

# Experiences and Expressions of Ageism:

**Topline Results (UK) from Round 4  
of the European Social Survey**

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# Accessing the European Social Survey Data and Documentation

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The European Social Survey provides free access to all of its data and documentation. These can be browsed and downloaded from its website: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>.

Specific initiatives have been developed to promote access to and use of the growing dataset, including EduNet and NESSTAR; both of which are available via the ESS website.

## EduNet

The ESS e-learning tool, EduNet, was developed for use in higher education. It provides hands-on

examples and exercises designed to guide users through the research process, from a theoretical problem to the interpretation of statistical results. Eight topics are now available using data from the ESS.

## NESSTAR

The ESS Online Analysis package uses NESSTAR which is an online data analysis tool; documentation to support NESSTAR is available from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (<http://www.nesstar.com/index.html>).

Public attitudes matter in democratic societies. They reflect what citizens believe, want, fear and prefer. They are difficult to measure, are often unexpressed, and cannot be inferred from electoral choices alone. Nor can they be gleaned from media opinion polls which tend to give momentary and incomplete glimpses of attitude formation and change. The European Social Survey provides detailed accounts of public attitudes and behaviour utilising high quality scientific methodologies and repeat measures over time.

This UK issue of the ESS Country Specific Topline Results series provides an introduction to key issues in the UK from leading academic experts in the field. The series goes beyond a simple presentation of the data, providing references to theory and detailed academically informed analysis. It is hoped not only that the series is informative but also that it will inspire others to utilise this rich data resource.

**Rory Fitzgerald**  
*ESS Director*

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The Experiences and Expressions of Ageism module was designed by Dominic Abrams and Luisa Lima at the Lisbon University Institute (ISCTE-IUL) and Geneviève Coudin at Descartes University Paris, in collaboration with members of the ESS Core Scientific Team. It was fielded in ESS Round 4 in 2008 and its development was supported by Age UK, UK Economic and Social Research Council, UK Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Institute of Ageing in Portugal.

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# Experiences and Expressions of Ageism: Topline Results for the UK from Round 4

**Dominic Abrams and Hannah J. Swift**

## Introduction

Ageism is the stereotyping of, and discrimination against, someone based on their age. Just like other forms of prejudice, ageism is a bias which devalues individuals on the basis of their perceived group membership. Ageism is a significant social issue in European societies, affecting individual and societal well-being.<sup>1</sup> A key factor in reducing experiences of ageism and expressions of prejudice is to promote solidarity between different generations. This is recognised by the designation of 2012 as the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations (EY2012), which has aimed to highlight the importance of creating opportunities for people to stay connected with labour markets, to participate in society and to maintain independent living throughout the life course.

The European Social Survey module in 2008 included 55 questions on Experiences and Expressions of Ageism and was fielded in 30 countries across the European region. Using data from the module, we explore people's experiences of age discrimination and the solidarity between generations. We specifically focus on findings from the UK, based on a representative sample of 2,352 respondents. The questions asked in the module are based on theories within psychology that suggest people's attitudes towards different age groups in society provide insight into how people of different ages interact, connect and provide support for one another, which are key elements of intergenerational solidarity and successful ageing for both younger and older people. Moreover, research in psychology particularly recognises the importance of

intergenerational ties and support to overcome ageist attitudes and assumptions faced by younger and older people.

## Experiences and Expressions of Ageism - Concepts, measures and theories

Unlike group memberships based on gender or ethnicity, age is continuous albeit with moveable boundaries. This means that people may experience ageism in different ways at different ages, in different contexts and perceive it to be more or less serious. Anyone can be a victim of ageism. However, an important question is how people's personal experiences of ageism relate to their perceptions of societal attitudes to age. The first part of this report explores people's experiences of ageism including the relationship between ageism and well-being and the impact of ageism on beliefs about how different age groups are viewed by society.

The second part of this report explores issues of intergenerational solidarity. Prejudices are dependent on people categorising each other into groups. It is important to understand whether there is consensus over where the boundaries of 'old' and 'young' are positioned because those boundaries determine who is likely to be vulnerable to negative age stereotypes and age discrimination. Perceived age group memberships such as 'young', 'middle aged' and 'old' are not fixed. There are also many different possible age thresholds that divide people into age groups (e.g. for insurance policies, education, pensions and so on) and there are likely to be a number of individual and contextual influences that determine who is labelled 'young' or 'old'.<sup>2, 3</sup>

Age categorisations provide distinctions between the self and others or between 'us' and 'them'. The perceptions of boundaries between different groups also frame social attitudes and relationships because people are more attracted to others perceived to be more similar to them. Understanding the extent to which people view members of different age groups as similar provides an indirect index of people's sense that they share common goals and interests and therefore how likely they are to engage with each other.

The module also explored the extent to which people have intergenerational friendships. This is important because the age structure of social networks has implications for ageism. The extensive literature on intergroup contact<sup>4</sup> demonstrates that positive experiences of contact between members of different groups forms the basis of positive attitudes and behaviours between these different group members and could reduce prejudice.

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*“Positive personal relationships, most notably friendships across group boundaries, produce more positive attitudes and feelings, and reduce negative stereotyping.”*

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These positive effects are generalised to the out-group as a whole. Research shows that older people with closer intergenerational contacts are less vulnerable to negative consequences of age stereotypes, discrimination and social exclusion.<sup>5</sup> Institutional and spatial age segregation in society may restrict the age range of people's social networks, which in turn limits opportunities for meaningful interaction with people across different age groups. Accordingly, intergenerational friendships are an important indicator of an individual's risk for discrimination or social exclusion. The extent to which people are able to maintain social networks has implications for health, well-being and quality of life. Social networks may be particularly important for

older people as they provide a source of social support that enables, facilitates and maintains independence in later life.

### Topline Findings from the UK

- Ageism is the most commonly experienced form of prejudice, affecting both younger and older people.
- Ageism takes different forms but is often experienced as being treated with lack of respect because of one's age.
- Experiencing ageism is associated with lower reported sense of well-being.
- Respondents under 70 view ageism more seriously than those over 70.
- Experiences of ageism are associated with perceiving ageism to be a serious problem in society.
- Ageism has a more profound impact on the attitudes and beliefs of people over 60 than those aged 35 and under.
- On average people perceive youth to end at 35 years and old age to begin at 59 years.
- People's perceptions of the end of youth and beginning of old age depend partly on their own age and gender.
- Most respondents (48%) regard people in their 20s and people in their 70s as two separate groups within the same community.
- Most people have friends in their own age group, but only 34% of people aged under 30 had friends aged over 70 and 44% of people aged over 70 had friends aged under 30.

### Experiences of ageism

The ESS module asked three questions about people's experiences of prejudice based on age, gender and ethnicity. Twenty eight per cent of UK respondents said they had experienced prejudice based on age, compared to 24% who had experienced prejudice based on gender, and 15%

based on race or ethnicity. Ageism appears to be the most commonly experienced form of prejudice.

Ageism can be experienced at any age. As Figure 1 below shows, more respondents aged 30 and under reported experiencing ageism than any other age group. This high prevalence of ageism among younger respondents could reflect challenges of the transition into adulthood in terms of others' expectations about their rights and responsibilities. However, it is also worth noting that younger respondents were also more likely to report experiencing gender and ethnicity based prejudice, perhaps suggesting that younger people are more attuned to inequalities and prejudices.

Respondents were also asked about the different kinds of ageism they had experienced – in particular, whether they had experienced lack of respect because of their age and whether they had been treated badly because of their age. Overall, 41% of respondents said they had experienced a lack of respect and 23% of respondents said

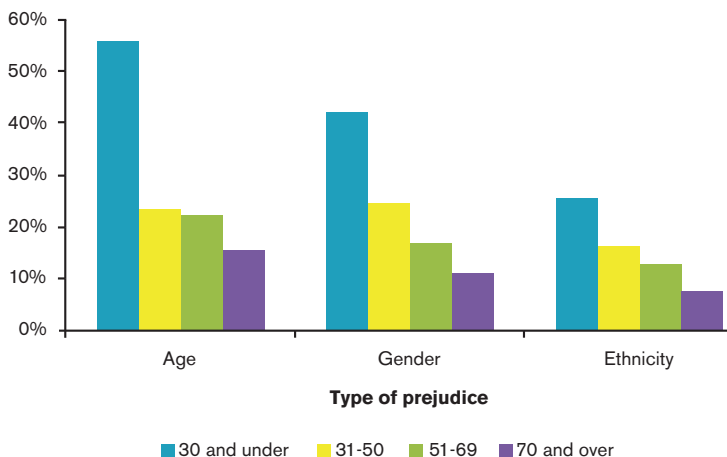
they had been treated badly because of their age. Women were more likely to experience a lack of respect (46%) than men (39%) because of their age, but there was no difference between men's and women's experiences of being treated badly. This could suggest that age prejudice is expressed differently towards women, or that women perceive this lack of respect more strongly.

Across all age groups and across the three measures of ageism (experience of age prejudice, experienced lack of respect and been treated badly because of age), just under half (46%) of respondents said they had experienced at least one of these forms of age prejudice.

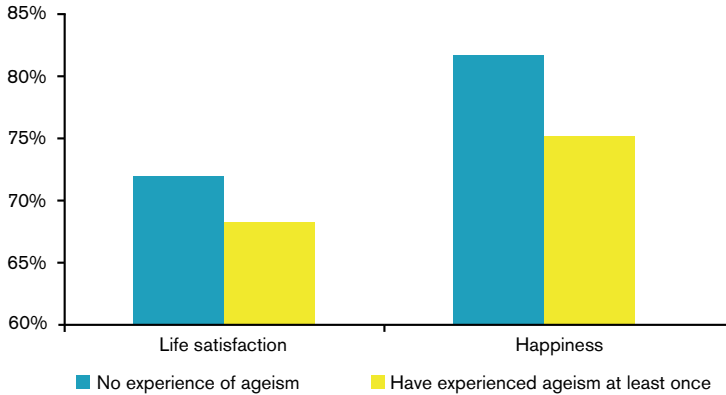
### Experiences of Ageism and Well-being

Respondents were also asked two questions about their well-being; life satisfaction (how satisfied with life as a whole, '0' = extremely dissatisfied to '10' = extremely satisfied) and happiness (how happy are you, '0' = extremely unhappy to '10' = extremely happy).<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1: Percentage of respondents who experienced each type of prejudice by respondent's age group**



Source: European Social Survey – UK data, Round 4, 2008 (N = 2352)

**Figure 2: Experiences of ageism, life satisfaction and happiness**

Source: European Social Survey – UK data, Round 4, 2008 (N = 2307)

Experiences of ageism are associated with lower life satisfaction and happiness even after controlling for the impact of two major influences on well-being: respondent's health and income (see Figure 2).

Ageism was most strongly related to lowered life satisfaction and happiness among people over 70. Among this age group those who experienced ageism reported 16% lower life satisfaction and 14% lower happiness compared with people who had not experienced ageism.

### Perceived seriousness of ageism

UK respondents were also asked how serious they considered 'discrimination against people because of their age' to be. Sixty one per cent of respondents said that age discrimination was 'very' or 'quite' serious. This perception varied by respondents' age group, with fewer people aged 70 and over perceiving ageism to be serious problem (50%) than respondents under 30 (63%),

those aged between 31 to 50 (69%) and those aged between 51 to 69 (64%).

These age differences may be attributable to the different forms of ageism experienced by older people. Older people are more likely to experience more subtle forms of ageism (such as being patronised), which they may be less likely to recognise as unacceptable. In comparison, younger people are more likely to experience overt criticism, because they are viewed with relatively less respect combined with greater feelings of envy.<sup>2</sup> It is also possible that these age differences reflect a greater awareness in younger age groups to issues surrounding equality, prejudice and discrimination.

Regardless of respondents' age, those who had experienced ageism were more likely to view ageism as a serious or very serious problem. There is a difference of 17% in the proportion of people who perceive ageism to be serious among those who had experienced ageism compared with those who had not.

## Experiences of ageism and attitudes to age

People's experiences of ageism are likely to have a profound impact on their attitudes to age and their beliefs about how their age group is viewed in society. Depending on their experience, people may become more aware of negative stereotypes, which may make them more vulnerable to other negative experiences. This section reports the relationship between people who have / have not experienced ageism and their attitudes and beliefs about how younger and older people are viewed in society respectively. The age boundaries used in this analysis are based on the UK's average perceptions of the end of youth and beginning of old age (see next section on age categorisation).

People aged 60 and over who say they have experienced ageism are:

- More likely to think that people over 70 are afforded lower status in society compared to those who did not report experiences of ageism,
- More likely to believe that people over 70 are viewed as less competent and with less respect and,
- More worried that employers would show preference towards people in their 20s compared to people in their 40s or older.

Respondents aged 35 and under who had experienced ageism were only slightly more likely to think that people in their 20s are viewed as less competent compared to those who had not experienced ageism. These results suggest that older people who have experienced ageism are more likely to adopt and recognise negative stereotypes and societal attitudes towards their own age group, while younger people are less likely to do so.

## Intergenerational solidarity

Intergenerational solidarity involves people's connections and mutual support for one another across different generations and age groups. In the ESS module, solidarity is reflected by age categorisation, the perceived similarity between age groups and friendships across age groups.

### Age categorisation

It is important to understand people's perceptions of age groups, to see who might be vulnerable to ageist attitudes. The process of identifying and classifying others into these age groups is known as age categorisation.

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“ESS respondents were asked to estimate the age at which people stop being described as 'young', and to estimate the age at which people start being described as 'old'.”

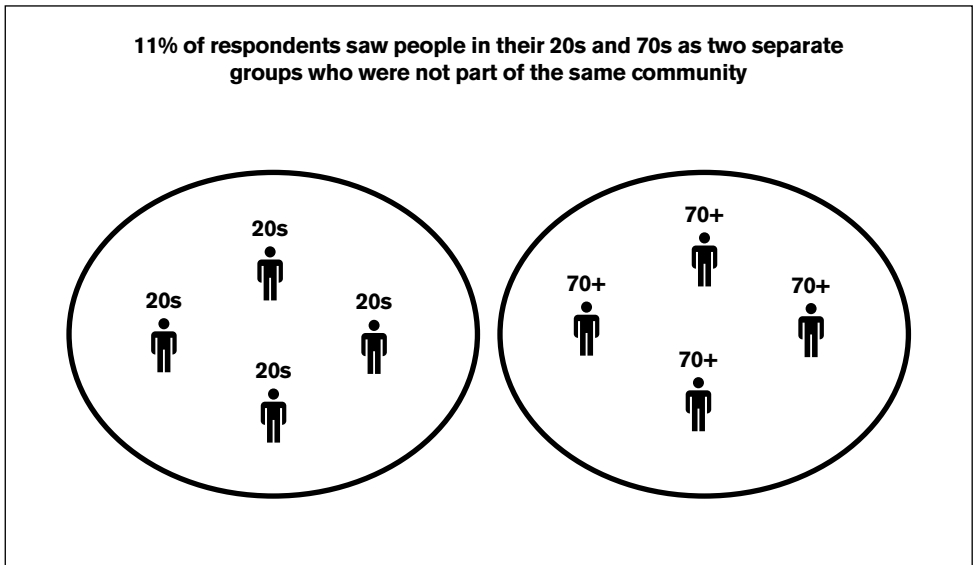
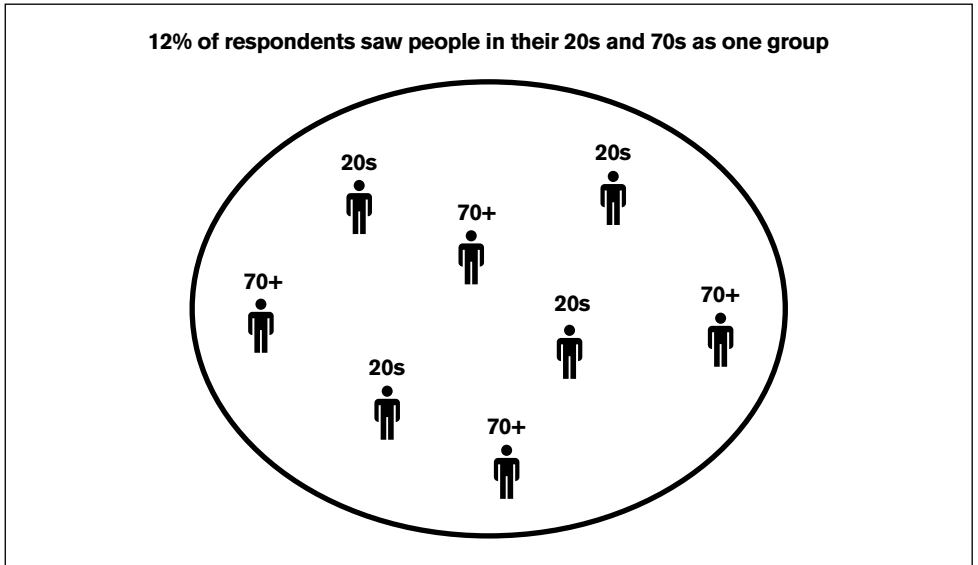
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On average, respondents from the UK perceived youth to end at 35 years and old age to begin at 59, which may mean that people below 35 and over 59 may be particularly vulnerable to ageist attitudes. However, the placement of these age boundaries varies by respondent's own age group and gender.<sup>6</sup> In line with this, perceptions of the end of youth and onset on old age increase with respondent's age, and women perceive the end of youth and onset of old age to be 3 years later than men.

### Perceived similarity between younger and older age groups

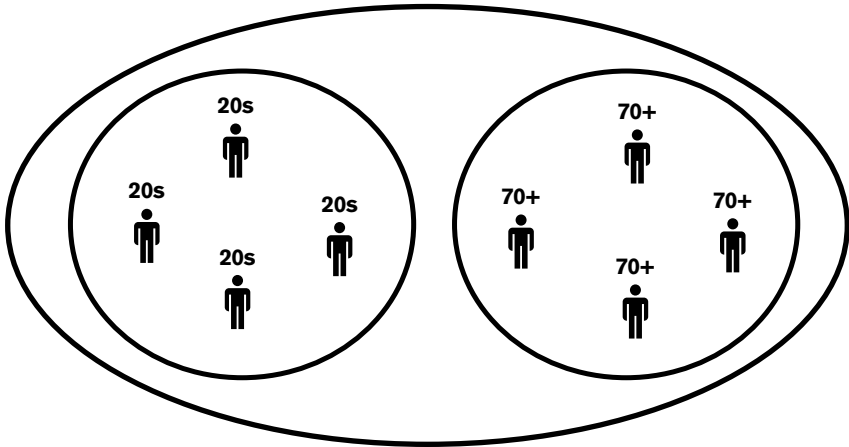
Perceived similarity between social groups is important for harmonious intergroup relations. The more people view others as similar to themselves, the more likely they are to hold positive attitudes and behave inclusively towards them.<sup>7, 8</sup> Conversely, viewing one's own group as very different or distinct from another group creates a psychological barrier between them. ESS respondents were asked how they saw people in their 20s and people over 70 (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Perceived similarity between younger and older age groups

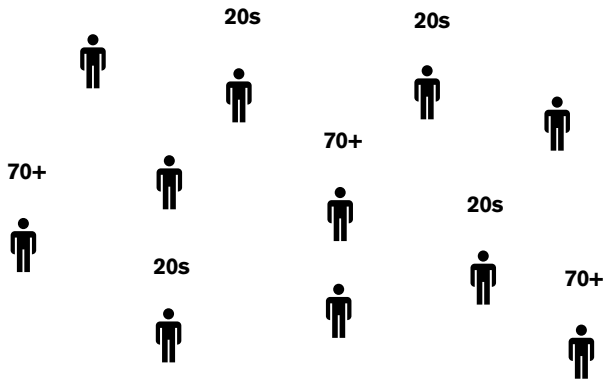


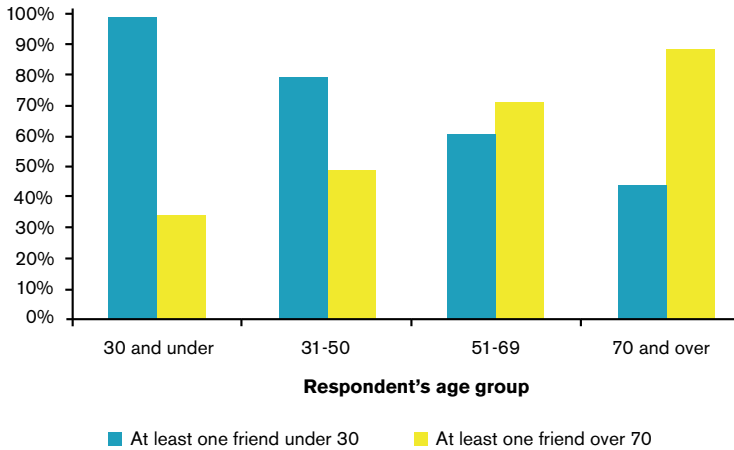


**46% of respondents saw people in their 20s and 70s as two separate groups within the same community**



**31% of respondents saw people in their 20s and people in their 70s as individuals rather than as groups**



**Figure 4: Relationships with people under 30 and over 70 by respondent's age.**

Source: European Social Survey- UK data, Round 4, 2008 (N = 2325)

The perceived similarity of people in their 20s and 70s varies by respondent's age group. Older age groups were less likely to view people in their 20s and in their 70s as two groups within the same community and more likely to think that they should be seen as individuals.

### Intergenerational friendships

To get a sense of whether respondents have meaningful voluntary interactions with people from different age groups, they were asked how many friends, other than family members, they had under the age of 30 and over the age of 70 – age boundaries which most people would regard as clearly distinguishing between young and old.

Across the UK 39% of respondents said they did not have a friend over the age of 70, compared to 29% who said they did not have a friend under the age of 30. The number of respondents who reported having friendships with people under 30 and people over 70 varied by respondent's

age group (see Figure 4). Those under 30 were more likely to have other friends under 30, but 66% stated they had no friends over the age of 70. People over the age of 70 were more likely to have friendships with those also over the age of 70 (88%), but over half of these respondents (56%) said they had no friends under the age of 30.

### Conclusions

Here we have presented some topline results from the ESS module on experiences and expressions of ageism for the UK. The findings illustrate some interesting and potentially important age differences in attitudes to age and impacts of age discrimination.

Ageism is experienced across age groups and equally affects men and women. It is more commonly experienced than prejudice on the basis of gender or ethnicity. Ageism is characterised more by being treated with a lack of respect than with being treated badly. Being treated with a

lack of respect on the basis of age was felt more strongly by women than by men. A common misconception is that ageism only affects those categorised as 'old'. However it's important to note that ageism affects both younger and older people, and that a higher percentage of younger and middle aged people perceived it to be a serious problem than people over 70. The lower perceived seriousness of ageism amongst people over 70 could be explained by its perceived inevitability. Those aged over 70 may view ageism as an inevitable consequence of growing older. Alternatively they may find it difficult to recognise the more *patronising* form of prejudice, which they are more likely to experience, as prejudice and hence as unacceptable. Independent of their own age, ageism was perceived to be more serious amongst those who had experienced ageism than those who had not.

In line with previous research, we have found that experiencing ageism is associated with lower subjective well-being in terms of both life satisfaction and happiness. The negative association between experiencing ageism and reported life satisfaction is largest among people over 70.

We were interested in understanding further how experiences of ageism may influence people's perceptions of their own age group. We looked specifically at the experiences of ageism and perceptions of age of people aged 35 or below, and among people aged 60 or above. Those aged 60 or above who had experienced ageism were more worried that employers show preferences for younger workers, perceived the status of people over 70 to be lower and thought that people over 70 were viewed as less competent and viewed with less respect compared to those who had not experienced ageism. These findings highlight that older people who experience ageism may feel more vulnerable to negative images and assumptions about their age. Respondents aged 35 and under who had experienced ageism were

more likely to think that people under 30 were viewed as less competent. However, there was no difference in the perceived status of their age group, suggesting that ageism experienced by younger people is less likely to be internalised.

Determining the age points and labels that people use to define age categories provides insight into how stereotypes about each category are applied and who they apply to.

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*“Women tend to perceive youth to end and old age to begin later than do men.”*

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In addition as people get older, they seem to re-categorise age boundaries, perceiving youth to end later, and old age to start later. The relativistic nature of age categorisation means that during the life course people's affiliation to different age groups changes, as does their relationships with others of different ages.

The more that people view others as similar to themselves, the more likely they are to hold positive attitudes and behave inclusively towards them. Respondents were most likely to view people in their 20s and in their 70s as 'two separate groups within the same community' followed by seeing them as 'individuals rather than one group', or 'two groups not part of the same community'. These perceptions are encouraging and important for harmonious intergroup relations and intergenerational solidarity.

The data also show that social networks are structured by age, which has implications for ageism, social care and exclusion. Not surprisingly, younger and older people are more likely to have friendships with others of a similar age. The majority of young people do not have friends over 70 and vice versa. This could be because people treat age as an indicator of their similarity to others, informing their decision to include those others among their social relationships. Age categories

are also segmented and reinforced by legal and organisational structures, such as education and the workplace.

### Where next?

The ESS data on ageism provide a framework for understanding people's attitudes to age, and their experiences of age discrimination. The data provide evidence based indicators that can inform UK policy on issues surrounding age equality and anti-discriminatory legislation. They also provide an insight into avenues for tackling some of the issues that affect older people and all of us as we age, such as negative attitudes to age, isolation and exclusion. They are important for a) understanding people's experiences of growing older, b) understanding processes that contribute to age discrimination, such as how age groups are perceived throughout the life course and c) understanding how people's experiences influence their perceptions of age, or how their perceptions of age influence their experiences.

Indicators within the Experiences and Expressions of Ageism module can be used to inform policies that encourage age-friendly societies and inclusive communities for all ages. They can also be used to identify which particular aspects of attitudes to age should be targeted to change public perceptions of both younger and older people in order to challenge some of the apparent negativity and ageism in society which can prevent people from participating within the community or the workplace.

There are several questions associated with psychological theories of prejudice that can also be explored using ESS data. We explored some of these in a research report for the UK DWP,<sup>9</sup> which examined European level differences in attitudes to age by testing the influence of a number of population, economic and policy level indicators that differed between countries. Moreover, the ESS data allow researchers to see whether these theories hold for different ESS countries and also draw comparisons between ESS countries. For instance, our work with Age UK has compared attitudes to age in the UK with those in other countries,<sup>9, 10</sup>

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### Endnotes: Technical details

<sup>1</sup>Following the ONS convention to use 7 and above to indicate satisfaction with life, responses of 7 and above were given a value of '1', responses below 7 were given a value of '0'.

Where a 'difference' has been mentioned this refers to significant statistical difference where 'significance' refers to differences which are confirmed to be reliable at the probability criteria  $p .05$ .



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## Notes

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# About the ESS

The ESS is a biennial survey of social attitudes and behaviour which has been carried out in up to 34 European countries since 2001. Its dataset contains the results of over 200,000 completed interviews which are freely accessible. All survey and related documentation produced by the ESS is freely available to all.

## ESS topics:

- Trust in institutions
- Political engagement
- Socio-political values
- Moral and social values
- Social capital
- Social exclusion
- National, ethnic and religious identity
- Well-being, health and security
- Demographic composition
- Education and occupation
- Financial circumstances
- Household circumstances
- Attitudes to welfare
- Trust in criminal justice
- Expressions and experiences of ageism
- Citizenship, involvement and democracy
- Immigration
- Family, work and well-being
- Economic morality
- The organisation of the life-course

The ESS has applied to become a European Research Infrastructure Consortium, hosted by the UK.

## Current governance arrangements

Supported up by a formidable array of multinational advisory groups (a Scientific Advisory Board, a Methods Group, Question Design Teams and National

Coordinators) the ESS is designed and coordinated by seven institutions

(its Core Scientific Team):

City University London

GESIS, Mannheim

NSD, Bergen

University Pompeu Fabra,

Barcelona

The Netherlands Institute

for Social Research/SCP,

The Hague

Catholic University of Leuven

University of Ljubljana

Find out more about the ESS and access its data at [www.europeansocialsurvey.org](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org)



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