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senior moment - a typical example of how older people are othered

Steven M Kaplan

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In a nutshell – 40 words

A typical example of how older people are othered, and how stereotypes of all kinds are utilised to trivialise, essentialise, and denigrate. This expression “jocularly” connotes that being older is tantamount to being forgetful or to have impaired brain function.

Article abstract – 250 words

Ageism is prevalent, usually perpetrated with impunity, and has deleterious mental and physical effects on those targeted. In addition to promoting inequality and exclusion, ageism disregards human dignity. Ageism can be positive, benevolent, or hostile. Hostile ageism includes being ignored or avoided on account of older age, using insulting age-related monikers, and being told they have *senior moments*. *Senior moment* is a derogatory, essentialising, and trivialising expression that incorrectly correlates advancing age with diminishing mental capacity. To those “humorously” utilising this phrase, any instance of confusion or forgetfulness by an older person is understood to be biologically determined on account of the deleterious effects ageing has on the brain. The persistent exposure to ageist stereotypes along with constantly being reminded that they are having *senior moments* can also be internalised by older adults, resulting in a deteriorated self-image and a *stereotype threat*. When faced with such a stereotype threat, many older adults might fear to ask for something to be repeated or explained, since this would “confirm” that they indeed have reduced mental abilities. An insensitive, inaccurate, unflattering, and insipid expression such as *senior moment* arises out of the need to employ euphemisms to placate the discomfort with older age and ageing. However, using *senior moment* to trivialise, essentialise, and denigrate older people, along with the ageing process, affects how they are perceived, which in turn influences how they are treated. All biased conceptions set the stage for shoddier treatment. All stereotypes *other*, and *senior moment* does this as well.

Body of the article – 1,840 words

The prevalence of *Ageism*, some of its harmful effects, and the *role senior moment* plays:

Ageism is *othering* based on age, particularly older age. This involves stereotypes, prejudices, exclusion, and discrimination which work to trivialise, essentialise, and denigrate older adults, as well as the ageing process.

Gullette (2019:xiii) declares that: “*ageism is the least censured, the most acceptable and unnoticed of the cruel prejudices,*” and suggests fighting *ageism* and not *ageing*. Zharovska, et al. (2022) assert that discrimination based on age is a major global issue, and similarly to any form of discrimination is a violation of human rights. They also maintain that these prejudices are based on factors that can hardly be helped, such as those of a biological or cultural nature. They go on to say that ageism has any number of manifestations which cause many harmful consequences, affecting how older people are treated in the medical, socio-cultural, socio-political, and financial spheres, all of which lead to exclusion, social inequality, poorer health, and violations of human dignity.

Based on a review of the literature, Barber (2017:88) quotes some ageism statistics, as follows:

- “84% of older Americans and 91% of older Canadians reported having experienced at least one incident of overt ageism¹, and over half of respondents reported experiencing multiple incidents.”
- “The European Social Survey found that ageism was the most commonly experienced form of prejudice within their sample.”

It could be reasonably surmised that the actual numbers are even higher, on account of a) some targets of ageism not realising they were being victimised by overt acts of discrimination, and b) a given proportion of respondents would not acknowledge such incidences on account of being embarrassed, for fear of further abuse, and so on

Barber (2017) also points out that some ageist stereotypes may also be positive (such as being good-natured or warm), which when combined by the “overall perception” that older people are lower in mental competence, result in a pitying stereotype in which older people are then patronised. In this manner, they may be thought of as lovable but “not quite there,” which can be quite demeaning to those who are more than sufficiently competent. Another significant point is made: if a younger person has a mental lapse, it is assumed that it was a fleeting thing, such as being in a hurry. If an older person were to have a similar mental slip, however, then it is a *senior moment*, which is understood to be of a more recurrent nature.

In the USA, based on their cross-sectional study involving over 2,000 participants between 50 and 80, Allen, et al. (2022) concluded that ageism is a prevalent and socially condoned phenomenon which they directly correlated with poorer health and reduced well being. Chronic physical health ailments included increased incidences of hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and ongoing pain. The higher probability of mental health issues included depressive symptoms, and a diminished sense of well being.

The most common instances of what they refer to as *everyday ageism* include “*brief verbal, nonverbal, and environmental indignities that convey hostility, a lack of value, or narrow stereotypes of older adults*” (Allen, 2022:2). They specifically mention the onslaught of antiaging commercials, and being told that they are having *senior moments* as a part of the stereotypical manner in which they are seen.

Davenport, et al. (2023) divide *ageism* into three manifestations:

- In *benevolent ageism*, they include being addressed using a term of endearment such as *sweetie* or *dear* (when hardly knowing the person), or people needlessly repeating things with the assumption that since the listeners were older they were not capable of understanding the first time.
- In *positive ageism*, they include people making reference to the wisdom acquired with age, or behaving with an added measure of respect on account of age.
- In *hostile ageism*, they refer to instances such as being ignored or avoided on account of older age, using insulting age-related monikers, and being told they had a *senior moment*.

¹ For instance, to be insulted or ignored.

Senior moment as one of the euphemisms that try to mask the societal distaste for ageing:

van den Hoonaard (2022) points out that one of the manifestations of the societal discomfort with the concept of ageing is the use of euphemisms. For example, to use *senior* or *senior ager* instead of *old* or *older adult*, or to refer to old age as the "*golden years*." She goes on to affirm that euphemisms might momentarily reduce the prejudice, but unless the societal conditions that gave rise to the prejudice in the first place are eliminated, the euphemisms themselves will soon also have similar negative connotations. By then, new, less stigmatised euphemisms will likely crop up, but the general discomfort with ageing and the othering of older people will nonetheless remain unchanged. She goes on to assert that humorous euphemisms serve to further embed ageism. Citing *senior moment* as an example, she says that it helps to neutralise the embarrassment of a momentary lapse of memory, but that the main reason that this expression is "funny" is that being old is already associated with weakened mental function. In this manner, the victims of this othering stereotype are again victimised by being the brunt of these jokes.

As an othering expression, *senior moment* quickly gained momentum:

Bonnesen and Burgess (2004) go into great detail on *senior moment*, basing an entire scholarly article on the use of this ageist expression, published just a few years after it first appeared. They conclude that the increasing popularity of this expression is indicative that such stereotypes remain as a socially acceptable norm. Here are some highlights:

- They state that *senior moment* is just one out of many negative stereotypes related to ageing.
- They point out that the first appearance in a newspaper they could find was in 1997, and that its use increased exponentially over the next three years, which was indicative of its acceptance by the [US] American culture.
- They underscore the important role the media plays in the propagation of such negative attitudes. The media reflects social attitudes, and the media shapes them.

Othering in the library:

Katopol (2016) tells about how such stereotypes adversely affect the in-library experience of older patrons. The author states that our society has so many negative stereotypes associated with older individuals, that people barely realise that they are spreading them through what they say and do. An important message here is that people recurrently judge others based on misconceptions, and simply propagate these incorrect notions without giving the matter any further thought. That is an insidious manner in which bias and exclusion work, and a part of how effective they are in othering. In the case of "forgetful seniors," older patrons are concerned that if they ask to have something written down, or need an explanation repeated, that they will be "proving" that they indeed have diminished mental ability.

This is all very ironic, since libraries are supposed to be a place where anyone and everyone should be able to acquire new knowledge in a safe and nurturing environment.

Othering on the job:

Griffiths, Thinnes, and Byers-Connon (2017) tell us how certain false beliefs and myths regarding older people can negatively affect how they are treated by those who work with

them. Manifestations of this ageism may include incorrect assumptions regarding their mental and physical abilities, and such rigid preconceptions do not help matters. The negative stereotyping that older people are subjected to may promote them to also believe such nonsense, which can deteriorate their self-image and enjoyment of life in general. They also point out that use of the expression *senior moment* encourages people to believe that older people have frequent memory lapses. The authors cite an example of an older man who was brusquely explained a new and complicated procedure to obtain health benefits. When this person asked for further explanations, the impatient younger person just repeated himself loudly, and when the older person moved on, the younger one muttered “these senile old guys.”

Perhaps if there wasn't such a prevalence of linguistically-based dividers of peoples, the younger man may have had a little more empathy.

The *othered* internalising the *othering*:

Bai (2014) explains how younger people tend to negatively typecast older people, and how this continued exposure to negative stereotypes is then internalised by the targeted group. The detrimental effects that these demeaning prejudices have on older people include a deteriorated self-perception, harm to their mental and physical well-being, and impairment of their social functioning.

Ageing stereotypes do not harm only the targeted group:

In “*Believing what you hear: The impact of aging stereotypes upon the old,*” (Bennett and Gaines, 2010) there is a journal article whose title says it like it is for all stereotypes, not just those that are ageist. The authors explain how the expression *senior moment* not only impacts older people, but also younger people “on the way there:”

- the younger people hear it and use it
- they adopt negative stereotypes pertaining to older people, including that they themselves may eventually have memory problems
- they then perceive these problems as inevitable
- when they later have a momentary lapse, the prophecy is already considered on its way to becoming fulfilled
- they then believe themselves to be on track to mental incompetence and finally dementia

This cycle is kept going by the continued mindless use of this expression. So, in excluding others with this ageist expression, those being “witty and clever” are also harming themselves.

Final thoughts:

Why should older age be equated with forgetfulness or to having impaired brain function? It must not, of course, but ageist expressions such as *senior moment* makes it appear to be so. *Othering* is usually perpetrated against people and groups that are perceived as vulnerable, and in the case of *senior moment* might also serve as a way to deal with their fears of ageing, and to feel better about themselves at the expense of *others* in the meantime. For example, some younger people might tell themselves that “*we* younger people can hear fine, remember things, and have ‘normal’ use of our brain, while *they* older people do not.”

The use of *senior moment* also presents a *stereotype threat* that can seriously diminish the quality of life of the targeted group. In this manner, the harm is being done at all times, not just when someone endures insulting age-related monikers or hears (or even self-deprecatingly articulates) an expression such as *senior moment*. It is very unpleasant to be in the position of not being able to ask something to be repeated or explained in order to not risk “confirming” these negative preconceived conceptions.

Why not exchange fearing and othering older adults and the ageing process for appreciation and respect? In this fashion, the fears and stereotypes could be eliminated, which in turn would obviate the need for expressions such as *senior moment*. An immediate solution to ending the sociocultural and sociolinguistic othering *senior moment* promotes is to simply stop using this insensitive, inaccurate, unflattering, and insipid expression.

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