



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 764632.



27/4/2020

Where are the instructions for young people? Hidden ageism in COVID-19 responses

By: Katri Keskinen

The reigning COVID-19 pandemic has also resulted in an outbreak of publicly visible ageism. Many individuals and organisations have rightfully taken a stance against ageist practices towards older persons in health care decisions and government-issued policies. However, as the focus is directed towards the most visible forms of ageism, we may become blind to the more subtle ways of everyday ageism that we might find ourselves even enforcing.

In the beginning of April, Finnish institute for health and welfare posted information to every household in Finland about the current situation, including guidelines to people aged 70 and over. Many would protest the use of 70 years as cut-off and lumping everyone aged 70 and over into a homogeneous group. Instead, the question I was asked at home was: *"Isn't this ageist? Why do the people 70 and over get the information what to do and we don't? Where are the instructions for people in their twenties?"*

The vulnerable old

Why is it that we as a society have taken a paternalistic attitude only towards our elders during this pandemic? Age has long been an indication of vulnerability. It is frequently used in health care decisions, legislations and policies as well as ethical guidelines to underline the vulnerability of a person who might not have all the necessary competences and traits. Traditionally, we perceive the relationship between vulnerability and ageing as a bell curve.

In the beginning phases of our lives we are vulnerable and dependent on our parents and legal guardians, and as we age and go through education we learn and develop the necessary competences to manage through life. Towards the end of our lifeline, we are more likely to develop comorbidities and illnesses affecting our memory that may make us dependent again, either on other people or medication. The homogeneous and simplified assumption is that this will happen to all of us, however, there are large age differences globally as to who is considered old and vulnerable. Even within Europe, the age at which we are considered vulnerable to coronavirus varies between 60 and 75 years.

The protective measures towards our vulnerable populations have sparked a number of initiatives from individuals, organisations and governments to help the vulnerable groups navigate through this difficult time. These include, for instance, mandated shopping hours for risk groups, home deliveries and calling up people to ask how they are doing while isolating from the rest of the social world. Many of these services (but not all), have, however, been directed towards people only because of their age. People with comorbidities, chronic illnesses, or other conditions that make them vulnerable may not be eligible for these services and initiatives, because they are simply not old enough.

Where are the instructions for younger people?

We take action to highlight the wrongdoing in setting up age-specific measures that paint a homogenous and false picture of our older population. Yet, we do not seem to mind that these age-specific measures create another homogenous group even more extensive than those 70 and over, namely those 69 and under. As we urge our older population to self-isolate and 'cocoon' at home, we expect the younger generations to do the same, without sending them targeted, age-specific leaflets and broadcasting it on national TV. It is then that we assume that everyone under the age of 69, including children and youth who are often classified as vulnerable because of developing competences, understands and follows recommendations that are not directly imposed to them. It is then that we strip them away from their right to be considered vulnerable.

The corona outbreak has been described as *novel*, *unprecedented* and *times as never experienced before*, as many of the Western countries face their first pandemic since the Spanish flu almost a century ago. That said, the situation is new for most, if not all of us. The younger generations are often associated with the (potentially ageist) assumption that

they are tech-savvy and able to find information online within a matter of seconds. However, since the spread of the pandemic, the internet has expanded with information and many of us are already experiencing levels of information overload. Debates on respirator-use and restrictions continue developing day-to-day and it is becoming increasingly difficult to stay updated on current affairs. It may be high time to admit that even the young people *don't know what to do*.

Does positive ageism make us look the other way?

For decades discussions around ageism have focused on the group they see it affects the most, the older generations. Ageism towards younger generations is often considered less serious, as younger people will always “*grow out of it*” and stop being “*too young*”. We say, “*age is just a number*” and stand against discriminatory policies and statements, because we perceive them as ageist and unjust. But we don't question the policies that enforce a positive image of a particular age group, such as picturing young people as tech-savvy, or have a positive impact, such as getting groceries and food delivered to your doorstep. As I explained that the additional information posted for those 70 and over were in fact, orders to distance themselves from the social world, the reaction was no longer envy that they got more information. It was no longer ageist towards people in their twenties, but only those in their 70s and over whose freedom and agency were restricted based on their age.

As governments globally start to dismantle their restrictive measures and allow their citizens to roam more freely again, those in the risk groups might face even more targeted restrictive measures. The European Commission has recommended in their [roadmap](#) to lifting coronavirus containment measures that among first steps the “general measures should progressively be replaced by targeted ones.” When moving from general to targeted policies, decision-makers worldwide should consider if the measures in fact, place those they identify as vulnerable into more vulnerable and dependent positions than before. The policies using chronological age as a marker of vulnerability can not only reinforce false and ageist images of old age but also neglect those at risk because of their health situation or socioeconomic status, rather than their age. Age should not determine who is too young to be considered vulnerable. That too, is #CovidAgeism.

Katri Keskinen is a doctoral researcher at Tampere University and a member of Gerontology Research Center, Finland. Her work within EuroAgeism focuses on the dynamics of ageism and individual agency in labour market decisions, career and retirement trajectories after redundancy and the role of institutional ageism. More information about her work can be found here: <https://euroageism.eu/staff/keskinen-katri/>

Disclaimer: This article reflects only the author's/authors' view. The Research Executive Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.