



Ageism and age-positive attitudes in health and social care: Examples from a study on hospital social work in the UK

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The PhD Study

- In the UK, social workers are often employed by the local authority, but work into National Health Service hospitals
- This study looked at the factors that impact on social work practice in these settings
- Interaction between structures (legislation, policy, funding, organisations) and individual agency (on the part of social workers and teams)
- Freedom of Information requests, interviews (n = 15) and online surveys (n = 93)





Ageism

- Prejudice, discrimination, and less favourable treatment, based on a person's age (Butler, 1969)
- Usually directed at older people
- Can include patronising treatment, as well as hostile attitudes (Cuddy et al, 2005)
- In Europe, 'older people' are most often perceived as sick, vulnerable, frail, and seen as a 'social problem' (e.g. Katz, 2014; Duffy, 2017; Grenier, 2020)



Findings

- Challenging ageism from professionals
 - Hospital is not the right place for older people
 - A fall = residential care
 - Safeguarding



Findings

- Challenging structural ageism
 - Lack of resources
 - Undervaluing care work
 - Safety > Freedom



Findings

- Expressions of ageism
 - Language
 - Assumptions about technological competence
 - Self-neglect
 - ‘Us and Them’

Implications for Practice

- Social workers need to be reflexive and question their assumptions
- Develop conscious awareness of the context in which they work
- Ally with critical gerontology (Moody & Sasser, 2021; Torres & Donnelly, 2022) and Care Ethics (Tronto, 1993; 2013)



A stack of books with a yellow cover on top and blue covers below, partially visible on the left side of the slide.

References and Further Reading

- This presentation derives from an article currently under review in the European Journal of Social Work
- See also; Phillips, C., Deacon, L. & Burrows, D. (2024) *Social Work in NHS Hospitals: Opportunities and Challenges*. Birmingham: BASW
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- Torres, S. & Donnelly, S. (eds) (2022) *Critical Gerontology for Social Workers*. Bristol: Policy Press
- Tronto, J.C. (1993) *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. New York: Routledge