Ageism is the stereotyping or discrimination of a person or group of people because of their age.

Defining Ageism

Since the inception of the term (Butler, 1969), the concept of ageism has been applied to a myriad of contexts, which can be looked at broadly and narrowly, depending on the concern (Bytheway, 2005). Butler's general definition of ageism references it as stereotyping and discriminating specifically against the old (Butler, 1995). The Gray Panthers' founder, Maggie Kuhn, envisioned the concept of ageism as an opportunity for both older adults and youth to bond over a common concern. Her definition included both ends of the age spectrum, proposing that a young person can be discriminated against because of their age in the same way as an older person (Bytheway, 2005).

Negative, Elder-centric Ageism

Some academics extend the discussion of ageism even further. Palmore asserts that ageism is "any prejudice or discrimination against or in favor of any age group," opening the concept to multiple perceptions and interpretations (Palmore, 1999). This approach of including positive and negative ageism gives credence to the notion that ageism has an impact in both directions. It logically follows that if a force such as negative ageism can have a detrimental impact then its opposite, positive ageism, may have a beneficial one. Many of the studies referenced in this website address the effects of both positive and negative ageism. Measuring the product of both types of ageism gives insight into the mechanisms by with ageism operates. The tendency of some researchers, Levy in particular, is to emphasize the power of positive age priming because it gives insight into ways of counteracting negative ageism's impact. Nonetheless, without diminishing the importance and potential effect of positive ageism or that experienced by youth, this website focuses on demonstrating the negative implications of ageism. Thus, unless otherwise noted, "ageism" references solely negative ageist attitudes and their outcomes on older adults. The limited scope of this working definition is not intended to diminish the importance and potential impact of positive ageism or that experienced by youth. It is only meant to simplify the course of this discussion.

Further Reading:

Implicit Ageism and Explicit Ageism
Embodied Ageism
Theories of Ageism
Sociological Levels of Analysis of Ageism

Works Cited:

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Bytheway, B. (2005). Ageism. In M. Johnson, The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing (pp. 338-339). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Palmore, E. (1999). Ageism Negative and Positive (second ed.). New York, NY: Springer.