

GENERATIONAL STEREOTYPES AND AGE-RELATED BIASES TOWARD SENIOR FACULTY: THE ROLE OF STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT: *The paper investigates how higher education students perceive older faculty members (aged 55 and above), with a focus on age-related stereotypes and prejudices, and their impact on educational interactions and academic experience. The study employs a qualitative approach, using group interviews, and identifies several major themes: the perceived rigidity of senior professors, biases shaped by prior schooling experiences, discrepancies between students' expectations and teaching styles, the ambivalence of attitudes, as well as the role of institutional culture in perpetuating or reducing biases. The findings confirm that prejudices toward teachers are strongly influenced by individual and affective experiences but can be reshaped through positive contact, intergenerational mentoring, and inclusive institutional policies. The conclusions emphasize the need for continuous professional development programs, comprehensive evaluation systems, and an institutional anti-ageism movement that promotes intergenerational equity and values diversity within the academic environment.*

Keywords: *Age-related stereotypes; ageism; higher education; senior faculty; intergenerational mentoring; student prejudices.*

1. Introduction

Age represents one of the most visible and socially charged dimensions of human identity. In the university environment, age differences between professors and students generate complex dynamics in which experience and authority intersect with expectations of innovation and adaptability. Although the university is traditionally conceived as a space of diversity and critical thinking, the intergenerational relationships that shape it are not free of tension. A major contributing factor is the set of stereotypes and prejudices associated with the age of academic staff, particularly those over 55.

The scholarly literature shows that age-related stereotypes are ambivalent: senior faculty are perceived positively through attributes such as “wisdom” and “warmth,” but also negatively, through associations with rigidity, resistance to change, or lack of digital competence (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; North & Fiske, 2015). These representations influence both student evaluations and professors' self-perceptions, as well as their responses to pedagogical innovation. In addition, such stereotypes are embedded within a broader institutional context, shaped and reinforced or mitigated by university policies,

organizational culture, and evaluation practices.

Against this backdrop, the present research examines how higher education students perceive older professors and how these perceptions influence educational relationships, learning experiences, and the academic climate. Using a qualitative approach based on group interviews, the study investigates the mechanisms through which generational prejudices emerge and persist, as well as the conditions under which they may be reduced through positive educational experiences, intergenerational mentoring, and inclusive institutional practices.

The paper is structured into several sections: the theoretical framework concerning age-related stereotypes and prejudices in education, the analysis of empirical data, and, finally, conclusions and recommendations for developing a university climate grounded in intergenerational equity, valuing the experience of senior faculty, and fostering open and innovative educational relationships.

2. Generational stereotypes and their impact on perceptions

Age-related and generational perceptions are shaped at the intersection of social stereotypes,

cultural norms, and psychological mechanisms of self-reflection. Levy (2009) argues that internalized attitudes toward aging can function as self-fulfilling prophecies, influencing older adults' health, motivation, and behaviour. A comprehensive analysis by Hausknecht and Trevor (2020) highlights that age-related perceptions range from positive attitudes toward experience and maturity to forms of internal stigmatization and expectations of decline. Age identity is therefore not merely a biological outcome but a socio-cultural construct that integrates life experiences and normative pressures.

A distinctive dynamic emerges when the label "generation" is used as a perceptual reference point. Weiss and Zhang (2020) demonstrate that such labels generate different representations than those associated with simple age groups, producing ambivalence in the evaluation of competence and social status. While historically consolidated generations tend to receive relatively favourable symbolic recognition, groups defined exclusively by chronological criteria ("older adults") are frequently placed in stigmatized categories.

This discrepancy shows that generational identity contains a symbolic component that transcends mere chronology.

Another significant factor is the discrepancy between chronological age and subjective age. Chopik et al. (2018) show that individuals over 55 typically perceive themselves as 10–15% younger than their actual age, a phenomenon that can positively influence interaction with students and attenuate distancing stereotypes. In the academic environment, this subjective perception has concrete effects on students' deference and empathy toward senior faculty, contributing to smoother relational dynamics and to recognition of their pedagogical experience.

Theories of ageism, discussed by North and Fiske (2015), introduce an additional normative dimension: society tends to project expectations of productivity, digital adaptability, and continuous engagement onto older adults. When these prescriptions are not perceived as being met, intergenerational tensions intensify, and perceptions of inefficiency arise. In universities, this form of prescriptive ageism translates into critical judgments regarding senior professors' capacity to employ modern teaching methods and digital tools.

2.1. The positive and negative dimensions of generational stereotypes

Generational stereotypes shape the ways in which students evaluate the teaching effectiveness of professors over the age of 55. On the one hand, positive attributes such as practical wisdom, extensive experience, and moral authority may enhance the professional and methodological credibility of senior academics. On the other hand, negative representations are frequent, including perceived rigidity and difficulties in adapting to technological change, reinforced by contemporary social norms that valorise flexibility and digital competence.

Ambivalence of perceptions. Generational labels can generate evaluative patterns distinct from those associated with simple age categories, producing ambivalence in the attribution of competence and social status. This variation illustrates that "generation" functions as a symbolic rather than merely chronological marker (Weiss & Zhang, 2020).

Prescriptive ageism - Normative expectations projected onto older adults (productivity, digital adaptability, continuous engagement) lead to more critical evaluations when such expectations are not perceived as being fulfilled. In the university context, this form of prescriptive ageism manifests through judgements concerning senior professors' ability to use modern teaching methods and digital tools (North & Fiske, 2015).

Subjective age and the educational relationship - The discrepancy between chronological age and subjective age is associated with a sense of closeness and authenticity, which may increase trust and empathy within educational interactions (Chopik et al., 2018).

Students' direct experiences - Perceptions are strongly shaped by concrete interactions. Collaborative, dialogic, and supportive experiences may reduce stereotypes, whereas predominantly frontal teaching and communication perceived as reserved may reinforce representations of inaccessibility. Manifestations of ageism in higher education have been documented comparatively among younger and adult students (Arias Fernández et al., 2018).

3. Stereotypes and age-related prejudices in the educational environment

In universities, age-related stereotypes are organised, according to the Stereotype Content

Model, along the axes of competence and warmth. Professors over the age of 55 are frequently placed by students in the “high warmth / low competence” quadrant: they are perceived as empathetic and well-intentioned but underestimated with regard to adapting to pedagogical innovation and digital technologies. This ambivalence produces practical consequences: although their theoretical expertise is acknowledged, methodological rigidity and reluctance towards e-learning tools are often noted (Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2007).

Positive stereotypes may enhance students’ deference and respect towards senior faculty. Nездoly, Tulk and Mantler (2019) show that students perceive them as possessing deep expertise and an ability to provide historical contextualisation of content, reinforcing the perceived relevance of the educational act. In contrast, negative stereotypes are grounded in prescriptive ageism, which demands that adults aged 55+ be consistently productive, flexible, and receptive to change. Failure to meet these expectations translates into subtle sanctions, from lower evaluations on “digital competence” to reluctance in seeking feedback or mentorship (North & Fiske, 2015). Arias Fernández and colleagues (2018) report that students evaluate older professors more harshly when they observe reserved body language or a teaching pace perceived as resistant to spontaneous interventions, interpreting such cues as signs of inaccessibility and reduced emotional engagement.

These interpretive frameworks produce bidirectional effects. First, on professors: anticipating critical evaluations regarding “digital competence” can induce performance anxiety and avoidance of innovation, leading to the reactivation of traditional methods and reinforcing the perception of “resistance to change”. Second, on students: the perception of “warmth without competence” can shift the classroom dynamic towards a vertical pedagogical model where respect coexists with passivity. As a result, the frequency of feedback-seeking decreases, active participation declines, and academic dialogue becomes increasingly limited.

4. The formation of prejudices through prior experiences

Age-related and generational prejudices do not emerge in a vacuum; they develop gradually,

shaped by the accumulation of earlier experiences with teachers or peers from different age groups. Repeated exposure to examples that confirm an existing expectation strengthens the mental association between a group and an attributed characteristic. For instance, students who have previously encountered senior lecturers who engaged less with digital platforms may generalise this trait to other professors of a similar age. In parallel, positive experiences with younger lecturers may reinforce the complementary stereotype that youth is associated with flexibility, whereas advanced age is linked to rigidity. Over time, such generalisations acquire normative force, shaping students’ course choices and influencing how they relate to senior academics.

Once formed, students’ expectations function as a filter that shapes subsequent relationships. The self-fulfilling prophecy theory (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) demonstrates that teachers’ expectations influence students’ performance; conversely, students’ expectations shape how they engage in interactions with their lecturers. Research on educational ageism suggests that negative anticipations regarding the digital competence of senior faculty may reduce students’ likelihood of seeking technical support or participating in multimedia activities, thereby reinforcing perceptions of inefficiency. Conversely, when senior lecturers are associated with valuable practical expertise, students tend to show greater respect and deference, which enhances academic dialogue and the quality of interactions. Thus, prejudices operate not only as cognitive labels but also as behavioural predictors that determine the quality and depth of educational relationships.

Feedback serves as a crucial resource in validating or counteracting prejudices. Winstone et al. (2018) define “feedback literacy” as students’ capacity to interpret, evaluate, and integrate feedback in order to improve their performance. When feedback is consistent, varied (written, audio, peer review), and grounded in clear criteria, it supports learning while also providing senior lecturers with opportunities to demonstrate competence and adaptability. In such cases, age-related prejudices are reduced through practical evidence. By contrast, when feedback is vague, unilateral, or lacking transparency, students may perceive senior academics as inflexible or distant, even when this perception is inaccurate. Consequently, the quality of feedback

becomes a mediating mechanism between stereotype and lived educational experience.

5. The impact of institutional culture on prejudices

Institutional culture plays a decisive role in the ways prejudices are either reinforced or reduced. Academic policies and managerial practices may operate as amplifiers of age-related bias or, conversely, as protective mechanisms. The literature shows that institutions which promote intergenerational mentoring and collaboration between academic staff of different ages contribute to reducing perceptual discrepancies and to creating a more inclusive educational climate (Arias Fernández et al., 2018; North & Fiske, 2015).

Professional development and continuous training programmes, including those focused on digital competencies, support senior academics in adapting to contemporary pedagogical requirements and improve students' perceptions (Wang & Torous, 2019). In this sense, organisational culture can transform age-related stereotypes from barriers into resources. Universities that invest in inclusive policies and intergenerational support schemes communicate a commitment to valuing diversity, which has positive effects on both staff and student experiences.

6. Methodology

The investigative approach was grounded in a qualitative design, with the objective of exploring how higher education students interpret the presence and professional activity of academics in an advanced stage of their careers, specifically those over the age of 55. The choice of this methodological option stems from the need to capture in depth the social representations, attitudes, and meanings that students attribute to educational relationships shaped by generational differences.

To obtain expressive and contextualised data, the group interview method was used, deemed suitable for investigating sensitive or complex themes such as intergenerational stereotypes and prejudices. This method enables access to a collective discourse generated within a semi-structured environment in which participants express themselves freely and interact

spontaneously, thereby providing varied and dynamic perspectives on the research topic.

Participants were selected from among students enrolled in undergraduate programmes within the social sciences at the same academic institution. The discussion groups included students from the following programmes: Human Resources (years I and III), Sociology (year I), Social Work (year I), and Occupational Therapy (year I). Convenience sampling was used, while ensuring diversity in terms of year of study, accumulated educational experience, and actual interaction with lecturers from different generations.

The group interviews lasted approximately 70–90 minutes and were moderated by the researcher acting as facilitator. The facilitator's role was to maintain coherence and continuity in the dialogue without intervening in a directive manner in the content of participants' views. The interview guide had a semi-structured format, allowing a balance between thematic direction and the freedom of spontaneous expression. Methodologically, emphasis was placed on encouraging active and equitable participation among all group members.

The study adhered to established ethical principles in social science research. Participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the research, provided informed consent prior to participation, and all data were anonymised. No sensitive personal information was collected, and recordings were stored confidentially. The excerpts used in the analysis were selected carefully to prevent participant identification.

7. Results

The qualitative analysis of the data collected through semi-structured interviews explored students' perceptions and experiences regarding the age of their lecturers, with a particular focus on stereotypes and prejudices associated with ageing. Thematic coding was conducted inductively, following the methodology proposed by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014), which involves the stages of data familiarisation, open coding, axial coding, and the development of emergent themes. The analysis identified five major themes relevant to understanding generational stereotypes and prejudices within the university context.

Theme 1: Stereotypes concerning the rigidity of older lecturers - This theme reflects the widespread perception that senior lecturers display inflexibility in their interactions with students and prefer traditional teaching methods. Many participants associated them with an authoritarian, rigid approach and with limited openness to students' views. Associated codes included: authoritarian style, rejection of alternative opinions, dogmatic approach, and non-interactive teaching. These perceptions confirm that prior experiences with authoritarian teachers contribute to reinforcing age-related rigid stereotypes (Levy, 2009).

Theme 2: Prejudices shaped by earlier schooling experiences - Many students grounded their opinions about older lecturers in experiences from secondary school. Such experiences shaped their expectations and attitudes towards senior academics in higher education. This theme supports existing literature showing that prejudices are formed through earlier experiences and subsequently transferred into later educational relationships.

Theme 3: Discrepancy between student expectations and older lecturers' teaching approaches - Students frequently reported mismatches between the teaching styles of senior lecturers and contemporary learning needs, which emphasise interactivity, collaboration, and flexibility. This theme aligns with classical literature on self-fulfilling prophecies (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), demonstrating that rigid expectations intensify frustration and reinforce existing prejudices.

Theme 4: Ambivalence in attitudes towards older lecturers - A notable finding is the ambivalence expressed by students: although negative stereotypes persist, many participants also recognised the presence of older lecturers who are empathetic, adaptable, and respectful. This ambivalence reflects the mechanisms described in the literature on stereotype reduction through exposure to positive examples (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Theme 5: Institutional culture and the consolidation of perceptions - Institutional culture-through the values it communicates explicitly or implicitly-shapes the consolidation or reduction of prejudices towards senior lecturers. Rigid institutional environments tend to foster discriminatory attitudes, whereas open and supportive environments facilitate the redefinition

of educational relationships. This theme highlights the fact that prejudices are not purely individual phenomena but are also institutionalised through cultural practices.

8. Analysis and interpretation

The present study examined how higher education students perceive their relationship with older lecturers, with particular attention to the stereotypes and prejudices associated with age and to the impact of these attitudes on educational experiences. The qualitative analysis revealed five major themes that offer a nuanced understanding of generational dynamics within the university environment.

The empirical data confirm that stereotypes about older adults are often negative and deeply embedded, a pattern well documented in the literature on ageism (North & Fiske, 2015). These prejudices extend beyond the cognitive level, incorporating internalised affective components that subsequently shape behaviours and evaluations. In educational settings, critical age-related perceptions may lead to avoidance and reduced engagement, a phenomenon also observed in comparative European studies (Ayalon, 2013).

A central objective of the research was to understand how stereotypes influence students' perceptions and behaviours toward senior lecturers. The findings indicate that these stereotypes have a strongly experiential and affective basis, and their impact is intensified in the absence of dialogic and inclusive pedagogical practices. Students who had collaborative and respectful relationships with older lecturers showed clear tendencies to reassess their initial attitudes, suggesting that prejudices can be reshaped through interaction and critical reflection.

Interpreting these findings through the lens of self-perception theory (Bem, 1972) and the self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), it becomes evident that stereotypes shape not only students' evaluations of lecturers but also their own engagement in the learning process. Lowered expectations lead to minimal participation, which in turn produces perceived weak performance, reinforcing a vicious cycle of stereotyping. Moreover, the emotional dimension of the lecturer-student relationship is essential: empathy and support offered by older lecturers

were frequently cited as reasons for educational engagement. This aligns with recent literature in educational psychology that underscores the role of positive emotions in learning (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

The analysis highlights an educational paradox: although age-related stereotypes are widespread, they coexist with genuine appreciation for senior lecturers who are able to cultivate authentic and empathetic relationships. Age is not, in itself, an educational barrier; rather, it becomes the visible label attached to pedagogical practices perceived as inflexible. This conflation of age with teaching style leads to the essentialisation of age and the perpetuation of implicit discrimination (Ayalon, 2013).

8. Discussion

The study has shown that stereotypes and prejudices directed at older lecturers are not merely individual opinions but stem from a complex socio-educational framework shaped by early schooling experiences, institutional norms, and the dynamics of lecturer–student relationships. The qualitative analysis outlined five central themes: the perceived rigidity of senior lecturers, the formation of prejudices during earlier schooling, discrepancies between generational expectations and pedagogical styles, the ambivalence of attitudes when positive experiences occur, and the role of institutional culture in perpetuating or reducing bias.

The findings indicate that lecturer age functions as a symbolic marker onto which students project anxieties and evaluative judgments, directly influencing educational communication and the quality of learning. However, such perceptions are not fixed. They can be reshaped through inclusive practices and institutional policies that treat generational diversity as a resource. Universities play a crucial role in supporting senior staff through continuous

professional development, intergenerational mentoring, and teaching evaluations that account for relational and emotional dimensions, not only cognitive performance.

Promoting an anti-ageism organisational culture, grounded in the recognition of senior lecturers' experience and in the avoidance of negative generalisations, can contribute to a more inclusive educational climate. Lecturers themselves require self-reflection, openness to feedback, and the adoption of interactive teaching methods that retain academic depth while responding to the needs of new generations. Embracing diverse opinions and learning styles transforms the classroom into a space of negotiation and co-construction rather than a site of vertical knowledge transmission.

At the level of university policy, it is necessary to monitor stereotypes and age-based discrimination through surveys, focus groups, and periodic evaluations. Curricula could integrate intergenerational dimensions through joint projects, participatory research, or community service-learning programmes that highlight collaboration between generations.

The study carries the limitations typical of qualitative research: a small sample, the absence of triangulation with lecturers' perspectives, and the possible influence of the pandemic context on perceptions of technological adaptability. Future directions include extending the analysis to senior lecturers themselves, undertaking cross-national comparisons and longitudinal studies, and evaluating the impact of institutional anti-stereotype interventions.

In sum, prejudices against older lecturers reflect broader relational and cultural structures but are open to change through inclusive policies and reflective practices. Age is not a pedagogical obstacle; it can become a catalyst for academic excellence when integrated into an educational environment that is open, equitable, and humanising.

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