

TRUTH IN LOVE

Ageism and Ableism: An American Obsession

By Parris J. Baker
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A recent Associated Press NORC^[1] poll reveals that a majority of Americans, 18 years and older, are concerned about the age, mental ability, and physical agility of both presidential candidates and their competence to lead the nation. As Americans prepare to vote for the 47th president of the United States, current political pundits and water-cooler commentators alike have facilitated discussions centered on three defining characteristics of each candidate: their age, their physical agility and mental and cognitive acuity. If reelected, President Joe Biden, born Nov. 20, 1942, will be 82 years old and remain America's oldest president. Former President Donald Trump, born June 14, 1946, will be 78 years and, if reelected, would replace Joe Biden as the oldest U.S. president by the end of his term. President Biden's recent debate performance has heightened this issue.

Since the Industrial Revolution there has been a diminishing esteem and appreciation for older Americans. The general expectation of aging adults moving through middle age (35-60 years) is they begin to engage in activities of generativity – investments that benefit future generations.

Recent age-related stereotypes, prejudices, and platitudes reflect American discomfort with the aged and the aging process, particularly from, but not limited to millennials (born between 1981 -1996) and Generation Z (born between 1997-2012) cohorts. The generalized perception from most millennials and Gen Zer's excoriates Baby Boomers. The "prescriptive stereotypes^[2] (belief about how older people should behave)" fall into three categories:

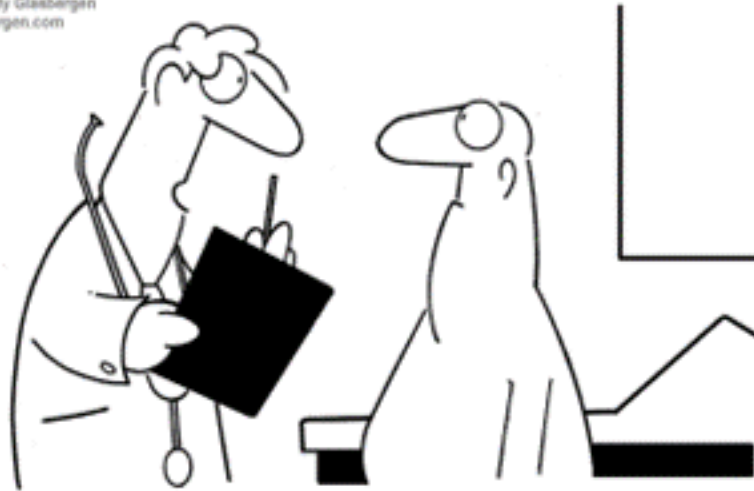
1. Succession of enviable resources – “move aside, it’s my turn! (willfully withdraw from economic, political, and social activities)”
2. Limited Consumption of shared resources – “don’t waste resources on old people. (younger people feel disproportionately disadvantaged)”
3. Symbolic Identity Avoidance – “don’t try to be young (maintenance of age-related boundaries.)”

American’s preoccupation with age, agility, and mental acuity may be our disdain or disparagement of difference and found rooted in two interrelated aging concepts: gerontophobia and gerascophobia. Gerontophobia is a psychopathological defense mechanism or coping strategy to mitigate one’s personal fears of older adults; an unreasonable, perverse fear and loathing of the elderly, which may include oneself. Gerascophobia is the irrational fear of the process of growing older and is exacerbated by the sensibilities of senescence, the gradual biological deterioration of the living organism. As we age, issues of morbidity (illness) and mortality become much more pronounced and salient.

Associated with our fears of the aged and the process of aging are the harmful practices of ageism and ableism. Ageism is “the systematic discrimination against older people.”^[3] Dr. Robert Butler believed that ageism is as harmful as other forms of discrimination because it prohibits access to opportunities and places unwarranted limitations or restrictions on aging individuals.

Ageism is a byproduct of the Industrialization Revolution. Beginning in Great Britain and France, the Industrial Revolution has been characterized by the increased use of machinery, industrial manufacturing, skilled labor, and technology. Rapid and historic transformations also occurred in political, socio-economic, and cultural institutions. During this transformative period, Western cultures have become much more youth centered. Significant changes, most unintended, in how people lived, worked, viewed family, community and treatment of the elderly were consequences of the Industrial Revolution. Industrialized countries view older adults as more difficult and more expensive to train, retrain, and retain. The guiding perception was that younger workers have a higher ROI value (return on investment) than aging workers. Until the Social Reform and Civil Rights Era of the 1960s the ecological transformations favored younger, able-bodied, male workers. In Eastern cultures and developing countries, where communal living and agrarian economies are common, society tends to venerate and value older adults and view them as wise sages and not “old geezers” to be tolerated.

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"I recommend hip replacement surgery for older men who aren't as hip as they used to be."

Americans also struggle with ableism – discriminatory practices, cruelty, or prejudices against individuals with disabilities. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibited employer discrimination against individuals with disabilities.

Recognizing that people with disabilities would need protection from heartless and inhumane treatment, the federal government's definition of disabilities was purposely broad to include physical, mental, emotional, and cognitive conditions. Historically, treatment of people with disabilities distinguished first their condition with little or no regard, respect, and compassion for their humanness. Therefore, people with disabilities experienced "infanticide and starvation, and were burned, shunned, and isolated, strangled, submerged in hot water, beaten, chained and caged, tortured, gassed, shot, sterilized, warehoused, sedated, hanged, and used as recreation and amusement[4]."



For better or worse, Americans subject most potential leaders to an “eye test.” Leaders must possess the look of a strong leader (physical characteristics that are appealing and desirable). People tend to choose leaders, influenced by the “halo effect.” The halo effect is a cognitive bias that correlates positive attributes, intelligence, smart, and trustworthy, to individuals perceived to be attractive.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, the governor of New York (1929-1932) and the 32nd president of the United States (1933-1945), was physical disabled, contracting polio sometime in 1921. To pass the eye test of most Americans, the majority of pictures or

portraits of FDR find him sitting behind a desk to maintain the profile of a strong, able-bodied man.

Roosevelt is often perceived as the president with a disability. The United States has had individuals with disabilities, past and present-day, who served as commander in chief:

1. James Madison – epilepsy
2. Woodrow Wilson – paralysis due to stroke
3. Franklin D. Roosevelt – paralysis due to polio
4. Dwight D. Eisenhower – learning disability, dyslexia
5. John F. Kennedy – dyslexia and chronic back pain
6. Ronald Reagan – hearing impairment
7. William “Bill” Clinton – hearing impairment
8. Joseph Biden – speech disorder – stuttering

Each of these men found methods to accommodate their disability or to modify their environments to successfully fulfill the duties of the presidency. Consider the Presidential Hall of Fame: All four of the presidents featured on Mount Rushmore had a disability.



Mount Rushmore Presidents: All Had Disabilities

1. George Washington – cognitive disorder – learning disability
2. Thomas Jefferson – cognitive disorder – learning disability, Dyslexia
3. Theodore Roosevelt – visually impaired, partially blind in left eye
4. Abraham Lincoln – psychological disorder – chronic depression, mood disorder

The intersectionality of ageism and ablism will influence American perception synergistically. Synergy is defined as the combined power of a group of things when they are working together that is greater than the total power achieved by each working separately^[5]. Hotly contested political deliberations regarding the age, mental ability and physical agility of both presidential candidates and their competence to lead the nation will consume Americans until Election Day Nov. 5, 2024.

Unfortunate for the future of America is that we are not having discussions to identify how we have promoted two presidential candidates who most Americans find undesirable. Choosing the lesser of two undesirable candidates is not the way we should elect the 47th president of the United States. America's obsession with age and ability may blind us from seeing a profoundly important and necessary trait for the president of the United States – character.

References

[1] AP NORC at the University of Chicago (National Opinion Research Center) Many are concerned about Biden's mental fitness and job performance. March 4, 2024. [Here](#).

[2] North, M.T. & Fiske, S. T. (March 6, 2013). Act Your (Old) Age: Prescriptive, Ageist Biases Over Succession, Consumption, and Identity. *Sage Journals* 39(6), [Here](#).

[3] In 1968 Robert Butler coined the term ageism. Dr. Butler, a practicing physician and gerontologist, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his book, *Why Survive? Being Old in America* in 1976.

[4] Marini, I., Graf, N. M., & Millington, M. J. (2017) (2nd ed.). *The History of Treatment Toward People with Disabilities. In Psychological Aspects of Disability: Insider perspectives and Strategies for Counselors*. Springer Publishing. DOI: 10.1891/9780826180636.

[5] Cambridge Dictionary. [Here](#).

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