Article

Combating Ageism through Adult Education and Learning

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Abstract: The demographic data and projections show that the world is ageing at a high pace and that this has transversal consequences to society. The available data on ageism show that it constitutes the most prevalent form of discrimination in Europe. Whilst this seems logical because ageism, potentially, affects everybody (unlike sexism or racism), public debates on the phenomenon are rare. The awareness of people of its importance is minimal, the resources and investigation devoted to understanding it are relatively small and the initiatives towards combating ageism are not enough. There is a mismatch between the dimension of the phenomenon and the attention that we have given it. Ageism has various negative consequences for the older adults themselves; for the institutions at large (but especially for the working world institutions) and for countries. In a fast-ageing world that will witness structural changes in age groups, ageism is a complex phenomenon that needs to be counteracted. So far, in Europe, combating ageism through law and public policy seems to have produced poor results. However, the literature shows that adult education and learning can provide very effective means to improve the mutual knowledge between generations, combat myths and prejudice and deconstruct age-based stereotypes.

Keywords: ageism; stereotypes; discrimination; workplace ageism; adult education; learning

1. Introduction

It is widely recognised that the ageing of the population is accelerating worldwide. The data from the World Population Prospects (United Nations 2019) show that in 2018, for the first time in history, older adults aged 65 or more outnumbered children under five years of age. The number of persons aged 80 years or over is projected to triple in 2050 and, by the same date, one in six people in the world will be over age 65. The ageing of the population will be especially intense in Europe. According to the European Union (2019a), by 2050, half of the EU Member States are projected to have an old-age dependency ratio above 50.0% (less than two persons of working age for every person aged 65 years or more), but this will peak at 65.8% in our home country—Portugal. The ageing of the population will be particularly felt in the working world. In Europe, by 2050, there are expected to be 66 million persons of 55–64 years of age and only 48 million of 15–24 years (Nyhan 2006). The ageing of the economically active population, together with an increased life expectancy and the fact that younger generations are entering later into the labour market, means that mainly one single generation, that of medium age, is actively working in many European countries (Guillemard 2013): two of the four living generations in a family line are now retired while the youngest is in school.

Those changes mean a new composition of the societal age groups that can potentially alter the ways generations related and live with each other and call our attention to intergenerational solidarity, originally defined as social cohesion between generations (Bengtson and Roberts 1991; Bengtson and Oyama 2007). Within this lens, there are those who state we witness decreasing intergenerational interactions consequently increasing

conflicting values in the society (e.g., Yilmaz et al. 2018). Conflict between generations is always a possibility. Views coming from economy and public finances sectors point out that the ageing of society implicates higher spending on health, pensions systems, etc., to conclude that the older generations constitute a bigger burden for the state than the younger ones (Piotrowski 2014). Without denying the strength of those arguments, its constant public debate can potentially promote negative images of older generations, opening avenues for ageism. A common theme of many publications is thus the likelihood for unavoidable negative consequences or tension-filled relationships between the generations (Seedsman 2017). This means that ageism is the fuel that lights the potential conflicts between younger and older generations and thus the importance to debate it.

Furthermore, ageism is much more common than we generally admit. The number of European surveys shows it clearly. The European Social Survey analysed in its fourth-round data taken from 54.988 respondents from 28 European countries. It revealed (Age UK 2011) that ageism is the most widely experienced form of discrimination across Europe. A total of 35% of respondents reported unfair treatment on grounds of age, much more than on grounds of gender (25%) and race/ethnicity (17%); 44% of all respondents see age discrimination as a serious problem, but this value rises to 61% in Portugal, one of the highest in Europe. The more recent Eurobarometer on discrimination in the European Union (European Union 2019b) shows that four in ten respondents in the EU think discrimination on the basis of being perceived as too old or too young is widespread in their country. In four countries, more than half think that this type of discrimination is widespread: France (54%), Portugal (52%), the UK (51%) and Greece (50%).

In short, the evidence we have shown so far show that ageism is the most prevalent form of discrimination in Europe. Unlike racism or sexism, ageism potentially affects everybody, because we are all ageing. Ageism has negative consequences on society, especially because it can be expressed on a micro, meso or macro level (Iversen et al. 2009). Ageism is often internalised by the older adults themselves (Butler 1980), and it is frequently an invisible phenomenon (European Union 2019a). For all the motives we have been describing in this introduction, ageism is a phenomenon that needs to be exposed. Being so, the first objective of our article is to discuss ageism, its origins and consequences. The second aim of our paper is to discuss ways to combat ageism. To achieve both our aims we need, first, to conceptualise ageism in a more precise way. Secondly, we will debate ageism at the workplace, which seems fundamental because of the changes in working age groups and the possibility of conflicts between generations affect deeply working environments. Thirdly, we will examine ways to counteract ageism in two different dimensions: (i) we will start by looking at law and policy and, within, the role of age retirement; (ii) finally we will examine the possibilities of counteracting ageism via education, intergenerational learning and adult education.

2. Conceptualising Ageism

Ageism surrounds us at work. In the most diverse public spaces we interact with others, or in the household. Being present in organisations and (being) generated in cultural settings, ageism transcends an individual's behaviour (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer 2018). Ageism is a complex multi-layered phenomenon with its primary origins, in occidental societies, in the negative images about ageing. Several factors contribute to this negative social perception, principally the fear of death and decay; an emphasis on the cultures of youth; the effective role of media in disseminating it; and the undeniable strength of Economy and Production (Formosa 2001), which continuously reinforce the idea that a human's social utility can be measured by production (substantially part of the problem of transitioning from paid work to retirement, for example). Ageism is deeply embedded in social relations and arises when younger generations cease to identify with older adults as a way to diminish their own fear of growing old (Findsen and Formosa 2011). In this sense, everything that makes generations grow apart (division between "us" and "them") can potentially contribute to ageism. For example, new models of family structure that no

longer include older adults living together with younger family members simply reduce the mutual knowledge between generations, potentially opening avenues towards ageism.

It was as soon as 1969 that Robert N. Butler introduced the term ageism for the first time: "we may soon have to consider very seriously a form of bigotry we now tend to overlook: age discrimination or age-ism, prejudice by one age group toward other age groups" (Butler 1969, p. 243). Subsequently, he defined the term ageism as stereotyping and discrimination against people just because they are old (Butler 1980), thus adding to prejudice (an affective component of the concept) two other important dimensions (stereotyping as a cognitive element and discrimination as a behavioural one). In fact, this tripartite way to define ageism seems to be the most frequently found in the literature, despite the fact that definitions range from simple, one-part definitions (Palmore 2005a) to complex ones that have up to eight components (Palmore 1999).

There are complex relations between the three primary dimensions of ageism, (prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination). It is obvious that myths and prejudice are feelings that might target people from other generations (either younger or older adults) and therefore can become the basis of the social construction of stereotypes, it is clear that stereotypes can either be positive (for example, old age as wisdom) or negative (for example, older adults' inability to learn). However, the presumable connection between stereotypes and overt discrimination is not always simple (it depends, in the first place on the relative difficulty of recognising stereotypes and discriminations). Voss et al. (2018) who reviewed this issue, conclude that stereotypes of age might be better predictors of perceived age discrimination than they are of "objective" discrimination and that it "is much too early for sweeping conclusions regarding the influence of age stereotypes on age discrimination" (p. 25).

Ageism is not always explicit and thus is sometimes difficult to recognise. In fact, very frequently, we are unaware of our own ageist behaviours. This "implicit ageism" was defined by Levy (2001) as the thoughts, feelings and behaviours toward older adults that work without conscious awareness or control, with the assumption that it is deeply embedded in most interactions with older adults. Moreover, according to Levy, every socialised individual who has internalised the age stereotypes of their culture is likely to engage in implicit ageism. Across our life cycle and via our continuous socialisation, there are numerous opportunities for internalising stereotypes and behaving as others expect us to behave. In short, stereotyping ageist beliefs may lead older adults to act as expected and, hence, to become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer 2018). Internalised ageism is itself, a form of insidious ageism that could lead older adults to embrace and/or legitimise social norms that lessen their peers. As Formosa (2021) notes, internalised ageism leads older adults to believe that being old is an undesirable category and, therefore, tend to "distance themselves from those they deem 'old,' by positioning themselves as active, busy, positive, and purposeful—and, hence, contrary to those considered 'old' by virtue of their social isolation, frailty, and loss of physical attractiveness" (p. 171).

To conclude, ageism can be defined in a comprehensive way as "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" (Iversen et al. 2009, p. 15). Often internalised by older adults themselves, ageism is mainly an invisible phenomenon.

In the last decades, researchers have documented, extensively, the negative consequences of ageism. It seems clear that in society older adults are often characterised as useless, ill, unattractive, forgetful, incompetent, in physical and mental decline, isolated and depressed (Cuddy et al. 2005; Palmore 1999). Negative behaviour toward older adults has also been well documented; to include disrespectful, avoidant, and patronising behaviour, among many other terms (see Levy and Macdonald 2016). Ageism is also problematic in specific sectors, such as in contexts of health, its institutions or its care, and acts negatively on people's mental and physical health.

In our opinion, however, ageism at the workplace deserves a closer analysis. As Solem (2016) argues, due to demographic evolution, ageing workers are progressively more needed in working life, but ageism may be an obstacle impeding the influx of older workers into the labour market. Additionally, Appannah and Biggs (2015) stress that "to manage older employees, employers need to first change the culture and environment of the workplace and have specifically identified policies to address ageist practices" (pp. 40–41). Kunze et al. (2011) showed that an increase in the age diversity of their workforce may produce a climate of high levels of perceived age discrimination in companies. The ongoing demographic changes advice is to rethink work management and organisation in order to achieve age-friendly working environments, suited to a new balance between age groups, and to retain older workers.

3. Ageism at the Workplace

Age discrimination at the workplace is in itself a vast area for research. It includes three main analytic dimensions (Stypińska and Nikander 2018): the micro level, where psychological deep-rooted prejudices and stereotypes are analysed; the meso level, including the management, organisation and interpersonal relations between employees, and the macro level, where macrostructural processes and factors, on a global scale, can be linked to the experiences of older workers suffering age discrimination. Workplace ageism may be spotted at all stages of the working processes (Solem 2016), from the recruitment and appointment phases, through the functioning of and incidents at the workplace (including the central issue of training, for example) to finally, what happens at the exit from paid work.

Ageism at the workplace mainly arises via the beliefs and expectations of workers on the grounds of their age (Hamilton and Sherman 1994), affecting not just middle-aged or older workers, but also younger ones. After a survey that produced responses from more than 1.000 British employees, Duncan and Loretto (2004) showed that reported examples of ageism were highest among younger (under 25) and older age (over 45) categories, but all age groups were affected to some degree. As in any other social context, a substantial part of ageism at the workplace is implicit and therefore difficult to spot and challenge. Malinen and Johnston (2013), using a novel methodology (and not self-report measures), found that negative implicit attitudes towards older workers remained stable, even when positive examples of older workers were made salient. Generally speaking, negative stereotypes and discrimination deprive organisations from using the full potential of older workers (Posthuma and Guerrero 2013) and include a plethora of behaviours, either explicit or implicit. For example, getting lower ratings in job interviews and performance evaluations (Stypińska and Turek 2017); the refusal to hire or promote older workers (Palmore 1999); low salaries and the exclusion of workers from training programmes (Furunes and Mykletun 2010); exposure to ageist jokes, disrespectful treatment of older workers by employers, clients or colleagues, and even humiliation and intimidation because of age (Stypińska and Turek 2017); violation of the seniority principle by downsizing, offering gift pensions or exit bonuses to older workers only by informal pressures and hinting or through mandatory retirement age (Solem 2016), among others.

Workers experiencing ageism see their work and employment conditions reduced, experience troubles in family life and well-being, such as increased stress, lower self-esteem, and loss of a sense of control over their lives (North and Fiske 2012). Research has shown that ageism reduces work engagement and a sense of belonging to the organisation (Bayl-Smith and Griffin 2014) and produces less job satisfaction and institutional commitment (Kunze et al. 2011). Stereotypes can lead to increasing levels of absenteeism and conflict and contribute to the loss of performance and institutional productivity (Kunze and Bohem 2013). Even when subtle, negative age stereotypes can reinforce the way decisions are made in a company, thus providing a connection between stereotypes and discrimination (Voss et al. 2018).

Workplace age stereotypes are beliefs and expectations about workers based on their age (Palmore 2005b). A review analysing 117 studies made by Posthuma and Campion

(2009) reveals the most common stereotypes at the workplace: older workers allegedly perform less well, have lower abilities and are less motivated and productive; are harder to train, less flexible and adaptable; have a lower ability to learn and have a reduced potential for professional development; are costlier and use social benefits more; are dependable, stable, loyal, trustworthy, dedicated to jobs, less likely to miss work and get lower ratings in interviews and performance evaluations. Of course, some of these stereotypes are false. The same review (Posthuma and Campion 2009) shows us that older workers' performance often improves with age. Declines are found (e.g., ability to learn, flexibility) to be minor. Older workers do get lower ratings in job interviews and performance evaluations and have huge difficulties in finding and keeping jobs, and getting promoted. Older workers hold the above age stereotypes. Negative stereotyping often affects how working colleagues, recruiters, supervisors or managers think about their workers and this affects their decisions. The net result can be various discriminatory behaviours against older workers "when they are not hired, are not selected for training, or are targeted for layoffs" (Kunze and Bohem 2013, p. 160).

To conclude, this issue of ageist working environments can have many negative consequences for workers and companies alike, to such an extent that estimations have been made in order to calculate the losses on companies' economic performance and even on a country's GDP. Workplaces that embrace age diversity have higher levels of employee engagement and loyalty, more motivated workers, greater productivity, and better customer relationships (Stypińska and Nikander 2018). Therefore, the arguments sustaining good relationships among workers of all ages are not only humanistic or guided by the values of social justice but also, with high-quality intergenerational contact and the promotion of a "multi-age" organisational perspective are beneficial to both workers and the organisation (Iweins et al. 2013). Older workers bring obvious benefits to employers, such as their broad capabilities, experience, corporate memory or creative problem solving, and therefore "are an essential organizational resource" (Fairlie 2013, p. 187). Challenging workplace ageism thus appears to be of universal benefit and should be a priority of policy-makers, employers, unions, and researchers. The question is how to do it.

4. Combating Ageism: Law and Policy Contributions

Maybe the most common or visible attempts to combat ageism come from laws and public policy, especially in Europe. Discrimination against older (and younger) workers can be potentially reinforced or countered by law and public policy. A European Union Framework Directive (Directive 2000/78/EC) that was transposed to 27 national legislations, applies to all aspects of discrimination in employment. It distinguishes between those aspects of age discrimination that are unjustifiable (therefore unlawful) and those which are justifiable (Sargeant 2013), "including legitimate employment policy, labour market and vocational training objectives" (Directive 2000/78/EC, Article 6). This means there is a huge latitude for national legislation. It is possible to legislate in ways clearly seen as ageist by some social sectors. However, we want to stress that there are issues of immense complexity and what seems ageist to some can mean a positive action to others. The policy of age retirement is one such issue.

Many countries have implemented policy changes to impede the early exit of workers from the labour market and, at the same time, to encourage older workers to prolong their working careers. Consequently, older adults' participation in the labour market and retirement ages have increased substantially (Mulders 2019). A specific measure often debated within this context is to abolish mandatory retirement—commonly labelled as ageist. Although some countries have outlawed mandatory retirement, in most cases it is an integral part of the constitutional framework and implicates deep changes in employment protection legislation (OECD 2017). We also need to consider that many other factors are involved in the decision about retirement timing. A recent article compared 20 European countries to understand to what extent the individual attributes and country-level conditions affect the decision about retirement timing. The findings (Axelrad 2018)

reveal that gender, education, health, and being a civil servant significantly affect retirement timing. However, country-level indicators such as GDP, annual unemployment rate, level of pension spending, and national policies and norms. So, if countries aim simply to retain workers, simple measures such as extending the retirement age might not achieve the intended results (see Mulders 2019). If, on the other hand, what we seek is to avoid ageist policies, we must remember first that ageism is not only against older workers but also against younger workers and the interests of the two age groups might be conflicting. The study conducted by Rozen-Bakher is illustrative. Her investigation explores the effect of raising the normal retirement age by age groups in 30 countries, focusing on comparing youth unemployment versus senior unemployment. The findings (Rozen-Bakher 2020) show that raising the normal retirement age in a labour market that has already suffered from a lack of available jobs leads to an increase in youth unemployment and even adult unemployment and helps to decrease senior unemployment. To conclude, and putting aside the considerations derived from complexity, abolishing mandatory retirement or increasing retirement age can be seen as a progress to older generations but ageist to the younger ones; and forced retirement can be seen as ageist to older generations and a positive action to younger ones.

Despite the fact that these decisions are truly complex, age remains a basis for acceptable and justifiable inequality (Georgantzi 2018). Being so, although policy and legal interventions can potentially counter discrimination, the European Union results are, to date, disappointing, as shown by (Doron et al. 2018; Georgantzi 2018; Mikołajczyk 2018). However, there are researchers like Stypińska and Turek (2017) who state that the long-term effects of functioning anti-discrimination legislation are still difficult to assess. Finally, it is, of course, possible that specific countries fight workplace ageism better than others, but it is difficult to do the analysis in this article.

Public policy, in general, has other potential roles to play in the ageism arena (and not just in the specific dimension of the workplace). It would be possible, for example, to formulate policies towards the recognition of the value of experience or towards fostering intergenerational competencies (Guillemard 2013). However, policy will always be limited when it comes to combating ageism in society or influencing long-term changes at a slow pace. Can education, adult education and learning at large contribute in a more significant way?

5. Combating Ageism: The Contributions from Adult Education and Learning

We can consider, firstly, the working life dimension and the central role that learning and training play in such settings. Lifelong learning, largely, can provide an important framework for improving the lives of older workers. It is widely adopted at the workplace in the format of formal training to improve workers' skills and competencies. The main aim of this approach is to keep older workers employed and capable of competing with their colleagues—very important because younger colleagues tend to be more qualified (Nyhan 2006). Despite its importance, it is clear that this approach is inadequate at combating ageism at the workplace because it is limited to the knowledge and competencies directly applied to older workers' jobs and functions. However, formal training is not our only possibility. The European Council Lifelong Learning Memorandum explicitly refers to broader supportive learning via participative learning and binding informal learning in the daily interactions at work or in the community (European Union 2019a). At the same time, we know that older workers prefer learning in informal and/or non-formal settings and that learning can assure the workers' social inclusion, promoting broader opportunities for older workers to achieve social change (Tikkanen 2006). Thus, non-formal and informal have the undeniable potential to combat ageism and its consequences, provided that employers and human resources departments acknowledge its importance and act accordingly. This is equivalent to saying that an adult education perspective on workplace learning—more than just training focused on professional competencies—is adequate to counteract ageism.

The field of adult education includes two traditions of critical analysis (Brookfield 2018): the first is composed of the works of critical social theory, produced by the Frankfurt School and the second is formed by the tradition of critical pedagogy, which is largely based on Paulo Freire's thought, but also on the conceptual heritage of Antonio Gramsci. Critical research assumed an extremely important part of adult research from the second half of the 20th century onwards (an emphasis on the 1970s), due to the radical impulse that placed it on the side of the most disadvantaged groups. The notion of education as a political act (Freire 1997) opened the way to a liberating education. Moreover, the concept of "conscientization" (Freire 1965, 1987) marked, in various ways, adult education and was crucial to its practices. Freirian conscientisation means not only the educational processes that built the awareness that change is possible, but also the action needed to bring about that change. So, Freirian processes of conscientisation are fundamental towards knowing more about ageing processes, deconstructing a series of myths and prejudices, and providing a means to deconstruct false stereotypes and promote positive attitudes crucial to combating ageism in all its forms. In short, adult education can surely improve older adults' capacity of interpreting social reality and deconstructing myths. Learning can help challenge stereotypes (Withnall 2010) and analyse the basis of age discrimination in the various social spaces it appears.

Critical adult education, today, continues with people who, more than passive subjects, are co-builders of knowledge. Among the characteristics that define current critical research and practises and beyond its primary commitment to transformative education and democracy, we can stress the importance of non-formal and everyday knowledge and a focus on issues of power and social justice (Grummell and Finnegan 2020). Critical adult education offers both the theoretical, inspirational and educational means to combat ageism via non-formal and informal learning and act in cooperation with civil society organizations, higher education institutions, and third-age universities. In other words, there is a plethora of institutions that already run educational programmes directed to older adults.

Educational programmes for older adults are a major part of the activities of universities of the third age. Third-age universities join a high number of older adults across Europe and hence represent a valid opportunity for an educational action aiming at ageism reduction. There are many accounts on the advantages of such programmes to older adults, for example, higher levels of self-esteem, self-assurance, resilience, social and civic engagement (Ricardo and Porcarelli 2019), promoting socialization and being active (Bjursell 2019) or increasing the level of knowledge and skills related to new information technologies (Gierszewski and Kluzowicz 2021). However, the most important advantages, considering the scope of our text, are of a different nature, namely the contribution of these programmes to counteract ageism components. Gierszewski and Kluzowicz (2021) found among older adults the changing on stereotypical thinking about age, and Formosa (2012) stress the combat to "the widespread stereotypes of older persons as a needy and dependent group, as passive takers and recipients of pensions and welfare services" (p. 8). The European university of third age is not without problems. Most of the learners belong to the middle and upper classes (Bjursell 2019), with a predominance of highly educated women (Veloso 2011), showing their difficulties in attracting working-class men.

Older adults, however, are increasingly participating and benefiting from intergenerational programmes (Lee et al. 2020) that seem to produce important results regarding ageism. For example, Lee et al. (2021) found that older adults could understand their generational position and think about ways to make meaningful contributions to other generations. Teater (2016) shows that apart from other important gains, older adults reported their participation to promote a greater understanding and respect between generations. Tullo et al. (2019), also referring to an intergenerational programme, found that older adults showed an increased empathy towards students that indicated the importance of knowing each generation well and having prevention action against ageism. A systematic review in which 3.796 articles were screened (Martins et al. 2019) highlighted that intergenerational

programmes embrace relevant problems to the generations involved and were capable to promote greater awareness and understanding among the younger and older generations. Even more interesting, although each programme undertook different activities, these did not seem to be the determining factor for success, but rather it was the contact between the generations themselves, regardless of the content of the sessions.

Adult education can also combat discriminatory attitudes (Requena et al. 2018) from an intergenerational perspective. Courses and training stimulate the development of self-esteem, self-control, confidence, optimism, self-efficacy and an increase in the level of satisfaction with life (Maloud and Lu 2020). The change of behaviour and attitudes of one generation towards the other does not generally occur because of the mere fact of putting older and younger people in the same space to interact. Sometimes there are prejudices from part to part: the older ones often consider the younger ones lazy, disrespectful, violent (Dow et al. 2016; Sharma 2016) and young adults often consider older adults as inactive and backward beings (Villas-Boas et al. 2017). In light of this, generational intelligence appears to be an effective educational model for establishing sustainable intergenerational relations. This model advocates the development of spaces and activities that foster knowledge and understanding of the temporal context of each generation. "Establishing ties between different generations is essential in order for members of different age cohorts to discuss differences between them as well as to express their need for each other" (Requena et al. 2018, p. 388). This type of interaction can occur in the context of training/learning, confronting younger and older adults with experiences and problematic situations that are called on to be solved based on their knowledge, their cultural and experiential context, and supporting activities in a dialogic dynamic.

We find in the literature other intergenerational models that seem suited to diminish ageism. This is the case of the PEACE (Positive Education about Aging and Contact Experiences) model (Levy 2016) that can be implemented by educators, health care providers or other social actors whose main aim is to counteract ageism. An educational intergenerational intervention based on this model was tested by Lytle et al. (2020). Their findings revealed that positive intergenerational contacts and challenging ageing beliefs via education reduced ageism effectively. Participants showed a decrease in ageing anxiety, psychological concerns about ageing, and negative stereotyping of older adults. Participants also reported positive attitudinal changes toward ageing and older adults. Additionally, based on the PEACE model, Macdonald and Levy (2021) built two educational experiments to address stereotypes associated with older adults and reported greater positive age perceptions and ageing knowledge. Their findings proved the model is able to challenge stereotypes, yielding positive views of ageing and older adults.

It is important to stress that the intergenerational perspective is central in the context of labour training and learning. The investigations of Iweins et al. (2013, p. 344) show that "high-quality intergenerational contact and the fostering of an organizational multi-age perspective are favourable both for the employees (more intergroup harmony within the organization) and the organization (more positive attitudes at work)".

We have so far talked about educational interventions among older adults and educational interventions based on contacts and learning between two different generations. However, it should be noted that educational programmes among younger adults are important. In fact, addressing ageism among students (regardless of their discipline or knowledge) via educational interventions is an issue that appears frequently in the literature. Chonody (2015) wrote a systematic review on this issue that shows that most of the studies in this body of literature used a combination of information and exposure for their educational interventions. Her findings are striking: on the whole, 83% of the knowledge-focused interventions produced a positive change and attitudes appear to shift when the intervention includes an experiential component (overall, attitudinal change was achieved in 88% of the studies reviewed in her article). In conclusion, there is overwhelming proof that educational interventions aimed at changing student attitudes and knowledge are working and are thus capable of combating ageism.

The last issue we want to examine in its potential to challenge ageism through learning, is critical reflexivity, narratives and experience. It has been long since adult education investigated the complex interrelationships between biography, experience and learning. More, given the particular interest of adult education in promoting social change and transformation, it should be noted that the interpretation of an experience is mediated by context, but also that the personal and historical context is significant for the outcome of a transformative experience (Taylor and Cranton 2013). In the process of telling or writing their stories, subjects in interaction (belonging to, or not, to different generations) are co-builders of meaning and interpretation of the experience. Thus, narrating stories offer learning opportunities, not only for researchers or professionals but also for all subjects involved including those who narrate their stories (Gouthro 2014). Narratives involve a great deal of reflexivity and the capacity to listen to other voices. These elements can therefore be used in courses and non-formal learning experiences for combating ageism, with good results. Flores-Sandoval and Kinsella (2020) found that narratives and critical reflexivity are relevant to combat ageism and prejudice: they interrogate assumptions and perceptions of the ageing process and are suited to critically examine beliefs and values. In their study, nursing students expressed negative feelings and ageist stereotypes prior to engaging in the practice. "However, by the end of the term, the students reported a perspective transformation and experienced 'bonding' processes with their patients" (p. 230).

6. Conclusions

Throughout this article, we have shown that ageism is the most widely experienced form of discrimination in Europe and has various negative consequences for older adults. From the perspective of intergenerational solidarity, the ongoing demographic changes can threaten the social cohesion between generations and eventually cause or increase conflicts between generations (there is no consensus on this issue, however). In these conditions, it seems important to further discuss ageism, whilst to find ways to combat it seems fundamental for several motives: to avoid negative consequences to older adults and promote balanced ageing processes with increased life quality, to promote better working environments and to increase the mutual knowledge and cooperation between different generations.

We reviewed the concept of ageism and the meanings of ageism at the workplace. Then we proceeded to analyse the alternatives to combat ageism. Law and policy are definitely a complex dimension where the conflicting interests of younger and older generations are visible: what seems ageist to one can seem positive to the other. The intersection between ageism and economic/financial/political interests is very strong and increases further the complexity of the issue. It seems valid that the results of anti-age-discriminatory policy and legislation are so far disappointing, but it might be wise to recognise that we are facing gradual changes that might take time—thus implicating a long-term analysis and approach.

Educational and learning approaches seem very promising at this moment. Programmes aimed at older adults produce interesting results, as do intergenerational programmes and even those who target mainly the younger generations. Despite the differences between these approaches, investigations report as results of educational interventions attitudes changing toward a better mutual knowledge between generations, a better understanding of ageing processes and mutual awareness on the possibilities of cooperation. We thus believe that adult education and learning can be ageism preventive and can make a relevant contribution to diminishing ageism.

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