

Breaking the Age Code: How Your Beliefs About Aging Determine How Long and Well You Live

**Becca Levy, Vermillion, London, 2022, 294 pp., pbk £16.99,
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This volume by Becca Levy, who holds professorships in psychology and epidemiology at Yale University in the United States of America, synthesises pioneering interdisciplinary research on the impacts of ageism on health and wellbeing in later life that she and her team have carried out over more than two decades. Levy aims this text at a general audience, stating ‘this book is about how we think about aging and how these beliefs impact our health in ways big and small. It is for anyone who hopes to age well’ (p. 5). The first part of the book (Chapters Two to Eight) describes the evolution of this emerging area that bridges social gerontology and psychology, highlighting its implications for ageing individuals and societies; the second part (Chapters Nine and Ten) focuses on strategies for confronting negative age beliefs based on these research findings.

In ‘Introduction: Ideas Bouncing Between the US and Japan’, Levy recounts her seminal early career experience in Japan, contrasting the age-embracing orientation of Japanese culture with older people’s general status and treatment in Western societies. This experience produced the premise of her work, that attitudes towards ageing and older people are culturally determined and that they have demonstrable effects. Chapter One, ‘The Pictures in Our Head’, lays out the resulting causal framework – stereotype embodiment theory (SET) – in which Levy proposes the principal mechanisms by which negative age beliefs ‘get under the skin’ to affect later-life health and wellbeing. These mechanisms – that negative age stereotypes are internalised throughout life beginning in childhood, function unconsciously, increase in effect as they become more personally relevant with age, and operate through psychological, behavioural and biological pathways – are the subject of Chapters Two to Eight.

The formula for this book is a skilful combination of cameos of older adults that illustrate various aspects of SET mechanisms, together with descriptions of Levy’s studies through which she unpicks these mechanisms across a range of health and wellbeing outcomes. Chapter Two, ‘Anatomy of a Senior Moment’, demonstrates the impact of ageist beliefs on memory processes while Chapter Three, ‘Old and Fast’, examines their effects on physical functioning. Chapter Four, ‘Brawny Brains: Genes Aren’t Destiny’, and Chapter Five, ‘Later Life Mental Health Growth’, turn to ageism’s effects on cognitive functioning and mental wellbeing, respectively. Chapter Six, ‘Longevity Advantage of 7.5 Years’, highlights Levy’s most well-known research finding about the additional years of life conferred on

individuals who have held positive beliefs about their ageing. Chapter Seven, 'Stars Invisible by Day: Creativity and the Senses', explores the heightened role of embodied experience in creative expression in later life, and the impact of ageist beliefs on sensory abilities. Finally, Chapter Eight, 'Ageism: The Evil Octopus', explores the nature and rise of ageism in modern society.

Throughout the first section of the book, we discover Levy's thought processes in devising novel social experiments, repurposing existing datasets from longitudinal cohort research and developing new investigations to test hypotheses about SET mechanisms with different study populations. The focus of the next part of the book shifts to individual and societal strategies for confronting negative age beliefs based on her research findings. Chapter Nine, 'Individual Age Liberation: How to Free Your Mind', describes the 'ABC' method for personal actions to change perspectives on ageing through a process of creating (A)wareness, placing (B)lame on ageism not ageing and (C)hallenging negative age beliefs. In Chapter Ten, 'Societal Age Liberation: A New Social Movement', Levy similarly proposes stages towards the formation of a societal age liberation movement drawing on experiences of other social justice movements. The book concludes with an afterword, 'A Town Free of Ageism', in which Levy describes an age-inclusive small New England town where ageism is seemingly non-existent and older residents enjoy high levels of intergenerational social engagement and civic participation. Although this scene sounds idyllic, this chapter is where a social scientist's perspective on the levels of social and economic capital needed to create and sustain this kind of community would provide a more critical assessment.

The final part of the book consists of three appendices covering exercises for practising the ABC method (Appendix One), a compilation of facts to debunk common negative age stereotypes (Appendix Two) and a set of specific recommended actions to help end structural ageism across sectors ranging from medicine to advertising (Appendix Three). These suggested steps for achieving societal change are nicely referenced with concrete examples of research, policy and practice to support them. Additionally, the social structural factors underpinning ageism that are given a lighter touch elsewhere are highlighted here.

This book will appeal to a range of gerontological audiences. Its mix of the biographical and empirical makes for an engaging and accessible read in the same genre as David Snowdon's (2002) account of his longitudinal cohort study on dementia. In particular, this volume provides a valuable learning resource for both undergraduate/postgraduate students, delivering insight into the backstory of a growing area of ageing science.

Reference

Snowdon D (2002) *Ageing with Grace: What the Nun Study Teaches Us About Leading Longer, Healthier and More Meaningful Lives*. New York, NY: Bantam.

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