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Who is 'young'? And who is 'old'?

Perception of age categories and
experiences of ageism in the UK and Europe

**ESRC Festival of Social Science
15 March 2010**

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Director, Centre for the Study of Group Processes**

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The Problem

- Age categorization:
 - Age is part of everyone's identity;
 - We categorize others based on their age;
 - We all have a sense of somebody being 'old' or 'young';
 - But at what age exactly is a person seen as 'young' or 'old'?
- Stereotyping and prejudice:
 - Stereotypes start with placing a person into a category;
 - In order to understand what people mean with prejudices someone is 'too young' or 'too old', we need to understand how people categorize age.
- Since ageism is under-researched, we do not know much about people's perception of when 'youth' ends and 'old age' starts.

What do the British think?

- Data are available through the European Social Survey (ESS)
- Round 4 (2008/09) of the ESS contains a module on ageism:
 - designed by Prof Dominic Abrams and colleagues*;
 - comprises 55 items;
 - representative samples from 21 nations;
 - data from more than 40,000 people; (UK > 2,000).

* Designed by Professor Dominic Abrams and Hannah Swift (Centre for the Study of Group Processes, University of Kent), Professor Luisa Lima and Dr Sibila Marques (Centre for Social Investigation and Intervention, Lisbon, Portugal), and Prof Genevieve Coudin (Paris V University).

The Ageism Module

What does it measure?

1. Age categorization and identification

- e.g., AGEGRBL: “Which age group do you belong to?”

2. Age stereotypes and prejudice

- e.g., OAFL20/ OAFL70: “How negative or positive do you feel towards people in their 20s/70s?”

3. Perceived status and threats

- P70HLTB: “Do you think people over 70 are a burden on [country]'s health service these days?”

The Ageism Module cont'

4. Experiences of and responses to age discrimination
 - LKRSPAG: “In the past year have you felt that someone showed you a lack of respect because of your age, for instance by ignoring or patronising you?”

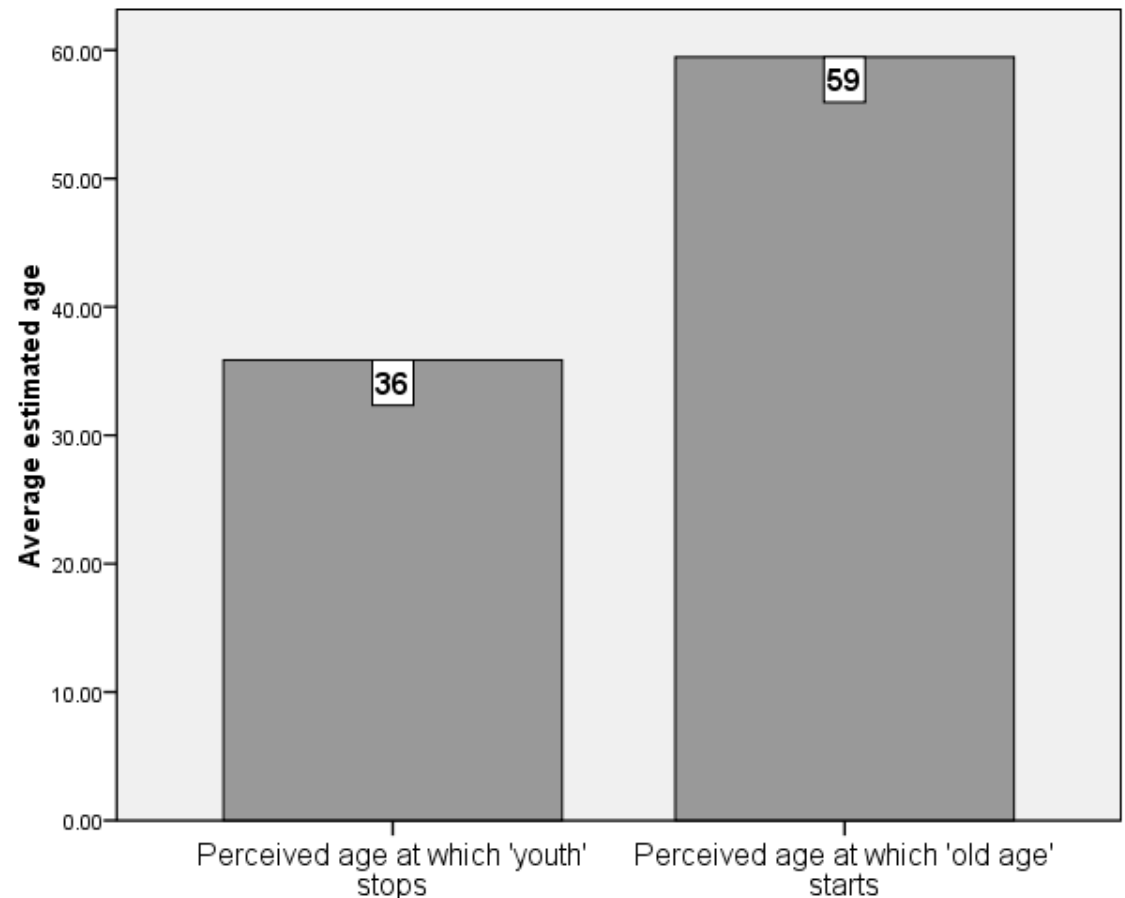
5. Intergenerational contact
 - FRNDY30/ FRNDO70: “How many friends, other than members of your family, do you have who are younger than 30/ older than 70?”

Age Categorisation: What the British think...

Perceived end of youth and start of old age

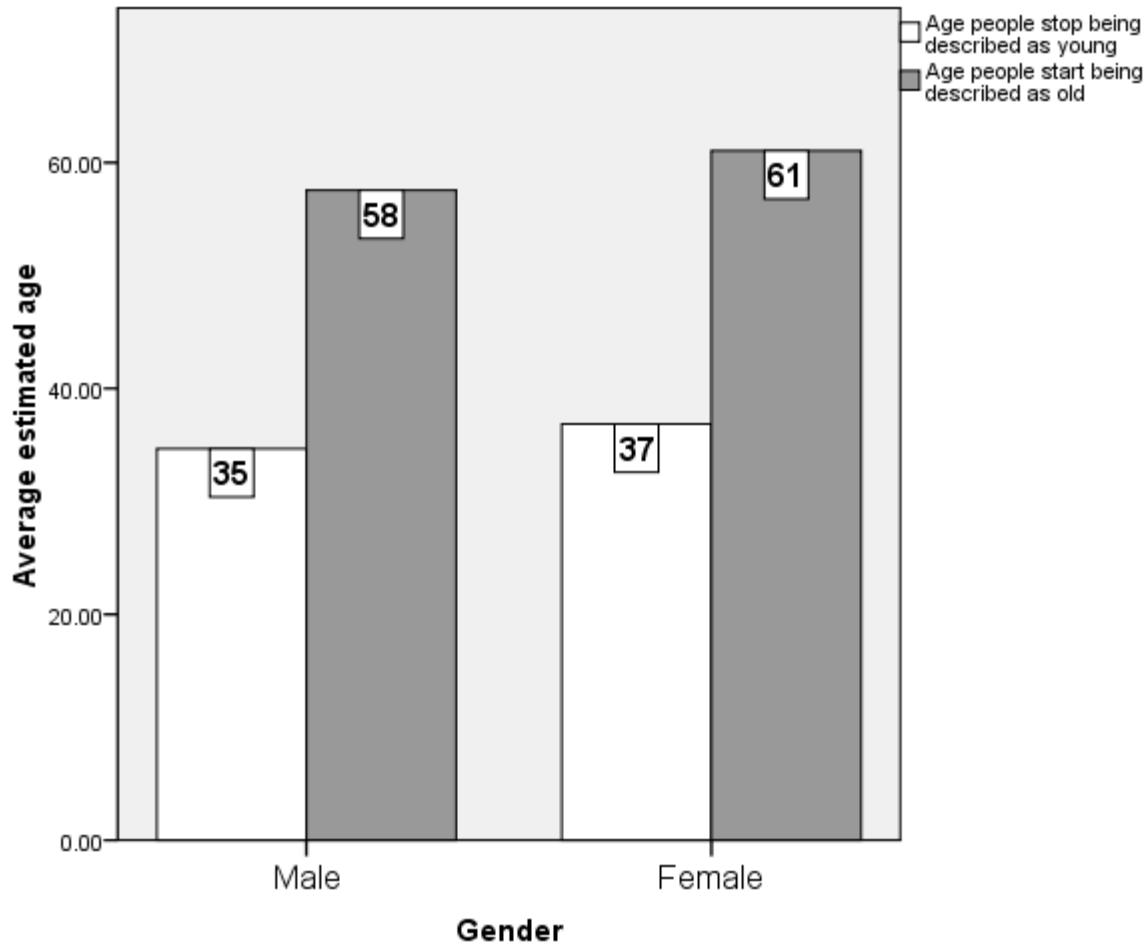
“At what age do you think people stop being young?” (AGDCYNG)

“At what age do you think old age starts?” (AGDOLD)



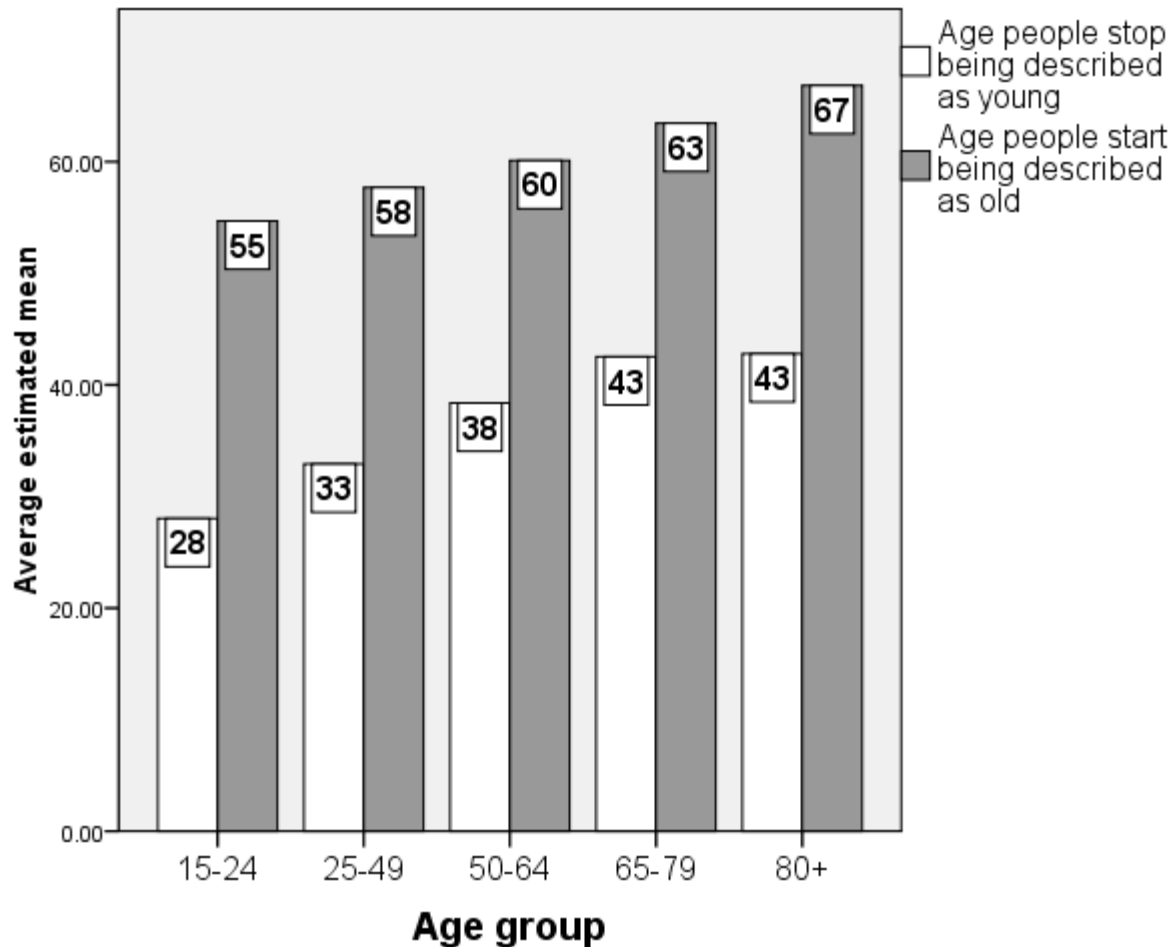
Age Categorisation: What the British think...

Perceived end of youth and start of old age by gender



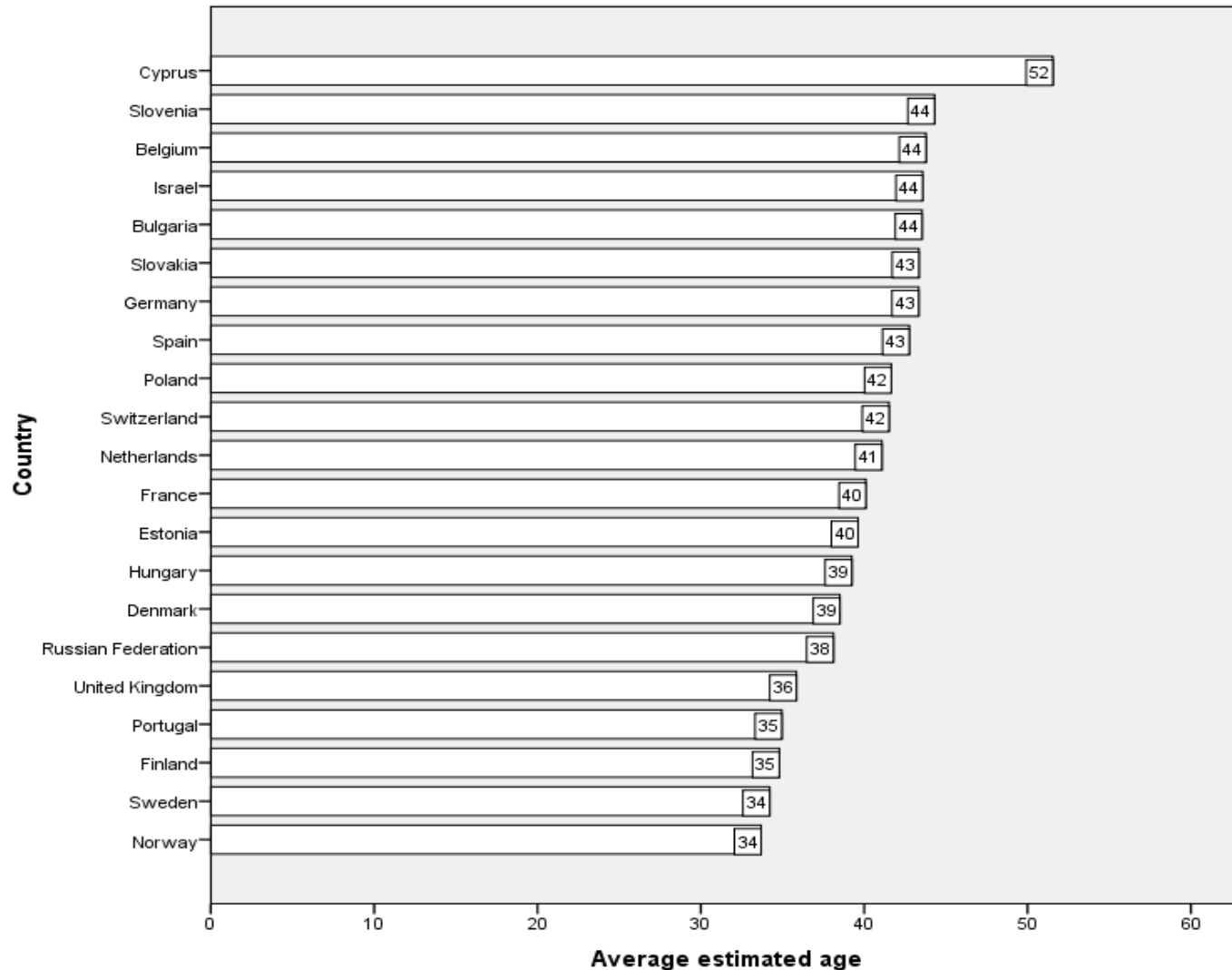
Age Categorisation: What the British think...

Perceived end of youth and start of old age among people of different ages



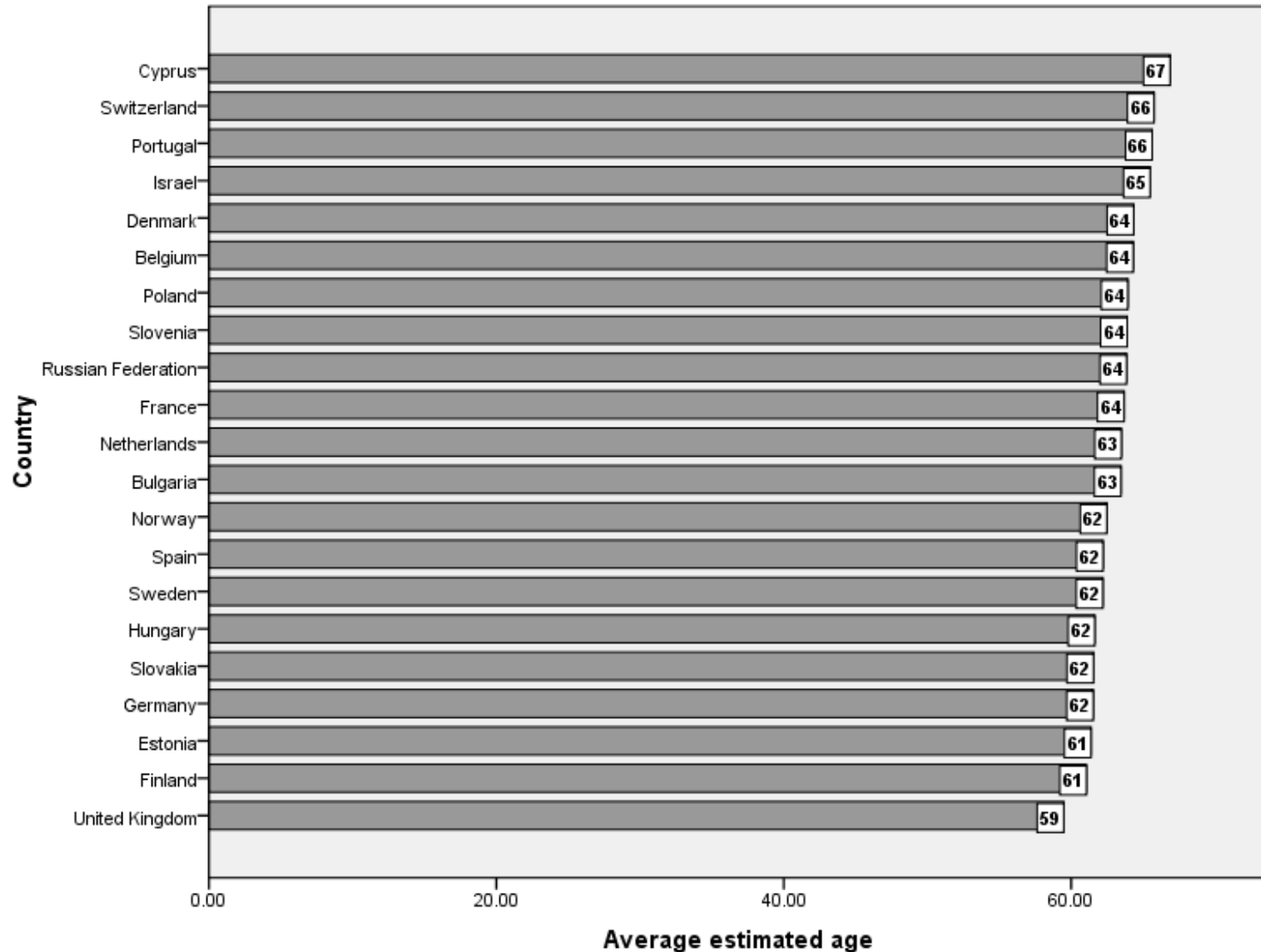
Age Categorisation: What people in other countries think...

Perceived end of youth across countries



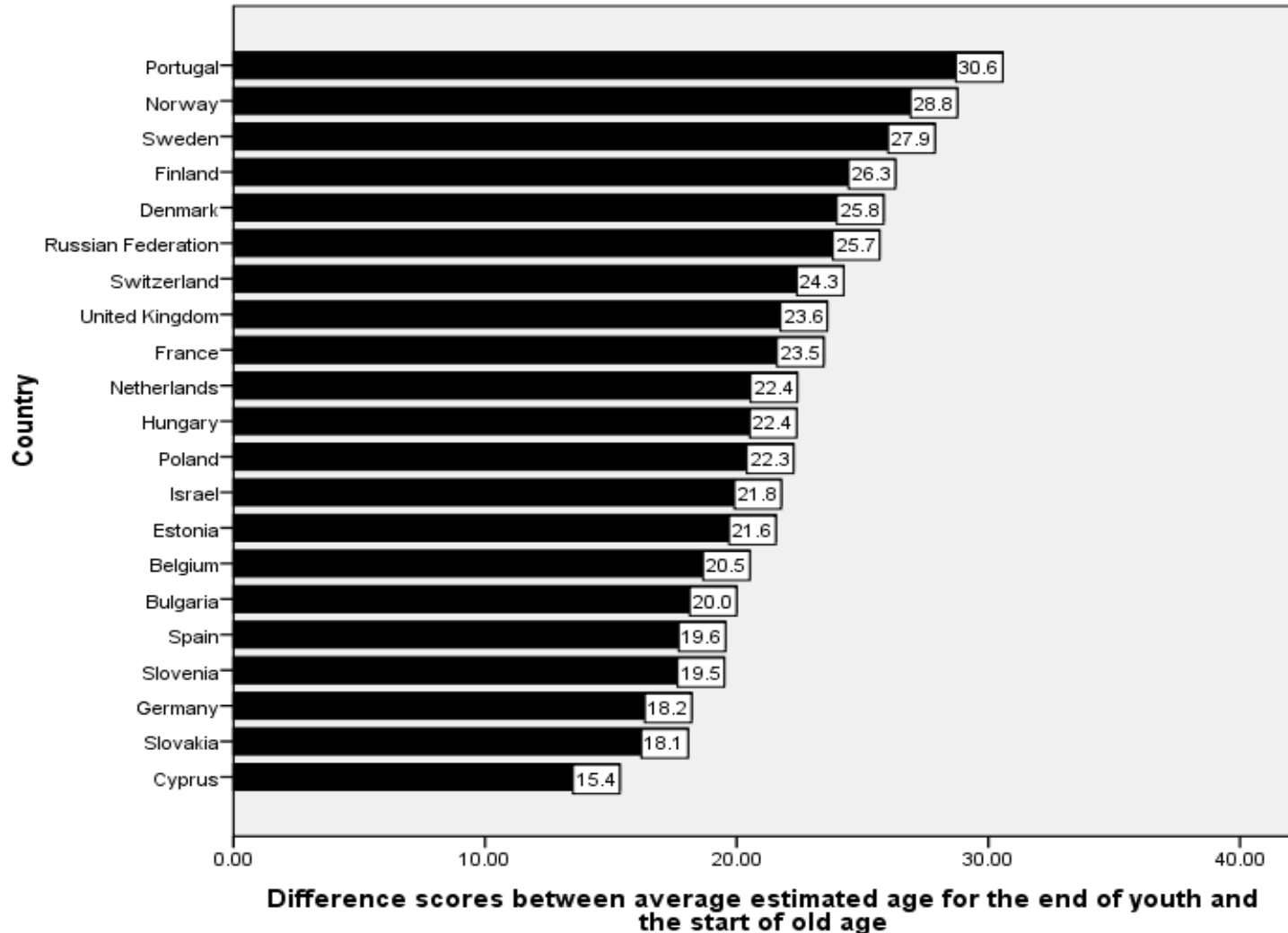
Age Categorisation: What people in other countries think...

Perceived start of old age across countries



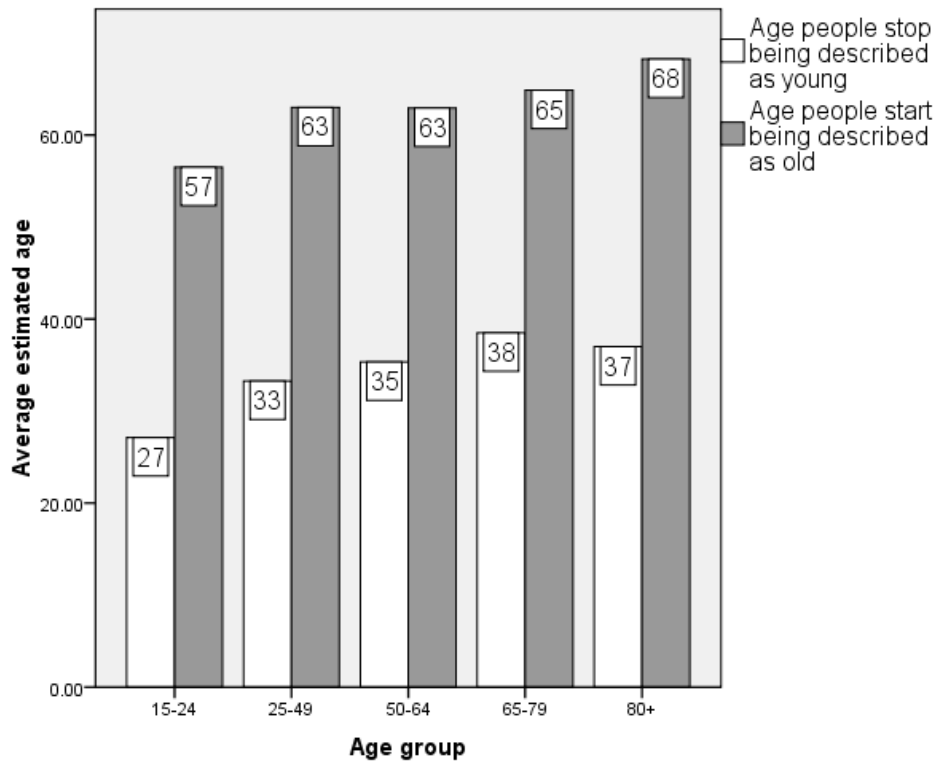
Age Categorisation: What people in other countries think...

Differences between perceived end of youth and start of old age across countries

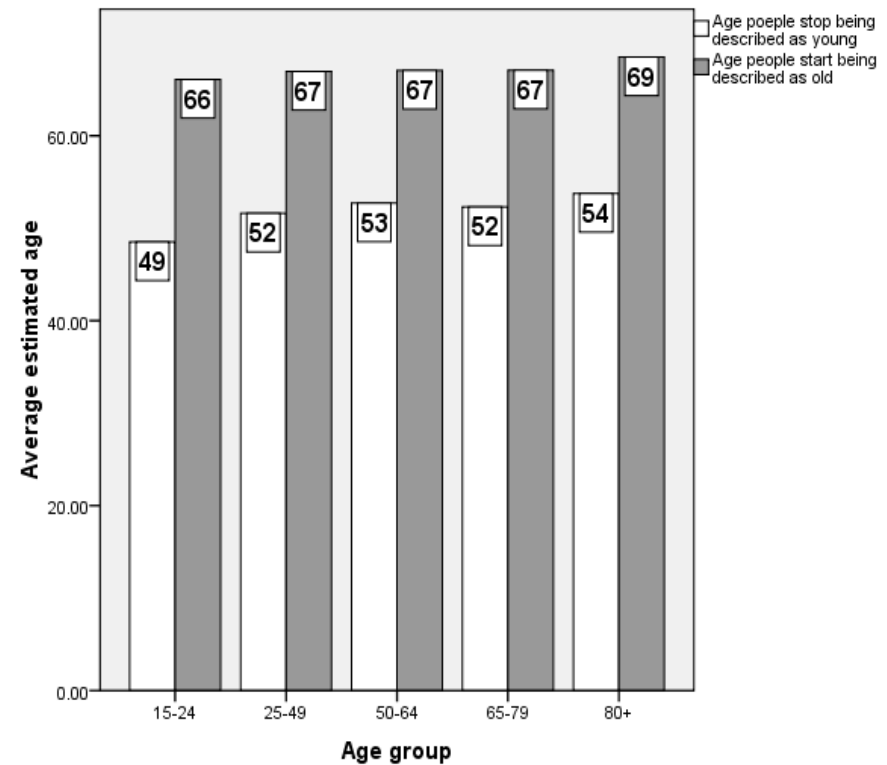


Age Categorisation: What people in other countries think...

Perceived end of youth and start of old age by age group in **Norway**

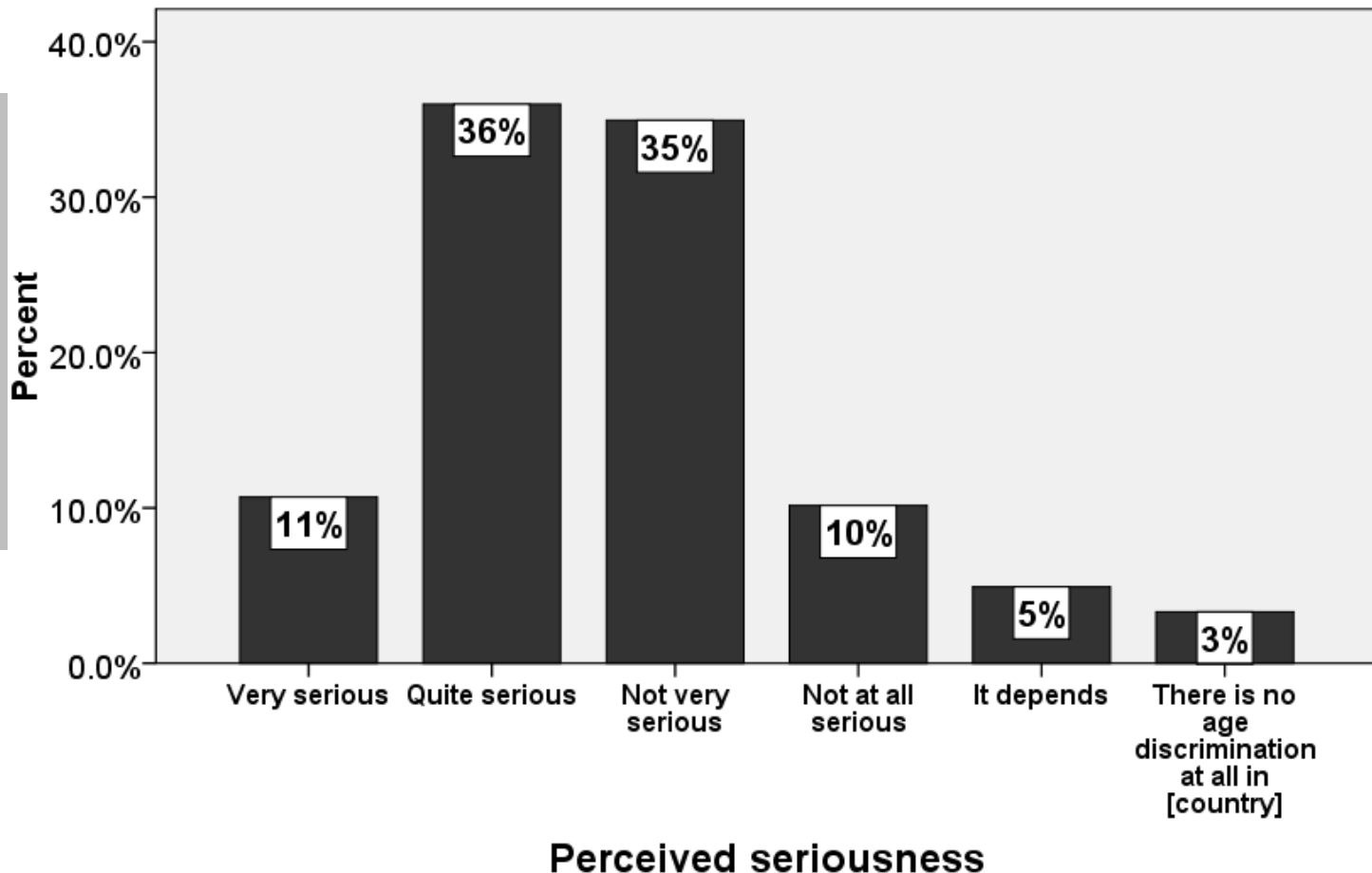


Perceived end of youth and start of old age by age group in **Cyprus**



Ageism: How serious is the issue?

Percentage of people from all 21 countries indicating different levels of seriousness of age discrimination

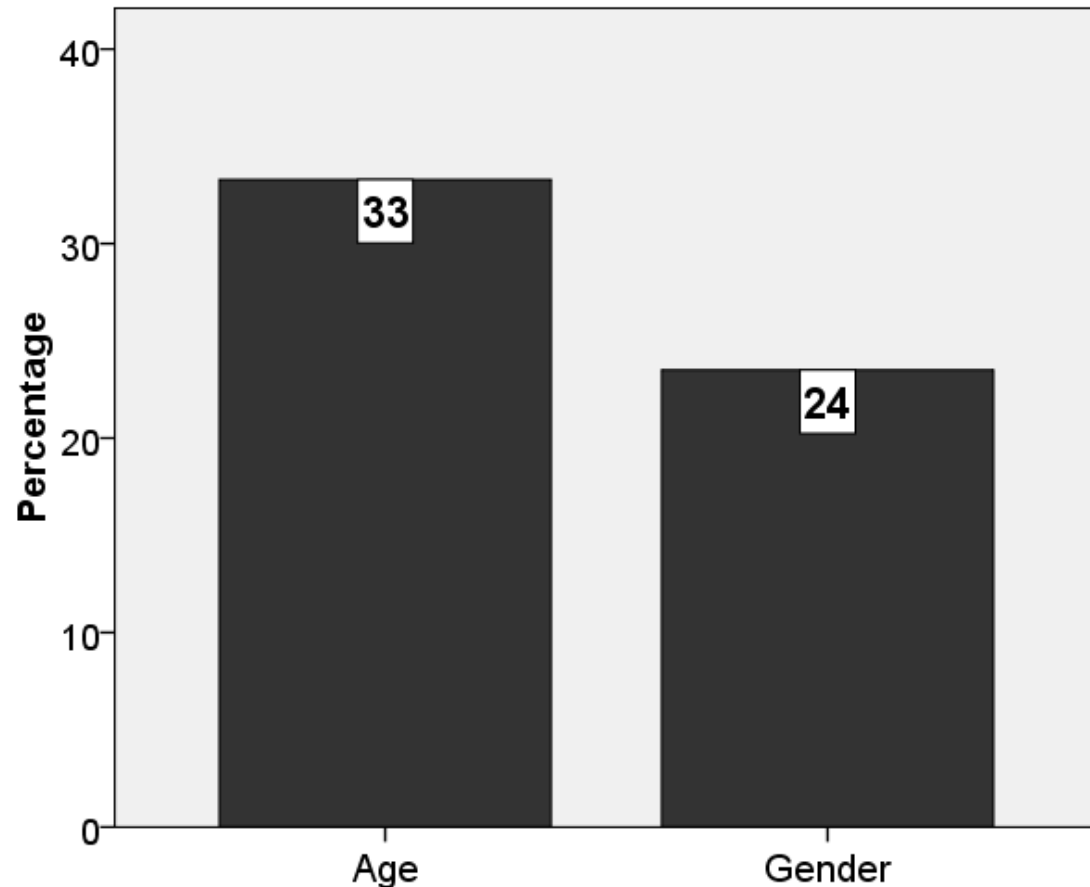


“How serious, if at all, would you say discrimination is in [country] against people because of their age – whether they are old or young.” (SRDSCAG)

Ageism: How serious is the issue?

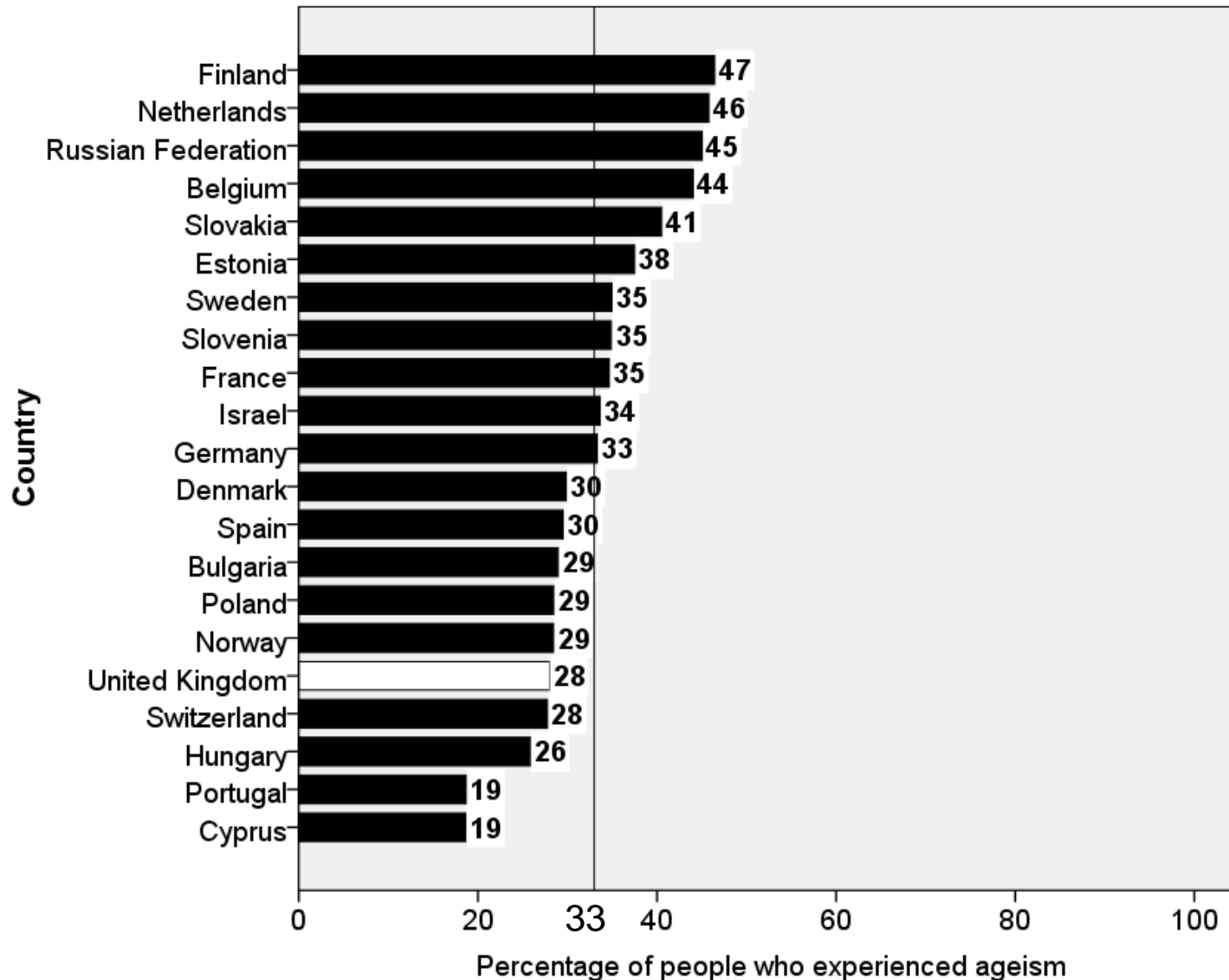
“How often, in the past year, anyone has shown prejudice against you or treated you unfairly because of your age/ gender.”
(PREDDAGE/ PREDDSEX)

Percentage of people from all 21 countries who experienced different types of discrimination



Ageism: How serious is the issue?

Experiences of ageism across 21 countries



Summary and Conclusion

- Old age is not well-defined; it means different things to different people and cultures;
- When people judge others as 'too young' or 'too old', they may use their own age and culture as an anchor for their judgment;
- Although age is in the 'eye of the beholder', almost half of the respondents from the ESS (47%) perceived ageism as a serious issue;
- Ageism is a more commonly experienced form of prejudice than sexism across 21 countries;
- The frequency of experienced ageism differs greatly across countries.

What is next?

Attitudes to age depend not only on the person, but also on the culture into which they are socialized and the structural aspects of society;

- The ESS provides the opportunity to link micro-level data (people's responses) to macro-level statistics (multi-level modelling);
- This way we can examine why there are differences in regard to experiences of ageism and attitudes to age across countries.

Thank you

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