Article

Beyond Ageism: A Qualitative Study of Intersecting Forms of Prejudice towards Retired Older People

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Abstract: Negative stereotypes of older people can have detrimental impacts on their mental health, hence better understanding of ageism is needed to combat ageism more effectively. Nevertheless, existing studies on ageism largely focus on the workplace, while relatively less is known about younger people's generalizations of older people in everyday neighbourhood contexts. This study investigated young adults' stereotypes of retired older people in the context of high-density residential neighbourhoods in Hong Kong, through 23 qualitative in-depth interviews. The findings counter the misconception that ageism is less prevalent in Asian societies, while uncovering young adults' novel interpretations of traditional cultural norms of respect towards older people. The findings also reveal more complex intersections between ageism, classism, and prejudice towards worldview-dissimilar older people. These findings suggest the need to broaden the scope of ageism-reduction interventions, to tackle not only age-related prejudice but other forms of prejudice. Paying closer attention to intersectional forms of prejudice can also facilitate the design of more inclusive intergenerational programs and intergenerational public spaces, both locally and internationally.

Keywords: older people; retirement; ageism; stereotypes; prejudice; intergenerational contact; high-density neighbourhoods; public spaces; qualitative research; Asia

1. Introduction

The term "ageism" was originally coined by Robert Butler in the 1960s, to refer to prejudice by one age group toward other age groups [1]. Ageism is now officially defined by The World Health Organization (WHO) as stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination directed towards people based on their age, which is most commonly experienced in later life [2]. Ageist stereotypes can be understood as "shortcut" cognitive tools which draw on incomplete knowledge and generalizations of older people [3,4]. Not all generalizations of older people are negative—the literature highlights some positive stereotypes of older people, such as stereotypes of warmth and wisdom [5].

Nevertheless, negative stereotypes of older people tend to be more prevalent. The perception of being negatively stereotyped can have negative effects on the psychological well-being of older people [6,7], which may result in lower self-esteem [8] and poorer mental health [9]. At an institutional level, ageism may lead to unfair treatment of older people in employment, legal and healthcare systems [10] (p. 2). These negative impacts explain why combating ageism has become one of the key priorities in public health and policymaking.

Despite the long history of ageism and its pervasiveness [11], scholars have noted lack of attention to ageism in previous studies on prejudice, compared to sexism and racism [9,12]. Nevertheless, in recent decades, the literature on ageism has grown considerably, such as research on ageist stereotypes in the workplace [13], and ageism in social and popular culture [14].

2. Background: Ageism in the Asian Context

One of the common assumptions is that people in Asian cultures may be less prone to ageism, because of norms that honour and respect older people [15]. However, past research suggests that ageist attitudes may be more nuanced, whereby personal attitudes towards older people may differ from the perceived normative context [15]. Furthermore, past studies on ageism in Asian cultures (e.g., South Korea) suggest that urbanization and globalization have triggered cultural changes and deepening intergenerational conflicts [16].

Rapid population ageing also means potentially greater demand on healthcare and other societal resources, while some argue that it is more difficult for the younger generation to step up due to delayed retirement of older people [9]. Other scholars argue that contemporary modernized societies are increasingly devaluing the contributions of older people in the form of wisdom sharing [17], which may have a significant impact on Eastern cultures, which used to be strongly influenced by Confucian values of respect for older people [18].

Apart from cultural changes, some scholars argue that the quality of intergenerational contact is a key factor which influences levels of ageism [19], which builds upon Allport's (1954) classic intergroup contact theory [20]. Face-to-face intergenerational contact tends to take place in the family context, especially in the form of grandparent-grandchild relationships [10] (p. 3). Beyond the family, intergenerational contact can take place in the context of service projects or intergenerational programs, which initiate face-to-face contact between biologically unrelated older and younger people [21].

Previous studies argue that Western youth have more non-family intergenerational contact, whereas Chinese youth have more family intergenerational contact [22]. However, it is not entirely clear whether such observations reflect the experiences of younger people living in high-rise, high-density cities such as Hong Kong. In the case of Hong Kong, multi-generational families are declining, meaning that younger people are less likely to co-reside with their grandparents, which may affect their frequency and quality of intergenerational contact. In addition, the high-density residential environment in Hong Kong implies a higher likelihood for younger people to encounter older neighbours in their neighbourhoods, which might increase their non-family intergenerational contact.

Thus, there is room for investigating whether younger people in Hong Kong rely more on non-family intergenerational contact (such as interactions with older people in their neighbourhoods) to form their impressions of older people. Since face-to-face contact may not be the only means by which young adults form impressions of older people, it is also necessary to explore how younger people are influenced by media representations of older people. Past research indicates that both traditional and social media may influence the ageist stereotypes which younger people acquire [23–25], such as language-based ageism in social media posts [26].

In addition, more recent studies argue that age may not necessarily be the primary factor which explains negative perceptions of older people. For example, North (2022) argues that ageism in the workplace is a multifaceted phenomenon, which involves complex interactions between workers' perceived generation (birth cohort), age (life stage), tenure (time with organization), and experience (accumulated skillset over time) [27]. Nevertheless, these studies largely focus on the workplace, while very little is known about the multiple factors which may influence younger people's perceptions of older people in other contexts, such as retirees in their residential neighbourhoods.

In view of the above research gaps, this study investigates the following major research questions, in the context of rapidly ageing Hong Kong: What are the positive and negative stereotypes held by younger people towards retired older people in their neighbourhoods? What are the factors that influence ageist stereotypes, such as cultural values, previous intergenerational contact, media representations, or other factors?

The main reason for focusing on the city of Hong Kong in Asia is because Asia is one of the regions of the world in which population ageing is most pronounced, and where

ageism is most likely to occur [15] (p. 136). In the case of Hong Kong, as of 2021, people aged 65 and above constitute around 20% of the total population [28]. The number of people aged 65 and above is projected to increase to around 2,500,000 by 2039, constituting more than 30% of the total population [29].

3. Research Methods

A qualitative approach was considered appropriate for this particular study, since it aims to understand more deeply the ageist stereotypes held by younger people, and to explore possible variations among them. In other words, the primary purpose of the study was to develop new theoretical angles to interpret ageist stereotypes, and to focus on depth instead of breadth or generalization.

Throughout this study, the term "older people" is used to refer to those people aged 65 and above, since people in Hong Kong tend to retire and withdraw their pension savings at the age of 65 [30]. Furthermore, the term "retired older people" was used in the interviews to refer specifically to those older people who are outside the labour market and living on their pension savings.

A total of 23 qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted from June to August 2021 among young adults aged 18–34. Young adults were defined as those aged below 35, since this is the definition commonly used in Hong Kong, such as the definition used in appointment of youth members to government advisory and statutory bodies [31] (p. 22). Each interview lasted for around one and a half hours.

The interviewees were initially recruited from students in the Department of Urban Planning and Design, and were subsequently recruited via snowball sampling through referrals by the students. The referrals included both students and young adults in full-time employment. It was not feasible to recruit interviewees through street interception, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and strict social distancing regulations in the city. The referrals were screened to ensure inclusion of respondents from different socio-economic backgrounds, and to ensure that the sample characteristics (gender, housing type, employment status) were as diverse as possible.

Since this research was qualitative in nature, representativeness of the sample was not a major concern. Nevertheless, the sample characteristics are briefly described here, to enable a better understanding of the background of the interviewees, and to highlight potential biases in the data. The interview sample included 48% of male respondents and 52% of female respondents, which is very close to the gender ratio in the wider population of young adults aged 18–34 in Hong Kong.

In addition, the distribution of respondents between public housing (public rental housing, subsidized owner-occupied housing) and private housing was 48% and 52%, respectively, which is very close to the housing type distribution in the wider population. Most of the interviewees had attended courses at degree level (which includes all first degree, taught postgraduate and research postgraduate courses), so they may not represent youth with lower educational attainment. Nevertheless, census data reveals that currently around 50% of youth aged 20–34 (excluding foreign domestic workers) have attended courses at degree level [32], meaning that youth with higher educational attainment constitute a significant proportion of the youth population.

The interview questions were semi-structured. Several key questions were asked, including: What are your positive or negative stereotypes of retired older people? Why do you hold (or not hold) certain stereotypes of retired older people? What do you think are the main factors that influence your attitudes, such as cultural values, previous contact with retired older people, media representations, or other factors?

The respondents were initially invited to reflect on their impressions of retired older people whom they know (grandparents or older relatives), then more specifically, their impressions of retired older people living in their neighbourhood. These questions were exploratory and were not meant to be exhaustive—interviewees were encouraged to propose other explanations of their attitudes. For example, as the interviews progressed,

interviewees referred to other concepts (e.g., education level of different birth cohorts). The interviewer added these concepts to the interview guide to facilitate probing in subsequent interviews.

The interviews were audio-recorded and manually transcribed. The qualitative data was analyzed manually by thematic coding. Since the interviews were conducted in Chinese, the transcripts were coded in Chinese and the codes were subsequently translated into English. As argued by van Ness et al. (2010), meaning easily gets lost during the translation process, which is why it is sensible to stay in the original language as long as possible, to avoid limitations in the analysis [33] (p. 315). It was not possible to recruit professional translators or expand the research team due to funding constraints. Nevertheless, the researcher responsible for coding and translation is fluent in both Chinese and English.

Coding was initially driven by the preliminary concepts identified in the literature. As pointed out by Gibbs (2007), concept-driven coding is appropriate if there are relevant concepts from the existing research literature and the researcher has hunches about what is going on [34]. As the analysis progresses and new themes emerge, further analytical and theoretical codes can be introduced. In this study, the researcher had already identified major relevant concepts from the literature on ageism, such as the role of previous intergenerational contact in shaping younger people's generalizations about older people. Throughout the coding process, the researcher made constant comparisons [34] between transcripts to ensure that the codes were applied consistently based on the code definitions.

4. Results

In total, five important themes were identified from the analysis, including: Visibility of older people in public open spaces; Conditional respect for older people; Educational divide among older people; Interaction between ageism and classism; Prejudice towards worldview-dissimilar older people.

4.1. Visibility of Older People in Public Open Spaces

Most of the interviewees did not co-reside with older relatives. Some of them recalled living with grandparents when they were in primary school, and they would still gather with older relatives during festive occasions, though such gatherings were not particularly frequent, i.e., family intergenerational contact was not as much as expected. In addition, some of the interviewees' older relatives had already passed away. The fact that these interviewees had little contact with older relatives meant that they could not easily articulate their impressions of retired older people:

> "Maybe their lives are a bit boring . . . I don't really know . . . my older relatives passed away at a relatively early age, and so, I can't really imagine the kind of post-retirement lives that they led." (Male, Public rental housing, #21)

For those interviewees who had previously co-resided with older relatives, their impressions of older relatives varied widely. Some reported very close relationships with their older relatives, whom they perceived as warm and caring. Others reported very distant relationships with their older relatives and highlighted a lack of intergenerational communication within their family.

Interestingly, even though some of the respondents did not feel close to their older relatives, or even described their older relatives as being unlikeable, these respondents rarely attributed their negative perceptions to the age of their older relatives, nor did they project these negative perceptions onto older people outside of their family. Instead, the interviewees were more likely to frame these conflicts as personality-related problems, which they believed were specific to the individuals in their family.

When asked more specifically about their impressions of retired older people outside of their family, especially those living in their residential neighbourhoods, the interviewees articulated several major stereotypes, which were mostly related to the lifestyles and dispositions of retired older people. For example, many of the interviewees believed that retired older people had a lot of spare time on their hands, since these youth often

saw older people hanging around in public spaces, especially in the open areas of public housing estates:

> "They [older people] don't have much to do. What I mean by nothing much to do is that each day they will just sit there. Some may be exercising, but I would say that they don't have any special activities to do". (Male, Public rental housing, #15)

In other words, since these older neighbours were quite visible in the public open spaces of their neighbourhoods, young adults acquired their impressions of older people mainly through passive observation of their older neighbours from a distance. The interviewees acknowledged that their encounters with older people in public spaces were usually quite brief, yet these brief experiences had quite a significant impact on the types of positive and negative stereotypes which they developed.

In terms of positive stereotypes, quite a lot of the interviewees perceived new generations of older people as being relatively healthier and maintaining more active lifestyles:

> "If I try to identify [older people] visually, then it would really be those who have difficulties walking or their hair is very white, or their skin is very wrinkled . . . that's how I would be able to directly correlate the person with old age. But those who are quite lively, you wouldn't think of them as an old person." (Female, Private housing, #8)

The emphasis on the health of older people hints at complex interactions between ageism, healthism and ableism, that is, judging older people positively or negatively based on their health status or their ability to engage in activities that are stereotypically associated with young age [35].

Indeed, it appears that the *visibility* of older people in public open spaces is a major contributing factor to the prevalence of positive stereotypes that are related to healthy, active lifestyles. While very few of the interviewees spontaneously brought up the role of media representations in shaping their impressions of older people, many of them recalled concrete examples of older people's passive or active recreational activities in public open spaces.

This is very likely due to the high population density in Hong Kong, a feature which distinguishes it from other cities with lower population densities, and which adds an interesting dimension to younger people's generalizations about older people. In places with lower population densities, younger people may rely on more structured activities to formulate their impressions of older people (such as participating in structured intergenerational programs or acquiring impressions from structured media reports). In the context of high-density cities like Hong Kong, unstructured contact in public open spaces may play a relatively bigger role in shaping intergenerational contact experiences.

For example, one of the interviewees initially articulated his general impression that retired older people lead very boring lives, spending most of their time eating and sleeping. Nevertheless, he subsequently qualified his views by saying he was aware that his generalizations may not apply to all retired older people, since he had previously encountered some interesting older people in public open spaces:

> "In my housing estate . . . from the time I was in primary school, five years old, I think he [older neighbour] was sixty at the time, and now he is around eighty . . . he would keep going downstairs every day, holding a *Gwandou* [martial arts sword] and maneuvering it in the open space . . . it [the sword] was so beautiful . . . I was absolutely attracted by it. So, in fact, older people's lives can be full of diverse activities." (Male, Subsidized owner-occupied housing, #13)

In other words, the visibility of older people in public open spaces in Hong Kong means that there are many opportunities for younger people to question their own assumptions about older people, although this largely depends on younger people's willingness to pay attention to the diverse behaviours of older people. Younger people who are more observant and reflective (as shown in the above example) are more likely to articulate a

wider range of impressions of older people, whereas those who are less observant (or less reflective) may rely on a narrow range of ageist stereotypes, based on a few brief contact experiences in the past.

4.2. Conditional Respect for Older People

Most of the interviewees believed that traditional cultural values of honour and respect towards older people continued to be the norm in society. These norms certainly influenced younger people's everyday behaviour, for example, they were quite accustomed to demonstrating respect towards older people through benevolent practices, such as giving up their seats:

> "That is, giving up your seat that kind of thing . . . in everyday life, apart from giving up your seat, there are many other aspects, for example, opening the door . . . helping older people open the door, or you would help them when you see them carrying very heavy things." (Male, Subsidized owner-occupied housing, #9)

Indeed, some of the interviewees commented that these practices were very much ingrained in their minds—their parents had taught them from a young age to show respect to older people. Other interviewees believed that their respectful behaviour was not necessarily linked to an older person's age—they were simply taught by their parents to be polite and helpful to everybody in their neighbourhood, regardless of age.

Furthermore, on a personal level, the interviewees pointed out that they would not necessarily show respect to all older people. Instead, they tended to evaluate each older person based on their "manners", such as whether the older person adopts a polite communication style and refrains from making demands on younger people:

> "My impressions are quite polarized . . . some older people are very nice, perhaps they have already reached such an advanced age . . . they are no longer driven by the desire for more, so they are very nice to those around them . . . and then . . . I hold [negative] stereotypes of others . . . older people who demand favours based on their age . . . they will say 'Hey, give me the priority seat' . . . 'You should stand up as soon as you see me entering the room' . . . . 'Don't you know how to respect older people' . . . so it's quite polarized." (Male, Subsidized owner-occupied housing, #11)

> "I'm not sure whether it's the Chinese way of thinking, or the Confucian way of thinking . . . the Confucian saying is that your ears become accommodating when you reach sixty . . . you've already lived such a long life, if you hear some [unpleasant] things you can pretend that you can't hear it. But older people nowadays are not like that, they still think that they are young, and they can't be happy unless if they argue back." (Male, Subsidized owner-occupied housing, #13)

In other words, it seems that the respondents of this study believe that respect is something they choose to give freely to older people, not to conform to cultural expectations, but out of their appreciation for those older people who display "good manners" and thus are deemed "worthy" of respect. Older people with more accommodating communication styles are perceived as fitting the stereotype of "wise" elders, while those who are argumentative and act with a sense of entitlement are subject to negative stereotyping.

This reflects generational differences in interpreting the cultural norm of "respect for older people"—while older generations may lean towards reflexive demonstrations of respect for older people, the respondents in this study are inclined to adopt a form of "conditional" respect for older people, that is, respect will only be granted on the condition that older people communicate in ways that meet younger people's expectations. These findings therefore point towards the dynamic interactions between social structures (cultural norms) and personal agency.

4.3. Educational Divide among Older People

A key theme which repeatedly emerged in the interviews was a perceived divide between older people from different generational cohorts. The interviewees believed that older people from more recent cohorts have higher educational attainment, and thus they are less inclined to perceive newer generations of older people in a negative way:

> "I think it's related to education background. I heard from others that in the past, people usually had a prejudiced view of older people as being really slow, or really troublesome, but over time, there emerged a cohort of people who have received education, who have now become older people because of population ageing. So, there is actually a group of highly educated older people . . . it [the older population] is now divided." (Female, Subsidized owner-occupied housing, #18)

It is worth pointing out that the interviewees tended to use the terms "highly educated" or "less educated" to describe older people, which have normative connotations. In reality, older people who have lower educational attainment may not necessarily be "less educated", since academic qualifications are only one measure of one's level of education. Therefore, although the terms "highly educated" can be found in the direct quotes from the interviewees, this paper adopts the more neutral term of "educational attainment" in the discussion of the findings.

Objectively speaking, the proportion of older people in Hong Kong with higher educational attainment has indeed increased. According to data from the Census and Statistics Department, the percentage of older people aged 60–64 in Hong Kong who had completed post-secondary education increased from 10.1% in 2011 to 16.4% in 2021, while the percentage of older people aged 65–69 who had completed post-secondary education increased from 9.9% in 2011 to 12.5% in 2021 [32,36].

Higher educational attainment has been most significant for the young-olds born after the 1960s: in 2011, a larger percentage of 60–64s had completed primary education only, compared to those with post-secondary education; by 2021, the number of 60–64s who had completed post-secondary education exceeded those with primary education only [32,36].

This helps explain why younger people hold rather different perceptions of older people from different generations/birth cohorts. Even though there is no objective evidence that people with higher educational attainment are more "well-behaved", the interview evidence suggests that young people associate lower educational attainment with problematic behaviours. From the interviewees' perspectives, older people with lower educational attainment tend to behave in "less civilized" ways, and lead less interesting lives:

> "Nowadays you see many old people spitting in the streets, cutting their nails on the MTR [mass transit railway] . . . well, they should actually behave themselves . . . those old people who were born before the 60s did not have many opportunities to be educated, so they are even more stubborn—they insist that they are right . . . so that's what causes problems." (Male, Subsidized owner-occupied housing, #13)

> "Usually old people like to hoard, they have a lot of stuff at home. I remember there was one time . . . I was visiting those old people living in public housing estates . . . usually they live alone, and they just like to watch the TV." (Female, Private housing, #8)

According to the interviewees' narratives, negative stereotypes of older people with lower educational attainment seem to have intensified under the COVID-19 pandemic, especially under the influence of media representations of older people who refuse to comply with public health requirements, such as wearing masks and social distancing:

> "One example of ageism is . . . those older people gather in the park in their estate, taking off their masks, smoking and playing chess. When this is frequently reported in the news, it may give young people the impression that older people are not mindful of public health." (Female, Subsidized owner-occupied housing, #4)

Even though not all of the interviewees explicitly referred to the education background of the older people whom they were describing, the implicit judgment is that these older people living in public housing are "less educated", since they do not behave in the ways that the interviewees expect from "more educated" people.

4.4. Interaction between Ageism and Classism

Further analysis of the data suggests that there are also more complex interactions between ageism and classism (class-based prejudice). The interviewees tended to hold positive stereotypes of high-income older people with higher educational attainment, who are living in private housing, and who are perceived as being more interested in continuous learning and leading more dynamic post-retirement lives. This theme was repeated across many of the interviews, meaning that these were not simply one-off examples of counter-stereotypical older people, but rather, a reflection of the increase in high-income older people in the population:

> "If we are talking about older people living in high-class residential areas, they are usually more highly educated. This type of older person is usually very polite, and the activities that they join are quite different . . . maybe playing tennis, playing golf and other sports to improve themselves. Whereas the other type of retired person just repeats their routine to pass their time." (Male, Private housing, #20)

Interviewees also tended to hold positive stereotypes of those retired older people who have a lot of professional knowledge and life experiences to share with younger people, whom they perceived to add value to younger people's lives:

> "Actually, many of them are . . . they've already worked up to a senior role, that is, they might have just retired, therefore they have lots of work experience to share." (Female, Private housing, #16)

> "Maybe I'm a bit biased, but I think that older people have seen more of the world, and they are very good storytellers." (Female, Private housing, #3)

Although most of the interviewees subscribed to the stereotype that older people are not good with technology, some of the interviewees from private housing expressed their admiration for tech-savvy older people who are good at learning new things:

> "Some of the older people whom I know are quite lively, that is, they are sometimes trendier than me. There are some new things which I haven't tried, but they are already using these things. This older woman whom I know, not only does she have Facebook and Instagram, but when people started using MeWe a year ago, she set up her account earlier than me." (Male, Private housing, #14)

Furthermore, they perceived older people with strong communication skills or those who pursued cultural interests as being more interesting, since these older people possessed specialized skills that they could share with the younger generation:

> "After going through so much, I think they must have accumulated loads of experiences to share, maybe they can tell you . . . if you speak in this way, it would sound better, more refined . . . [better] communication . . . in terms of cultural interests, maybe they dig deeper into these things or they are knowledgeable . . . retired older people have lots of time to answer our questions [about cultural interests]." (Male, Private housing, #6)

Not all of the interviewees made explicit references to the socio-economic background of older people whom they were interested in, but it is possible to identify subtle references to social class in these narratives. For example, the interviewees were not simply referring to the wisdom offered by older people because of their long life, but were specifically thinking about older people who had worked up to senior positions, and who had seen much of the world through travelling. The interviewees also referred to specialized interests, such

as cultural interests, which were more likely to be pursued by older people from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds.

In addition, some of the interviewees pointed out that media representations tended to focus on stories of older people who are financially worse off, especially those living in public rental housing, such that younger people have negative impressions of lower-income older people, who are associated with mental health problems in old age:

> "What we usually see on the TV are those [older people] whose homes are very small, that is, they will usually film those whose conditions are relatively pitiful, such as older people living on their own. They may have some health problems, and there may be some social workers visiting their homes and helping them." (Female, Private housing, #19)

In other words, there is evidence that the interviewees were not simply prejudiced against older people from earlier generations who have lower educational attainment, but they also judged older people based on their social class, whereby lower-income older people from public housing backgrounds were perceived less positively and were more likely to be associated with negative health status.

It is worth noting that gender did not appear to be a significant factor in shaping the interviewees' perceptions of older people. While the dimensions of education and income came up spontaneously in the interviewees' sharing, the topic of gender was noticeably absent. When probed about the role of gender, some of the interviewees commented that they had slightly more negative perceptions of older women, due to stereotypical representations of demanding mothers-in-law in Asian television dramas, while other interviewees did not think that older people's gender made any significant difference to how younger people evaluated them.

4.5. Prejudice towards Worldview-Dissimilar Older People

Interestingly, some of the interviewees pointed out that they were not necessarily interested in interacting with older people with higher educational attainment. Even though older people with higher educational attainment had more knowledge and skills to share with the younger generation, and were supposed to be evaluated positively, they were instead stereotyped as stubborn people who enjoyed criticizing others:

> "There is a group of highly educated older people . . . this group is actually very demanding . . . they [highly educated older people] will keep challenging you, criticizing things that you haven't done well, and telling you what you ought to be doing . . . " (Female, Subsidized owner-occupied housing, #18)

These findings suggest that educational attainment and socio-economic status are not the only factors which influence younger people's positive or negative perceptions of older people. An additional factor to consider is that younger people may evaluate older people based on the extent to which they affirm younger people's worldviews. Older people who communicate their support for younger people's worldviews, or who express empathy for the challenges faced by the younger generation, are labelled positively (e.g., "encouraging"). Those older people who challenge the worldviews of younger people, or who are unwilling to adopt behaviours preferred by younger people, are labelled negatively (e.g., "stubborn").

As articulated by the worldview conflict hypothesis in the social psychology literature, people with both traditional and liberal worldviews may attempt to protect their worldviews through prejudice [37] (p. 1). In the context of Hong Kong, some age-related derogative terms have emerged in recent years (e.g., in social media posts), which have been used by some younger people to express their disdain towards older people with different political views:

> "Nowadays, some younger people . . . if their political views do not match the views of people in their 50s and 60s, they call them 'Fai-lo (useless old people) . . . I think that's not good . . . let's say your political views differ from those of your

family members, you wouldn't call your family members 'Fai-lo', right." (Male, subsidized owner-occupied housing, #23)

Although the interviewees in this study generally disagreed with labelling older people using derogative terms, they believed that there were substantial differences in worldviews between the older and younger generations, including not just political views but also other matters, such as moral evaluations. Some of the interviewees expressed their perception that it is rather difficult for older people to change their worldviews, and that it is necessary for older people to align their worldviews with younger people's worldviews first, before meaningful intergenerational communication can take place:

"They are conservative towards many things … actually this type of mindset is not only limited to older people … younger people can also be traditional and conservative, but in general, I feel that older people tend to have this kind of perspective." (Male, Subsidized owner-occupied housing, #9)

"Unless they are the more progressive-minded kind of person … you can rectify their thoughts,.. but most older people's thoughts can't be rectified, I think." (Male, Subsidized owner-occupied housing, #20)

What appears to be ageism can therefore be alternatively interpreted as the intersection between ageism and prejudice towards people with dissimilar worldviews. In the case of this study, it appears that younger people with more liberal worldviews are prejudiced against people who hold conservative worldviews. Although some of the interviewees acknowledged that there is no inherent linkage between age and worldviews, there is an assumption that older people are more likely to subscribe to conservative worldviews, and an implicit judgment that older people would be better off if they aligned their worldviews with the worldviews of younger people.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings in this paper highlight the importance of adopting a holistic view of younger people's prejudices towards older people. As mentioned in the introduction, the existing literature on ageism tends to focus on ageism in the workplace or the media, so this study broadens the discussion by considering everyday ageism in residential neighbourhood contexts.

The study makes two major contributions to the literature on ageism. First, it counters the common misconception that ageism is less prevalent in Asian societies due to traditional norms of respect for older people [15]. The empirical evidence suggests that ageist attitudes are rather common among younger people in Hong Kong, which appear to involve more complex intersections between ageism, ableism and classism. On the one hand, the findings on ableism echo Gibbons' (2006) argument that discourses of active and healthy ageing reinforce youthfulness and ablebodiedness as ideals, thereby casting old age and disability as devalued states [38] (p. 2).

On the other hand, the findings on classism add to the literature by further highlighting the influence of social class on ageist perceptions, which is seldom discussed in the literature. These findings highlight the risk that discourses on career mentoring and lifelong learning may prioritize the value of activities or behaviour that are associated with people from more privileged socio-occupational backgrounds, whilst devaluing older people from less privileged backgrounds and those with lower educational attainment.

Indeed, younger people's prejudice against older people with lower educational attainment resemble the observation of Kuppens et al. (2018) that groups with higher educational attainment tend to believe that those with lower educational attainment are blameworthy for their behaviour [39]. In addition, the interviewees in this study not only judged older people based on their educational attainment, but also considered older people's worldviews as being inferior to those of the younger generation, which echoes previous research on prejudice towards worldview-dissimilar people [37].

The second major contribution of this study is uncovering young adults' new interpretations of traditional Confucian values of honour and respect towards older people [18], which can be conceptualized as a conditional form of respect. The interviewees in this study were more prepared to accord respect to those older people who display polite and accommodating manners in their communication with the younger generation, compared to those who are perceived as demanding.

In other words, these younger people were not in favour of reflexive demonstrations of respect towards older people, but instead, preferred to evaluate the extent to which an older person meets younger people's expectations, before deciding how much respect that they are willing to show. This novel finding opens up new dimensions for future research on the influence of cultural norms on intergenerational relations, by drawing attention to the dynamic interactions between social structures (cultural norms) and personal agency.

One unexpected finding from this study is the comparatively weaker influence of media representations on younger people's ageist attitudes. Previous studies on ageism in both Asian and Western contexts have highlighted the strong influence of media representations on ageism, such as negative representations in television programmes and advertisements [24,25]. However, the interviewees in this study referred more to everyday encounters with older neighbours rather than media representations in their narratives.

This is likely explained by the high-density environment of Hong Kong, which makes it much easier for younger people to observe the diverse activities and behaviours of retired older people in public open spaces. These spaces serve as important settings for younger people to acquire positive and negative impressions of retired older people, and thus rely less on media representations. This finding has important implications for future planning of high-density urban neighbourhoods—more generous provision of public open spaces is not just a means of enhancing the opportunities for physical activities [40], but could play a vital role in countering age-related stereotypes, through increasing exposure to different age groups.

Although this study focuses empirically on Hong Kong, it is quite probable that the findings are relevant to other cities which are also rapidly ageing, and which have a significant proportion of older people from earlier generations with lower educational attainment [41]. There could be further comparisons between Hong Kong and other places, to understand whether ageist attitudes in other places also interact with classism and worldview-related prejudices, and why.

As mentioned in the methods section, one of the major limitations of this study is the high proportion of younger people with high educational attainment in the sample. This may explain why there is prejudice against older people with lower educational attainment. As predicted by homophily theories [42], people tend to identify more strongly with those from similar background, including similar education background. Further research could be conducted to explore the attitudes of younger people with lower educational attainment, to find out whether there are any similarities or differences in ageist attitudes compared to the sample in this paper.

A practical implication of the findings is that ageism-reduction interventions may need to be diversified, to address the multiple forms of prejudice experienced by older people beyond ageism. At present, many intergenerational programs are designed with the aim of increasing intergenerational contact [21]. The assumption is that younger people lack holistic understanding of older people, and that more positive intergenerational contact can help reduce younger people's ageist beliefs [43]. Yet, these programs could be refined to tackle not only younger people's stereotypical beliefs about older people, but also their beliefs about older people from different generational cohorts and socio-economic backgrounds.

For example, perspective-taking interventions could draw younger people's attention to the systematic, environmental factors which may explain lower-income older people's lack of participation in continuous learning, or the reasons behind older people's unwillingness to subscribe to the worldviews of the younger generation, to challenge younger

people's negative stereotyping of older people. This could encourage younger people to adopt a more open-minded approach when they interact with older people, and to evaluate each older person based on their personal qualities and circumstances, instead of judging older people based on age or class-related generalizations.

In addition, further research could be conducted to better understand the implications of the findings in this paper for the design of intergenerational public spaces [44] and intergenerational programs in residential neighbourhoods. The findings reveal the many hidden assumptions of younger people about older people, which involve complex intersections between age, generational cohort, social class and worldviews, and which may affect the effectiveness of neighbourhood initiatives in terms of fostering intergenerational contact. Better understanding of the inter-relationship between younger people's prejudices and their willingness to interact with older people could facilitate the design of more inclusive intergenerational programs and intergenerational public spaces, both locally and internationally.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Hong Kong (Reference No. EA1901007; Date of Approval: 24 January 2019).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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