

Ageism and its implications from the perspective of older public servants

Etarismo e suas implicações sob a ótica dos servidores públicos mais velhos

La edadismo y sus implicaciones desde la perspectiva de los servidores públicos mayores

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ABSTRACT

Goal: To understand the perceptions of ageism among older public servants at a Higher Education Institution. **Methodology/approach:** This qualitative research involved semi-structured interviews with 16 public servants aged 45 and older. Thematic analysis of narratives and biographies was employed for data analysis. **Originality/relevance:** Grounded in the perspective of social constructionism, this study explored how ageism manifests in the practices of older workers within the context of Brazilian public administration. **Main findings:** The narrative analysis revealed that ageism is often a silenced, denied, and misunderstood phenomenon. However, some narratives highlighted the presence of both hostile and benevolent forms of ageism. In these cases, ageism was linked to the specter of uselessness and obsolescence, invisibility, downward career mobility, and symbolic dismissal or retirement. To avoid ageism in the workplace, older public servants often strive to remain proactive, productive, experienced, qualified, and up-to-date. **Theoretical contributions:** The findings highlight that ageism interacts with sexism, racism, and prejudice against certain classes of workers. This interaction proves particularly disadvantageous for older women. **Management contributions:** The findings underscore the importance of implementing human resource policies aimed at preventing and combating the negative effects of ageism on public servants in organizational settings.

Keywords: Ageism. Aging. University Management. Public Administration.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Compreender as percepções sobre o etarismo dos servidores públicos mais velhos de uma Instituição de Ensino Superior. **Metodologia/abordagem:** A pesquisa qualitativa contou com entrevistas semiestruturadas de 16 servidores públicos com 45 anos ou mais. Para a análise dos dados foi adotada a análise de narrativas e biografias do tipo temática. **Originalidade/relevância:** Sob a perspectiva do construcionismo social, a pesquisa explorou a maneira pela qual o etarismo se revela na prática dos trabalhadores mais velhos no contexto da administração pública brasileira. **Principais resultados:** A análise das narrativas revelou que o etarismo comumente é um fenômeno silenciado, negado e incompreendido. Contudo, algumas narrativas indicaram o etarismo hostil e benevolente. Nesses casos, o etarismo articulou-se com o fantasma da inutilidade e obsolescência, invisibilidade e mobilidade para baixo na carreira e demissão ou aposentadoria simbólica. A fim de evitar o etarismo no ambiente organizacional, os servidores públicos mais velhos comumente buscam se manter proativos, produtivos, experientes, qualificados e atualizados. **Contribuições teóricas:** Os resultados indicam que o etarismo interage com o sexismo, o racismo e o preconceito contra as classes de trabalhadores. Essa interação é desvantajosa principalmente para as mulheres mais velhas. **Contribuições para a gestão:** Os resultados evidenciam a necessidade de políticas de gestão de pessoas voltadas aos servidores públicos mais velhos com o objetivo de prevenir e combater os efeitos negativos do etarismo nas organizações.

Palavras-chave: Etarismo. Envelhecimento. Gestão Universitária. Administração Pública.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Comprender las percepciones sobre discriminación por edad entre servidores públicos de mayor edad en una institución de educación superior. **Metodología/enfoque:** La investigación cualitativa involucró entrevistas semiestructuradas a 16 servidores públicos de 45 años o más. Para el análisis de los datos se adoptó el análisis temático de narrativas y biografías. **Originalidad/relevancia:** Desde la perspectiva del construccionismo social, la investigación exploró la forma en que la discriminación por edad se revela en la práctica de los trabajadores mayores en el contexto de la administración pública brasileña. **Principales resultados:** El análisis de las narrativas reveló que la discriminación por edad es comúnmente un fenómeno silenciado, negado e incomprendido. Sin embargo, algunas narrativas indicaron discriminación por edad hostil y benevolente. En estos casos, la discriminación por edad se articuló con el espectro de la inutilidad y la obsolescencia, la invisibilidad y la movilidad descendente en la escala profesional y el despido o la jubilación simbólicos. Para evitar la discriminación por edad en el entorno organizacional, los funcionarios públicos de mayor edad suelen tratar de seguir siendo proactivos, productivos, experimentados, calificados y actualizados. **Contribuciones teóricas:** Los resultados indican que la discriminación por edad interactúa con el sexismo, el racismo y los prejuicios contra las clases trabajadoras. Esta interacción es desventajosa especialmente para las mujeres mayores. **Contribuciones a la gestión:** Los resultados resaltan la necesidad de políticas de gestión de personas dirigidas a servidores públicos de mayor edad con el objetivo de prevenir y combatir los efectos negativos del edadismo en las organizaciones.

Palabras clave: Edadismo. Envejecimiento. Gestión Universitaria. Administración Pública.

■ INTRODUCTION

Aging is a process that encompasses a multitude of factors (Cepellos et al., 2019; Torres et al., 2015; World Health Organization [WHO], 1993). It begins before birth and extends throughout an individual's lifetime (Schneider & Irigaray, 2008). Moreover, aging is an personal process, meaning that each person experiences aging in a unique way (Stuart-Hamilton, 2002; Zacher et al., 2018). Age, in turn, is a salient characteristic that individuals use to categorize themselves and other distinct social groups (Rudolph & Zacher, 2022).

Discussions about the aging process are embedded within the broader context of population aging. Population aging is a significant phenomenon in contemporary Brazilian society (Silva & Helal, 2019). The increase in life expectancy, the reduction in birth rates, and the growth of the older population in recent decades indicate that changes in the age structure and the population aging process are occurring rapidly in Brazil (França et al., 2013; *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* [IBGE, Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics], 2021).

Population aging has led to the aging of the workforce (Cepellos et al., 2019; Cepellos & Tonelli, 2017; Chand & Tung, 2014; Silva et al., 2021; Vasconcelos, 2015). In the first quarter of 2023, individuals aged 40 to 59 years constituted the majority (31.8%) of the working-age population, while those aged 60 years or older represented 19% (IBGE, 2023). According to projections by the *Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada* (IPEA, Institute for Applied Economic Research, 2010), jobs will predominantly involve professionals aged 45 years or older by 2040. Thus, older professionals are expected to constitute the majority of the active working-age population in the coming decades.

It is important to highlight that the participants of this study are older workers. Although there is no consensus on the definition of an older worker, as the aging process is multidimensional and heterogeneous (Cepellos et al., 2019; WHO, 1993), in this study, the category of older workers comprises individuals aged 45 years or older. The choice of this age group is based on studies indicating that the aging process begins to influence an individual's functional capacity for certain types of work from the age of 45 (Hanashiro & Pereira, 2020; Pedro et al., 2020; WHO, 1993). Furthermore, this research argues that workers aged 45 and older are susceptible to ageism in the organizational environment.

Ageism refers to prejudice and discrimination based on age (Butler, 1980; Fineman, 2014; França et al., 2017; Palmore, 2001). In summary, ageism involves using age to harm, disadvantage, and perpetrate injustices against individuals and social groups (WHO, 2021). Ageism can affect any age group (Butler, 1980); however, it is widely associated with old age (Goldani, 2010; Teixeira et al., 2018; Vasconcelos, 2015) due to the symbolic nature of the aging process and the stereotypes surrounding old age (Silva et al., 2021).

Ageism is considered the third major “-ism”, after racism and sexism (Palmore, 2001). However, ageism differs from racism and sexism because all individuals may experience it at some point in life, as those who live long

enough will eventually become old (Butler, 1980; Goldani, 2010; Palmore, 2001; Teixeira et al., 2018).

In the organizational context, ageism is a phenomenon that influences the hiring, inclusion, and retention of older workers in the labor market (Silva & Helal, 2019). Studies indicate that the aging process and ageism can influence career disengagement and early retirement (Vasconcelos, 2012), encourage symbolic dismissal or retirement (Cepellos et al., 2019), and affect older workers' decision of whether to extend or discontinue their professional lives (Nilsson, 2011; Smyer & Pitt-Catsouphe, 2007; Taylor et al., 2016; Zanuncio et al., 2019). Therefore, public policies and human resource management practices aimed at preventing and mitigating the negative effects of ageism in organizations are needed.

Despite the relevance of the topic, ageism directed at older workers remains a social phenomenon that is underdiscussed in organizations, the media, and society. Similarly, there is a lack of political activism and affirmative actions aimed at combating the negative effects of ageism. Furthermore, ageism has received limited attention from the Brazilian scientific community (França et al., 2017) and within the field of organizational studies (Silva et al., 2021). Among the existing publications in Brazil, most studies on ageism are theoretical in nature (Silva et al., 2021). These gaps highlight the need for and the opportunity to conduct empirical research on ageism targeting older workers in organizational contexts.

In the context of international research on ageism, Helmes and Pachana (2016) emphasize that most studies on ageism directed at older individuals have been conducted from the viewpoint of a younger population. These studies have identified numerous negative attitudes associated with aging, as younger individuals tend to perceive aging negatively.

Thus, this research aims to explore older workers' perceptions of ageism. Accordingly, this study seeks to uncover ageism in organizations through the interpretations and assessments of workers who are susceptible to experiencing it daily. Consequently, the primary contribution of this article is to understand how ageism is reflected in the practices of older workers.

This study also contributes to the discussion of ageism within the context of Brazilian public administration. The particularities of public service, especially job stability, contribute to aging in the workplace, as public servants face a lower risk of dismissal compared to workers in the private sector (Oliveira & Almeida, 2022). Thus, this study seeks to understand ageism from the perspective of older public servants, specifically technical-administrative staff in education (TASE) working at a higher education institution (HEI).

In this context, the article aims to answer the following research question: How do older TASE perceive ageism in the context of an HEI? More specifically, the objective of this study is to **understand the perceptions of older TASE at an HEI regarding ageism**. To achieve this objective, a qualitative study was conducted using a social constructionist approach. The participants consisted of 16 TASE members aged 45 or older working at an HEI. Thematic narrative and biographical analysis were employed to analyze the results.

The following section presents the theoretical framework on ageism in organizations and the methodological procedures of the research. Subsequently, the analysis and discussion of the results are presented, followed by the final considerations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since this research is based on the participants' perceptions, social constructionism was adopted as the epistemological and theoretical perspective. Social constructionism posits that knowledge and reality are social constructs. Thus, social constructionism emphasizes common-sense knowledge and contributes to understanding the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Spink & Frezza, 2004). The adoption of social constructionism aims to address the processes of meaning-making in everyday life and the subjectivity of older workers regarding ageism.

Ageism encompasses stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination based on age (Mannheim et al., 2023; WHO, 2021). Stereotypes are cognitive structures about a social group or its members that influence individuals' thoughts and behaviors. These can be positive, negative, or neutral (Hanashiro & Pereira, 2020; Palmore, 1999; Silva et al., 2021). Stereotypes help individuals manage different stimuli brought forth in context and can also contribute to the formation of prejudice. Prejudice is defined as a negative attitude toward a social group or its members (Hanashiro & Pereira, 2020; Palmore, 1999) and is composed of three elements: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The cognitive element relates to information obtained about a particular social group, the affective element pertains to negative feelings toward this group, and the behavioral element concerns the likelihood of an individual acting in a certain way toward the group or its members. Discrimination, in turn, refers to personal acts or institutional policies, meaning it concerns behavior (Hanashiro & Pereira, 2020; Palmore, 2001).

In the North American context, Palmore (1999) developed a typology to systematize stereotypes related to ageism. Initial research conducted by Palmore in the late 20th century identified negative stereotypes, such as senility and unproductivity, as well as positive stereotypes, such as wisdom and kindness. However, the author emphasizes that negative stereotypes attributed to older individuals are often disproven by facts. Nevertheless, negative stereotypes underpin negative attitudes toward older adults and aging.

Helmes and Pachana (2016) emphasize that negative stereotypes of old age are more prevalent in society. In this context, older individuals may internalize these negative stereotypes. As a result, the health, socialization, and self-esteem of older individuals can be affected by their negative expectations regarding their own aging process.

In the Brazilian context, Loth and Silveira (2014) conducted an exploratory-descriptive qualitative study aimed at identifying stereotypes related to ageism as perceived by aging professionals within an organization. The participants' perceptions of ageism were categorized into three thematic groups: (1) stereotypes perceived in oneself, such as "greater experience and knowledge, broader life experience, respectability, wisdom and prudence, maturity, remaining energy ('still have fuel in the tank'), credibility, and self-criticism" (Loth & Silveira, 2014, p. 78); (2) stereotypes others perceived about them, including "obsolescence and resistance to change, inability and insufficiency in handling new technologies, tediousness, reduced dynamism, and lower propensity for risk" (Loth & Silveira, 2014, p. 78); and (3) stereotypical perceptions of younger individuals, referring to seeing them as "necessary for the continuity of their roles and as possessing greater technological profi-

ciency and vitality” (Loth & Silveira, 2014, p. 78). It is worth noting that negative stereotypes were commonly directed at other individuals or social groups.

Overall, stereotypes of old age underpin ageism (Butler, 1980; Fine-man, 2014; França et al., 2017; Goldani, 2010; Palmore, 2001; Vasconcelos, 2015). In the organizational context, França et al. (2017, pp. 766-767) define ageism as “a set of negative or positive attitudes toward aging, either valuing or devaluing the older workforce, and either promoting or hindering their inclusion/exclusion and retention in the labor market.” However, Levy et al. (2022) argue that the boundary between negative and positive attitudes is not well-defined, and even positive views can have negative effects when they are paternalistic.

In this sense, ageism can be either hostile or benevolent. Hostile ageism refers to openly negative behaviors and attitudes, such as neglect or verbal abuse directed toward older individuals. Benevolent ageism, on the other hand, is associated with paternalistic behaviors and attitudes that can lead to negative outcomes. For instance, excessive care and control over older adults may constitute unwanted help, resulting in a loss of confidence and self-esteem (Cary et al., 2017).

Furthermore, ageism is pervasive and insidious, as it is often neither perceived nor challenged (WHO, 2021). In other words, ageism may manifest subtly and covertly (Silva et al., 2021; Teixeira et al., 2018; Vieira & Cepellos, 2022) and in a familiar, normalized manner (Hanashiro & Pereira, 2020; Spedale, 2019). The normalization of ageism assumes that “people see nothing wrong in being characterized based on age-related stereotypes” (Hanashiro & Pereira, 2020, p. 189).

This article argues that ageism, like old age itself, can also be denied, relativized, or directed toward other social groups by aging individuals. From the perspective of older workers, research by Cepellos et al. (2019) and Torres et al. (2015) indicates that the process of aging and/or old age is commonly denied and silenced. Cepellos et al. (2019, p. 284) found that professionals aged 50 and older “hesitated, avoided, questioned, and relativized the relevance of age for themselves”, often feeling younger and asserting that old age belonged to “others”.

Ageism is interconnected with normative age. In the private sector, the normative age for work establishes the age limit for hiring and career development (Smyer & Pitt-Catsoupes, 2007). According to Vasconcelos (2015), there is a subtle boundary in the Brazilian labor market that hinders the hiring of older workers. This subtle age boundary is linked to the specter of uselessness and obsolescence (Sennett, 2006) and contributes to ageism in the organizational environment. In this context, human resource management practices and policies may rely on normative age, creating obstacles for older professionals in terms of skill development, professional training, and opportunities to assume leadership positions.

Ageism directed toward older workers is often grounded in negative stereotypes of aging, such as notions of finitude and uselessness (Zanuncio et al., 2019). In this context, older workers experience fears related to downward career mobility because of aging, career invisibility, and the specter of uselessness and obsolescence (Sennett, 2006). Sennett (2006) further asserts that older workers may pursue jobs considered inferior or engage in underemployment during career transitions.

In organizations, ageism affects how workers are judged and treated based on their age (Fineman, 2014). In this sense, individuals of any age group can express prejudice and/or discrimination against older individuals (Butler, 1980). Notably, older individuals themselves may also exhibit age prejudice toward their peers (Loth & Silveira, 2014; Schneider & Irigaray, 2008). In this context, older workers may be perceived as less willing to work, as other organizational members might claim that they use aging as an excuse to avoid work.

Indeed, older individuals may use ageism as a form of resistance to work (Zanoni, 2011). In such cases, individuals internalize the stereotypes and prejudices associated with their age group and act in accordance with those perceptions (Fineman, 2014). Zanoni's (2011) research revealed that workers aged 45 and older reappropriated some negative sociodemographic identities to resist exploitation and managerial control. Thus, older workers employed the discourse of incapacity for work to justify absences and tardiness and to advocate for lighter and easier tasks. However, the author emphasizes that the strategy of reappropriating sociodemographic identities is effective in institutional contexts that protect workers from arbitrary dismissals and that have advanced labor legislation and efficient unions.

In the context of the Brazilian public sector, Cepellos et al. (2019) report the phenomenon of symbolic dismissal or retirement. Symbolic dismissal refers to "a form of removing an employee from a specific role or activity without formal termination" (Cepellos et al., 2019, p. 275). In this situation, the older public servant is "dismissed by others, even though they continue working" (Cepellos et al., 2019, p. 282), without being assigned a new role. Symbolic retirement, on the other hand, occurs when the older public servant chooses to retire while still working. According to Cepellos et al. (2019, p. 282), "it is as if pre-retirement were a period during which nothing happens, a moment of waiting... The professional becomes idle, settles in, and enters a phase where they neither leave nor produce." Symbolic dismissal or retirement is linked to the specter of uselessness and obsolescence (Sennett, 2006) and to the job security of public positions.

Ageism intertwines with other "-isms", particularly racism and sexism (Butler, 1980; Fineman, 2014). In the Brazilian context, the inequality and oppression experienced by an older Black woman are part of an intersectional system of discriminations (Goldani, 2010).

In this sense, Spedale et al. (2014) note that organizational routines can legitimize and reproduce gendered ageism in the workplace. The interaction between ageism and gender shapes discriminatory practices, primarily against women, and has negative consequences on career development. Thus, aging can become an implicit barrier for women in professions that value youth and physical attractiveness, such as receptionists, flight attendants, and waitresses (Fineman, 2014).

Women are generally subjected to age discrimination at a younger chronological age compared to men (Fineman, 2014; Spedale, Coupland, & Tempest, 2014). According to Dinnerstein and Weitz (1994), signs of aging in men, such as graying hair, baldness, a wider waistline, and wrinkles, can carry positive connotations in some contexts, such as maturity, wisdom, sensuality, and experience. In contrast, signs of aging in women signify asexuality and decline, which may create career development barriers as aging challenges societal norms of femininity.

It is worth noting that aging has profound implications for older women, as women face additional forms of discrimination and prejudice in organizations (Thomas et al., 2014; Zanoni, 2011).

Ageism can also intersect with prejudice directed at certain classes of workers. It is important to highlight that public servants have frequently been stigmatized in Brazilian society. According to Nunes and Lins (2009, p. 54), former president Fernando Collor de Mello and the media “launched one of the greatest attacks against public servants, inciting the population against them and initiating the ‘hunt for the maharajas’ at the end of the 1980s.” In 2020, Paulo Guedes, who was the Minister of Economy at the time, compared public servants to parasites during a lecture at *Fundação Getúlio Vargas* in Rio de Janeiro. In this context, Brazilian politics and mass media propagate negative stereotypes and prejudices that further deteriorate the public image of civil servants.

Age discrimination directed at older individuals transforms aging into a social issue (Butler, 1980). In the workplace, Butler (1980) identifies examples of ageist practices, such as mandatory retirement, limited opportunities for promotions, and age-based hiring decisions. In the Brazilian public administration, Complementary Law No. 152 (2015) restricts entry into public service and establishes the mandatory retirement of public servants at the age of 75. Thus, this law reflects institutionalized ageism in Brazilian public policy, as it prevents the hiring of individuals aged 75 or older and limits the length of public servants’ professional careers.

In this scenario, public policies and human resource management practices for counteracting the negative effects of ageism are needed. National studies (Cepellos & Tonelli, 2017; França et al., 2017; Goldani, 2010; Silva et al., 2021; Vasconcelos, 2012) suggest several human resource strategies to address ageism, such as raising awareness and educating about the aging process, ageism, and its consequences; sensitizing managers to the importance of valuing older workers; encouraging organizational demographic diversity; forming intergenerational teams alongside other inclusion and retention strategies for older workers; providing opportunities for hiring, promotion, qualification, and training of older individuals; and promoting the retention of specialized labor through special leave policies and the reduction or flexibilization of work hours.

The following section presents the methodological procedures adopted for conducting the research with the older public servants.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

The qualitative research was conducted at a higher education institution (HEI) located in the southeastern region of Brazil. The research subjects were active technical-administrative staff in Education (TASE) aged 45 or older. At the time, the HEI employed 1,948 TASE, of whom 52% were aged 45 or older.

The field research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the snowball sampling method was adopted to select participants. According to Bockorni and Gomes (2021), snowball sampling is a non-probabilistic sampling technique that relies on referral chains and recommendations. Thus, referral networks were necessary to access research participants due

to social isolation and the adoption of remote work at the HEI during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sixteen public servants (eight men and eight women) participated in the research. The participants' ages ranged from 47 to 66 years. The average age was 56 years, with no significant difference between the mean ages of men and women. Figure 1 lists the social and demographic data of the research participants.

Figure 1

Sociodemographic Data

Fictional Name	Age	Sex	Color or Ethnicity	Job Position	Education
Lorena	47	F	Mixed-race	Administrative Assistant	Master's Degree
Isabela	49	F	Mixed-race	Laboratory Technician - Field: Nursing	Lato Sensu Post-graduate education
Marcos	50	M	Black	Mechanical Technician	Lato Sensu Post-graduate education
Maria	50	F	White	Executive Secretary	Master's Degree
Gabriel	53	M	White	Administrative Assistant	Lato Sensu Post-graduate education
Nicolas	53	M	White	Administrative Assistant	Lato Sensu Post-graduate education
Helena	55	F	White	Pantry Worker	Lato Sensu Post-graduate education
Bernardo	56	M	Mixed-race	Administrative Assistant	Lato Sensu Post-graduate education
Alice	57	F	White	Administrative Assistant	Doctorate
Elisa	57	F	Black	Executive Secretary	Lato Sensu Post-graduate education
Heitor	58	M	Mixed-race	Administrator	Lato Sensu Post-graduate education
Lucas	58	M	Mixed-race	Economist	Master's Degree
Diego	60	M	White	Administrator	Master's Degree
Laura	62	F	White	Laboratory Technician - Field: Nursing	Lato Sensu Post-graduate education
Mateus	65	M	Mixed-race	Administrative Assistant	Lato Sensu Post-graduate education
Sofia	66	F	Mixed-race	Administrative Assistant	Undergraduate degree

The data collection technique used was the semi-structured in-depth interview (Gaskell, 2002). The interview script included questions related to aging in one's career, the influence of age on work, relationships between older and younger staff, changes in treatment due to the aging process, rejection based on age, and how the HEI manages older workers.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, oral data collection was conducted via video calls using the WhatsApp application. The use of video calls presents certain limitations, particularly regarding accessibility and connection quality. The virtual interview model required participants to have internet access, a smartphone, and basic knowledge of how to use video call applications. Additionally, one interview was completed via telephone due to technical issues with the internet connection. Nevertheless, the use of communication technologies for data collection enabled interaction between

the researcher and participants and facilitated the gathering of valuable material for analysis.

The audio recordings of the interviews were made with prior consent from participants, resulting in over 23 hours of recorded material. The average interview duration was one hour and 27 minutes.

Data collection was concluded upon reaching the saturation point. According to Gaskell (2002, p. 71), saturation is achieved when “common themes begin to emerge, and there is a progressively growing confidence in the emerging understanding of the phenomenon.” Thus, during the 14th to 16th interviews, it was observed that adding more information or participants would not yield new themes for the research.

Thematic analysis of narratives and biographies was employed for data analysis (Gibbs, 2009). The thematic approach allows for the examination of multiple stories and the inductive creation of conceptual groupings through the development of a narrative typology. The narrative typology aims to organize broad narrative units by themes. Thus, broad narrative units are treated as analytical units and illustrated with vignettes or excerpts from the narratives (Riessman, 2005).

The data analysis process was conducted in two stages: (1) data organization, which involved transcribing the audio recordings and proofreading the transcripts for spelling and grammar; and (2) thematic coding and categorization. Gibbs (2009) states that coding “consists of identifying one or more passages of text that exemplify a thematic idea and linking them to a code” (Gibbs, 2009, p. 60). Codes can encompass theoretical or descriptive ideas, phenomena, activities, and explanations that share similarities (Gibbs, 2009). Subsequently, similar codes were organized into thematic categories. The construction of thematic categories is based on thematic comparisons, i.e., identifying differences and similarities between narratives about specific topics or similar events. It is also grounded in the research objectives and the literature review. Thus, the thematic categories were constructed *a posteriori*.

The analysis and discussion of the results will follow. Fictitious names were assigned to the interviewees to protect their identity and ensure anonymity.

■ PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

This section presents the findings and analyses derived from the empirical investigation. The data analysis process resulted in the construction of four thematic categories: (1) misunderstanding and naturalization of ageism; (2) hostile and benevolent ageism, uselessness, and obsolescence; (3) ageism and other “-isms”; (4) strategies for confronting ageism.

Misunderstanding and Naturalization of Ageism

Overall, the interviewees stated that they did not perceive differences in interpersonal treatment as they aged (Helena, Laura, Isabela, Heitor, Sofia, Bernardo, Lorena, Gabriel, Diego, and Mateus) and did not feel rejected in the organizational environment due to their age (Helena, Laura, Isabela, Heitor, Sofia, Lorena, Gabriel, Diego, Mateus, and Maria). However, some participants

reported experiencing ageism within the HEI (Marcos and Elisa). In contrast, Alice, Lucas, and Nicolas initially denied experiencing ageism when asked about rejection or changes in treatment as they aged but later described instances of ageism during the interview.

Additionally, some participants identified with positive stereotypes of aging while attributing negative stereotypes to other individuals or social groups (Helena, Laura, Sofia, Bernardo, Lorena, Gabriel, Lucas, Elisa, and Mateus). For example, Elisa mentioned possessing knowledge and experience due to her long career at the institution. Furthermore, she stated that she did not identify with the group of older workers. According to her, work colleagues “frequently say, ‘Oh, age this, age that!’ but it’s like this, I... It doesn’t apply to me! Because that which they criticize, I haven’t reached that stage yet” (Elisa). However, Elisa also reported experiencing ageism, particularly in relation to rejection and abandonment regarding the use of information technologies:

The person needed something on the computer. Instead of asking me, they asked someone else, assuming that the other person knew how to do it and I didn’t. This has happened more than once! “Oh, I can’t print something!” They never call me! “The projector isn’t working”: apparently, I can’t fix that either! But... why is that? My colleague, who is the same age as I am, doesn’t even wanna try to do it! They immediately call someone else to do it. (Elisa).

Elisa also stated that older work colleagues are unwilling to learn and master information tools and technologies. She claims that younger individuals believe older workers are “against new procedures. They are slow to catch on. They don’t accept change. And these characteristics are real! Older people don’t embrace innovation, they don’t accept change, they are slow!” (Elisa). Thus, Elisa attempts to justify the ageism she experiences by associating negative age-related stereotypes with her older work colleagues. Moreover, Elisa’s narrative reinforces the argument presented by Butler (1980) and Schneider and Irigaray (2008). According to these authors, individuals of any age group can exhibit prejudice and/or discrimination against older individuals, including older workers themselves who experience ageism.

Elisa’s account supports the arguments presented by Loth and Silveira (2014), Torres et al. (2015), and Schneider and Irigaray (2008) regarding age-related stereotypes. The authors identified that older workers often associate positive aging stereotypes with themselves, such as greater experience, knowledge, maturity, respect, credibility, and wisdom. Conversely, negative aging stereotypes prevail in situations where participants project their perceptions of aging onto other groups of older individuals. The notion that negative aging stereotypes apply to other older individuals or social groups relates to social categorization and an attempt at social differentiation (Tajfel & Turner, [1979] 2004). Thus, some interviewees seek to differentiate themselves and distance themselves from losses and negative aging stereotypes (Rudolph & Zacher, 2022).

The findings indicate that ageism is sometimes perceived as a sensitive topic. Some interviewees hesitated, avoided, or circumvented certain questions, and demonstrated limited reflection or knowledge about ageism, aligning with prior research by Cepellos et al. (2019), Spedale (2019), and Vasconcelos (2012) on aging. For instance, Helena displayed moments

of silence and reflection during the interview, hesitating and circumventing the question about ageism.

- **Interviewer:** Do your colleagues treat older people differently in the workplace?
- **Helena:** Oh, I think so! I think. [Silence].
- **Interviewer:** Why do you think that?
- **Helena:** [Silence] They don't have much patience. Oh, I think I'm being unfair, I don't know... I think it's better not to answer this question... I don't know! [Laughter].

Additionally, some interviewees indicated a lack of awareness about ageism. According to Gabriel, *"I've never thought about this [age-related prejudice], but it is something worth considering... because at some point in life, this might happen."* Bernardo stated that he does not feel rejected because of his age, but he added, *"it might be that in one situation or another, it could lean in that direction, but..."*

The lack of awareness and critical reflection on ageism reinforces the normalization of ageist practices in the workplace. In this context, some narratives seek to naturalize ageism. For instance, Elisa asserted that older workers' difficulties with information technologies and their exclusion in the context of HEIs are "cultural". The term "cultural" serves to naturalize ageism in the organizational environment. Meanwhile, Marcos built his argument based on stereotypes commonly associated with aging, such as physical appearance and the perception of uselessness and obsolescence (Sennett, 2006).

When you reach a certain age, it's logical that someone might look at you and say: "No, he's not fit to do that", and it almost becomes something natural, right? I think this happens as well, when something new comes up, and they think that the guy [older worker] won't understand it. Or there might even be prejudice. The [public] servant is qualified to do the job, but because of their age, people think, "No, he's about to retire; he doesn't care about anything anymore! He's been here too long!" (Marcos).

According to Spedale (2019), negative age stereotypes can take on the appearance of familiarity and normality. Thus, silence, lack of understanding, normalization, and the association of ageism with other contextual situations are related to the naturalization of ageism (Hanashiro & Pereira, 2020; Spedale, 2019). Additionally, the interviewees employ certain elements of ageism, such as physical appearance, lack of proficiency with technology, and the specter of uselessness and obsolescence, as justifications for the naturalization of ageism.

These findings reaffirm the challenges within the field of aging research, particularly regarding the difficulty in accessing and examining the ideologies, norms, and beliefs of older individuals concerning ageism (Spedale, 2019; Vasconcelos, 2012). Research participants generally do not acknowledge their own prejudices (Vasconcelos, 2012) and instead attribute negative age stereotypes to other individuals or social groups (Loth & Silveira, 2014; Shneider & Irigaray, 2008; Torres et al., 2015). Furthermore, the findings suggest that interviewees struggle to comprehend ageism, primarily due

to its naturalization and its association with other forms of prejudice and contextual situations. Ageism is also a phenomenon that is silenced, denied, and poorly understood by aging individuals (Cepellos et al., 2019). As França et al. (2017) indicate, these findings are situated within a broader context of limited awareness and scarce discussion about ageism in Brazilian society.

Hostile and Benevolent Ageism, Uselessness, and Obsolescence

Some interviewees expressed fear of being replaced by younger workers and highlighted the influence of normative age (Smyer & Pitt-Catsoupes, 2007) on professional training, qualification, and the occupation of specific roles in the workplace. For example, Alice stated, *“I might not be chosen for a particular job or a particular investment because of my age, you know? I am aware that time is running out [laughs].”* These findings align with Nilsson’s (2011) research in the Swedish context, where older workers reported having fewer opportunities for professional training and development due to their age, as well as being disadvantaged in the selection process for new projects and supervisory positions.

Unlike careers in the private sector, the results indicate that downward mobility in public administration can occur during the tenure of the position due to the stability of public servants. Thus, older public servants may become invisible in the workplace due to aging and the specter of uselessness and obsolescence. As a result, they may be assigned trivial tasks, excluded from professional training and development initiatives, or symbolically dismissed or retired (Cepellos et al., 2019).

In this regard, Marcos noted that he is not asked to perform certain work tasks because management does not believe in his technical capabilities. According to Marcos, the situation worsened after young workers were hired for the department: *“When the new colleagues arrived, about a year ago... They started calling on that person [the young worker] there and didn’t talk to me. They just put me in the corner!”* The worsening of this situation demonstrates the connection between ageism and symbolic dismissal (Cepellos et al., 2019), i.e., the abandonment of older workers by management and work colleagues.

Similarly, Lucas reported the abandonment of an older work colleague with hearing impairment due to aging. According to the interviewee, the colleague *“started noticing that people didn’t want to talk to him because he spoke very loudly”* (Lucas). Thus, physical limitations resulting from aging can also underpin symbolic dismissal (Cepellos et al., 2019). Furthermore, Lucas’s account highlights the intersection between ageism and ableism (discrimination and oppression of people with disabilities) due to physical limitations potentially related to aging.

It is worth noting that the narratives of Alice, Marcos, and Lucas point to the presence of hostile ageism (Cary et al., 2017) in the HEI. Overall, the interviewees reported experiences of discredit and abandonment, as well as a preference for younger workers. Physical limitations associated with aging, intergenerational distancing, and lack of proficiency with information technologies also underpin hostile ageism.

The results also indicate the presence of benevolent ageism (Cary et al., 2017). For example, Lorena mentioned that older workers are subjected

to paternalistic treatment, particularly concerning reduced working hours. According to the interviewee, her work colleagues often remark: “Oh, let’s assign him [the older worker] to six-hour shifts! ‘Poor thing, because he can’t take it!’ It’s usually to protect them. It’s overprotection.” Reducing working hours is an age management practice adopted by various organizations but is not a common reality in the context of the HEI. In the public service, reducing the workday to six hours is only possible in certain sectors requiring uninterrupted in-person attendance. For this reason, the interviewee described assigning older workers to sectors with flexible working hours as a paternalistic attitude. Thus, benevolent ageism relates to paternalistic and overprotective behaviors and attitudes toward older workers in the HEI, as also highlighted in the studies by Cary et al. (2017).

Older workers who did not invest in career development and are neither productive nor proactive are deemed useless and obsolete. In this regard, Gabriel used the term “Jurassic” to refer to certain older workers who, in his view, are idle, outdated, and unproductive in the HEI. It is important to emphasize that the term Jurassic expresses ageism against older workers.

Jurassic refers to when the guy [an older worker] does not work anymore. The guy [older worker] just shows up to clock in... He just sits there, idle, and ends up feeling completely useless! From our perspective, the guy [older worker] isn’t producing anything. (Gabriel).

From the interviewee’s perspective, older workers who are regarded as unproductive and obsolete are abandoned and forgotten. Gabriel stated, “We treat those people [jurassics] as if they no longer existed. We don’t even remember these people.” He also mentioned, “Those who don’t work, we place them in a room with a computer and a phone” (Gabriel). Finally, Gabriel added, “Either you keep yourself updated, or you’ll end up forgotten, sitting on a couch, waiting for death to come.” The interviewee’s account highlights the phenomenon of symbolic dismissal or retirement (Cepellos et al., 2019) of workers deemed unproductive and obsolete. It also underscores the ageist practices observed in the HEI.

Similarly, Nicolas narrated the situation of a worker who has no assigned tasks in the HEI. According to the interviewee, “It seems like [management] no longer trusts her and does not assign her any tasks anymore. So, she clocks in and just stays there! Wandering about [the HEI]!” (Nicolas). Evidently, the older worker was symbolically dismissed (Cepellos et al., 2019) from her public position in the HEI.

Furthermore, some older workers may experience unproductivity, invisibility, and indifference in their careers. In other words, some older workers retain their rights and remain in public positions, even though they experience symbolic dismissal or retirement (Cepellos et al., 2019). In this regard, Alice stated, “I don’t want to end my career like many others, just spinning wheels [laughs]. Doing nothing just for show.” The expressions “spinning wheels” and “doing nothing just for show” reflect unproductivity and relate to symbolic dismissal or retirement in the public sector (Cepellos et al., 2019).

This finding also connects to the reappropriation of negative socio-demographic identities, as discussed by Zanoni (2011). Given the HEI context, which protects workers from arbitrary dismissals, the specter of uselessness and obsolescence (Sennett, 2006) and symbolic dismissal or retirement (Ce-

pellos et al., 2019) may be reappropriated by some older workers as resistance strategies against their work environment.

In this context, Elisa highlights the lack of training and qualification policies for older workers in the HEI. The interviewee reported that some older workers face ageist practices, such as downward career mobility (Sennett, 2006), where they are assigned to trivial tasks due to their age. Despite this, the HEI does not provide training for these older workers to perform their new duties. According to Elisa, the HEI *“places someone at a reception desk without offering any guidance on how to be a receptionist... Because to be a receptionist, you need to receive proper information”* (Elisa). Additionally, Elisa pointed out the absence of a training program tailored to the specific needs of older workers.

Research findings on ageism in the private sector indicate that older workers are susceptible to dismissal during employment restructuring and workforce renewal processes. Moreover, they face difficulties reintegrating into the labor market due to age limits in recruitment processes (Hanashiro & Pereira, 2020). However, the findings of the study involving older public-sector employees diverge from and broaden the discussion on age discrimination. The public sector, particularly the stability associated with public positions, facilitates experiences of uselessness and obsolescence in careers. Older workers who experience uselessness and obsolescence are often abandoned and forgotten. In some cases, they face downward career mobility (Sennett, 2006) or are symbolically dismissed or retired (Cepellos et al., 2019).

Ageism and Other “-isms”

From the perspective of some interviewees, ageism intertwines primarily with racism and sexism. Spedale et al. (2014) argue that the interaction between ageism, sexism, and racism is complex and deepens gender asymmetries within organizations. This interaction is particularly disadvantageous for women.

Alice began her career at the HEI at the age of 45. She recounts that her hiring in the workplace *“was a disappointment for the men because other sectors [laughs] got the young, pretty girls, you know? And they got an older woman!”* Alice also highlights that *“there is some appreciation... not for physical or productive age, but I think there is a sexual element within the University. For the young [female public servant] ones who are pretty.”* Furthermore, Alice notes, *“I’m perceived more as a mother figure... someone who always tries to do things for everyone, for the good of everyone.”*

As Dinnerstein and Weitz (1994) point out, aging among women leads to a decline and loss of sensuality and sexuality, while also associating older women with the figure of a mother. Thus, women’s aging can create career barriers (Dinnerstein & Weitz, 1994) and exacerbate discrimination and prejudice in the organizational environment (Thomas et al., 2014; Zanoni, 2011).

Alice also reports experiencing resistance and discredit from her colleagues at the beginning of her career at the HEI. According to the interviewee, her colleagues perceived that *“women don’t have much capability, don’t have much competence, no matter how much effort we put in, you know? And I think that within the University there is still sexism”* (Alice).

Additionally, Alice reports the condescension of some colleagues toward her qualifications. The interviewee holds two undergraduate de-

grees: Language Studies and Law. Despite this, she recounts that a male colleague attempted to teach her how to “*write constitutionally [laughs] and... place commas [laughs]*” during the early stages of her career at the HEI. This narrative reflects the phenomenon of *mansplaining* (Joyce, Humă, Ristimäki, Almeida, & Doebling, 2021), in which a man asserts his supposed superior knowledge based on gender, disregarding the possibility that the woman may have more expertise on the subject.

Regarding the intersection of ageism and racism, Elisa recalls the behavior of her supervisor when she joined the HEI at the age of 43. According to the interviewee, “*I clearly remember the look on his [the teaching center’s director] face when that big Black woman walked into his office to assume the position of Executive Secretary. I was going to be his secretary!*” (Elisa). Furthermore, she recounts, “*During the first meeting to set up the departmental council [in the teaching center], I clearly remember the [director’s] ironic behavior, you know? The condescension and sarcasm*” (Elisa). Elisa asserts that “*it is very difficult to be a Black woman, older, at the end of your career, and working at the [HEI]. Because the [HEI] is very prejudiced!*”

Elisa describes working at the HEI as a challenge. She further states that her experience and knowledge gained over the course of her professional career are not recognized or valued.

I feel like a person with a lot of knowledge... although, because of the way I look, people don’t give me opportunities, you know? I think I’ve learned a lot throughout this journey... It’s unfortunate to reach 57 years of age, after a 36-year journey [work years], and not be valued for what I’ve learned. (Elisa).

It is important to highlight that the interaction between ageism, sexism, and racism is tied to gender experiences, as this intersection between these “-isms” was observed only in the narratives of women. Thus, the results support the assertion by Spedale et al. (2014) that the interaction among these “-isms” disproportionately disadvantages women.

Finally, ageism is also linked to prejudice against public servants and the TASE. According to Helena, “*I didn’t slack off like many people think public servants do. No! People perceive public servants as having it easy*” (Helena). Elisa, in turn, reports the intersection of ageism with racism and class prejudice. Elisa states that TASE are “*discriminated against for being technical staff. The technical staff are the servants. They’re the ones who ‘don’t know anything.’ And on top of that, I’m also discriminated against because of my color. And now, because of my age*” (Elisa). Therefore, ageism interacts with various forms of prejudice in organizational settings, including sexism, racism, and class-based discrimination against workers.

Ageism Coping Strategies

Due to fears of downward career mobility and the aging process, Elisa expresses apprehension and reluctance to be reassigned to tasks that deviate from her role as Executive Secretary:

As long as I am here [at the HEI], I want to remain productive. The day they assign me to a small reception desk — which I won’t allow —

because, before they assign me to that desk, I'll retire! Another thing that I won't do, if they someday ask me to [laughs], is make coffee or go to the pantry. "Oh, you make delicious food..." They're just trying to keep me busy!" (Elisa).

The interviewee's account reflects a fear of failure and marginalization among older workers (Sennett, 2006) and highlights ageist practices typically directed toward older workers, as well as tasks commonly assigned to older women. In this context, the interviewee strives to remain productive and proactive, aiming to avoid marginalization and downward mobility in her career. Furthermore, the right to retirement is framed as a form of resistance to ageist practices at the HEI.

Alice, in turn, reports concerns about age at the start of her career at the HEI, having been hired at the age of 45. The interviewee describes a fear of being reassigned to tasks unrelated to her position due to her age. As a result, she demonstrates a continuous need to stand out among younger work colleagues and take on professional challenges to avoid invisibility and downward mobility in her career.

It's just that, among that group [of public servants hired through the same selection process], I was the one who stood out the most among the young folks, who achieved the most, and who showed the greatest involvement with the institution... I think they [the HEI] didn't expect this from me... They thought I had joined [the HEI] to settle down, finish off the remaining years I had left, stay comfortable, and perform some tasks — who knows, "they'll get Alice to make coffee, serve coffee." Little did they know that this was never my goal. I could even make it [coffee], as a matter of courtesy or politeness, but I would pursue other paths. (Alice).

To counter the resistance and discredit from work colleagues, Alice also highlights the need for continuous training and qualification to stand out and gain recognition in the workplace. According to the interviewee, "we [women] have to work much harder to be recognized as professionals" (Alice).

Ageism and racism present significant challenges and obstacles in one's career. Considering this, Elisa states that she strives to excel in the workplace to overcome ageism and racism. In her words, "we have to hustle. Always aim to be the best employee, always the best person. Be careful, for instance, when saying things they won't like because they'll use your ethnic characteristics to label you" (Elisa).

Nevertheless, job security in the public sector prevents the arbitrary replacement or dismissal of public servants due to discrimination based on age, gender, or skin color. According to Elisa, "dark skin tone bothers people! It bothers them. But since I'm a public servant, they have no choice but to accept it, right? Deal with it. So, you survive" (Elisa). Although the account indicates experiences of oppression within the organizational context of the HEI, the findings also suggest that marginalized groups have gained access to the HEI. This finding underscores the need for human resource policies and practices that address various forms of discrimination within the HEI.

In addition, older workers must demonstrate experience and proactivity in the workplace to avoid ageism within the organizational environment.

For instance, Sofia states, *“I have never felt discriminated against because of my age; on the contrary, I have always felt valued for my experience”* (Sofia).

Aging leads to reduced productivity due to the natural process of physical and cognitive decline, as well as the obsolescence of knowledge and skills (Chand & Tung, 2014). Nonetheless, remaining productive and proactive in the organizational environment is a way to resist uselessness and obsolescence, as well as to avoid invisibility, downward career mobility, and ageism.

■ FINAL REMARKS

Ageism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon (Cary et al., 2017). The research findings also revealed that ageism is occasionally a silenced, denied, and misunderstood phenomenon within the HEI. Despite this, some accounts indicated that ageism primarily manifests in a hostile manner among older public servants.

In the context of the private sector, ageism commonly creates barriers in recruitment processes, career development, and access to leadership positions. It can also lead to mandatory retirement or the dismissal of older workers (Butler, 1980; Hanashiro & Pereira, 2020; Smyer & Pitt-Catsoupes, 2007; Vasconcelos, 2015). However, the research findings demonstrate that certain ageist practices in the context of the Brazilian public sector exhibit characteristics distinct from ageism in the private sector. These specific characteristics of ageism are related to the particularities of the public sector, especially the job stability of public servants. Thus, ageism in the public sector aligns with the specter of uselessness and obsolescence, invisibility, downward career mobility (Sennett, 2006), and symbolic dismissal or retirement (Cepellos et al., 2019) in the exercise of public office. These findings expand and enrich discussions about ageism across different work contexts.

The article also highlighted that ageism interacts with sexism and racism. This interaction proves particularly disadvantageous for older women. In this context, older public servants consistently seek to remain proactive, productive, experienced, qualified, and up-to-date to avoid ageism in the organizational environment.

From the perspective of social constructionism, the empirical research addressed a phenomenon rarely discussed by the scientific community and in the field of organizational studies: ageism. Discussing ageism is also important for expanding the understanding of the phenomenon among aging individuals, as well as for proposing human resource management policies aimed at preventing and combating the negative effects of ageism in organizations. Furthermore, it is worth noting that adopting a qualitative approach was essential for understanding the nuances and complexity of ageism from the perspective of older workers who are susceptible to experiencing it in the organizational environment.

The identification of ageism indicates the need for human resource management policies and practices that address ageism in the context of public administration and meet the specific needs and particularities of older workers (Zacher et al., 2018; Zancunio et al., 2019). In this regard, public organizations must adopt human resource management policies and strategies that contribute to the development of professional skills, engagement, and the

strengthening of workers' attitudes toward their work. These human resource management policies and strategies should respect human development and the aging process in the workplace, and they may also reconfigure the aging process within public sector careers (Cepellos et al., 2019).

This study has several limitations: (1) the research is susceptible to the denial of the aging process and ageism (Cepellos et al., 2019; Torres et al., 2015), as well as to participants' reluctance or inability to identify themselves as older workers (Shneider & Irigaray, 2008); (2) the research is subject to difficulties in exploring and accessing the ideologies, norms, and beliefs of the participants (Spedale, 2019; Vasconcelos, 2012); (3) the research is vulnerable to the attribution of negative characteristics to other groups of older workers (Tajfel & Turner, [1979] 2004); and, (4) the study relied solely on interviews as the data collection technique. However, it is considered that these limitations did not interfere with the analysis of the results due to the quantity and quality of the data.

Based on the analysis of the results, the following avenues for future research on ageism were identified: (1) adopting other qualitative data collection techniques to study ageism in the context of the public sector, such as focus groups and participant observation; (2) investigating ageist practices in public organizations using a quantitative approach; (3) evaluating public policies and human resource management practices aimed at older public servants; and, (4) conducting in-depth studies on the intersection of ageism with sexism, racism, class prejudice, and ableism.

The discussions on aging in careers reveal several practical and social implications: (1) the Brazilian population is aging rapidly (Cepellos & Tonelli, 2017), and the recent pension reform contributes to the prolongation of the professional life of many workers. Consequently, organizations need to adapt to an aging workforce; (2) the findings indicate the experience of ageism in the context of HEIs, where public servants adopt individual strategies to circumvent or cope with its negative effects on their careers. Therefore, institutional actions are necessary to address ageist practices in HEIs, such as raising awareness among managers and younger workers about the negative effects of ageism and implementing professional development programs targeted at older public servants; (3) the findings highlight the need for human resource management strategies that value diversity within organizations; (4) discussions on ageism unveil and denaturalize a social phenomenon that is rarely discussed in the media, organizations, and society. They also contribute to promoting broader citizenship and fostering an egalitarian society (Goldani, 2010).



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