* remain in the workforce” [emphasis added] (2011, p. 687). What is it that prevents Bal et al. from explicitly describing themselves as those people who will possibly remain in the workforce, and what would be the case if ILS had followed through by addressing the us–them mystery that they identified? This may certainly seem trivial, but from a radical perspective, it is worth devoting some thought.

If we, on the other hand, wish to understand ageism as a broader social phenomenon in itself, other contributions can be used. Following Nikander, it can be said that the emerging “cultural and discursive turn” (2009, p. 864) also applies to ageism. All people are involved in this linguistic turn marked, for instance, by ageist signifiers (cf. Nussbaum et al., 2005; Nikander, 2009; Snellman, 2009; Snellman, Johansson & Kalman, 2012). Guided by this type of knowledge research can for instance investigate how language is used in order to discriminate and endorse ageist practices. In this case, using the definition of everyday ageism by Bytheway et al. (2007) is more useful compared to the one offered by ILS since it better corresponds to the events people experience in their everyday life. All aspects of ageism cannot be operationalized in a way that makes them measurable, and thereby testable, in the quantitative sense.

Naturally, psychometric properties of scales are important issues towards the positivistic (nomothetic) end of the science continuum (Føllesdal, Walløe & Elster, 2001). When applying these types of approaches, it makes perfect sense to strive for validity by operationalizing, test-

ing and retesting different theories and scales. Often this is accomplished by using individual attitudinal questionnaires. However, towards the other end of the science continuum, the ideographic (interpretivism) end (*ibid.*), ambitions to test and retest in order to achieve higher reliability and validity requires another approach. Considering conceptual definitions of ageism that describe it as an ideology (Laws, 1993; Krieger, 1999) or by its everyday practices (Ward & Bytheway, 2008), it can be concluded that these kind of conceptual definitions are not easily operationalized, tested and retested by using individual attitudinal questionnaires. Thus, the examination of ageist practices requires different kind of evidence. The assessment of ageist practices has for instance been carried out by Snellman et al. (2012). This study used different types of birthday cards and encouraged people in focus groups to freely discuss attitudes towards ageing. In the RoAD project (Research on Age Discrimination), one way of collecting people's accounts of discrimination, exclusion and rejection was by using diaries. In this encompassing study, people shared their experiences of how age discrimination featured in their everyday life. Thus, in the ideographic sense, other methods for collecting ageism data are required. Additionally, an ideographic approach to researching ageism and attaining higher reliability and validity is that the research process is systematically documented, transparent and delivered to the reader. Attention to these criteria assures repetition and validation of empirical findings.

Howarth's (2000) distinction between empirical and constitutive theories is useful here. Without explicitly identifying which of the ageism definitions listed by ILS are empirical and which are not, I would suggest that ILS hand-picked empirical elements, and that what ILS have developed is a new, refined empirical definition. They have not considered constitutive types of definitions, or the constitutive elements, in a sufficient way, some of which I have put forth earlier in this article. I argue that the definitions listed by ILS to some extent contains important constitutive elements, but that the traditional way of defining ageism unintentionally became predominant in the same way as it did by reconstructing the us–them distinction. Our decisions, in researching ageism, are dependent on what we wish to accomplish with the knowledge we produce. With empirical types of definitions – or theories – researchers attempt to establish “causal explanations of phenomena by establishing the necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of an event or process” (Howarth, 2000, p. 130), i.e. if we want to know that ageism occurred and why, we first attempt to measure it and then we analyse what caused it to take place or what consequences follow from it. This is an example of deterministic approach to studying ageism.

Constitutive theory, or, in this case, constitutive definitions, are “intimately connected to the social reality it seeks to describe and interpret and cannot be falsified by the accounts of reality it facilitates” (Howarth, 2000, p. 130). A constitutive definition addresses the two-way relation between structure and agency. As we make the smallest or biggest decisions in research and in life (e.g. to propose a definition of ageism targeted for older people, or, not to partake in an activity, despite being fully able, because I'm too old or too young), structural influences have affected that decision, and, simultaneously the structure is enforced. Thus, our actions are *constituted* (influenced) by structural circumstances and *constitute* (influence) structure. In ageism research this has been described as the “dialectical confluence of ageism” (Wilkinson & Ferraro, 2002, p. 353). Compare this constitutive approach to the epistemological view that structure *determines* our actions. Relating to the issue of agency Tornstam (2006) has suggested a typology of attitudes and shown that individuals can be prejudiced discriminators (consistently negative), prejudiced non-discriminators (pitying positive), non-prejudiced discriminators (no fuzz group)

and non-prejudiced non-discriminators (consistently positive). That is, even if the structure of society suggests that people are predisposed to act in specific ways, we do not necessarily do so.

According to Howarth (2000), the usefulness of a constitutive type of definition is, however, ultimately decided by the research society. The question of how useful or useless a constitutive type of definition is will be decided by its capacity to generate reasonable explanations of the social phenomenon ageism itself. Subsequently, this reveals that researchers may have different views of whether something empirical or constitutive qualifies as theory, which, in turn, may influence us in what kind of ageism definitions we introduce and chose to use.

6. Discussion

If we do not view and define the concept of ageism – in its core essence – as a universal phenomenon that concerns people of all ages and in many different ways, past research as reviewed by ILS, leaves us with a reductionist understanding of ageism. This is based on particularistic processes that are normatively aimed at interventions for older people, and thus, excludes research on and interventions for other age groups affected by ageism and blocks awareness of life-course ageism. However, that is not to say that the concept of ageism cannot, or should not, be used for such purposes. Older people are certainly as important a group of people as any other group that embodies age, perhaps even more so (Andersson, 2008).

The new empirical definition of ageism by ILS in itself is a small step forward in understanding ageism as a general concept – ageism in its core essence. It does, however, not address the constitutive types of ageism definitions. I have discussed in this article: (i) unsystematic research processes and their opaqueness; (ii) the repetitive and superfluous practice of supporting the us–them distinction in defining ageism, despite the stated aim of not doing so; (iii) additional conceptual and constitutive ways of defining and understanding ageism; and (iv) the different ways in which researchers desire to study ageism.

Based on these four issues, I conclude that we need constitutive theoretical contributions in order to understand ageism as a concept in a broad sense. The ageism research field, if approached too narrowly, will not develop sufficiently on its own merits alone. That is, a contemporary theoretical field (Hurd Clarke, Griffin & Maliha, 2009) of research cannot simply guide itself. The current state is that if the research field of ageism is approached too narrowly, which I have suggested is the case, it might appear to be theoretically underdeveloped, which is by no means the case. The field is theoretically developed in a sufficient way if we study delimited aspects (dimensions) of ageism, but is not sufficiently developed to comprehend the concept itself. This present article as well as the article written by ILS are two contributions to the latter, which hopefully will be developed from here on.

One challenge is that we often lack a terminology for describing and understanding ageist events. The Swedish pioneer within the field, Andersson (2008), points out that a lack of terminology might lead to situations in which problems are not identified. However, the term ageism itself, regardless of how it is defined, is perhaps not sufficient to account for all experiences people have, even though it is a start. Perhaps ageism on its own is too simple, and perhaps we should be content with treating it as a justifying ideology (Krieger, 1999) when we carry out empirical research and try to improve knowledge and terminology based on that.

In that process, we should also – juxtaposed to identifying more accurate definitions of ageism – acknowledge the opportunities that follow from an epistemological openness towards ageism.

There will always be elements within the discursive exterior that researchers will not be able to account for in succinct definitions of the concept (cf. Howarth, 2000). For the time being, we can keep Tillys' reasoning in his book *Durable Inequality* in mind. He writes:

Concepts are tools. Their values depend on whether they do the job at hand. Just as a crystal shovel looks lovely but remains useless for digging coal, elaborate concepts sometimes glitter alluringly but break down when put to work. (1998, p. 73)

What then will get the work done and whom do we think the ageism concept should serve? Imagine that you are working in a retirement home for older people, dealing with many work tasks and having difficulties in managing all of them. At Christmas time, you are entrusted with distributing a big box of chocolates to the residents, but cannot manage this single-handed. You notice that an eight-year-old relative of one of the residents is sitting on a chair in a corner, and appears to be extremely bored. You ask this person to help you distribute the chocolates. How do you get the work done? By saying that the chocolates are for the older people exclusively or by saying that the child can have two pieces when finished? The answer to that question should be self-evident, and that is why ageism is like a box of chocolates we should all try to share. Bytheway and Johnson write: "If, however, as proposed, we define the oppression of those currently over the appointed age as just one aspect of an ageism which relates to age throughout life, than there is much more that the 'non-old' can do" (1990, p. 37). Why is this apparently self-evident observation so hard to understand and execute? Why are researchers, typically casting themselves as the 'non-old', so resistant to the idea that their approach to studying age might exacerbate the problems generated by ageism?

We need to learn and think about the age-related pros and cons that come with different ages in order to become more aware and empowered to act against the relative inferiority that is so often assumed to come with advanced age. We will ourselves all too soon realize that we are part of a group labelled older people, that is that we have become old, and can expect to face other types of ageist actions. We may, however, not be able to identify ageist actions in old age if we have not learned to identify them during the course of our own lives. If we are aware of the fact that age organizes life during our whole life course, we can more easily avoid becoming the prejudiced advocates of advanced age inferiority. All welfare-concerned work begins with a recognition of our own potential vulnerability. Calasanti and King argue that "to leave age relations [e.g. issues of us and them] unexplored reinforces the inequality that subordinates the old, an inequality that we unwittingly reproduce for ourselves" (2005, p. 21). Perhaps we can be motivated by previous research, which shows that people below the age of 50 with lower levels of ageist attitudes towards old age and ageing live an average of 7.5 years longer compared to those with high levels of ageist attitudes (Levy et al., 2002). The above arguments are reasons to why the answer to the question "whose ageism?" in the title of this article should be everyone's ageism.

We all have a responsibility to acknowledge our reflections and definitions on the concept of ageism. When carrying out ageism research and in justifying our work, we should ask in what ways different conceptual understandings of ageism might guide our analysis and what might be the consequences of our chosen methods for the understanding of ageism itself? We do not need, however, to agree on which definition of ageism is the correct one, and, it is also unlikely that there is one true definition out there. Instead, we do need to delimit our investigation and clarify what aspects of ageism we are studying and reflect upon the consequences our choices might have.

I enthusiastically hope and encourage that ILS – as well as other scholars interested in the study of ageism – will continue this debate.

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