UNDERSTANDING AND CHALLENGING AGEISM

Ageism is a term that was coined in 1969 by Robert Neil Butler as a way to describe bias against older people; the term was patterned on definitions of sexism and racism. Ageism is most commonly understood to describe bias and discrimination against older people but it can also include bias against young people or even specific age groups like millennials. Ageism can take many forms including discrimination (in employment, housing, healthcare, etc.), violence, exclusion, media portrayals, microaggressions, stereotyping, belittling and more. It is important that students understand and reflect on examples of ageism in their lives and in society in general because, like all forms of bias, it contributes to a culture of intolerance and injustice in society.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to understand what ageism is and the many ways it manifests, reflect on specific examples and categorize them and consider ways they can be allies and take actions to confront and challenge ageism.

See these additional ADL resources: Lesson Plans "Slurs, Offensive Jokes and How to Respond," "How Natural Disasters Discriminate," "Hair, Identity and Bias," "What is Weight Bias?" and "Stereotypes of Girls and Women in the Media."

Grade Level: grades 6–12

Time: 45–60 minutes

Common Core Anchor Standards: Reading, Speaking and Listening, Language

Learning Objectives:

- Students will understand what ageism is and will be able to identify and categorize specific examples of ageism.

- Students will learn about the different ways in which ageism is manifested on interpersonal, institutional and internalized levels.

- Students will identify ways they can be allies and actions they can take to challenge ageism.

Material:

- Categories of Ageism Worksheet (one copy for each student)

- "You're How Old? We'll Be in Touch" (*The New York Times,* September 3, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/09/04/opinion/sunday/youre-how-old-well-be-in-touch.html, one copy for each student)

Compelling Question: Who does ageism impact and why is it harmful?

Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL's "Glossary of Education Terms.")

- attitudes
- diminished
- discrimination
- diversity
- incompetent

- invigorated
- liability
- millennial
- misperception
- motivation

- pension
- promotion
- retirement
- scrutiny
- self-sufficient

- stereotype
- structural
- work ethic

WHAT IS AGEISM?

1. Ask students: *Does anyone know what ageism is?* Using what they know of the word "age" and the suffix "ism," elicit a definition of **ageism** as follows:

   Prejudice and/or discrimination against people because of their real or perceived age.

2. Ask students: *Do you think ageism relates to a certain age group of people? If so, which age group?* Explain that although ageism is often assumed to focus on bias directed at older people, members of other groups, such as teens, are also targets of prejudice and/or discrimination based on their age. Ask if students can provide a quick example.

TURN AND TALK: EXAMPLES AND CATEGORIES OF AGEISM

1. Instruct students to turn to a person sitting next to them and respond to this question: *What are some examples of ageism that you have seen, heard about, experienced or witnessed?* Have students in their pairs take notes and record their combined responses on a piece of paper. Remind them not to use names of people they know or specific situations that could identify individual people.

2. Bring the students back together and have them share aloud the examples on their lists and record them on the board/smart board. If something is shared more than once, put a check mark next to the item. Be as exhaustive as possible. The list might look something like this:

   - Not getting a job because a person is too old or too young
   - Assuming old people don't know anything about technology
   - Not letting me and my friends in a store or restaurant because we're teenagers
   - Stereotypes that teens spend all their time on their smartphones and social media
   - Not paying a young person at least minimum wage
   - Stereotypes about millennials that they are lazy, unpredictable and unreliable
   - Making jokes about older people
   - Not caring what young people say, dismissing their voice
   - When someone forgets something, saying they are having a "senior moment"

- The lack of older people in the media, specifically movies and TV shows

- People feeling they have to dye their hair or have plastic surgery so they don't look old

3. After generating the list, explain to students that now they are going to place all of these examples into certain categories. The categories are ones that most forms of bias and discrimination fit into: **interpersonal, institutional** and **internalized**.

4. Ask students if they know what these words mean. Take a few minutes to hear their responses and then share the following explanations below. To help with the explanation, share (or ask for) examples of each, but the examples you provide should be ones that do not involve age bias.

   Interpersonal: The idea that one identity/societal group is better than others gives permission for people to disrespect or mistreat individuals (jokes, slurs, stereotypes, threats, physical assaults, bullying). *Example: Someone makes a racist joke at a party.*

   Institutional: The idea that one group is better than another gets rooted in the institutions—the laws, legal system, police, education/schools, hiring, housing, media images, political power—so that discriminatory or unequal practices are condoned and implemented. *Example: Women earn less than men for doing a similar job.*

   Internalized: The idea that one group is better than others gets internalized so that people start to believe the stereotypes, prejudice and negative messages about themselves (that they are weak, not smart or competent). *Example: A girl who is overweight doesn't try out for the basketball team because she thinks she won't be good.*

5. Distribute a copy of the [Categories of Ageism Worksheet](#) to each student. Explain to students that they are going to work in pairs (same pairs as before) and using all of the examples on the board (from #2), place them in categories based on where they think each example should go. If they think that an example falls into more than one category, they can note that on the sheet. Model an example if necessary and encourage students to add other examples if time permits. Give students 5–7 minutes for this task.

   NOTE: You can do this exercise with the whole class, going through the list from #2 and having students call out into which categories they think they should go.

6. Reconvene the class and have pairs share aloud what they came up with, if the class didn't do the exercise together. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:

   - What did you notice as you were doing this activity?

   - Did we all put the same examples in the same categories? Why or why not?

   - Did you and your partner agree or disagree?

   - Do you think some of these examples are more serious than others? Explain.

   - Do you think some of these examples are more easily addressed than others?

   - How do the items relate to each other?

   - Did any of the examples fit into more than one category? How so?

INFORMATION SHARING

1. Explain to students that now they are going to talk about some examples of ageism based on research and data. Share the following information by first asking the question posed, then soliciting responses and finally providing the information under the question.

   Employment Question: *How common do you think workplace age discrimination is?*

   The majority of older workers believe age discrimination occurs in the workplace. Approximately two-thirds (64%) of older workers ages 45–74 say they have seen or experienced age discrimination at work. Of those, 92% say it is somewhat or very common. In addition, older workers ages 60–74 say they have not been hired due to their age (25% for workers ages 60-74 compared to 17% for workers ages 45-59).

   Source: *Staying Ahead of the Curve 2013: AARP Multicultural Work and Career Study Perceptions of Age Discrimination in the Workplace – Ages 45-74* (Washington: AARP, 2014)

   Healthcare Question: *Are there more doctors for children (pediatricians) or for older people (geriatricians)?*

   National research conducted in 2008, 2010 and 2012 found that one out of five adults age 50 or older reported experiencing discrimination in healthcare settings and one in 17 experiences it frequently. Despite the growing number of seniors in this country, there doesn't seem to be much interest in or respect for geriatrics. There are about 7,000 geriatricians in the U.S. compared with 91,915 pediatric-focused physicians.

   Source: Alexander Pecci, "1 in 5 Adults Report Age Discrimination in Healthcare Settings" (Healthcare Leaders Media, 2015)

   Media Question: *How do you think ageism plays out in Hollywood?*

   According to a recent study, among the 25 feature films nominated for the Best Picture Oscar during the past three years, less than 12% of characters who were named or had speaking roles were aged 60 or older, The underrepresentation of characters older than 59 among the Best Picture nominated films echoes the findings of an earlier study from University of Southern California, which reported that in 2015, 11% of characters in the 100 highest-grossing films of the year were over the age of 59. In addition, seniors depicted in film are often the targets of stereotypical jokes or are depicted as suffering from various ailments. Of the 14 films that included a senior as a lead or supporting character, six were found to have ageist comments.

   Source: Graham Winfrey, "Oscar-Nominated Films Reflect Hollywood Ageism, New Study Reveals" (New York: IndieWire, 2017)

2. After going through this process, engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:

   - What is your reaction to the information you heard?

   - What was surprising?

   - What wasn't surprising?

   - Do you think progress has been made around age bias and discrimination?

   - What do you think still needs improvement?

   - What other questions do you have?

NOTE: Intersectionality is defined as a way of looking at the overlap and intersections of people's social group identities (e.g. race, gender, class, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, etc.) and addresses the related and intersecting systems of bias, discrimination and oppression. This is

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something to keep in mind and address with students during the course of the lesson. Bias and discrimination may manifest differently for older (or younger) people based on other aspects of their identity. For example, teenage boys of color walking around a store may be seen differently than white teenage girls, so race and gender play a role. Or, poor elderly people may face different obstacles in the health care system than elderly people who are middle class.

READING ACTIVITY

1. Have students silently read the article "You're How Old? We'll Be in Touch." Give them 10 minutes to complete the reading.

2. Engage students in a discussing by asking the following questions:

   • What is the writer's point of view and how do you know?

   • What did you learn that you didn't know before?

   • What stood out for you while reading the article?

   • Why are more people over age 65 working compared to prior years?

   • What are some of the stereotypes she cites in the article about older workers and how does she dispel them?

   • Are older workers the only ones who experience age bias and how do you know?

   • What are the positive aspects of workplace diversity (age) and what are the downsides of age segregation in the workplace?

   • What are examples of institutional, interpersonal and internalized age bias in the article?

   • What do you think should be done about age bias in the workplace?

ALLY, ADVOCATE, ACTIVIST ACTIVITY

1. Ask students to define the words: **ally, advocate** and **activist** and share the following definitions, asking students to come up with an example for each. Explain that there is overlap between the three terms; sometimes a person or group is acting as an ally and an advocate at the same time.

   Ally: Someone who speaks out on behalf of someone else or takes actions that are supportive of someone else. *Example: Hearing someone make an ageist joke and reaching out to that person and telling them you thought it was wrong.*

   Advocate: Someone who publicly supports or recommends a particular cause or policy. *Example: Writing a letter to a local newspaper about how small businesses should not prohibit teenagers in their stores.*

   Activist: Someone who gets involved in activities that are meant to achieve political or social change; this also includes being a member of an organization which is working on change. *Example: Starting a local group that works to address ageism in employment.*

2. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking:

   • What do the three words (ally, advocate, activist) have in common?

   • Why do people engage in ally, advocacy and activist behavior?

   • What impact does acting as an ally, advocate and/or activist have on the people engaging in it?

- What message does it send to others?

3. Explain to students that now they are going to think together about what can be done about ageism by engaging in role playing around being an ally, advocate or activist. Divide students into seven small groups based on these individuals or constituency groups:

   - Individual citizen

   - School administrator

   - Legislator (senator, congressperson, city council)

   - Community-based organization

   - Small business owner

   - Faith based organization

   - News reporter

   Playing the role of the group/person assigned to them, have students brainstorm what they can do about incidents of ageism from the perspective of their assigned role. For example, if they are in the small business group, one of their ideas may be to study age discrimination in small businesses in your town and provide a report with your findings. Ask the groups to come up with 3–5 ideas that will be shared later with the rest of the class. Give students 10 minutes to complete this task.

   NOTE: If students suggest confronting ageist language, use ADL's Challenging Biased Language for strategies and suggestions.

4. Have each small group share their ideas with the whole class.

5. Based on what ideas they generate, consider turning those ideas into projects that a group of students or the whole class takes on as a class or school-wide project.

CLOSING

Do a go-round and have each student share something new they learned or understood about age bias.

ADDITIONAL READING

- "3 Tips On Combating Ageism From An Anti-Ageism Activist" (*The Huffington Post,* March 8, 2015)

- Age Discrimination Fact Sheet (AARP)

- "Age equality: five examples of discrimination against young workers" (Personnel Today, October 19, 2015)

- "Millennials: The new victims of age discrimination?" (Benefits/Pro, September 30, 2015)

- "Too Much Experience To Be Hired? Some Older Americans Face Age Bias" (NPR, March 24, 2017)

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Standard 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Language
Standard 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
Standard 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts to make effective choices for meaning or style and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

CATEGORIES FOR AGEISM WORKSHEET

Directions: Using the explanations of the following categories, record examples in categories based on where they think each example belongs.

Interpersonal: The idea that one identity/societal group is better than others gives permission for people to disrespect or mistreat individuals in the other group (jokes, slurs, stereotypes, threats, physical assaults, bullying).

Institutional: The idea that one group is better than another gets rooted in the institutions—the laws, legal system, police, education/schools, hiring, housing, media images, political power—so that they implement discriminatory or unequal practices.

Internalized: The idea that one group is better than the other gets internalized so that people starts to believe the stereotypes, prejudice and negative messages about themselves (that they are weak, not smart or competent).

Interpersonal	Institutional	Internalized