

CHRISTMAS 2009: YOUNG AND OLD

Retrospective analysis of attitudes to ageing in the *Economist*: apocalyptic demography for opinion formers?

Ruth Martin, registrar, Caroline Williams, registrar, Desmond O'Neill, associate professor

Centre for Ageing, Neuroscience and the Humanities, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

Correspondence to: D O'Neill
doneill@tcd.ie

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ABSTRACT

Objective To investigate the description of older people and ageing in a major weekly newspaper, influential in political and financial circles, to see whether it reflected ageing in a balanced manner, and to what extent it indulged in apocalyptic demography—the portrayal of population ageing as a financial burden rather than a scientific advance.

Design Electronic search of the digital archive of the *Economist* of articles published between January 1997 and April 2008.

Main outcomes measures Categorisation of articles as portraying population ageing as a burden or a benefit or with a balanced view.

Results Of 6306 identified articles, 262 were relevant. Most featured pensions, demography, and politics. Of these 262, 64% portrayed population ageing as a burden and 12% as a benefit; 24% had a balanced view. Most articles therefore showed a predominantly ageist view of older people as a burden on society, often portraying them as frail non-contributors. Recurrent themes included pension and demographic “time bombs” and future unsustainable costs of health care for older people.

Conclusion This negative view of older people might be influential in shaping the attitudes of readers, who include opinion formers in political and economic circles. Gerontologists (including geriatricians) need to engage with influential media, as well as helping to promote a professional development of journalists that is informed and knowledgeable about the negative impact of ageism on the wellbeing of older people.

INTRODUCTION

Ageism is the discrimination against, contempt for, abuse, stereotyping, and avoidance of older people.¹ It is a harmful prejudice and stereotype that negatively impacts on older people. The term was coined by US gerontologist Robert Butler in 1969,² and ageism is common in health care. When such systematic prejudices arise in health care, they cannot be tackled in isolation from their wider social context. Susan Sontag wrote about illness being a second citizenship and of how it was impossible “to take up residence unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it is

landscaped.”³ One such lurid metaphor is apocalyptic demography, a flawed concept that predicts disproportionate burdens arising from population ageing.^{4–6} This alarmist attitude fails to recognise the many benefits of ageing and concentrates on the negative attributes of ageing.

Official discourse on older people is often coloured by apocalyptic demography,⁴ a concept that has been adopted by policy makers in other parts of the world.⁷ Among the contributors to this misinterpretation are over-reliance on highly variable demographic forecasts,⁶ misapplication of dependency concept, homogenisation of populations of older people, failure to count in reductions in child and education spending (despite considerable increases in the numbers of older people, the “dependency” ratios in the developed world will be relatively stable from 1997 to 2015),⁸ and failure to incorporate scientific findings showing little extra impact from population ageing on health care.⁹

Classifying older people as “dependent” in the same manner as children is inappropriate and reductionist. Increasing numbers of those over 65 continue working, and the proportion is bound to increase as mandatory retirement becomes less common. Dependency ratios do not count unwaged labour, and older people do an important amount of caring for spouses. Indeed dependency ratios create a false dichotomy that ignores the relations of interdependence and reciprocity.¹⁰ Private transfers, including education, bequests, and a range of others, substantially offset public funds directed towards older people.¹¹ Older people also contribute to their own care financially, over and above their entitlements.¹² Finally, they also have a history of having supported previous generations of older people in our “pay as you go” pension system.

Tackling apocalyptic demography should concentrate on opinion formers, politicians, and in particular economists, as much apocalyptic demography is expressed in terms of threats to the economic wellbeing of society. Although the media have been recognised as a source of propagation of ageism in television^{13–17} and print,^{18,19} most research to date has concentrated on media ageism in terms of the mass

media rather than on its impact on influential opinion formers. We analysed articles in the *Economist*, a weekly magazine that has a uniquely powerful global readership, with 46% in senior management, 20% who have lobbied or advised government, and 28% who hold a position in a social or community organisation (<http://theideaspeople.economist.com>). This influence is even more marked in government circles, reaching 45% of opinion formers in US federal government and rising to 56% of opinion leaders in the congressional branch of the executive. We hypothesised that the perspective on ageing of this influential newspaper might be unbalanced, thus perpetuating apocalyptic demography and ageism at the highest levels of society.

METHODS

Using the online digital archive of *Economist* (from January 1997 to the present day) in May 2008 we performed a search using the Boolean search phrase “older” or “elderly” or “pensions” or “retirement” or “long term care.” We chose these five search terms to get a broad overview of articles pertaining to older people. The term “old” was less helpful as it covered a wide range of subjects, from cars to archaeology and oenology, and yielded an enormous number of articles. The terms “older” and “elderly” produced a higher yield of articles about population ageing and demographic changes while “pensions,” “retirement,” and “long term care” had a more direct focus on these aspects of ageing.

Two observers (RM and CW) independently read and analysed articles. Those considered relevant had at least one comment on older people. The articles isolated were then read and categorised according to their subject matter. The diversity of themes and approaches and the relative brevity of the articles was such that a formal content analysis procedure was difficult, and we took an approach based on Goffman’s stigmatisation.¹⁹ We assessed article content for stigmatisation of older people on account of their age or ageing. We classified language suggesting a less desirable or more desirable state because of older age. Before the study started reviewers discussed classification to improve inter-observer reliability and conformity.

Negative language was taken as that which portrayed older people as socially undesirable or less desirable or to have reduced personal worth or implied they were a net drain on societal resources. Conversely, positive language was defined as wording that portrays older people in a positive light and as a benefit to society. We classified articles as to whether they portrayed population ageing as predominantly a burden or a benefit or took a balanced view with positive, negative, and neutral comments in balanced proportions depending on the language they contained. We have previously used this approach in media studies on attitudes to older people.²⁰ Disagreements were resolved by a third reviewer (DO’N) and consensus.

Positive quotes

Age cannot wither them (16 April 1998)

Grandparents are now raising an awful lot of America’s poorest and most troubled children (Skipping a generation, 14 June 2007)

The new demographics that are causing populations to age and to shrink are something to celebrate (Incredible shrinking countries, 5 January 2006)

Politicians may fear the decline of their nations’ economic prowess, but people should celebrate the new demographics as heralding a golden age (Incredible shrinking countries, 5 January 2006)

The old are wealthier and healthier than ever (Over 60 and overlooked, 8 August 2002)

Negative quotes

The older they get, the more they cost (23 September 2004)

Fewer and wrinklier Europeans (13 January 2000)

They waddle slowly through the shopping malls; drive with exaggerated care on the freeways; fumble with their change at the check-out tills (Venerable elders, 22 July 1999)

After years of warnings about the “demographic time bomb” due to detonate some time around 2020 (All-clear? 13 April 2000)

Given that they all agree that a demographic “pension time-bomb” is ticking, Europe’s policymakers have done remarkably little to defuse it (Old hopes stirring, 12 October 2000)

Wrinklies (Fewer and wrinklier Europeans, 13 January 2000)

Weary crumbles (Who wants to live forever? 21 December 2000)

Granny farming (27 November 1997)

At what point does an ageing mind become a liability and not an asset (Wisdom or senility, 16 February 2006)

RESULTS

The search yielded 6306 articles, of which 262 were considered relevant. The articles included 78 on pensions, 34 on demography, 34 on the ageing population, 33 on politics, 24 on health care, 20 on retirement, 12 on the biology of ageing, nine on long term care facilities, and the remainder on a range of other issues (table 1).

The raters agreed on 256 articles, with recourse to third party adjudication on six. We found 168 articles portrayed population ageing as a burden, 63 articles portrayed a balanced view, and 31 portrayed it as a benefit (table 2). The box shows some quotes from the articles.

Content analysis showed that the topics that tend to depict population ageing in the most negative light include those on pensions and demography. Despite the fact that our study was based on a 10 year period, analysis did not show a shift in attitudes over time. The numbers of articles portraying older people in a

Table 1 | Principal theme of articles on ageing in the *Economist*

Categories	No of articles
Pensions	78
Demography	34
Ageing population	34
Politics	33
Health care	24
Retirement	20
Biology of ageing	12
Long term care of elderly	9
Centenarians	3
Euthanasia	2
Miscellaneous	13

negative or positive light were comparable between 1997 and 2008.

DISCUSSION

In researching attitudes to older people in the *Economist*, we found that nearly two thirds of the relevant articles portrayed them in a negative light, effectively as a burden to society. The subject matter in three quarters of the articles involved pensions, demography, health care, and politics; and the theme of apocalyptic demography was widespread. Older people were often portrayed as frail non-contributors to society. The alarmist words “time bomb” were commonly used in relation to demography and pensions.

That the *Economist*, a highly influential economic newspaper that prides itself on being “an enemy of

privilege, pomposity and predictability,”²¹ should have such a predominantly simplistic and negative view of older people, mirroring that found in the popular media and advertisements, is surprising. Even with latitude for its tradition of mordant humour, its articles are rife with ageist references, including referring to older people in derogatory terms such as wrinkles and crumbles. Given the influence of the newspaper—*Time* magazine describes it as “exerting an influence far beyond its circulation . . . its calm authoritativeness has made it a favorite of political and business leaders in the US as well as Britain”—the message it portrays affects not just its readers but a wider population. It would seem unconscionable that the newspaper would be openly racist or sexist, and use such dismissive descriptors for these groups, yet older people do not seem to be accorded the same degree of courtesy and critical thought.

Journalists, economists, and gerontology

Given the scale and speed of demographic change of the past 50 years, journalists and economists (and indeed all involved in the formulation and debate of public policy) need to be educated in a more comprehensive overview of ageing, ideally through the introduction of gerontology and a more balanced view of the growth and loss of ageing. A similar process has been reasonably well studied for racism in journalism.²² Encouragement is given by positive experiences with media literacy training and exposure to counter stereotypical media content that reduce stereotype activation.²³ When participants on such courses receive training in critical media engagement skills, they are more likely to proactively seek information that questions stereotyping in the media, with a reduction in the activation of both contemptuous and paternalistic stereotypes at the implicit, subconscious level. There is little evidence that ageing and ageism have the same profile as racism and sexism for journalists²⁴ and some evidence of resistance from senior journalists to the concept featuring on courses.²⁵

For economists, the challenge is more daunting, with not only powerful vested interests in the pensions industry but also deeply held beliefs about the “dependency” of older people, despite convincing arguments to the contrary. The relation between longevity and economic growth, however, is complex,²⁶ with some linking increased longevity with economic growth—the “demographic dividend.”²⁷ One calculation of this dividend is that cumulative gains in life expectancy after 1900 were worth over \$1.2m to the representative American in 2000, whereas gains after 1970 added about \$3.2 trillion a year to national wealth, equal to about half of gross domestic product.²⁸

Fortunately, some international forums have understood the need to bring economists, politicians, and gerontologists together (as well as journalists), and the World Demographic Association meetings have helped to bring about a focus on the positive as well as the negative aspects of ageing.²⁹ Palmore and

Table 2 | Content analysis of articles relating to ageing

	Positive	Balanced	Negative
Pensions	1	21	56
Ageing population	4	5	25
Demography	4	4	26
Politics	5	6	22
Health care	0	6	18
Retirement	5	8	7
Biology of ageing	3	6	3
Long term care	0	4	5
Centenarians	2	0	1
Euthanasia	0	1	1
Marketing	1	1	0
Wealthy Germans	0	1	0
Age discrimination	1	0	0
Suicide in Korea	0	0	1
Productivity	0	0	1
Technology and older people	1	0	0
Exercise and older people	1	0	0
Gadgets for elderly	1	0	0
Grandparents raising grandchildren	1	0	0
Funeral homes	0	0	1
Old musicians	0	0	1
Art	1	0	0

WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN ON THIS TOPIC

Ageism is common in both society and health care

Service provision in health care is coloured by popular discourse and narrative

Such prejudices need to be recognised to be addressed, and ageism has not yet been examined in the economics literature

WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS

There is a noticeable trend to ageism in one of the most influential economic and political magazines in the world

Geriatricians and gerontologists who want to influence policy makers to improve services for older people will need to engage in a dialogue with journalists in areas other than the biomedical literature

colleagues provide a useful overview, pointing out that ageism can be turned around by the same sort of methods that have been successful in reducing racism and sexism—education, persuasion, protest, organisation, legislation, civil suits—and by the personal examples of “successful ageing” that challenge negative stereotypes.³⁰

In defence of the *Economist*, the letters page shows a small but increasing volume of dissent to its ageist positions. In 2008 it ran a webcast from Robert Butler on whether John McCain was too old to run for the presidency (which emphasised that the presidential candidate’s age was not relevant) (http://video.economist.com/index.jsp?fr_chl=3d496f33789a66b0ac399caef4b80456973b70e2&rf=rss).

The strengths of our study include the large time span over which the articles were produced (11 years) and the wide search terms, leading to over 6000 articles being analysed. The use of Goffman’s stigmatisation concept led to a high level of reliability between observers; only six of 262 articles required a third independent review.

The weaknesses include a possible expectation of bias against older people, given that the senior author had previously analysed and described negative attitudes in the popular press to older drivers and stroke.^{20,31} We had agreed, however, to prepare this paper on the basis of the results, regardless of the outcome. There is also some chance of missed relevant articles because of the necessary constraints of our search terms. The broad range and high number and range of articles read, however, give us some reassurance in our results.

This study is not an attack on the *Economist*, but rather a manifestation of how deeply ingrained negative stereotypes and prejudices about ageing are in an influential magazine. By stimulating debate on the pervasiveness of ageism, we hope to stimulate reflection and discussion among journalists and economists as to whether or not they are fulfilling their professional ethical imperatives of balance and justice when reporting on one of the most extraordinary social changes of the past century—our increased longevity.

Contributors: DON generated the concept for the paper and is guarantor. RM, CW, and DON generated the search strategies and analysis scheme.

RM and CW undertook the analysis and classification of the articles, with DON as an arbiter for those papers where there was not concordance. All authors took part in the writing and subsequent revisions of the paper.

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