



## Article

# Unfolding Ageism: A Comparative Study of the Divided Ethnic Communities in Cyprus

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**Abstract:** The aims and objectives of this article are to present the first survey ever conducted in Cyprus of the views and perceptions that Cypriots have of old age. In particular, the researchers, Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot social workers, wanted to explore the issue of ageism within the two Cypriot communities, the Greek-Cypriot (Greek-speaking) and the Turkish-Cypriot (Turkish-speaking) populations. Against all odds, the two social workers, one from each community, began collaborating towards the exploration and comparison of social issues in the two Cypriot ethnic communities. Because the two communities have been forced to live separately since 1974, researchers aimed to investigate whether this long separation affected their views on old age. The study was also run online, and the survey was designed with the use of Google Forms. Although the results of the study are not significantly different between the two communities, the current survey explores the preservation of common cultural and social views and values among the two ethnic communities, despite their forced separation.

**Keywords:** ageism; older adults; Greek-Cypriots; Turkish-Cypriots

## 1. Introduction

The main objective of this bi-communal survey, the first of a series of bi-communal social surveys carried out within the context of social work and social welfare in Cyprus<sup>1</sup>, is to bring together social workers and social scientists from both communities in order to establish synergies after a long lasting separation due to the 1974 military coup and war. The rationale of the survey was to explore attitudes towards older people through an exploratory and comparative study among Greek-Cypriots (G/C) and Turkish-Cypriots (T/C). In case of a solution to the Cyprus problem, it is of vital importance that among other synergies, social workers are prepared to join forces and work together in order to share knowledge towards common goals. We consider this survey as a part of this effort, so that, in case Cyprus is reunited, we will have the necessary scientific knowledge to understand each other, especially the post-war generation of G/C and T/C who do not share any common ground on social issues.

As this was the first time that such a survey has been undertaken in Cyprus, the researchers stepped into an unknown research area. Based on assumptions and hypotheses, they tried to determine

<sup>1</sup> For more information on Cyprus population, politics, etc. please visit: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyprus>.

if Cypriots (G/C and T/C) still share common values, or if the 44 years of geographical division on the island has created a new social context.

Having limited knowledge of the ‘others’, yet a common ground in terms of population ageing, the researchers, a Greek-Cypriot and a Turkish-Cypriot social worker, took the initiative through this study to explore each other’s cultural aspects within the context of the division of the island and the lack of any institutional collaboration between the two communities for more than 50 years.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the extremely limited research and literature on ageing in Cyprus, especially within a bi-communal context, we consider the present study a grassroots effort to create a context where many social aspects within the areas of social work and social policy in the two Cypriot communities will be researched. Consequently, the literature review section does not include any discussion of Cyprus, because such a discussion, based on limited information, would not present any valid, objective, and reliable evidence. Therefore, the literature section is based on a general, international review covering the major aspects of ageism.

## 2. Ageism

The increase in the ageing population can lead to overreactions towards older adults. In many instances, older adults are treated with a low level of respect by individuals, as well as institutions. This behavior places older adults in a difficult and challenging position regarding their role in contemporary society, and their social integration and participation.

Although the number of older adults is increasing rapidly, this particular age group is considered a minority in terms of health and social vulnerability, and in many cases, suffers from prejudice and discrimination. Mounting evidence suggests that older adults constitute a stigmatized group in western societies, such as the United States and Europe (Richeson and Shelton 2006). A number of difficulties for older people, such as social exclusion and lack of social services or limited access to social and health care services, are the result of negative attitudes about them. In that direction, the European Commission Report (European Commission 2015) assumes that the growing older-adult population will need new social, economic, and psychological governmental policies, which will put additional strain on countries’ governments and their resources.

Although pre-industrial societies focus on group membership, modern Western societies concentrate on individuals and use chronological age as a central feature of careers in organizations such as schools, government bureaucracies, and firms (Hagestad and Peter 2005). The focus on age and age selection in various aspects of human life could lead to a feeling of superiority among younger people over older adults. As the literature demonstrates, old age in various industrial societies is viewed by both younger and older adults as a time filled with disease, trouble, and nothing to look forward to. However, someone might wonder why people react that way to old age. Most of these approaches are based on stereotypes of old age which accompany societies and, in several cases, convince older adults that they have to accept that view.

Finkelstein and Farrell (2007) built upon Fiske’s “tripartite view of bias”, adapting it for the special case of age bias. They differentiated among three dimensions of age bias by classifying “stereotyping” as the cognitive component, “prejudice” as the affective component, and “discrimination” as the behavioral component (Kunze et al. 2011). Stereotypes are socially shared cognitions and biased attitudes and beliefs that are not based on well-established facts. Age stereotypes may affect organizational members’ decision-making, evaluations, and behavior, and prevent the processing of new information that contradicts these false beliefs. Thus, age stereotypes can result in discriminatory behavior. In an attempt to explain stereotypical behaviors, and why they may contribute to age discrimination, several theories have been developed (Finkelstein and Farrell 2007). For instance, congruency theories suggest that when age stereotypes are not consistent with the perceived

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<sup>2</sup> The geographical and institutional division of the two communities began in 1963 through the so-called ‘bi-communal riots’.

work-related requirements for a specific job, age stereotypes are more likely to result in workplace age discrimination. Cognitive categorization theories suggest that age stereotypes are a result of positive and negative age schemas that are automatically activated during contact with younger or older employees (Finkelstein and Farrell 2007). In addition, the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne 1971; Riordan and Shore 1997) proposes that individuals prefer to affiliate with persons whom they perceive to be similar to themselves based on demographic characteristics, including age and social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1986), and self-categorization theory (Turner 1987), which suggest that individuals tend to classify themselves and others into certain groups on the basis of dimensions that are personally relevant to them, such as the demographic categories of gender, race, or age.

The age segregation that societies impose on their members can lead to the development of discriminatory attitudes. Like other forms of discrimination such as racism and sexism, discrimination against older adults is defined as ‘ageism’. Ageism, affecting both the young and old, is the most widely-experienced prejudice in Britain, according to the first major study into age discrimination, as Steve Connor, science editor of *The Independent* (Connor 2005) indicated. The term ‘ageism’ was first used in 1969 in the United States by Robert Butler (1927–2010), who was a physician, gerontologist, psychiatrist, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author, as well as the first director of the United States National Institute on Ageing.

When ageism was first defined by Butler, the phenomenon was viewed as something directed only at older adults, and characterized by negative valence (Hagestad and Peter 2005). Butler himself in a 2005 article explained that, from his experience in 1968 with the public’s attitudes towards older adults, he decided that, ‘prejudice was not different from the discrimination against blacks and women experienced in society’ (Butler 2005, p. 85). Therefore, for him, the term ageism came naturally because other population groups were suffering as a result of who they were, i.e., an ‘irrational prejudice’ and a ‘deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged; a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and a fear of powerlessness, “uselessness”, and death’ (Butler 1969, p. 243). Similarly, ageism has been defined by others as an attitude, action, or institutional structure that treats a person or group based on their age or any assignment of roles in society because of their age (Woolf 1998, referring to Traxler 1980).

Older adults may suffer from negative stereotypes that do not accurately represent their everyday realities and aspirations (Featherstone and Wernick 1995). Featherstone and Wernick’s statement clearly presents the misrepresentation of older adults in society because of their age. The participants in a study that was carried out among older adults in Australia expressed their discontent about negative experiences, such as ‘being seen as old’ and ‘being treated as old’ (Minichiello et al. 2000).

To test the hypothesis that ageism can influence physical function, especially mobility, research was carried out. It indicated that stereotypes on ageing have a powerful impact on the gait of older persons (Hausdorff et al. 1999). In many cases, old age is considered a general category, a time of life when people’s health deteriorates, they experience physical and mental decline, and they retire and become useless (Coupland 2009).

The fear of ageing and the multitude of prejudices against older men and women affect all areas of professional and public life (Angus and Reeve 2006). Academics, advocates, policy-makers, and health-care professionals bring to their workplace their stereotypic attitudes about older people. Literature on ageism in the workplace suggests that it arises in younger people because older adults fail to pass down (or, in the workplace, retire, so that younger people can have the job) enviable resources (succession), they consume more than their fair share of limited resources in society (consumption), and they fail to act according to their age identity (North and Fiske 2012, 2013).

Racism became a burning issue in the 19th century, and was attacked by abolitionists and civil rights movements; sexism became a burning issue in the 20th century, and was attacked by the suffrage and feminist movements (Palmore 1999). Ageism is now being attacked by gerontologists and older adults’ advocacy movements (Rupp et al. 2005). Additionally, almost 80% of older Americans claim to be the targets of ageism, which is more prevalent than sexism and racism in modern societies

(Giles and Reid 2005; Palmore 2001; Rupp et al. 2005). Although there are concrete efforts to reduce racism and sexism, very little is being done to diminish ageism because its implicit nature of ageism difficult to notice (Christian et al. 2014; Maner 2016).

The above discussion indicates that contemporary societies are characterized by feelings of *gerontophobia*. This term derives from the Greek words *geros*, which means old person, and *phobia* meaning fear. Gerontophobia is a term developed by Bunzel in 1972, who defined it as ‘unreasonable fear and/or irrational hatred of older adults’ (Palmore 2004, p. 2). In addition to these arguments, ageism is an attitude that people learn from the time they are born (Calasanti 2005).

The National Institute of Ageing in the United States agrees with Nelson, and believes that, like other forms of bigotry such as racism and sexism, ageism is a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old (Angus and Reeve 2006). In the early 20th century, old age was treated the same way as sickness (Phillipson 1998, p. 109). Provision for old age was not at first differentiated from provision for sickness (Slater 1930; Fischer 1977). Ageism is ‘a set of beliefs originating in the biological variation between people and relating to the ageing processes. A process that “legitimizes” the use of chronological age to mark out classes of people who are systematically denied resources and opportunities that others enjoy, and who suffer the consequences of such denigration-ranging from well-meaning patronage to unambiguous vilification’ (Bytheway and Johnson 1990).

Social isolation ‘kills’, and it is important to note that seniors aged 75 and older have the highest suicide rate of all age groups in most industrialized countries (House 2001; Phillipson et al. 2004). In addition, the more the global population ages, the greater the chances for older adults to live alone and become socially isolated. Especially in industrialized countries and large societies, people are more socially isolated than in traditional and small societies. The lack of social ties and social activities could cause an older person to develop depression or other mental disorders, which could eventually lead to suicide (Dennis and Lindsay 1995; Waern et al. 2003).

It is very important to see the implications of ageism for older adults, in other words, to (a) examine the effects of ageism on older adults, (b) evaluate current policies and practices, especially by professionals, and (c) if necessary, to introduce new policies and practices to reduce ageism, because this is an attitude that could affect anyone who becomes old (Dittmann 2003).

### 3. The Fraboni Scale of Ageism

Earlier ageism scales were limited to assessing only the cognitive components of ageism (only one aspect of ageism as defined by Butler 1980; Fraboni et al. 1990). The Fraboni scale of ageism (FSA) is derived from Butler’s (1978) definition, and is intended to measure the affective component of attitude. FSA was developed to measure antagonistic and discriminatory attitudes and the tendency towards avoidance, to represent a more complete measure of ageism. In the present study, Allport’s (1958) levels of prejudice were used to guide the writing of the items. Based on Allport’s levels and Butler’s definition of ageism, three factors were proposed: Antilocution (antagonism and antipathy fueled by misconceptions, misinformation, and myths about older persons), Avoidance (withdrawal from social contact with older persons), and Discrimination (discriminatory opinions regarding the political rights, segregation, and activities of older persons).

#### 3.1. Study 1

##### 3.1.1. Methods

##### Participants

In this study, 100 Greek-Cypriots took part (67 women, 33 men). Participants’ mean age was 29.18 ( $SD = 8.09$ ). With respect to employment status, 41% were students and 59% were employed.

To recruit participants, we forwarded the link to potential participants (only Cypriots) through private messages on Facebook, as well as through one-to-one invitations.

### Material

For the purposes of this paper, we employed the Fraboni instrument for ageism (Fraboni et al. 1990). The instrument consisted of 29 questions, which were answered using a five-point Likert scale (1-strongly disagree, 5-strongly agree). The instrument was translated into Greek, and the study was run online. The online questionnaire was produced with the use of Google Forms. It consisted of two parts. In the first part, the Fraboni instrument was given; in the second part, demographic information was collected (i.e., sex, age, employment status). The researchers maintained the participants' anonymity and confidentiality. Ethical approvals were obtained by the researchers' university ethics committees.

#### 3.1.2. Results

The Fraboni consisted of three scales, namely Antilocution, Discrimination, and Avoidance. The internal consistency ( $\alpha$ ) for each sub-scale was as follows: Antilocution (0.75), Discrimination (0.64), and the Avoidance (0.63). Accordingly, we estimated participants' scores for each scale. For Antilocution, the mean was 2.60 ( $SD = 0.62$ ); for Discrimination, the mean was 2 ( $SD = 0.35$ ); and for Avoidance, the mean was 1.97 ( $SD = 0.39$ ).

To examine significant effects, we ran a MANCOVA, where scale scores for each dimension of the Fraboni instrument were entered as the dependent variables, participants' sex and employment status were entered as the categorical independent variables, and participants' age was entered as a continuous independent variable. For the Antilocution and the Discrimination, no significant results were produced. For the Avoidance, there was a significant main effect of employment status [ $F(1,90) = 5.99, p = 0.016, \eta_p^2 = 0.062$ ] where students scored higher ( $M = 1.71, SD = 0.60$ ) than employed participants ( $M = 1.46, SD = 0.36$ ).

### 3.2. Study 2

#### 3.2.1. Methods

##### Participants

In this study, 141 Turkish-Cypriots took part (104 women, 37 men). Participants' mean age was 29.74 ( $SD = 8.82$ ). With respect to employment status, 36.9% were students, 51.1% were employed, and 12.1% indicated 'other' as their employment status.

To recruit participants, we forwarded the link to potential participants (only Cypriots) through private messages on Facebook, as well as through one-to-one invitations.

### Material

Similar to Study 1, here we used the Fraboni instrument, which this time was translated into Turkish. The study was also run online, and the survey was designed with the use of Google Forms. It consisted of two parts. In the first part, the Fraboni instrument was given; in the second part, demographic information was collected (i.e., sex, age, employment status).

#### 3.2.2. Results

In this sample, the internal consistency ( $\alpha$ ) for each sub-scale was as follows: Antilocution (0.74), Discrimination (0.60), and Avoidance (0.74). Similar to Study 1, we estimated participants' scores for each scale. For Antilocution, the mean was 2.71 ( $SD = 0.69$ ), for Discrimination, the mean was 2.19 ( $SD = 0.52$ ), and for Avoidance, the mean was 2.15 ( $SD = 0.64$ ).

To examine significant effects, we ran a MANCOVA, where scale scores for each dimension of the Fraboni instrument were entered as the dependent variables, participants' sex and employment status were entered as the categorical independent variables, and participants' age was entered as a continuous independent variable. No significant effects were produced.

#### 4. Ageism across Communities

To examine if there were significant differences between the Greek-Cypriot and the Turkish-Cypriot communities in terms of ageism, we ran a MANCOVA, where scale scores for each dimension of the Fraboni instrument were entered as the dependent variables, participants' sex, employment status and community (Greek-Cypriot, Turkish-Cypriot) were entered as the categorical independent variables, and participants' age was entered as a continuous independent variable. For Antilocution and Avoidance, there were no significant differences. However, for the Discrimination subscale, the scores for the Greek-Cypriot community were significantly lower ( $M = 2$ ,  $SD = 0.35$ ) than for the Turkish-Cypriot community ( $M = 2.19$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ) [ $F(1,217) = 6.33$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.028$ ].

The first factor of the Fraboni instrument is Antilocution. In this factor, we found that most of the responses were very similar, indicating the existence of common attitudes of the two communities. For instance, when subjects were asked if teenage suicide is more tragic than suicide among older Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots, scores were very close.

##### 4.1. Analysis of the Fraboni Factors

###### 4.1.1. Antilocution

In this factor, the differences were not significant. However, by analysing the responses one by one, we identified interesting points. For example, there is ignorance among participants of important issues concerning the older population. For instance, regarding the statement *Teenage suicide is more tragic than suicide among the old*, all participants had very similar scores ( $G/C = 28\%$  and  $T/C = 26\%$ ). Similarly, the scores for the statements *Many old people are stingy and hoard their money and possessions* ( $G/C = 35\%$  and  $T/C = 27.5\%$ ), *Many old people just live in the past* ( $G/C = 39\%$  and  $T/C = 31\%$ ), and *Most old people should not be allowed to renew their driver's license* ( $G/C = 27\%$  and  $T/C = 28.9\%$ ) demonstrate that many people do not understand the culture of ageing, the needs of older adults, and the feelings of insecurity and loneliness they may have.

On the other hand, the similarities of Cypriots on other issues indicate that the 44 years of separation, along with the fact that the younger generations of Cypriots grew up separated from each other, did not have any significant influence on their attitude towards older adults. One possible reason is the foundations of the Cypriot culture, which probably has been passed down to younger generations. This common culture was built in times when Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots, under a common identity (Cypriots), treated their older family members with respect, taking care of them in the absence of any state welfare to assume that responsibility.

###### 4.1.2. Discrimination

In this factor, it is obvious that Cypriots from both communities have the same or similar views reflecting their ignorance of ageing. Although, on many aspects of this factor, Cypriots share positive views of older adults, in some areas they share negative views. For instance, their responses to *There should be special clubs set aside within sports facilities so that old people can compete at their own level* were similar, with 55% of Greek Cypriots and 41.6% for Turkish Cypriots agreeing with the above statement. On the statement *The company of most old people is quite enjoyable*, they seem hesitant to indicate a straightforward approach. In all, 19% of Greek Cypriots were not sure, whereas 48% were not completely positive. At the same time, 43.2% of Turkish Cypriots were not sure, whereas 25% of them were not completely positive towards the above statement. Another area that indicates a confused approach and lack of knowledge of older adults' place in society is the responses to the



statement *Old people should be encouraged to speak out politically*, where 32% of Greek Cypriots were rather negative to indifferent, and 59.6% of Turkish Cypriots were rather negative to indifferent. The only statement in this factor that indicates a variance between the two communities is the statement *Most old people are interesting, individualistic people*, where 63% of Turkish Cypriots rather disagree whereas 99% of Greek Cypriots rather agree. We argue that, with this factor, as was the case in the previous one, many people do not understand the culture of ageing and the needs of older adults.

#### 4.1.3. Avoidance

In this factor, all participant responses from both sides indicate that Cypriots need to be educated about old age and the culture of ageing. Their responses clearly reveal that there is not an awareness of old-age culture among Cypriots in both communities.

### 5. Discussion and Conclusions

In conclusion, the above findings indicate that, in general, both ethnic communities have similar unclear and confused views of older adults. Although on some issues they have positive approaches to old age, on other issues they are not so clear, and their views are rather negative. These unclear views indicate that ignorance plays a significant role in the way both communities view old age.

The presence of ignorance among the general population, which can easily open the path to ageism, leads to the conclusion that there is a need for education about and awareness of the culture of old age, especially among younger generations through school and university curriculums. Education on old age could help younger people understand the culture of ageing, and therefore, develop a better appreciation of older adults. In a world where older adults are constantly pushed to the margins of society, it is even more vital for this kind of education to be introduced.

A thorough analysis of the results, and a stricter evaluation of the views of participants, reveal that Turkish-Cypriots prefer to keep slightly more distance from older adults than Greek-Cypriots. Some views indicate issues of discrimination and avoidance against older adults. The separation of the two ethnic communities does not seem to play an important role in the attitudes towards older adults. This finding indicates that a common culture between the two communities is preserved. Yet, it is imperative to state that it is the Euro-Mediterranean culture, as well, which maintains these commonalities. Furthermore, the findings are in line with the international literature on ageism whose implicit nature makes it go unnoticed or ignored (Christian et al. 2014; Maner 2016).

The ageism phenomenon should be taken into serious consideration by social policy-makers to promote programmes for the social inclusion of older adults. Avoiding measures against ageism could lead towards the social marginalization of the older people which could impose tremendous financial and social costs on local economies to address issues such as the deterioration of mental and physical health of older adults owing to their social isolation. It is very important to examine the implications of ageism on older adults, in other words, to examine the effects of ageism (Dittmann 2003) on older adults, evaluate current policies and practices, especially by professionals and, if necessary, to introduce new ones as a way to reduce ageism, because this is an attitude that could affect anyone who becomes old.

It is important to emphasize that the proper preparation today can benefit older adults and the Cypriot society in general, especially in the event of a future solution of the Cyprus problem and the reunification of the island. It is very important that institutions and professionals who work with older adults on both sides of Cyprus should find a common ground to work together and prepare the ground for the future. In addition, institutions should be modernized to meet the needs of older people without age-based criteria, because, at the end of the day, we are all candidates to become older. To achieve and maintain an intergenerational solidarity, it is important to provide professionals with appropriate and specialized training, as well as to inform the public through campaigns and educational programmes, combined with integrated social policies that will not exclude anyone, especially because of age.

Finally, the two researchers agree that further research is needed on larger samples in both communities to examine the attitudes, as well as any prejudices and even fears that people may have towards old age. At the same time, it would also be very interesting to examine the views of older adults and their perceptions of younger peoples' attitudes towards them.

**Author Contributions:** G.N. conceived of the presented idea, developed the theory, carried out the survey among Greek/Cypriot participants, supervised the project and wrote the manuscript in consultation with B.E. and M.A. B.E. contributed in the theory, translated the questionnaire into Turkish language and carried out the survey among Turkish-Cypriots. M.A. designed the model and the computational framework and analysed the data. All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

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