Ageism and Employment: Controversies, Ambiguities and Younger People's Perceptions

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Ageism and employment: controversies, ambiguities and younger people's perceptions

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ABSTRACT
This paper traces the emergence and evolution of the concept of ageism with respect to employment matters in the UK, and challenges some features of the emerging concept as defective and undermining of efforts to eradicate age discrimination in employment. Also revealed is some loosening in recent years of the association of the term 'ageism' with older employees. This latter observation informed the focus of our empirical work, which examined the views of 460 Business Studies students concerning age and employment. A significant proportion had experienced ageism directly in employment, and a large majority favoured the introduction of legislative protection against age discrimination, with blanket coverage irrespective of age. Though negative stereotypes regarding older workers were by no means uncommon among the sample, little firm evidence emerged of intergenerational tensions or resentment towards older people. The concluding section considers the policy implications of our findings, including the relative merits of weighting policy responses towards older employees. It is argued that initiatives restricted in this way, and further constrained by commercial imperatives and macro-economic objectives, are likely to prove divisive and self-defeating as a means of combating ageism.

KEY WORDS – Ageism, age discrimination, early exit, employment, attitudes, decline, younger people.

Introduction

According to the extended *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term 'ageism' first appeared in the *Washington Post* in 1969 and was attributed to the American psychiatrist, Dr Robert Butler, who believed that many of

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his neighbours suffered from 'age-ism'. The proposed siting of public housing for older residents had provoked a virulent reaction from middle-aged local residents. The dictionary invites comparison with the terms 'racism', which first appeared in 1936, and 'sexism' in 1968. Butler's subsequent and oft-quoted definition of ageism (Butler and Lewis 1973) draws parallels with these other forms of oppression, where ageism is described as 'a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin colour and gender'.

In Britain, the term only entered public discourse during the 1980s. Even as late as 1991, Laczko and Phillipson (1991: 33) observed that ageism was still 'an alien word' in the UK and that there had been very few academic studies of age discrimination. Indeed, a book published under the auspices of Age Concern in 1990 was entitled '*Age: the Unrecognised Discrimination*' (McEwen 1990). Earlier acceptance of the concept in the United States has been attributed to the greater cohesiveness and success of the age lobby, represented by the growth of such groups as the Gray Panthers, reflecting its genealogy 'as part of an impetus for civil rights, now recognised as a distinctive feature of the late 1960s' (Biggs 1993: 85).

Concern over ageism in Britain in the 1990s derived chiefly from worries over the trend in the labour market towards the 'early exit' of older workers from employment. This focus upon ageism in employment has influenced the evolution of the concept in directions that depart significantly from earlier formulations. In the section which follows, we trace the emergence and development of the concept with respect to employment matters, and review some controversial features of the evolving concept. One important development is a significant degree of consensus among commentators, also apparent in recent policy initiatives, that ageism in employment is mostly 'irrational' in commercial terms. We argue that this overly-narrow conception of ageism may impede efforts to combat age discrimination in employment. Also discussed in this section, is a loosening in the initial association of the term with discrimination against older employees: ageism in the labour market is now increasingly recognised as potentially affecting *any* age category. It is this development that informed the focus of the empirical work which we present in our second section. This investigates the perceptions of younger adults on a range of matters relating to age and employment, an area that has so far received little systematic investigation. On the basis of our analyses and findings, the concluding section considers some requirements of an effective policy in combating age discrimination in employment.

Early exit and discrimination against older workers

The 'early exit' phenomenon has occurred to varying degrees in almost all Western economies, and has been described as 'one of the most dramatic economic transformations of labour markets in modern industrial economies' (Rein and Jacobs 1993: 53). It refers to the trend towards earlier withdrawal of older workers from employment and is well illustrated by economic activity rates for Britain (Table 1).

For men, the trend towards early exit seems to have begun in the early to mid-1970s, and to have accelerated during the 1980s and 1990s, especially during recessionary periods. Expressed in the same terms, early exit among women is masked by the general increase in women's participation in the labour market. However, analysis of the employment participation of different age cohorts of women over time reveals a similar, if less marked, trend towards early exit (Ginn and Arber 1996). Early exit entails a number of routes out of employment, including early retirement or voluntary redundancy, compulsory redundancy, dismissal, and retirement on grounds of ill-health. Moreover, the evidence is that very few of these displaced employees find their way back into jobs. Accordingly, early exit in most cases proves permanent (Campbell 1999: 40–2). The phenomenon seems widespread across the economy, occurring in both the public and private sectors, and in growth industries as well as those experiencing employment decline (Campbell 1999: 39; Jacobs *et al.* 1991).

Explanations for early exit have tended to favour 'push' over 'pull' factors, identifying employer policies and economic conditions as the main driving forces (Kohli and Rein 1991: 9–10). In Britain and elsewhere, however, governments and trade unions have often colluded in the process in the belief that this trend would create jobs for the young and reduce official rates of unemployment. In Britain this consensus did not survive the 1980s. Increasingly, in a context of alarmist projections of a 'demographic time-bomb' arising from population ageing, declining fertility and an increase in the dependency ratio that such trends implied (Johnson *et al.* 1989), there was a growing belief that, in the longer term, society could no longer afford the costs of early exit. This shift in perspective was remarkably abrupt, as is illustrated by the oft-quoted first paragraph of a report of the House of Commons Employment Committee:

> When we began to plan the inquiry, interest still centred on the development of schemes to ease older workers into early retirement. By the time we had finished taking our evidence there had been a dramatic shift of emphasis and there was growing discussion of ways in which older people could be

TABLE 1. *Economic activity rates of older men and women in Britain, 1951–97*

		1951	1961	1971	1975	1981	1985	1990	1994	1997
						%				
Men	55–59	95.0	97.1	95.3	93.0	89.4	82.6	81.3	76.1	74.6
	60–64	87.7	91.0	86.6	82.3	69.3	55.3	55.3	51.2	51.6
	65+	31.1	25.0	23.5	19.2	10.3	8.5	8.7	7.5	7.5
Women	55–59	29.1	39.2	50.9	52.4	53.4	52.1	55.0	55.8	53.2
	60–64	14.1	19.7	28.8	28.6	23.3	18.9	22.8	25.7	27.0
	65+	4.1	4.6	6.3	4.9	3.7	3.0	3.4	3.3	3.2

Sources: 1951–1971: Taylor and Walker (1995).
1985–1997: Armitage and Scott (1998).

persuaded to stay at work in order to offset the impending shortage of young workers. The pendulum has rarely swung so swiftly. (House of Commons 1989: para.1)

In addition to the worries of the Government and some employers about impending labour shortages, and the longer-term costs and affordability of early exit, employees and trade unions were also becoming concerned. This reflected the impact of the recession in the late 1980s and early 1990s upon previously secure and relatively senior white-collar occupations in commerce, finance and the public sector. This added a powerful middle-class note of dissent that helped shift popular perceptions of the desirability of early exit. Previously it had been seen as a necessary and socially acceptable means of coping with mass unemployment and structural change, mainly affecting manual employees. Now, in contrast, it was seen as a phenomenon deriving from age prejudice.

Through such developments, ageism in general, and its manifestations in employment in particular, have secured a place of some prominence on current social and political agendas. One early sign of the new consensus was the government setting up in 1992 an *Advisory Forum on Older Workers*, to encourage employers to abandon age discriminatory practices. The Forum included representatives of employers, trade unions, the Equal Opportunities Commission, Age Concern and the Institute of Personnel Management (now the Institute of Personnel and Development). An *Employers Forum on Age* followed in 1996, again aimed at persuading employers to jettison ageist practices. The Labour Party, when in opposition, promised comprehensive legislation to outlaw age discrimination but, upon securing office in 1997, promptly performed a policy U-turn. It issued a non-statutory

code of practice in 1999 and warned that, should this prove unsuccessful, subsequent legislation was not ruled out (DfEE 1999).

The goal of these initiatives has been to discourage discrimination chiefly against older employees, not only with respect to exit, but also in recruitment, training and promotion practices. Many parallels have been drawn between the employment experience of older workers and the treatment and experience of those of more advanced years: negative stereotyping, undervalued ability and potential, denial of opportunities, and a reluctance to acknowledge the heterogeneity of older age categories. Nonetheless, application of the concept in the employment sphere is narrower, in that a distinction has been drawn between 'unwarranted' or 'irrational' discrimination and that based upon commercial criteria (*e.g.* Campbell 1999: 57). In other words, the argument has developed that discrimination on the ground of age is ageist only if guided by irrational prejudice and mistaken beliefs, rather than by commercial exigencies.

This narrower conception is implied by, and in some part a consequence of, the methods chosen to measure and combat ageism in employment. Investigations have focused upon the 'accuracy' of employers' beliefs concerning the employment characteristics of older employees. This has produced much evidence that negative stereotypes underlie employer attitudes and practices, endorsing a deficit model of ageing. In general it has been found that employers think that older workers are less productive, have less relevant skills, are resistant to change and new technology, are less trainable, leave employment sooner so that training them has a lower rate of return, and are more prone to absenteeism and ill health (Taylor and Walker, 1993, 1995; Tillsley 1990; Trinder *et al.* 1992). Accordingly, there is discrimination in recruitment – evident in the widespread use of overt and covert upper age bars in job advertisements – and in training and promotion opportunities, as well as exit policies.

The claim that such beliefs are mistaken and irrational is based chiefly upon a large body of industrial gerontological research that argues that age is a poor proxy for performance (*e.g.* Doering *et al.* 1983; Grimley Evans *et al.* 1992). As a result, the aim of recent government-backed campaigns against ageism, and much academic work, has been to persuade employers that discrimination against older employees is not only irrational but also commercially damaging. This is the '*business case*' against ageism: the argument that discrimination against older workers can lead to a sub-optimum use of human resources, including a poor return on investment in human capital, a sub-optimum balance between youth and maturity, and a narrowed

pool of talent to draw upon in recruitment. (Taylor and Walker 1995; DfEE 1999). It is also argued that early exit has resulted in important skill shortages; a loss of the 'collective memory' of organisations; and that, given the ageing of the population, older workers help firms understand better the needs of the ageing market, and that they provide a more age-balanced interface with customers.

The popular presentation of ageism in employment as widespread, irrational and commercially damaging, may be said to represent the current orthodoxy. It is forcefully canvassed by government and lobbying groups. In several respects, however, it has been challenged. Early exit and other age-related policies have been seen as rational responses to current macro-economic and competitive conditions (Duncan 2000; Kohli and Rein 1991; Standing 1986). For reasons that do not include the assumption that personal productivity declines with age, it has been argued that there may be clear advantages in terms of cost, flexibility and industrial relations in discriminating against older workers in exit and recruitment strategies and reorganisation processes. Indeed, it is possible to argue that early exit practices reflect a *decline* in the use of age-based criteria in employment; it denotes a shift from chronological age to functional criteria in determining retirement. Older workers are being laid off, not because they are old, but because they tend to be costlier, less flexible and less useful to the organisation, possibly *but not necessarily* as a result of ageing. Concentrating job losses upon older employees may secure public relations or industrial relations advantages for employers, simply because this approach conforms to prejudices in the wider community. It may be rational in commercial terms to insist upon greater job mobility, but this may be more difficult for older employees given family commitments or a more settled lifestyle. There are also broader labour process perspectives that assign a certain rationality to age-based discrimination: the use of older workers as a contingent labour force or 'reserve army' to be drawn into the labour market as and when conditions demand, is a case in point. The existence of such a process receives some support from analyses of past trends (Tillsley 1990: 4–6; Laczko and Phillipson 1991: 39–42).

Thus the business case against ageism, while attractive as a lobbying tactic, may be too limited as a means of protecting the employment interests of older workers. Commercial rationality need not preclude discrimination. The limitations of the business case approach have been recognised elsewhere. For example, Dickens (1998) dubbed this approach towards eliminating sex discrimination as inevitably 'contingent, variable, selective and partial' and, at best, a useful addition to statutory intervention. In the case of ageism, however, such

limitations and reservations seem rarely articulated. The business case is clearly endorsed in the language of the government's *Code of Practice on Age Diversity in Employment*. Unlike sex and race discrimination, this approach is not yet complemented by legislation. This disparity reflects how concern over age discrimination in Britain originates in employment matters and in commercial and economic imperatives, and how there has been a failure to connect age discrimination in employment to ageism in other areas: discrimination which continues to receive lower recognition and priority than other forms of oppression. Indeed, some 10 years after the term had been coined by Butler, Bytheway felt the need to discuss whether ageism in Britain was 'just a joke' (Bytheway 1980) and, 15 years later, he bemoaned the near-exclusive focus on manifestations in employment:

> Some … think of ageism primarily as age discrimination in employment practices and that it mainly affects people in their forties, fifties and sixties – they would be surprised if it were to be suggested that exactly the same phenomenon affected the lives of people in their nineties. (Bytheway 1995: 105)

In another respect however, the focus upon employment has *broadened* the meaning of ageism from that as originally defined by Butler. It has raised the question of discrimination against younger workers.

Ageism and younger employees

The origin of the concept of ageism has meant that, in policy terms and in public discourse, the phenomenon is still mostly associated with prejudice against older age groups. In recent times, however, this association has begun to loosen as evidence mounts that age prejudice in employment can be experienced at any age. For example, upper age bars in some recruitment advertisements for professional posts are set as low as 30, and training and promotion opportunities tend to diminish rapidly after 40 years of age (Tillsley 1990: 9; Trinder *et al.* 1992). Moreover, age discrimination in employment policies is often apparent not in terms of an old/young dichotomy. There is instead the notion of 'prime age' labour (often considered as falling within the age range 25–35). This age group is favoured relative to *both* older and younger workers. Furthermore, age-related discrimination among women exhibits complex patterns that may reflect the 'double jeopardy' of age and gender. In their local authority case studies, Itzin and Phillipson (1993: 45) found that, whatever their age, women perceived their age to be held against them, and that line management attitudes revealed

in interviews were consistent with the view that 'women are never the right age'. Finally, ageism seems to have become established as a broad-based industrial relations issue. The recent (and massive) *Workplace Employment Relations Survey*, for example, found that around 40 per cent of the 3,000 workplaces surveyed had a formal, written equal opportunities policy that included reference to age (Cully *et al.* 1998: 13), and by definition such policies and procedures can hardly be age selective.

As with older employees, it is difficult to establish whether ageism significantly affects younger employees, and to untangle the extent of unwarranted prejudice. However, recent trends in youth labour markets in OECD countries suggest that age discrimination may play a significant role in the marginalised position of many young workers. Despite a decline in their share of population, increased enrolments in full-time education, and shifts in industry mix toward youth-intensive sectors, the relative wages of young people fell and youth employment rates declined during the 1980s and 1990s in Britain and other OECD countries (Blanchflower and Freeman 1996). Moreover there is some evidence that many younger employees perceive themselves as victims of age discrimination. For instance, a telephone survey of a 1,000 adults conducted by Gallup on behalf of Age Concern found that a quarter of people aged between 16 and 24 claimed to have experienced age discrimination in employment (Age Concern 1998).

The gerontological study of ageism has by no means ignored evidence of discrimination against younger persons. Bytheway (1995: 11) and Bytheway and Johnson (1990: 33) argue that ageist prejudice is based primarily upon presumptions about chronological age, that there is a common conceptual base in terms such as 'children', 'youth', the 'middle-aged' and 'elderly', and that parallels can be drawn between oppression of children and of people regarded as old. Negative stereotypes concerning older people are matched by similar ones that are applied to children, forms of prejudice sometimes labelled as 'adultism' (Itzin 1986). It is only to be expected that vestiges of this will affect the employment opportunities of young adults, just as older employees experience forms of prejudice most apparent among those beyond retirement age.

The experiences and attitudes of younger people

Despite this recognition that ageism can affect younger employees, there has been relatively little systematic investigation of the

perceptions of younger adults on matters relating to age and employment. Our research was motivated by this observation, and we sought information on three areas that we considered most relevant to policy formation. The objectives in these three areas were:

- to establish the extent to which younger adults experience ageism in employment, directly or indirectly, and to determine how salient the issue of ageism is among younger adults;
- to establish to what extent younger adults are themselves ageist in their attitudes and beliefs about older employees; and
- to explore the degree of cross-generational solidarity and inter-generational tensions in the attitudes of younger people.

Fieldwork and sample

To address these objectives, undergraduates studying Business Studies at the University of Edinburgh participated in a questionnaire survey in spring 1997. Questionnaires were distributed in lectures across each of the four years of the degree course. Participation was voluntary, but as far as could be determined, everyone present at the lectures agreed to complete a questionnaire. The resulting sample of 460 students constituted nearly 77 per cent of those registered for the degree. The respondents ranged in age from 17 to 29 years, with the majority aged either 19 or 20. The gender composition of the sample (55 per cent male and 45 per cent female), although slightly under-representative of females registered for the Business Studies degree course, was consistent across all four years.

As the aim was to investigate ageism in the work setting, students were asked to provide details of their past or current employment experience, *e.g.* during vacation and term-time, or in a 'gap' year. The vast majority of students (89 per cent) reported experience of at least one job, mainly in service sector industries, such as retailing and hotel and catering. Although there were no differences in relation to age or year of study, 95 per cent of female students reported employment experience compared to 85 per cent of their male counterparts ($p < 0.001$). Table 2 illustrates the sex differences between the number of vacation and term-time jobs.

In investigating attitudes towards older workers, we included many of the items utilised by Lyon and Pollard (1997: 251–2) in their study of MBA students (Masters in Business Administration). These in turn had been adapted from an Institute of Personnel Management study of the attitudes of personnel managers (IPM 1993). The effects of age, year of study, gender and job experience on all the issues of interest

TABLE 2. *Number of vacation and term-time jobs held, by sex*

	Vacation jobs		Term-time jobs	
Number of jobs	Males %	Females %	Males %	Females %
0	23	13	66	53
1	37	35	28	36
2	17	28	6	10
3	14	14	—	—
4	9	10	—	—
Total (= 100%)	253	207	253	207

were investigated and, where appropriate, inter-relationships between the discriminator variables were also taken into account.

Understanding and experience of ageism

The first question the students were asked was simply what they understood by the term 'ageism'. This was a closed response question; the possible answers were:

- discrimination against *older* workers on account of their age
- discrimination against *young* workers on account of their age
- *any* form of age-based discrimination, *irrespective* of age.

The majority of respondents (82 per cent) indicated that they understood ageism to refer to *any* form of age-based discrimination. Seventeen per cent of students thought that ageism referred to discrimination against older workers only, while a mere one per cent felt the term referred to discrimination against young people.

Of the 410 students who had experience of working, some 35 per cent had experienced age-related discrimination (Table 3). Although some had received *more* favourable treatment because of their age, mainly in respect of attitudes or recruitment decisions, rather more had experienced *less* favourable treatment.

There were no significant differences between males and females or between the age groups in their experience of ageism. It is of interest to note that, although 48 students perceived they had been treated more favourably because of their age, nearly half of this group also claimed experience of having been treated less favourably. For example, those respondents who felt they had been given a job because they were young had found they were paid relatively low wages as a result of their age.

The respondents were also asked about other negative age-based

TABLE 3. *Students' experience of positive and negative age-related discrimination*

Type of discrimination	Examples of treatment	% of those with employment experience
Positive	Being given a job because they were young	12
Negative		29
– Attitudes	Seen as untrustworthy because of their youth	11
– Wage-related matters	Worked for a lower rate of pay	9
– Job deployment	Given less responsibility because they were young	7
Total (= 100%)		410

discrimination known to them. Sixty-four students (16 per cent) replied that they knew of co-workers who had experienced such discrimination, mainly in the areas of attitudes, wages and job deployment. Of these, 41 reported that their parents had encountered ageism, most notably in relation to recruitment decisions. For example, 15 respondents mentioned that their parents had come across age bars in advertisements when looking for jobs.

Attitudes towards ageism legislation

As an additional measure of the salience of age-based discrimination to these young people, they were asked if they were in favour of legislation to tackle ageism: over 86 per cent were, female students (92 per cent) more so than male (82 per cent) ($p < 0.01$). Given their understanding of ageism, it is not surprising that 88 per cent of those in favour of legislation expressed a preference for legislation that would cover *all* employees. Nevertheless, seven per cent and five per cent respectively felt that older workers and young employees should be the sole focus of any legislative intervention.

Those in favour of legislation were also asked about the scope of such measures. As Table 4 shows, the most popular area covered attitudes and behaviour. Some of these respondents, however, were against legislation regarding dismissal, redundancy and recruitment practices.

A notable proportion (13.8 per cent) *disagreed* that anti-ageism legislation should be introduced. Most of these 63 students argued that ageism legislation would not work and that it would interfere with 'natural' labour market forces. The content of their responses ranged from general statements expressing the concern that 'legislation is

TABLE 4. *Preference for scope of anti-ageism legislation*

Area	%
Dismissal or redundancy	61
Recruitment	63
Training and promotion	65
Attitudes and behaviour	76
Wages and salaries	70
Total (= 100%)	397

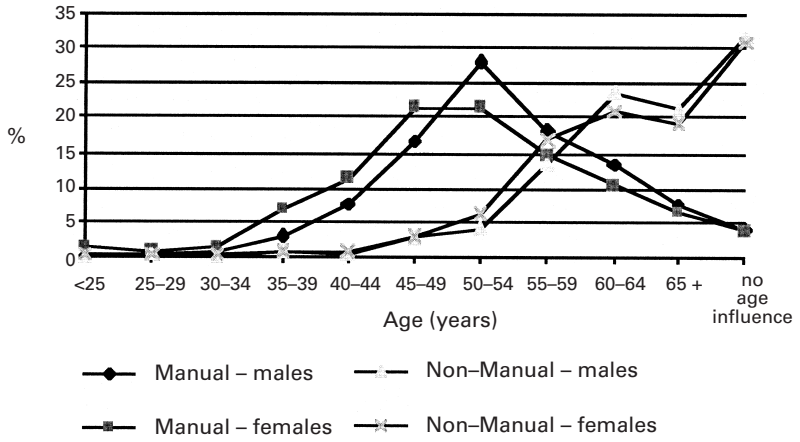

Figure 1. Perception of onset of decline in job performance.

costly to competitiveness', to more vigorous opposition: that legislation would be 'a petty extension of the nanny-mentality that is currently undermining the efficiency of the West'.

Attitudes towards age and older workers

In addressing the second of our objectives – the extent to which the students were ageist themselves – we focused first on one of the principal recurring debates, that of performance declining with age. The students were asked to indicate at what age they considered the performance of an employee might decline. The response categories were split into males and females employed in manual and non-manual occupations respectively. The answers obtained are profiled in Figure 1.

TABLE 5. *Difference in mean ages (years) of perceived decline in performance*

	Male employees	Female Employees	
Manual employees	52	48	< 0.001
Non-manual employees	64	60.5	< 0.05

TABLE 6. *Differences in mean ages of perceived decline in performance, by age and attitude towards anti-ageism legislation*

Attitude towards anti-ageism legislation	Age of respondent	Manual Employees		Non-manual employees	
		Males	Females	Males	Females
In favour	17–18	50	48	62	58
	19–20	52	49	64	58
	20–21	52	52	63	59
	22+	54	53	63	61
Against	17–18	52	49	63	58
	19–20	53	52	63	59
	20–21	55	54	64	62
	22+	64	60	64	64
ANOVA		< 0.05	< 0.01	NS	< 0.05

Overall 96 per cent of respondents believed that there is an age-related decline in performance of manual employees, while only 68 per cent thought this of non-manual employees ($p < 0.001$). In the case of manual employees, most considered that this decline started around the ages of 45–54; whereas for non-manual employees the decline was thought to begin at 55 or later ages. Treating the data as interval in nature[1] revealed that the students perceived performance amongst female workers to begin to decline at a younger average age in both manual and non-manual categories (Table 5).

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was subsequently conducted on these data to ascertain if and how perceptions of decline were affected by the characteristics of the respondents – gender, age, year of study, employment experience, and respondents' attitude towards and experience of ageism. The results can be seen in Table 6. With the exception of non-manual male employees, the age of respondent and whether or not the respondent was in favour of anti-discrimination legislation affected the pattern of responses. In general, compared with

TABLE 7. *Students' attitudes towards older workers*

	Agree	Unsure	Disagree
Older workers:		%	
Are better team workers	40	26	34
Have better interpersonal skills	28	29	43
Are more patient	34	26	40
Are more conscientious	28	27	45
Are more reliable	37	26	27
Are more committed	29	30	41
Are more mature	75	15	10
Have lower expectations	12	32	56
Are less flexible	40	27	33
Are less productive	9	26	65
Are prone to higher absenteeism	8	22	70
Are resistant to change	73	13	14
Are more difficult to train	57	21	22

those who were in favour of legislation, those not in favour felt that the performance of manual workers started to decline at a later age. This tendency was stronger amongst the older students, particularly those aged 22 and over. The only difference between male and female respondents' opinions was found to be in relation to non-manual female employees ($p < 0.05$). The mean age indicated by male students (58 years) was significantly lower than the average of 61 years indicated by female students.

To measure further the respondents' attitudes towards older workers, a list of statements was presented (adapted from Lyon and Pollard 1997). This contains both positive and negative items and respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed, disagreed or were 'unsure' (Table 7). Attitudes to employment-related attributes of older workers were extremely varied. For example, comparing three of the negative items, nearly three-quarters of the respondents agreed with the assertion that older workers were more resistant to change. In contrast, fewer than one in ten considered older employees to be less productive or prone to higher absenteeism.

In order to investigate whether there is an underlying pattern to the responses, we undertook a hierarchical cluster analysis (Hair *et al.* 1995). This reveals that the students can be split into two groupings regarding their attitudes towards older workers. Cluster 1, with 284 students, tended to be more opinionated, and more sympathetic to older workers, while the 166 in Cluster 2 tended either to have more negative views or, especially in relation to the more positive items, to choose the 'not sure' option. Thus, for example, while (as explained

TABLE 8. *Students' attitudes towards older people*

Statement	Agree	Unsure	Disagree
		%	
Working population is subsidising the elderly	56	23	21
Too much public expenditure is devoted to the elderly	10	28	62
Sometimes resent the affluence of the older generation	20	0	80
Willing to pay extra tax to improve State pensions	23	25	52
In best interests that more older people secure employment	22	46	32
Youth employment more important than employment of over 50s	53	17	30
Early retirement should be encouraged to improve job prospects for the young.	20	26	54
Employers should adhere to LIFO in redundancy decisions	18	23	59
Pay should increase automatically with length of service	47	19	34

above) most respondents agreed that older workers are more resistant to change, cross-tabulation revealed that 68 per cent of Cluster 1 agreed with this statement as opposed to 84 per cent of Cluster 2. In relation to a more positive item, 51 per cent of Cluster 1 agreed that older workers were more reliable. This compares with only 10 per cent of Cluster 2, the majority of whom stated that they were 'unsure'.

The two clusters were cross-tabulated with age, gender, year of study, employment experience, experience of ageism and whether or not the respondent was in favour of legislation to tackle ageism. The only variable significantly to differentiate between the two groups ($p < 0.05$) was year of study. Cluster 1, the more opinionated group, was characterised by students in their earlier years (66 per cent of members were in their first or second years), whereas membership of Cluster 2 was higher amongst years 3 and 4 (these years accounted for 52 per cent of members).

Intergenerational tension

The third objective – to assess whether intergenerational tension exists from the point of view of young people – was explored through several further attitudinal questions. Unlike the previous set of items, which concerned older people in employment, the first four of these nine statements relate to the older population *in general*.

As can be seen from Tables 8 and 9, there was considerable variation

TABLE 9. *Students' attitudes towards older people: differences with gender and employment experience.*

Statement		Agree	Unsure	Disagree	p
Working population is subsidising the elderly	Has work experience	56	25	20	< .05
	No work experience	60	8	32	
Too much public expenditure is devoted to the elderly	Has work experience	8	29	63	< .001
	No work experience	26	18	56	
	Male	12	33	56	< .05
	Female	9	22	69	
Willing to pay extra tax to improve State pensions	Has work experience	23	26	51	< .05
	No work experience	23	10	67	
	Male	23	20	57	< .05
	Female	22	31	47	
Youth employment more important than employment of over 50s	Male	57	12	31	< .05
	Female	48	23	29	
Pay should increase automatically with length of service	Male	51	14	35	< .05
	Female	44	24	32	

in responses. It is therefore worth paying some attention to each item in turn, beginning with the more general statements. First, while a small majority agreed that today's 'working population is subsidising the elderly', rather more disagreed that 'too much public expenditure is devoted to elderly' as a discrete group. Those who had experience of at least one job were much less likely to disagree that 'the elderly' were being subsidised, and were significantly more likely than those who had not worked to be unsure of their response. Female students and students with experience of the labour market were significantly less likely to agree that 'too much public expenditure was devoted to the elderly'. This gender effect was particularly strong amongst those with experience of at least one job ($p < 0.05$) – in this subgroup, only eight per cent of female students agreed with the statement.

The third general statement was also negative and responses revealed that only one-fifth resented the affluence of the older generation. This sentiment was consistent across the genders and ages, and was not affected by experience of employment. However, altruistic attitudes do have their limits: less than one-quarter of students agreed with the fourth statement: that they would be willing to pay extra tax to improve State pensions. Students with work experience were no more likely than their peers who had no job experience to agree with this proposition. Nevertheless, they were less likely to disagree, instead

preferring the opt-out category. Differences between the sexes were particularly apparent in the sub-group who had never worked – amongst these students, males (74 per cent) were almost twice as likely as females (40 per cent) to be reluctant to consider extra taxes ($p < 0.05$).

Turning now to statements that related to employment policies (Table 8), while just over one-fifth of respondents considered that it was in their best interests that more older people secure employment, and a small majority (especially females) agreed that youth unemployment should be accorded a greater priority. Only one-fifth felt that early retirement should be encouraged as a means of improving job prospects for young people.

The students were also asked about two well-established, age-related employment practices. The first of these refers to one of the most common methods of selecting employees for redundancy, that of 'last in, first out' (LIFO). Nearly three-fifths of the students disagreed with this principle, while fewer than 20 per cent agreed. There were no differences according to gender or any other of the independent variables of interest. However, in relation to another well-established practice, that of pay automatically increasing with length of service, males were more likely than females to agree with this; female students being more likely to choose the 'unsure' category.

Finally, one further age-related attitudinal question was asked. The students were asked to indicate what ages they would prefer in their work colleagues. The majority (58 per cent) stated that they would prefer to work with a mixed age range; 23 per cent had no strong preference; and 17 per cent claimed they would rather work with people predominantly their own age. Only five students indicated that their choice would be to work with colleagues mainly older than themselves. These five responses were combined with the mixed age range category for further bivariate analysis. The results of this revealed that female students were more likely to prefer a mixed-age work team (65 per cent of females chose this option as opposed to only 55 per cent of males), whereas males were less likely to have a preference (28 per cent of males and only 17 per cent of females fell into this category) ($p < 0.05$).

Discussion

There was an overwhelming response from the students that the term ageism should refer to any form of age-based discrimination,

irrespective of age. As indicated in our introduction, this finding runs counter to the prevailing view of ageism, but is in line with the current evolution of the concept. One in three students with employment experience felt they had been subject to age discrimination in employment. It is interesting to find that this was not only in pay and conditions which, it might be argued, would reflect their labour market position rather than attitudinal prejudice. They also reported experience of negative behaviour towards them. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that the majority were in favour of legislation to tackle ageism, particularly that which would challenge discriminatory attitudes and behaviour. It is interesting that the most common reason given by the minority of students who were not in favour of invoking legislation, was that this would interfere with labour market forces. It has been argued that, in the development of equal opportunities programmes during the 1980s, it was the commitment of the Conservative government to the free-market that led to the ascendancy of the business case strategy over enhanced legislation (Dickens 1998: 11).

Are these young people ageist?

The heterogeneity of responses to the various attitudinal measures poses some difficulty in interpreting these findings. There was certainly evidence of what might be described as ageist attitudes. This was especially noticeable in perceptions of an early decline in work performance amongst employees in manual roles and amongst women workers. These views secure little support from empirical work in this area (*e.g.* Snel and Cremer 1994). Our survey findings do support the notion that women are faced with the 'double jeopardy' of age and sex discrimination, at least in the perceptions of these students of an early decline in job performance. However, the analysis of perceived decline in performance also shows that those students who did not favour legislative intervention were less likely to assume an early decline. It could be argued that these individuals were *less* ageist than their colleagues who felt there was a need to 'protect' people whose performance they assumed would decline as they grew older.

The other finding of note was that, despite a narrow age range of respondents, age was a factor in how individuals responded to this question, with older respondents judging performance less pessimistically. Similarly a survey of personnel managers revealed that those

over the age of 40 exhibited less negative attitudes towards older employees than their younger counterparts (IPM 1993).

As a whole, the attitudes displayed are similar to other surveys conducted among managers and employers. Lyon and Pollard studied the age-related attitudes of MBA students (all of whom had managerial experience), and concluded that their respondents held fairly negative views towards older employees and older managers. In line with our findings, their students felt that older managers did not want to be trained, and were strongly resistant to change. They also exhibited the same ambivalence to the loyalty, commitment and reliability of older workers (Lyon and Pollard 1997: 251–2). There was some indication, however, that our students were rather more positive in relation to certain aspects. For example, a majority of Lyon and Pollard's respondents were inclined to believe that older managers work less well in teams, whereas 40 per cent of our sample thought that older employees were better suited than their younger counterparts to team working. Moreover, a majority of our respondents expressed a preference for working with colleagues of a mixed age range – not a sign of inherent ageism. An interesting finding from the cluster analysis of the attitudinal data was that negative attitudes towards older employees appeared to increase with time spent at university. This may be due, in part at least, to a loosening of links with their parents or to their socialisation into a student youth culture.

Intergenerational tensions

The findings provide little evidence of any significant degree of resentment towards older people. There was a strong perception that working people are subsidising elderly people, but no great feeling that this level of support should be reduced. Nor was it felt in general that the older generation had an unfair share of society's resources, though there was some resistance expressed to increasing taxation to improve state pensions.

With regard to the labour market, early exit can be perceived both as working for and against the interests of younger people. It may be viewed as enhancing the employment prospects of younger people, but at the same time it has the potential to adversely affect dependency ratios. This latter view was not strongly displayed: only one in five agreed that it was in their best interests that older people secure employment. Moreover, most respondents disagreed with the LIFO principle, and a majority agreed that tackling youth unemployment should be accorded greater priority than for those over 50. Nevertheless,

few agreed that early retirement should be encouraged as a means of improving job prospects for younger people. In relation to many of the attitudinal measures, female students and those who had some employment experience were less negative towards older people. The broad sentiment is that older people should receive no special favours, but neither should they be discriminated against.

Overall, the results show a degree of ambivalence on the part of these respondents towards older people, both within the sphere of employment and in general society. On the one hand, there is evidence of ageist attitudes. On the other, the students appear to hold more altruistic attitudes compared to practising managers. It is thus difficult to discern whether their manifestation of age-related discrimination confirms inherent ageism, or whether it merely reflects prejudice based on mistaken beliefs.

Inevitably, these are somewhat speculative and tentative conclusions. There are limits due to the usual deficiencies associated with questionnaire surveys. Also it is difficult to generalise from the respondents in this survey: they were selected from a narrow age range, socio-economic background, and in the main had had limited employment experience. Nevertheless, these young people represent the managers of the future, and as such, canvassing their opinions and attitudes is important in anticipating policy responses to age discrimination in employment. Lyon and Pollard used this argument, maintaining that age discrimination by the next generation of managers was '… crucial to the whole thesis that attitudes, and hence discriminatory behaviour, is better changed by persuasion than legislation' (1997: 249).

Conclusions and policy implications

The focus upon employment in policy relating to ageism in Britain during the 1990s has been associated with both a *narrowing* of the concept of ageism, with the issue largely subsumed in business imperatives, and a *broadening* of the concept in terms of who is perceived to be affected. With respect to the former, it is now commonly held that age discrimination by employers is mostly irrational and self-defeating, thereby denying the presence or importance of 'rational' discrimination, or implicitly excluding this aspect from definitions. Moreover the distinction between 'rational' and 'irrational' discrimination is itself problematic, as irrational prejudice can clearly be exploited for economic gain. On this basis it may be argued that present policy

preoccupations, aimed at persuading employers *voluntarily* to reform their attitudes and practices with respect to age matters, are insufficient and unlikely to be proved effective.

Our empirical focus was upon the broadening of concerns with ageism, since younger people's experiences and perceptions of age discrimination have rarely been the subject of systematic investigation. That a significant portion of our sample perceived themselves as having encountered age discrimination in employment, is supportive of an inclusive, broad-brush, approach to tackling ageism in employment. This seems sounder on social equity grounds, allowing scope to challenge age discrimination that is clearly experienced by younger as well as older employees, and the diverse patterns of age discrimination affecting women. Such an approach would additionally be in tune with current trends in equal opportunities policy, and could also help foster understanding of the pervasive nature of ageism as an ideology that affects us all, whether as perpetrators or victims, and regardless of our age.

However, recent government policy has maintained an association between age discrimination and older employees, invariably justified by the assertion that older employees are those most seriously affected. Thus the DfEE consultation document, while acknowledging that ageism can affect the whole spectrum of employment, refers to a 'wide range of research' that mostly confirms 'that people aged 50 and over experience more difficulties than their younger counterparts' (DfEE 1998: para. 2.2). The same emphasis has been apparent in a series of Private Members' Bills in recent years, that have mostly sought to eliminate upper age bars in recruitment. This is also consistent with practice abroad: legislation against age discrimination, with but a few exceptions, has generally been confined to assisting older employees only (Moore *et al.* 1994).

The advantage of this focus may be thought to be the greater practicability of such initiatives, and the priority it affords to those employees considered to be most adversely affected. The downside is not only the exclusion of some 'deserving' cases but also the possibility of policy initiatives being perceived as being at the *expense* of excluded groups. The Government seems aware of this risk, commenting in the consultation document that: 'there is a thin line between trying to help people who are most likely to experience age discrimination in employment so that they have the same opportunities as others, and positively discriminating in their favour at the expense of others' (DfEE 1998: para. 2.13). Our own evidence suggests such caution is well-founded, given these students' experience and conceptions of ageism,

and their majority view that any legislative solution should be applied irrespective of age.

In some respects our empirical work provides grounds for optimism: those about to embark on careers in industry and management appear to have more enlightened attitudes on age issues than present incumbents. Our findings differ to some degree with those of Lyon and Pollard relating to management students who had already secured some managerial experience, and whose attitudes were less positive. Attitudes may become more negative however as students age and, with experience, gain increased exposure to employment and the discriminatory cultures of organisations.

In line with other recent findings (Wilkinson and Mulgan 1995: 113), our work reveals little firm evidence of intergenerational tensions or resentment towards older age groups; but negative stereotypes regarding older workers were by no means uncommon among our sample. It is not inconceivable that these may be further fuelled if current policy approaches are perceived as unjustifiably geared to the interests of older employees. This may build resentment and foster rather than tackle ageist attitudes in the longer term.

Government concern over age matters in employment is chiefly a by-product of macro-economic and welfare concerns rather than concern over ageism per se. Post-war experience demonstrates that the policy priority accorded to specific age groups in the labour market can quickly and dramatically change with events. Political and public concern over age discrimination is most evident when wider concerns coincide with those of the age lobby. This seems too fragile an alliance to allow a sustained, broad-based attack on ageism in employment that is unconstrained by current labour market, commercial and welfare pre-occupations, nor confined to particular age categories. It is rarely argued that efforts to tackle other forms of oppression such as sexism or racism should be similarly constrained. An elaborate, inclusive, anti-ageist strategy that on occasions challenges commercial imperatives and government priorities will encounter formidable opposition, but to do otherwise may prove self-defeating.

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NOTE

1 It was necessary to assume that the category of 'performance uninfluenced by age' follows naturally at the upper end of the age categories. In addition, as the distributions for non-manual employees were positively skewed, they were subjected to a logarithmic transformation to attain an approximately normal distribution – a necessary criterion for t-tests (and subsequently the ANOVA procedure).

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