Re-thinking old age: Time for AGEIVISM

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The work of the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI) provides an example of significant work in this field by a regional NHRI network. ENNHRI received a grant from the EU and undertook a three-year study focused on the human rights of older persons in long-term care. This project was conducted in six pilot NHRI (Belgium, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania and Romania) and was finished in 2017 with a joint conference and the release of a final report.

The findings showed that most care workers instinctively used a person-centered approach to inform their work, valuing older care users as individuals, respecting their dignity and independence, and understanding the value of social interaction.

But it also showed that there are significant gaps in European human rights law. The results of this research were also presented to an international audience at the OEWGA sessions.

FINAL REMARKS

NHRI’s work in the field of human rights of older persons on the international, national and regional level and as shown above, closing the gap between the different levels including the UN, ministries in charge and civil society, is an important task. NHRI’s try to raise awareness of the issues through joint events on the regional level and on the national level, and we have raised our voices on all levels and promote the rights of older persons through different activities. NHRI’s promote the development of a new binding treaty which would provide the highest level of protection of the rights of older persons and would have the capacity to make older persons viable at the national level and in the human rights framework.

Ageism is the negative social and cultural construction of old age. From a social-policy perspective, it seems that “active ageing” has become one of the dominant policy frameworks in response to global ageing and ageism.

“Active ageing” is the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age. International bodies (e.g. the UN, World Health Organization) have embraced the concept as a leading policy instrument, and governments and regional frameworks have embedded it in their strategic plans and policies. Not surprisingly, critical perspectives on active ageing have also developed in recent years. They have attempted to reveal how “active ageing” works to preserve existing social power-relationships and enforce capitalist and male-oriented values of production and independence. Yet, this article will argue that something was and still is missing from the existing critical debates. This “missing element” will be termed: “Ageivism”.

In order to understand the concept of Ageivism it is necessary to begin with understanding Butler’s definition of ageism. In this context, and despite the years that have passed by, Dr Robert Butler’s historical definition of ageism still sets the basic platform of conceptualising the phenomena in defining it as the discrimination of individuals based on their age. Ageism, under Butler’s definition, is a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people just because they are old.

Butler’s definition has been subject to various critical reviews and various alternative definitions have been articulated ever since. These new definitions usually broadened the conceptual borders and emphasized that ageism can be both positive and negative; that it may be relevant to all ages; that it can be manifested in various forms (prejudices, stereotypes and discriminatory behavior); that it may be relevant to all ages and not only to older persons; and finally, that one can be self-ageist.
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON “ACTIVE” AND “POSITIVE” AGEING

A key concept in the field of social gerontology is the ideology of “active” and “positive” ageing, which encompasses a set of ideas and ideals regarding older persons as a distinct social group. This is the outcome of viewing old age as a social construction rather than compartmentalising old persons according to chronological age, biology or other categories. Ageism calls for the liberation of older persons as a distinct social group, or eradicate old age as a unique human experience. Ageism, as an ideology, encourages older persons to struggle against ageism and implement greater social action (echoing similar “isms”, e.g. feminism, or socialism) on the protection and promotion of the rights of older persons based on the grounds of political, social and economic principles of identity, dignity and social justice. Ageism derives from two well-known bodies of knowledge: one – the politics of identity; the other – the field of social justice and social policy. Women, American people with disabilities, the LGBTQ community, have all used this kind of discourse to frame their social struggle for equality, dignity, human rights and social justice.

By extension, active ageing has been also criticised for the way that it overemphasise the concept of independence, self-reliance, consumerism, and individual responsibility – which are the positive ideas of a social group. As well as this, it is often criticised for the way that it stresses the importance of personal and social responsibility, including future social roles in ageing societies. In this case, it is as not to fall into the trap of ageism.

Eventually, Ageism as an ideology calls for change through active social action. Once again, these terms are not only historically and culturally rich, but are also complex, composite, and augmented in psychological and political contexts.

CONCLUSION

Along with the politics of identity, the concept of “ageism” in the 1960s, “ageism” in the 1970s, and implement the idea of the new ideology of Ageism. For the purpose of this article, “ageism” will mean a system of ideas and ideals as well as the set of beliefs characteristic of a social group.

REFERENCES