

## **Triple Standards of Ageing in Europe?**

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The existence of a “double standard” of ageing has been recognized since a long time in the feminist and psychological literature, at least since Susan Sontag (1979) argued that growing older, and in general the meaning of age, were more consequential for women than for men (Deusch et al., 1986). Yet, during the last decades the salience of this question has become increasingly more central, given the growing share of older adults in the population and changes to family structure. Social factors affecting ageing play an important role in the physical, social, and cognitive outcomes of older people, and their better understanding could help to design policies aimed at well-being and at limiting discrimination. Double standards of ageing are central in “ageism” a term coined by Butler, 1969, which refers to the discrimination against the elderly, which often manifests in negative attitudes.

Ageing is a biosocial process where individuals progress from being classified as adults to being classified as old. The aim of this study is to explore the role of gender and socio-economic status in the timing of life perception in Europe. Our main questions are: is there a “double standard” of ageing in Europe today? Does this difference change by socio-economic condition and education, as one could expect from an intersectionality perspective (Åberg et al., 2020)?

We analysed data collected in Round 3 (2006/07) and Round 9 (2018/19) of the European Social Survey, which includes a module on the timing of life, in order to highlight the determinants of the perception of transition into old age. Our first and very preliminary results show that women in mean are perceived to become old before men, with men emphasizing these double standards.

## *Framework*

Ageing is a complex conceptualized construct defined in terms of physical, psychological and social factors with strong individual differences. (Aylaz et al, 2012) emphasize personal differences in the process of ageing, which includes attitudes, socioeconomic status and lifestyles. In addition to the feminist and gerontology perspective, gender stereotypes have been well documented also in economics (Blau et al, 2017; Olivetti and Petrangolo, 2016).

A great deal of research attention has been paid to the examination of attitudes towards older adults and to find ways to counteract such biases. Given our rapidly ageing society, such research attention has been warranted. Several studies confirmed the presence of negative attitudes towards older adults (Gellis et al, 2003). Such negative perceptions of ageing are continuously reinforced within society, where media depict older adults as physically, cognitively, and sexually inadequate (Zebrowitz and Montepare, 2000). Calasanti (2005) argues that it is not merely the physical changes to bodies that foster ageism, but the meaning that we, individually and socially, give to such changes that matters. The stigma associated with the ageing process is argued to affect women and men differently.

Women are viewed as “old” sooner than men in all European countries (Billari et al, 2021). Women experience a double standard in that they are exposed to a greater degree of ageism than men through sexism and social standards that create unrealistic expectations for women in terms of their physical appearance (Hatch, 2005).

Yaghoobzadeh et al., 2018, explore the role of sex, socioeconomic status, and emotional support in elders’ ageing perception. Other studies have shown various factors associated with ageing perception. Subjective aging, specifically, is considered as an important factor associated with ageing perception. Increased social support has been found to be positively associated with increased self-esteem, and perceptions of feeling valued. Other research has shown that religious beliefs influence the perception of ageing as well.

## *Data and methods*

We used the European Social Survey, which is an academically-driven multi-country survey, administered in over 30 countries to date. More specifically, we analysed data collected in both

Round 3 (2006/07) and Round 9 (2018/19), which include a module on the timing of life. All persons aged 15 and over resident within private households, regardless of their nationality, citizenship, language or legal status, in the countries as listed in the "Geographical Coverage". Having two time points gives the possibility to verify the evolution of social ageing perceptions over a decade and fill an important gap in the literature.

Part of the questionnaire were used to gather information about participants' age, gender, level of education, socioeconomic status, income level, more or less religious and country.

During the questionnaire, in the section of timing of life, a split ballot technique was adopted in order to reduce the effects of position bias in multiple-choice survey questions, by dividing in half the group of respondents. Each group receives a questionnaire that asks for the same information but to the first group the question is "when do you think a woman is considered to be old?" and to the second group the question is "when do you think a man is considered to be old?". We use answers to these questions as dependent variable in full multiple linear regression analysis performed to identify explanatory variables of double standard in ageing perception among participant scores.

### *First Evidence*

Our first and very preliminary results show that women in mean become old before men and men emphasize these feelings. First, through a linear regression model we regress the perception on when women/men reach old age on a vector of control variables which includes gender, age (and age squared), year of interview, level of education (ISCED), deciles of households income, income perceptions, countries, and indicators for religious frequency levels and health status.

Table 1: When do you think people become old?

	Woman	Man
Man	-3.233*** <small>-36.43</small>	-1.453*** <small>-17.22</small>
Age	0.223*** <small>-16.44</small>	0.215*** <small>-16.69</small>
2018_2019	1.040*** <small>-7.77</small>	0.465*** <small>-3.69</small>
Primary	-0.503 <small>-1.91</small>	-0.139 <small>-0.56</small>
Lower Secondary	0.013 <small>-0.06</small>	0.470* <small>-2.17</small>

Upper Secondary	0.535*	0.818***
	<i>-2.36</i>	<i>-3.76</i>
Post_secondary (NT)	0.468*	0.982***
	<i>-2.14</i>	<i>-4.71</i>
Short_Cycle Tertiary	0.876***	1.059***
	<i>-3.65</i>	<i>-4.65</i>
Bachelor or Equivalent	1.301***	1.429***
	<i>-5.39</i>	<i>-6.21</i>
Master or Equivalent	1.137***	1.175***
	<i>-4.74</i>	<i>-5.12</i>
Doctoral or Equivalent	1.474	2.712**
	<i>-1.58</i>	<i>-2.84</i>
_cons	59.950***	60.144***
	<i>-105.94</i>	<i>-111.42</i>

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Notes: Level of significance: \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001; t statistics in italics; covariate includes: age squared, income deciles, Income perception, how religious you are? how much do you practice the place of worship? health status, 30 countries.

Men give earlier ages regardless of whether they are talking about women or men. From a man point of view in mean a woman becomes old about 3.2 years before woman's point of view and a man 1.45 years in mean before. This "double standard" pattern exists in all countries, in particular are larger in the case of Easter Europe ones. The ageing perception improves with high level of education and get worse when income difficulties increase.

Finally, contrary to what is expected, those who declare themselves as very religious are also those who declare higher threshold of age of transition into becoming old.

The next step is to perfect these first analyses through targeted and more sophisticated models that allow to outline the factors affecting the double standards of ageing at different levels. Analyses may include multilevel or meta-analytical approaches.

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