



Received: 03-12-2022  
Accepted: 13-01-2023

ISSN: 2583-049X

## **Similarities in Differences or Differences in Similarities: Beyond a Meta-Review of Ageism**

**Yok-Man Khei**

Independent Researcher, Malaysia

Corresponding Author: **Yok-Man Khei**

### **Abstract**

Negative ageism is thought to be an existence of social oppression and inequality which occurs both consciously and unconsciously. Since when ageism has been a global phenomenon after the formation of society 7,000 years ago remains unanswerable. It is at least true in a post-industrial society. The Social Closure framework, including Glass Ceiling, is employed to gain insights on how attitudes of inequalities pertaining to ageism per se or Gender-bias ageism in male-dominated societies are developed, justified and reinforced in interactions within cultural, institutional and organizational environments in this investigation. Additionally, the 'similarities in differences or differences in

similarities' co-existence is examined in random data comparisons, not forgetting the interdependency on social reality of late adulthood ageism. Notwithstanding the existence of seniority systems, ageism legislation and three key strategies as well as campaigns to reduce or tackle ageism proposed by the World Health Organization, including some positive stereotypes of older people concluded from research, meta-analysis of ageism all points to its eventual inevitability in most countries including Malaysia. Much to the regret and disappointment of older job seekers, it suggests wanting of strong interventions at both individual and societal levels.

**Keywords:** Ageism, Social Closure, Glass Ceiling, Gender-Bias, Stereotypes

### **1. Introduction**

The formation of society started as recently as 7,000 years ago when agriculture was initially employed as a mean to obtain food, let alone the construction of larger buildings and permanent settlements as far back as 2,000,000 billion years ago when the distant ancestor of homo sapiens—homo habilis—first appeared (Lamoureux, 2009) <sup>[1]</sup>. 'Post-industrialization is the next evolutionary step from an industrialized society and is most evident in countries and regions that were among the first to experience the Industrial Revolution' (Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/postindustrial-society>): examples are China, the United States, Western Europe, Korea and Japan.

How we cognitively think (stereotypes), how we affectively feel (prejudice) and how we behaviorally act (discrimination) towards people based on their age is understood as ageism; it can be institutional (macro-level), interpersonal (meso-level) or self-directed (micro-level) and has long been existing in societies one way or another though no commencement date documented.

Ageism can also happen at younger age group (Johnson & Bytheway, 1993; Larsen & Solem, 2007) <sup>[2, 3]</sup>, yet in this investigation, it only deals with late adulthood ageism.

As it stands, negative ageism (henceforth ageism) is an existence of social oppression and inequality which usually goes unconsciously. There are contributes in the formation of ageism. Regrettably, on social media, songs, greeting cards and advertising, ageist evidences abound. Unnoticedly, ageism becomes normalized and turns unchallenged in time. 'Feelings of shame based on getting older can also become internalized, constraining what people believe is possible in later life and limiting a sense of pride in the accomplishment of growing up and growing older' (WHO, 2020) <sup>[4]</sup>.

In a modern industrial world which begs for efficiency, ageism may stem from belief (performance declines with age); internalization of prevalent age norms; negative stereotypes of older people; extra costs to society; shorter tenure, et cetera in the light of technological changes and advancements. To correspond the need of combating ageism, the 194 Member States of WHO called for the development of a global campaign in 2016 (WHO, 2016) <sup>[5]</sup>.

In response to the urgency, the World Health Organization had proposed three key strategies subsequently in a bid to reduce ageism. These strategies include (1) enacting policies and laws; (2) implementing educational; and (3) intergenerational contact interventions (WHO, 2020) <sup>[6]</sup>. They are so recommended to help stakeholders eliminate or decimate ageism. As

stressed in the document, political commitment, the engagement of different sectors and actors and context specific adaptations are required to implement together to maximize their impact on ageism (WHO, 2020) [7].

Connotationally, the undertakings of boundaries drawing, identities construction, and community build-up in order to control scarce resources for one's own group, excluding others from using them in the course is dubbed as Social Closure. But Social Closure is not merely restricted to processes happening in national societies. In this study, the social world is understood to be organized at the regional or global level.

Besides ageism and Social Closure, for older women in a male-dominated society, Glass Ceiling—the difficulties in career advancements faced by women and minorities while trying to move to higher roles in a male-dominated society—remains another challenge which if truth be told adds fuel to the fire.

## 2. Research Methodology

In this review, meta-analysis on late adulthood ageism research accessed are administered for discussions and interpretations in the light of Social Closure, Glass Ceiling and Gender-bias framework with a focus on the world in general and Malaysia in particular. In addition, in random cross-country review, the “similarities in differences or differences in similarities” social co-existence is particularly taken note of. Accordingly, ‘this position has the potential to creatively combine a search for differences and unique characteristics (idiographic perspective) with a search for similarities and discovering overarching patterns (nomothetic perspective) by demonstrating that differences and similarities can co-exist’ (Wilińska *et al.*, 2018) [8].

## 3. Literature Review

‘Ageism’ was used earliest in the *Washington Post* in 1969 after Dr Robert Butler had coined the term ‘age-ism’. Indeed, research on the perceptions of older workers was first embarked back in the early fifties with the belief that ‘performance declines with age’; whereas investigation specific to ageism only emerged in the late sixties (Butler, 1969) [9].

Over the years as it evolves, negative ageism is stereotyped in the following adjectival phrases, namely, ‘poor performance’, ‘resistance to change’, ‘lower ability to learn’, ‘shorter tenure’, ‘costly’, and ‘high dependency level’ often manifest specifically in the light of technological changes and advancements (Iweins *et al.*, 2013; Ng and Feldman, 2012; Zacher, 2015; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2015; Finkelstein *et al.*, 2015, etc.). [10, 11, 12, 13, 14]

Drawing from established definitions for ageism, Nordic *et al* (2009) [15] derived a rather comprehensive analysis of ageism. In their understanding, the key dimensions of ageism are as follows: (1) cognitive, affective and behavioral; (2) positive/negative aspects; (3) conscious/unconscious aspect; and (4) typological division of levels: micro, meso and macro level.

One subtle example of age discrimination at meso-level being that a senior employee who was close to retirement was removed to a smaller office (Xia & Kleiner, 2001) [16]. Hertel & Zacher (2015) [17] found that partly due to stereotypes and myths about the older worker and aging at work, older workers usually received negative performance assessments in health and productivity review. In a study

embarked on Polish employers, over 40 percent of respondents had specific preferences on the age of their employees and were unwilling to hire older job seekers to a certain extent (Górniak, 2010) [18].

Honestly, there are perceptible bias and recognition error on the employment of older people in China. Worrying that the labor market in China is more than demand, if older people continue to engage in the competition of labor market, employment stress will be higher. As such, older people's involvement in the employment market is tantamount to ‘vying for employment and competing positions with the younger generation’. Therefore, confrontational relationship is generated between the young and the old (梅長青/Mei, 2007) [19]. Across the strait in Taiwan, the overall treatment towards the labor engagement of older people, in particular 65 of age and above, is unvalued either in legal norms or employability (蘇麗瓊/Su, 2007: 30) [20].

In the United States, more than US\$63 billion was spent in excess health care costs in the year 2018 alone. Levy *et al.* (2020) [21] hence stated, a reduction of ageism would mean a monetary benefit for society and a health benefit for older people.

Many employers in Malaysia have the perception that having older workers in the organization translates higher costs incurrence (Anisah *et al.*, 2018) [22]. Based on the findings of the study, it has been discovered that the existence of discrimination at workplace in Malaysia in terms of age, race, religion and gender in the workplace can still be felt in subtle forms and thus the Human Resource Departments are told to monitor closely on the recruitment and selection process to minimize any workplace discriminations (Kadiresan *et al.*, 2015: 37-38). [23]

Nonetheless, in Waldman and Avolio's (1986) [24] meta-analysis, positive stereotypes were identified. They found no significant differences between age groups in objective work performance measures which reflected older workers are ‘typically more engaged, loyal, and client-focused and have better social skills’. Iweins *et al.*, (2013) [25] reported that positive stereotypes towards older workers were pertaining to affection reflecting admiration, which indicated relationships with supportive workplace behavior. Furthermore, it was recognized older workers have skills and competencies often wanting among the young workers. A study on the stereotype of older workers from the perspective of younger and middle-aged workers revealed, 60 percent of the descriptors generated by younger workers and 85 percent by middle-aged workers were positive and ‘experienced’ was the most common belief surfaced (Finkelstein *et al.*, 2015) [26].

On the other hand, Social Closure which links individual change with institutional change often happens through institutional exclusion and dominant group positioning (Rosigno *et al.*, 2007:316) [27]. To Max Weber, ‘it is a way to conceptualize how power is derived from processes of exclusion’ (Murphy, 1988: 101; Weber 1922/1978: 638) [28] [29] as well as a ‘process of subordination whereby one group monopolizes advantages by closing off opportunities to another group of outsiders beneath it which it defines as inferior and ineligible’ (Murphy, 1988: 88) [30]. However, Parkin (1979: 44) [31] defined Social Closure as ‘the process by which social collectives seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles’.

The term 'Glass Ceiling' is used as a metaphor referring the difficulties in career advancements faced by women and minorities when trying to move to higher roles in a male-dominated society 'of historical, rather than cultural or geographical origin' (Khei, 2007)<sup>[32]</sup>. Glass Ceiling prevents successful women from reaching the peak of their professions which is defined demographically by documenting 'the dearth of women at the top' (Williams, 2004)<sup>[33]</sup>. 'The barriers are most often unwritten, meaning these individuals are more likely to be restricted from advancing through accepted norms and implicit biases rather than defined corporate policies' (Kagan, 2021)<sup>[34]</sup>. Moreover, self-limiting is noted another cause of unemployment for the older workers. This narrative, as Romaioli and Contarello (2019)<sup>[35]</sup> have characterized, disclosed that it is the older workers' personal decision to let go opportunities available.

### Objectives of the Study

This paper discusses and reviews the concept of ageism and its rise, or the prejudice or discrimination on the ground of a person's age (aged 50 and above), employing meta-analysis derived around the globe.

Its objectives are to exhibit the causes and consequences of ageism, including gender-bias ageism, and how it is combated around the globe besides examining the challenges and difficulties in its decimation efforts within the Social Closure, Glass Ceiling and Gender-bias paradigms, where data obtainable. In arbitrary cross-country comparisons, the social co-existence of 'similarities in differences or differences in similarities' in ageism is likewise examined.

### Discussions and Interpretations

Apropos of ageism, it is obvious that little research attention has been engaged socially relative to gender, class and race, and this trend equally holds sway worldwide.

Anbäcken and Nitta (2008)<sup>[36]</sup> discussed the position of "similarities in differences and differences in similarities" (Anbäcken and Nitta, 2008: 172)<sup>[37]</sup> as a more useful response to the challenges posed by cross-country comparisons. The static view of culture is rejected in their position, instead 'it brings to the fore sensitivity to the context and the interlinked relations between particularities and universalities'. It is a position, for instance, which enables researchers to demonstrate that the perception of daily life among older people whose spouses were either institutionalized in the East or West contexts are similar. Moreover, it might be useful to highlight in-group varieties rather than simply outlining differences between countries (Anbäcken and Nitta 2008; Johansson *et al.* 2008)<sup>[38, 39]</sup>. Such a position carries the capacity to innovatively mingle a search for differences and unique characteristics (idiographic perspective) with a search for similarities while bringing to light overarching patterns (nomothetic perspective) by revealing that differences and similarities can co-exist.

Yang (楊銘杰/Yang, 2015)<sup>[40]</sup> reports, China had entered an aging society in 1999 and his corollary for how it will roll on in the upcoming years are as follows: in 2014, 200 million; 2026, 300 million; 2037, 400 million; the year 2051 will reach the highest followed by an average scale of 300 to 400 million. And the aging of population will directly impact labor provision in China.

In the west where market economy prospers, measures implemented to deter older workers from working to increase younger workers in number has never been effective saliently; European Union experience proves that there is no significant relevance between older worker retirement and the employment of younger work force (王樹新及楊彥/Wang and Yang, 2005)<sup>[41]</sup>. Yet the misinformation and understanding of older work force evidently are the major causes of the unemployment of older workers.

As far as the measure and policy towards the aged work force is concerned, the engagement of professional and educated older people in the society of China is only restricted within the education, research and counselling fields (王莉莉, 2011)<sup>[42]</sup>. China, like most highly populated countries, has older worker surplus and it makes it hard for older people without any expertise to be re-employed successfully (李瓊業及周丹丹/Li and Zhou, 2010)<sup>[43]</sup>.

On the other hand, since age restriction prevails in China, while applying for posts in the government sector most people have accepted the actuality that 'above 35 of age there will be meagre opportunity for employment and those beyond 50 of age will not be hired' (姜向群及杜鵬/Jiang and Du, 2009)<sup>[44]</sup>. Many enterprises take the age bar into account, thus making it impossible for the older workers to be re-employed (程遠順/Cheng, 2013)<sup>[45]</sup>.

In Taiwan, a survey on the general difficulties a job seeker may face found that 70 percent of those above 50 of age face 'age bar' restriction. Employers have low willingness to employ older or aged workers attributed to their age, physical condition, response and productivity cost (行政院主計處/Executive Yuan ROC, 2007 : 73)<sup>[46]</sup>. In short, the social participation attitude towards older people, in particular 65 of age and above is unvalued either in legal norms or employability (蘇麗瓊/Su, 2007:30)<sup>[47]</sup>.

Currently, with a ratio in 2017 of over 50 persons aged 65 and above for every 100 persons aged 20 to 64, Japan tops the old-age dependency ratio of all OECD countries. This ratio is estimated to hit 79 per hundred in 2050. In fact, some of the major challenges towards the rapid population ageing in Japan are achieving further increases in living standards and ensuring the financial sustainability of public social expenditure (OECD, 2018)<sup>[48]</sup>. A study on ageism in Japan noted that perceived age discrimination at work is correlated with a lower level of job satisfaction (Ken Harada *et al.*, 2018)<sup>[49]</sup>. Many companies in Japan are 'still leery of hiring female applicants, especially for high-ranking, high-responsibility openings' though more Japanese women than ever before are continuing to work throughout adulthood, even after marriage or childbirth (Baseel, 2019)<sup>[50]</sup>.

In the same vein, age discrimination occurs most frequently in the labor market than in other areas in the Republic of Korea. Of all the cases of discrimination complaints filled, the complaints against age discrimination in employment stands at 45.1 percent (Lim, 2017)<sup>[51]</sup>. The Korea Labor Institute (KLI)'s survey of 1,433 businesses demonstrated that '51.8 percent of the cases considered age as a criterion for layoffs, of which 30.4 percent targeted those aged 50 or above for layoffs'. A filing of 49.9 percent businesses was recorded to limit the age of applicants when hiring new employees (Chang, 2003)<sup>[52]</sup>. In addition, National Human Rights Commission of Korea's survey also reported ageism

exists in employment and labor area. Among which, 93 percent of older respondents claimed that due to their age they had to retire. Age discrimination in the job search process or in the work place is experienced by 90.6 percent of older respondents (National Human Rights Commission of Korea, 2017)<sup>[53]</sup>.

Accordingly, the Act on Prohibition of Age Discrimination in Employment and Aged Employment Promotion was enacted in 2008 in the Republic of Korea. This law prohibits age discrimination from hiring to placement, wages, remuneration, education, training and dismissal. The enforcement of this law may reduce 'visible discrimination against older persons and increasing the employment security of older workers', but 'it will be difficult to change discriminatory attitudes or perceptions concerning productivity'. For the sake of practicality and productivity, older workers will not be re-employed despite the operating laws (Lee, 2008)<sup>[54]</sup>.

A study on age discrimination after employment administered by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2015)<sup>[55]</sup> informed that more than 25 percent of the respondents experienced some form of age discrimination in the workplace, and the rate of such experience was even higher among job-seekers. Specifically, negative stereotypes about older workers include, 'older workers do not like changes'; 'older workers are forgetful'; 'older workers do not like learning what to do from young people'; 'older workers find it difficult to learn new or complex things'; 'older workers do not like to work long hours'; and 'older workers do not like to be engaged in tasks involving new technologies' (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2015)<sup>[56]</sup>.

That low employment rate of older persons can be a result of ageism is figuratively evident in Europe. The employment rate of population aged 55 to 64 in Italy was recorded at 31.4 percent in 2005, about 10 percent lower than the European average. Italy actually showed the lowest employment rate of older women in Europe, which was 20.8 percent (ISTAT, 2006)<sup>[57]</sup>. In 2014, the employment rate of women and men aged 50 to 65 in Poland was 44 and 60.3 percent respectively, which was lower than European average of 54.3 and 67.1 percent. What is more, according to a study administered on Polish business owners, more than 40 percent of respondents had specific preferences towards the age of their employees and were somewhat hesitant to hire older job seekers (Górniak, 2010)<sup>[58]</sup>.

More than two decades ago in England, it was cautioned that 'negative stereotypes may be further fueled if current policy approaches are perceived as unjustifiably geared to the interests of older employees' as 'this may build resentment and foster rather than tackle ageist attitudes in the longer term'. (Lorette *et al.*, 2000: 300)<sup>[59]</sup>. Interestingly, few years back in the United Kingdom, the abolishment of mandatory age, the increase of the State Pension Age and the introduction of age discriminating legislation (ILC-UK, 2017; Lain, 2016)<sup>[60, 61]</sup> were noted in place to stimulate older people to extend their working lives.

Since 1950, the median age of the population has increased by 47 percent in Europe and by 29 percent in North America, and the trend is not about to change as informed by the United Nations Population Division. In the upcoming decades, it is expected that Asia and Latin America will age faster than today's rich nations of the West (Bershidsky, 2020)<sup>[62]</sup>.

It is predicted that by 2050, the cohort of people aged 60 or above is expected to rise from 962 million in 2017 to 2.1 billion in 2050 and 3.1 billion in 2100<sup>[63]</sup>.

In Russia, as revealed by a recent study, 'the probability of a 29-year-old getting a job is twice as high as for a 48-year-old seeking the same employment'. 'The ageism is typical of many post-communist countries without labor shortages, such as Romania, Ukraine and Slovakia. There, life expectancy is lower than in wealthier neighboring countries, and age is often associated with the crippling experience and mental baggage of the communist system' (Bershidsky, 2020)<sup>[64]</sup>.

Back in Malaysia, Yusoff & Zulkifli (2014)<sup>[65]</sup> disclosed that the employment opportunities for older persons are limited. Attributed to the lack of knowledge or better understanding of issues pertaining to aging workforce, many employers have the perception that having older workers in the organization means higher costs incurrence (Anisah *et al.*, 2018)<sup>[66]</sup>. When the number of people over 60 years old is expected to increase by 15 percent in 2030, Malaysia is anticipated to experience an aging population. 'Increase in life expectancy, declining fertility due to late marriages, reduction in the family size, more women in the workforce and urbanization are among other factors accounting for changes in the population profile' (Jacob, 2016)<sup>[67]</sup>. Like similar developing countries, Malaysia has since 2012 accorded to delay the retirement period by postponing the retirement age from 58 to 60 years (Yusoff & Yusof, 2013)<sup>[68]</sup>.

The objective of the National Population Policy in Malaysia is to raise its total population to 70 million by 2100. Notwithstanding the initial adverse responses to the policy, there are good reasons for the expansion. By and large, it is a point-of-departure effort for a population of industrious, disciplined and productive people to facilitate Malaysia for its foundation buildup, to be ready for one of the industrialized countries in South East Asia (Anisah *et al.*, 2018: 6)<sup>[69]</sup>. Statistics from the Ministry of Human Resources (2016)<sup>[70]</sup> for employment and labor in 2015 recorded that 26.1 percent of the total workforce of Malaysia are in the range of 45 years and above, with 2.8 percent belonging to the aging workforce (60 years and older). 'This number is envisaged to increase as the growth rate of the aging population increases in coming years' (Anisah *et al.*, 2018: 7)<sup>[71]</sup>.

Though both law and organizational mandates will constrain discriminatory behaviors toward older workers, assuming that 'there is not significant discretion even in the most formalized, bureaucratic environments, or that informal workplace subcultures do not play a role in shaping either gatekeeper behavior or the impact of workplace diversity policies' is indeed questionable (Rosigno *et al.*, 2007: 317)<sup>[72]</sup>.

Simultaneously, Social Closure, functioning as a theoretical orienting frame is critical since it not only pushes scholars to touch on the extent of inequality, 'but also the mechanisms and processes through which status inequalities are developed, unfold and are reinforced in the course of interaction and within cultural, institutional and organizational environments' (Rosigno *et al.*, 2007: 330)<sup>[73]</sup>.

### Summary of Meta-Analysis

From accessible research, the most common positive belief

found on late adulthood ageism is their experience, let alone their skills and competencies usually falling short of in younger workers.

Of all the documented findings around the globe on ageism of the negative type, features such as Social Closure, Glass Ceiling and Gender-bias can be identified notably.

While stressfully committed to reducing or tackling ageism in practice, countries across the world are in fact exhibiting the co-existence of similarities and differences pattern, let alone Social Closure, Glass Ceiling and Gender-bias functioning as theoretical orienting frames.

These social features on ageism identified can be summarized as follows: incessant growing number of older work force as a social reality (nomothetic); more than \$63 billion was resulted in excess health care costs in the year 2018 alone in the US (idiographic); crippling experience and mental baggage of the running system in communist countries (idiographic, Glass Ceiling); older workers translate higher cost incurrence and shorter tenure in Malaysia (nomothetic, Glass Ceiling); negative stereotypes may be further fueled if policy approaches are perceived gearing to the interests of older employees in the UK (idiographic, Glass Ceiling) yet remedied policies were implemented later to stimulate older workers to extend their working lives (nomothetic, Social Closure); lower productivity in Korea (nomothetic, Glass Ceiling); preferences on younger age of their employees in Poland (nomothetic, Social Closure); lowest employment rate of older women in Europe in Italy (idiographic, Glass Ceiling, Gender-bias); mere education, research and counselling area open for older work force in China (idiographic, Social Closure); prevailing negative stereotypes about older workers in Australia (nomothetic, Social Closure, Glass Ceiling); female applicants excluded from high-ranking, high-responsibility openings in Japan (idiographic, Social Closure, Glass Ceiling, Gender-bias) and age bar below 50 in Taiwan (idiographic, Social Closure).

#### 4. Conclusion

Like similar others, advantages monopolized by one group blocking another group of outsiders thought to be inferior and ineligible from accessing opportunities, including stereotypes of older workers, is common and has resulted in late adulthood ageism and gender-bias ageism. They develop through the process of institutional justification, internalization (self-directed) and societal reinforcement, which at the end of the day turns into an inevitability despite the existing positive stereotypes, seniority systems, ageism legislation implemented and the three key strategies and campaigns proposed by the World Health Organization.

Based on the meta-analysis obtained from scholars globally and current scenario on aging workforce in Malaysia, it could be concluded, if not oversimplified, that several initiatives to reduce ageism are required to ensure employment for the aged group. These initiatives are, namely, seniority systems, the delay of retirement period, the enforcement of law on prohibition of age discrimination in employment and aged employment promotion and the implementation of educational and intergenerational contact interventions. To function effectively, unwavering commitment, engagement and executive power among others, need to be at play.

As the discussions of this paper only based on the findings of scholars from different countries lacking its own field

data, limitations exist inevitably; yet it evidences and summarizes the extant actuality that older workers of both genders are either limiting themselves due to age norms internalization or generally being oppressed and discriminated, be it consciously or unconsciously in diverse cultural contexts. Furthermore, 'similarities in differences or differences in similarities' co-existence pattern within any one country or countries in terms of the actuality of and remedied efforts on ageism is evident. Having said so, there is no gainsaying that ageism or gender-bias ageism is an actuality beyond boundary.

In sum, besides the existence of Social Closure, Glass Ceiling and Gender-bias, external variables such as the COVID-19 pandemic (December 2019-now), the global recession generated by Russia-Ukraine conflict (February 2022-now) as well as the escalating US-China economic/political confrontation, in one way or another further close off older job seekers' from being re-employed; it consequently contributes to their dismay at a global level despite the existence of positive ageism stereotypes and combating efforts. Without strong interventions at the individual, societal and institutional levels, late adulthood ageism will not be decimated or eliminated, if ever possible.

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