



NCPOP NATIONAL CENTRE FOR THE PROTECTION OF OLDER PEOPLE (NCPOP)

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National Centre for the Protection of Older People

Seminar Programme 2010

Public Perceptions of Older People and Ageing

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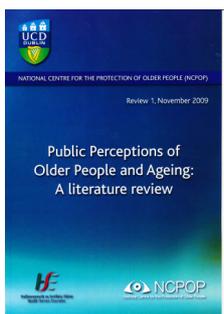


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Introduction

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- Background
 - Rationale for the study
- Methods
- Findings
 - Perceptions and Stereotypes
 - Factors that influence perceptions of older people
 - Implications for older people and society



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Background and Rationale

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- Perceptions of older people are thought to influence ageist behaviour, discrimination and mistreatment
- Age Discrimination (Eurobarometer 2008)
- Greater understanding and insight into the nature of perceptions of older people will help to plan interventions and target resources to promote positive attitudes and to tackle ageism
- Ageing of the Population
- Elder Mistreatment, Abuse and Neglect



"negative attitudes towards, and perceptions of, ageing and older people can lead to a tolerance and acceptance of abuse...Ageism and ageist attitudes are not the sole factors contributing to elder abuse but can give rise to a culture which creates a fertile environment in which elder abuse can develop, leading to age discrimination, and devaluing and disempowering older people." (HSE 2009 p. 21)

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Literature Review

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- **Aim**
To bring together the existing knowledge base on public perceptions of older people and ageing.
- **Objectives**
 - To establish what is currently known about public perceptions of older people and ageing
 - To identify what factors influence people's perceptions of older people and ageing
 - To explore the consequences of these perceptions on older people and on society

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Search Strategy

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- **Database Search**
- **Journal Hand Search**
- **Internet Search**
- **Search words**

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Findings

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1. Perceptions and stereotypes of older people
2. Factors that influence people's perceptions of older people
3. Implications of these perceptions on older people and on society

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Perceptions and Stereotypes of Older People

- Mixed perceptions of older people and ageing
 - Perceptions of older people vary widely
 - Perceptions can be multi-dimensional or conditional
 - Some evidence of positive perceptions
 - Negative perceptions tend to predominate
- Myths and stereotypes of ageing

Ill-health and Decline

- Frail, weak, fragile
 - Sick
 - Physically impaired
 - Eyesight and hearing problems
 - Dependent
 - Associated with death
- e.g. When asked what happens to people as they age 58% of children said they 'die' and 36% said they get 'weak and sick' (Hall & Batey 2008)

Declining Physical Appearance

- Wrinkles
- Balding, thinning or greying hair
- Traits associated with unattractiveness
- Lacking care in appearance

Sexuality

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- Asexual
- Sexless
- Lacking sexual desire, interest, ability and activity

e.g. 69% of young people considered elderly women to be 'sexually inactive' (Arnold-Cathalifaud et al. 2008)

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Mental Decline

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- Memory loss
- Confusion
- Intellectual incompetence
- Inefficiency

- Wisdom

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Personality and Disposition

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- Irritable
- Pessimistic
- Difficult
- Inflexible or Intolerant
- Conservative

e.g. 56% of an Irish sample (65% of 18-24 year olds) agreed that older people are 'too set in their ways and ideas' (ARK survey - Evason et al. 2004)

- Kind
- Sincere
- Warm
- Dependable

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Lonely and Isolated

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- Sadness
- Loneliness
- Isolation
- Depression
- Linked to stereotypes of ill-health and mental decline
- Affluence



Disrespected and Undervalued

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- Lower status than other groups in society
- Passive citizens
- Not socially valued

e.g. In Ireland 86% of participants felt that society does not recognise the contribution that many older people are still able to make (ARK survey - Evason *et al.* 2004)



Factors that influence perceptions of older people

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- **Gender**
 - of the perceiver
 - of the older person

‘Double Standard of Ageing’
e.g. Women considered to be elderly at 40-49 years, men considered to be elderly at 70-79 years (Musaiger & D'Souza 2009)
- **Age of the perceiver**
 - Attitudes change and develop with age



Factors that influence perceptions of older people

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- **Knowledge and understanding**
 - Poor knowledge and understanding of ageing is common
 - Misconceptions often reflect negative age stereotypes
 - Education is considered one of the best methods of countering ageism although the evidence is inconclusive
 - Success of educational interventions in altering attitudes may depend on content, format, and age
- **Level of contact with older people**
 - Opportunities for interaction across age groups and engagement with healthy older people can challenge stereotypes and promote positive attitudes

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Factors that influence perceptions of older people

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- **Societal and cultural influences**
 - Ageism is pan-cultural
 - Perceptions of older people do vary across cultures
 - Individualistic versus Collectivist cultures
- **Modernisation and industrialisation**
 - Ageist attitudes are becoming more prevalent
 - Changing social roles
 - Technological advances
 - Globalisation
 - Ageing demographics
- **The media**

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- **Ageist Behaviours**
 - Positive and negative ageist behaviours
 - 46% of people over 50 years in Ireland have experienced some form of ageism, 40% of the incidences were reported to have occurred 'more than once' (Stokes *et al.* 2003)
 - Age discrimination can occur at individual, institutional or societal level
- **Ageism in the Workplace**
 - Attitudes towards older people in the workplace are mixed
 - Reliable, experienced, loyal, dependable
 - Increasingly under-represented in the workforce
 - Inefficient, resistant to change, slow to adapt to new technology
 - Implications for employment practices and retirement policies

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■ Ageism in healthcare system

- Access to services – upper age limits
e.g. women over 65 are not entitled to free breast cancer screening
- Diagnosis and Treatment
e.g. inadequate assessment, less likely to get referral to specialist services
- Attitudes of health and social care students and staff have implications for the provision of high quality services to older people
- 'bed blockers'
- Consultations with family members rather than older person
- Gerontological work is often perceived as unchallenging and unrewarding
- Negative attitudes may be attributed to lack of education and training, and confidence dealing with older people

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Implications of Perceptions on Older People and Society

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■ Social Exclusion of Older People

- Older people are often portrayed as a burden on society
- Exclusion from employment, politics, community and recreational activities
- English Longitudinal Study on Ageing (Barnes *et al.* 2006)
Almost one third of people over 50 suffered exclusion on at least one dimension (social relationships, cultural and leisure activities, civic activities, access to basic services, neighbourhood exclusion, financial products, material goods).
Poor health, being over 80, living alone, having no children, low income increase risk of exclusion

▶ Elder Abuse and Neglect

- Limited evidence linking ageist attitudes to elder abuse and neglect
- Qualitative research with victims of elder abuse in New Zealand elicited strong emotions about ageism and lack of respect experienced (Peri *et al.* 2008)
- Tolerance and acceptance of abuse

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Countering Ageist Attitudes in Ireland

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- Consultation on National Positive Ageing Strategy (2009)

- 'Say no to Ageism Week'



- Inclusion of age in equality legislation
Equal Status Acts 2000, 2004

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Conclusions and Recommendations

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- Diverse, complex, multi-dimensional perceptions of older people
- Further research needed on the relative importance of age, gender, knowledge and culture in the development of perceptions and attitudes
- Targeted Positive Ageing Campaigns and Education Programmes

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Seminar Series 2010
Seminar 3, 27th April 2010
Speakers: Ms. Imogen Lyons

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