

# AGEISM IN THE COMMUNITY

Anung Ahadi Pradana<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Affiliation not available

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Anung Ahadi Pradana

<sup>1</sup>Department of Gerontology Nursing, STIKes Mitra Keluarga-Indonesia

Email: ahadianung@gmail.com

## Abstract

The increase in the elderly population in Indonesia and the aging process that occurs in the elderly group can bring negative consequences in the form of negative stigma. The negative stigma of aging is a perception that is internalized and becomes the basis for interactions in society and is known to cause discrimination, increase dependence on family and decrease productivity of the elderly in social life. This paper aims to examine the effects of the negative stigma of aging on the lives of the elderly in society. The search method used by the author is a narrative study of several scientific articles obtained in 2016-2021 from several databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, EBSCO, and CINAHL. The article search was conducted using several keywords such as “ageism”, “older adults”, “elderly”, “negative stigma”, and “aging process”. Articles were selected based on inclusion criteria which included: 1) articles written in both Indonesian and English, 2) articles were original research, 3) the population/sample in the articles were the elderly group, and 4) articles explained the negative stigma experienced by the elderly. The negative stigma of aging that is internalized in society can cause a decrease in the productivity of the elderly group in carrying out existing activities, other things that can occur include discrimination, social isolation, declining health conditions, increasing dependence of the elderly on relatives, the emergence of anti-aging movements and economic burden that must be borne by the community. Negative stigma that occurs can be prevented through the active role of all community members in 3 ways, namely: strengthening elderly-friendly policies, providing education related to the aging process for the community, and increasing inter-generational contact activities in the community. The lack of research on the negative stigma of aging in Indonesia can be an entry point for further research in revealing the image of stigma in community, public perceptions and understanding, and the effects of other evidence-based interventions that can affect the occurrence of negative stigma of aging in Indonesia.

Keywords: Elderly, Aging process, Negative stigma, Narrative study

## Introduction

Elderly is someone who has reached the age of 60 years and over (Republik Indonesia, 2004). According to the type, elderly are divided into 2 categories, namely potential and non-potential elderly. Potential elderly are elderly who are still able to do work and or activities that can produce goods and/or services, while non-potential elderly are elderly who are powerless to earn a living so that their lives depend on the help of others (Republik Indonesia, 1998).

A significant increase in the elderly population in a country can have an impact on increasing the era of the aging population. Asian countries including Indonesia have entered the era of aging population, where the

number of elderly population is more than 7% (a country is said to have an old structure if the number of elderly people is more than 7%) since 2015. The number of elderly people in Indonesia has also experienced significant growth over the last few years, data summarized from Indonesia's Infodatin Lanjut Usia in 2016 states that the increase in the percentage of Indonesia's elderly population has increased in 2013 by 8.9%, continuing to 21.4% in 2050 and become 41% in 2100 (Kementerian Kesehatan RI, 2017).

The health and welfare program for the elderly in Indonesia in the strategic plan of the Ministry of Health focuses a lot on primary health services as well as promotive, preventive, and rehabilitative prevention as priority actions taken. The direction of policies and strategies for developing healthy elderly people needs to be supported by various parties, namely the ministry of health, the ministry of social affairs in collaboration with the private sector and other government agencies to create elderly-based programs, especially in helping the elderly go through the aging process in living their daily lives in the community (Pradana, 2021).

Aging is objectively seen as a process that begins when humans are born and is experienced by all humans. Specifically, aging is the process of getting old or getting old (Miller, 2012). Healthy aging is defined as a condition in which an elderly person is in a state of physical, psychological, social, spiritual, intellectual, functional and environmental well-being (Touhy & Jett, 2018). Aging is a normal process, cannot be prevented and is not a health problem that occurs in humans, the aging process is progressive, lasts a lifetime, and can be observed or not (Allender, Rector, & Warner, 2014). A healthy aging process is influenced by several factors including a healthy lifestyle, life experiences, strong environmental support, and a positive emotional response.

Healthy elderly can be interpreted as elderly who are able to maintain physical, psychological and social health in a balanced state. This means that the elderly can adapt to changes that occur, are able to manage stress that arises, and are active in social life (Allender et al., 2014). The aging process experienced by the elderly often leads to the emergence of functional consequences, which is an effect that tends to be negative as a result of a combination of physical changes, increased risk factors, and health behavior of the elderly which can ultimately affect daily life and lead to the emergence of a negative stigma of aging in the elderly (Pradana, Casman, & Nur'aini, 2020).

The negative stigma of aging is a prejudice and stereotype against the elderly group which often has a negative meaning due to their age (Miller, 2012). This refers to stereotypes, prejudice and direct discrimination against the elderly. The negative stigma that occurs can occur institutionally, interpersonally or directly to the elderly. Institutional stigma refers to the laws, regulations, social norms, policies, and operational standards of an institution that prevent the elderly from achieving self-development. Interpersonal stigma appears in group and community interactions while direct stigma can arise due to negative perceptions internalized by community groups towards the elderly (World Health Organization (WHO), 2021).

The negative stigma of aging that occurs in the elderly in society is often the result of excessive internalization of community members which causes the emergence of a set of beliefs that serve the interests of certain groups so that the elderly group experiences gaps in the process of achieving the services needed in society (Higgs & Gilleard, 2021). The increase in the number of elderly people (silver tsunami) can pose a threat to the demographic situation and social construction in society through the dependence of the elderly on productive groups. The task of experts is to be able to contribute through recognizing the negative stigma of aging in society by conducting research on how age intersects with inequality and is considered a normal thing by society (Calasanti, 2020).

Research conducted by Ng & Lim-soh (2020) states that the number of health costs burdened by the negative stigma of aging each year can reach \$63 billion, while the negative stigma received by the elderly group can cause a decrease in productivity in living daily life, This situation may become more high-risk in the near future given the increasing number of elderly population that occurs in almost all countries and the process of stigmatization in society which is often the result of daily internalization. Based on the explanation above, the researcher took the initiative to conduct a deeper search to answer questions about the dangers of stigma of aging that occurs in society.

## Method

The search method used by the author is a narrative study of several scientific articles obtained in 2016-2021 from several databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, EBSCO, and CINAHL. The article search was conducted using several keywords such as “ageism”, “older adults”, “elderly”, “negative stigma”, and “aging process”. Articles were selected based on research inclusion criteria which included: 1) articles written in both Indonesian and English, 2) articles were original research, 3) the population/sample in the articles were the elderly group, and 4) articles explained the negative stigma experienced by the elderly.

## Results

The World Health Organization (WHO) active aging framework states that the barriers of age and aging need to be removed to increase the potential of the elderly. The importance of implementing an active aging policy has a positive tendency to reduce the negative stigma of aging (Swift, Abrams, Lamont, & Drury, 2017). Age and frailty experienced by the elderly are known to lead to the increasing challenges of the negative stigma of aging faced in society (Ye et al., 2020). The negative stigma of aging is one of the forms of social prejudice that people from all social backgrounds have to face where young people are valued more than old age and where older people are often subjected to abuse and negative stereotypes by society. Young people are more likely to have negative feelings in general towards the elderly group, while women are more likely to experience excessive anxiety about the aging process (Berger, 2017).

World Health Organization (WHO) (2021) states that the negative stigma of aging that occurs is influenced by several factors, namely intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors include demographic factors and the dependence of the elderly on social support, while extrinsic factors that influence the negative stigma of aging are influenced by the role of many social institutions including those that provide health and social care, the workplace, the media and the legal system. Berger (2017) mentions the mass media as one of the main actors causing the negative stigma of aging in society. While other research shows that older people who are still working have a tendency to choose to extend their work careers, business owners are known to be less interested in hiring an older workforce (Solem, 2020).

The condition of society that is starting to age due to the process of demographic change also brings the need to prevent stigma against the elderly group which in turn can have an impact on the perception of the community and the elderly themselves (Donizzetti, 2019). explains that the negative stigma of aging occurs due to the internalization of culture by individuals from an early age and is further strengthened through the process of socialization in society from time to time. People ultimately use their own perceptions to interpret the results of the internalization of aging that they get since childhood.

Globally, one in two people in the world has a negative stigma towards the elderly. In Europe, one in three elderly people has been targeted by the negative stigma of aging, and younger people are found to be more likely to discriminate against age than other age groups (World Health Organization (WHO), 2021). Meanwhile, the results of research conducted by Berger (2017) show that Native Americans and Middle Easterners have a more positive view of the elderly and the aging process than other regions.

A long-term study (25 years) conducted by Chang dkk., (2020) stated that from 45 countries studied there was a significant increase in the prevalence of negative stigma cases of aging over time. Furthermore, this study found that the increase in the prevalence of cases was higher in developing countries than in developed countries. This is supported by research conducted by Officer dkk. (2020) which states that of the 57 countries studied, 34 of them are classified as countries that have a negative stigma of moderate and high aging. Meanwhile, of the 83,034 respondents studied, 44% belonged to the group with low negative stigma, 32% had moderate negative stigma of aging and 24% were classified as the group with high negative stigma of aging. Despite the magnitude of the problem and its negative health impacts, aging remains a neglected global health problem (Officer et al., 2020).

The magnitude of the social impact generated by the negative stigma of aging in society requires several preventive measures that need to be implemented with the ultimate goal of increasing the quality of life and

involvement of the elderly in various activities in the community. This is supported by research conducted by Hu, Luo, Zhang, & Li (2020) showing evidence of a significant relationship between self-perceptions related to aging and health. This can be proven by the lower the negative stigma of aging experienced by the elderly, the higher the level of quality of life. There are three strategies that have proven effective to reduce the negative stigma of aging, including: elderly-friendly policies and laws, education about the aging process and preventing the negative stigma of aging, as well as routine inter-generational contacts that are routinely carried out in the community and activities aimed at increasing public awareness (World Health Organization (WHO), 2021).

## Discussion

The stigma of aging arises when a person's biological age is used to categorize and separate groups of people, which in the end can lead to injustice, material and non-material losses, and an increasingly tenuous sense of solidarity between age groups. The negative stigma of aging can reduce the level of health and well-being and is one of the biggest inhibiting factors in creating effective regulations regarding healthy aging (World Health Organization (WHO), 2021). Furthermore, Higgs & Gilleard (2021) explain that the negative stigma of aging exists in all kinds of circumstances and levels as a situation and negative consequences associated with old age.

The negative stigma of aging can be expressed unconsciously and consciously through interpersonal interactions, through socio-cultural institutions, through exposure to or contact with the legal, government, and health care systems. Seen from an ecological framework, the negative stigma of structural aging is a process in which structural institutional factors essentially encourage and reproduce negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors at the societal level. The influence of these structural institutions includes the system of policies, laws, people's attitudes, language and culture that shape institutional practices, as well as cultural representations which then reinforce the ways in which negative and age-based discrimination is implemented (Gordon, 2020).

Stigma that occurs in the elderly can be proven through several things, including: 1) The elderly are often less fortunate at work, 2) People are more irritable and take it seriously when they read of crimes committed by younger offenders, than those committed by the elderly, and 3) negative stigma causes the elderly to be often marginalized when there are research data collection activities in the community or other social activities (World Health Organization (WHO), 2021). Other common manifestations of this negative stigma include social isolation, psychological disorders, asexual behavior, lack of creativity, decreased physical and mental condition, economic burden and caregivers burden experienced by the family (Miller, 2012).

Factors that can increase the negative stigma of aging in the elderly include: low level of education owned by the community, anxiety and confusion about the relationship between aging and death, gender perspective in society, demographic, socio-economic factors, low quality of communication and interaction between the community and the elderly, cultural beliefs and social trends that are happening in society (Cooney, Minahan, & Siedlecki, 2020; Miller, 2012; Ng & Lim-soh, 2020; Officer et al., 2020; World Health Organization (WHO), 2021). The stigma of aging can cause other age groups to have a negative view of the aging process, and feel anxious about the risks due to aging that will be experienced by them (eg losing loved ones, experiencing social isolation, financial insecurity, changes in physical form, declining in health conditions and body functions) (Miller, 2012).

Several other factors that can increase the risk of the elderly being stigmatized in society include: elderly who are old and dependent on others / undergoing the treatment process, elderly who have a low life expectancy compared to other elderly, the elderly who are still working in certain occupational sectors such as the hospitality and technology sectors that require hard work, elderly who do not have a partner, unemployed elderly, elderly who have low income and who have a poorer health status, and the elderly with low education are very likely to experience the adverse health effects of the negative stigma of aging (Chang et al., 2020; Heywood et al., 2018; World Health Organization (WHO), 2021). Meanwhile, several factors that can reduce stigma in the elderly include the elderly who regularly participate in social activities that involve

inter-generational, extroverted personality, Elderly groups who actively use internet access and have access to more complete and accurate information about aging information tend to experience stigma conditions less often (Choi, Lee, Kim, Chipalo, & Lee, 2020; Miller, 2012).

Miller (2012) states that the effects of the negative stigma of aging for the elderly include depression and anxiety, lack of social interaction, low self-esteem, high risk of cognitive decline and reduced function and self-confidence of the elderly in society. The elderly often experience negative discrimination at work and when they want to shop or when using the services of others. Regardless of one's age, the negative stigma of aging is generally experienced in the form of a lack of respect or wrong assumptions (Chasteen, Horhota, & J. Crumley-Branyon, 2020). Another consequence of the negative stigma of aging is the emergence of the anti-aging movement. The anti-aging movement views aging as a process that can be stopped and lifespan as something that can be extended for decades. The anti-aging movement today is more directed at selling products that are used to prevent aging, where people are forced to think the aging process as a failure of the body (Miller, 2012). Research conducted by Levy, Slade, Chang, Kanno, & Wang, (2018) in the United States found that the total health costs incurred for 1 year due to the negative stigma of aging were \$63 billion. The findings suggest that reducing the negative stigma of aging has not only monetary benefits for society, but also health benefits for the elderly.

Prevention of wrong perceptions related to aging is an important thing to implement, one of the efforts that have been carried out to support this prevention is through global campaigns and special strategies. The global campaign to combat the negative stigma of aging will be the cornerstone for changing attitudes towards aging and forging global partnerships to build an inclusive world for all ages. These changes are critical to ensuring health and well-being throughout the life course and will only be possible through concerted and evidence-based action (Officer & Fuente-núñez, 2018).

Three specific strategies were created by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2021) and have proven effective in reducing the negative stigma of aging, including: 1) elderly-friendly policies, 2) education about the aging process and preventing the negative stigma of aging, and 3) routine intergenerational contacts that are routinely carried out in the community as well as activities aimed at increasing public awareness. Wherever possible, they should be implemented together to maximize their impact on the negative stigma of aging.

### **Recommendation 1: Invest in evidence-based strategies and policies to prevent and combat aging.**

One way to prevent the occurrence of stigma in society against the community is through the socialization of active aging which can increase the life expectancy of the elderly, increasing participation of the elderly in community activities, and reduce the risk of morbidity and mortality in the elderly. Massive socialization of active aging in society is also known to have a positive effect on other age groups besides the elderly in viewing the aging process (Miller, 2012). This is also supported by Officer dkk. (2020) which states that the possibility of a person or a country having a negative stigma against the elderly is significantly reduced with increasing healthy life expectancy and the proportion of elderly people in that country.

Research conducted by Tavernier & Aartsen (2019) shows that there are still many special policies issued by the authorities to increase the participation of the elderly in society. There are still many elderly people who are isolated from society due to various obstacles such as lack of financial resources and strong social resources for the elderly. In addition, a study in Singapore shows that policies related to access to education for the elderly are very important in reducing structural culture and internalizing the negative stigma of aging through more access to education for the community and elderly groups (Maulod & Lu, 2020).

In relation to the participation of the elderly in community activities, research conducted by Massie & Meisner (2019) shows that the role of the government in creating various policies and the community as collaborators in creating more physical activities in the community that can improve the physical health of the elderly needs to be considered to add. This is related to how the negative stigma of aging in society can affect the motivation, participation, and preferences of the elderly to spend their free time in the community.

This also applies to the working life of the elderly in society, where the conclusion that can be drawn is that even though governments in many countries have implemented anti-age discrimination policies and promoted an extended working age, The negative stigma of aging presents a barrier to achieving and maintaining a satisfying work life for the elderly. Given that older workers may not have as many resources and capabilities as possible to combat the negative stigma of aging on an individual basis, based on conditions such as age, socioeconomic status, or gender (Harris, Krygsman, Waschenko, & Rudman, 2018).

### **Recommendation 2: Provide information and education regarding the aging process based on the latest evidence.**

The negative stigma of aging is of increasing concern due to the growing older population worldwide and the youth-centered focus of many societies. Increased education about the aging process can help reduce anxiety and stereotypes about aging among society and the age group considered most responsible for the stigma that occurs in the elderly. Knowledge that is more related to the aging process and the life of the elderly is the most important factor and can have positive implications for reducing the negative stigma held by the community (Donizzetti, 2019). Another important thing that needs to be considered is the danger of inaccurate information related to the aging process in society, so that the role of the government and other related parties becomes very important in challenging this inaccurate information and providing accurate education for the community (Ashley Lytle & Levy, 2019).

The provision of educational interventions for the community is known to be able to have a positive effect on stereotypes in the elderly which is more positive in the younger age group (A. Lytle, Macdonald, Apriceno, & Levy, 2020). Meanwhile, research conducted by Barnett & Adams (2018) shows that increasing knowledge related to the aging process in society can reduce the negative stigma of aging, decreased level of anxiety about the aging process and a higher sense of optimism about death when they get older.

### **Recommendation 3: Intergenerational contacts in the community involving the elderly.**

Intergenerational social interventions that are carried out to prevent the negative stigma of aging are known to have a significant effect on attitudes, knowledge, and comfort in younger groups of people towards the elderly (the greatest positive effect occurred in women and groups of adolescents and young adults) (Burnes et al., 2019). Other research conducted by Ashley Lytle & Levy (2019) also supports the positive results of long intergenerational contact on reducing the negative stigma of aging in society. This research shows that contact can increase the respect of the younger age group towards the elderly. Another study showed that the contact between the younger age group and the elderly was able to show a more positive attitude and a higher sense of inclusiveness towards the elderly, while the same study also shows that people who have nostalgia/positive memories of the elderly are known to be more able to connect socially and have a lower desire to avoid the elderly in community activities (Turner, Wildschut, & Sedikides, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

The negative stigma of aging that is internalized in society can cause a decrease in the productivity of the elderly group in carrying out existing activities, other things that can occur include discrimination, social isolation, decreased health conditions, and increased dependence of the elderly on society. Two important points from the negative stigma of aging are the emergence of the anti-aging movement and the economic burden that must be borne by the community. The negative stigma that arises can be prevented through the active role of all levels of society in 3 ways, namely: strengthening elderly-friendly policies, providing education related to the aging process for the community, and increasing inter-generational contact activities in the community.

The low level of research on the negative stigma of aging in Indonesia can be an entry point for further research in revealing how stigma is portrayed in society, public perception and understanding, as well as the effects of other evidence-based interventions that can influence the occurrence of negative stigma of aging in Indonesia. For policy makers, the importance of rules and laws that favor the elderly and facilitate the elderly in accessing various existing social services as regulated in existing regulations about elderly welfare

deserves to be reconsidered considering the condition of Indonesia which has entered the category of an aging country (the number of elderly population >7%) and the potential of Indonesia's productive elderly to be able to play a positive role in actively developing the country.

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