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Ageism Is Not Just About Age: Introducing the Concept of Generalized Discrimination Experiences

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Throughout their social development, people may experience various forms of discrimination. Discrimination research typically analyzes such experiences based on one characteristic, for instance, by isolating age from other characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, or financial status. We propose expanding the perspective in discrimination research by examining how discrimination across multiple dimensions is interlinked, resulting in what we call generalized discrimination experiences. Focusing on age specifically, recent research has shown that in highly modernized societies, teenagers and young adults report more age discrimination than do older adults. We hypothesized that younger people are particularly affected by generalized discrimination. By contrast, discrimination toward older adults may be more age-specific. This perspective helps reconcile conflicting views on ageism in the literature. To test the hypothesis of generalized discrimination experiences, we analyzed survey data collected in the United Kingdom ($N > 14,000$, ages 18–93, with diverse ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds). Confirmatory factor analysis supported a one-factor model of generalized discrimination across domains: discrimination based on age, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, health/disability, and financial situation (comparative fit index = .994; root mean square error of approximation = .030). Structural equation modeling then distinguished generalized from age-specific discrimination, showing that younger respondents reported substantially more generalized discrimination experiences, whereas older respondents reported more age-specific discrimination (comparative fit index = .996; root mean square error of approximation = .014). We also found that older adults reported generalized discrimination experiences primarily if they had lower social status. We conclude that discrimination research will benefit from an awareness of how multiple forms of discrimination can converge into generalized discrimination experiences.

Public Significance Statement

Discrimination is often studied one category at a time, such as age, gender, or ethnicity. This study indicates that many people—especially younger adults—experience discrimination as a generalized pattern across multiple domains, whereas discrimination against older adults is more age-specific. Recognizing these differences can improve how researchers, policymakers, and practitioners understand and address ageism and discrimination across the life course, including the particular vulnerability of younger people.

Keywords: discrimination, generalized discrimination, ageism, youth, structural equation modeling

Supplemental materials: <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0002222.supp>

Throughout life, individuals may face discrimination in multiple forms. Yet research dissects these experiences one by one—studying either ageism, or sexism, or racism. This single-dimension approach has shaped the understanding of who experiences discrimination

and why. Specifically, age discrimination was long studied as an issue of age only and assumed to affect primarily older adults. However, recent research has challenged this assumption. Studies in highly modernized societies show that teenagers and young adults

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Christopher Bratt played a lead role in conceptualization, formal analysis, methodology, visualization, and writing—original draft and an equal role in writing—review and editing. Dominic Abrams played a lead role in resources and an equal role in writing—review and editing. Fanny Lalot played a lead role in data curation and an equal role in resources and writing—review and editing.

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report experiencing more age-based discrimination than their older counterparts (Bratt et al., 2018, 2020). Younger people may even experience more discrimination generally (Abrams & Houston, 2006). Such findings prompt researchers to reconsider how discrimination is conceptualized and how it manifests across the life course.

We propose a model of “generalized discrimination experiences” that moves beyond single-dimension analysis. We suggest that different types of discrimination—such as those based on age, gender, ethnicity, and religion—converge into broader, generalized experiences of discrimination. Experiencing discrimination based on multiple grounds may create a vulnerability to discrimination that goes well beyond earlier concepts of “double jeopardy” (Ferraro & Farmer, 1996) or intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1997; Walker & Zelin, 2021). Finding that discrimination experiences tend to be generalized may have important implications for the design of antidiscrimination initiatives.

To test the framework of generalized discrimination experiences, we analyze large-scale data collected in the United Kingdom, applying confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). We test the factor model across several subgroups, including a comparison of three age groups: younger, middle-aged, and older respondents. We then distinguish generalized discrimination experiences from age-specific discrimination to examine how these forms of discrimination relate differently to age.

Understanding Age-Based Discrimination

The Pervasiveness of Discrimination Across Age

Ageism has been referred to as the most pervasive form of social discrimination (Abrams & Houston, 2006; Abrams et al., 2018). Early work on ageism focused on older individuals (Butler, 1975; Nelson, 2005; Palmore, 2015), and the term ageism became synonymous with discrimination against older people, a definition that still persists in some publications (e.g., Ackerman & Chopik, 2021; Allen et al., 2023; Teaster & Giwa, 2023). However, ageism can target people at any age (World Health Organization, 2021), and research from the European Social Survey (Round 4) shows that teenagers and young adults in highly modernized societies report more age-based discrimination than their older counterparts (Bratt et al., 2018, 2020), a pattern also observed in an earlier data set from the United Kingdom (Abrams & Houston, 2006).

Often, discrimination manifests in workplaces, and ageism from coworkers can target younger, middle-aged, or older adults (Chasteen et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2018). Ageism also occurs in recruitment (Abrams et al., 2016; Duncan & Loretto, 2004); younger job applicants can be rejected for perceived inexperience, and people in their 50s or 60s often struggle to find work (Neumark et al., 2019; Petery & Grosch, 2022).

Discrimination also happens in informal settings, including shops and public transport (Chasteen et al., 2021; Purifoye, 2015; Thomas, 2021). Teenagers and young adults might be particularly exposed to discrimination in informal settings, as they tend to be more socially active. People who spend time in a larger array of different social settings—often younger people—may encounter more “microaggressions” from others who do not share their group memberships (Midgette & Mulvey, 2021). Older adults may instead seek interactions with emotional closeness and intimacy

(Weiss & Kuball, 2025), which can reduce their exposure to discrimination.

Overall, ageism can be directed at people at any age, but teenagers and young adults appear most affected in highly modernized societies. Nevertheless, the public’s attention to ageism typically centers on discrimination against older adults. Indeed, some countries even explicitly restrict antidiscriminatory laws to protecting middle-aged and older adults (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2024).

Toward a Concept of Generalized Discrimination Experiences

Research finds that many individuals face multiple forms of discrimination, for instance, through both belonging to an ethnic minority group and being a woman. Multiple stigmas accumulate stress, sometimes referred to as “double jeopardy” (Ferraro & Farmer, 1996) or multiple jeopardies (Denise, 2014; Szymanski & Gupta, 2009; Velez et al., 2013). However, multiple stigmas do not merely add up; they can multiply. Crenshaw (1997) referred to overlapping stigmas as intersectionality, explaining how being both Black and female can result in unique discrimination that goes beyond an addition of sexism and racism and create unique effects for those affected. With intersectionality, one stigma can amplify the effect of another. This is particularly evident in the workplace (Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Walker & Zelin, 2021).

We do not analyze how specific identity combinations produce distinct outcomes but instead focus on the structure of discrimination experiences themselves. We introduce the framework of generalized discrimination experiences, an individual’s perceived exposure to discrimination across multiple domains. We examine how reports of discrimination across multiple domains may converge and reflect a broad pattern. Although these forms of discrimination reference distinct social characteristics, they may cluster statistically into one factor. An individual who reports one type of discrimination (e.g., based on age) is more likely to report others (based on gender, ethnicity, and other characteristics).

Abrams and Houston (2006) observed that younger people reported more discrimination experiences than other age groups—not just age-based discrimination but also discrimination because of gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, and disability. We suggest that these experiences coalesce into generalized discrimination experienced by younger people. If younger people who experience age discrimination are also more likely to face discrimination based on other characteristics, the nature of age-based discrimination may differ for younger and older people: Discrimination against older adults might focus on their age specifically, whereas discrimination against younger individuals may be more general.

Other researchers have hinted at such differences between younger and older people as targets of age-based discrimination, referring to “youthism” (Missotten et al., 2016) or “youngism” (Francioli & North, 2021). Although we think these terms are ambiguous (they may refer to the celebration of youth instead of negative prejudices), we note the argument that age-based discrimination toward younger and older people may differ qualitatively (Solem, 2024). Perhaps most discrimination against younger people is not solely or even primarily about age.

Age, Generation, or Social Status

Ageism research has centered on age as a leading cause of discrimination experiences. Francioli and North (2021) questioned this interpretation. They found that participants recalled past generations of youth more favorably, and the researchers concluded that prejudice toward younger adults stems from generational rather than primarily age-based conflicts (see also Weiss & Zhang, 2020). Notions of generational decline have little evidence (Rudolph et al., 2021); rather, people tend to idealize the past (Morewedge, 2013). However, Francioli and North argue that even if the perception of generational decline is factually inaccurate, it fuels prejudice toward today's young. Thereby, Francioli and North draw attention to the potential of other factors explaining what appears to be age-based discrimination.

We will focus on age as a predictor of discrimination experiences but also consider social status since discrimination generally is linked to the perceived status of the target (Ridgeway, 2014). A person's age may anchor other people's perception of that person's social status (Weiss & Zhang, 2020). Offenders might associate young age with lower social status as teenagers and young adults are often not in full-time employment (Arnett, 2024) or occupy subordinate positions (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017). They also tend to be less affluent than older adults (Pfeffer & Killewald, 2018). With multiple low-status characteristics converging at young age, the likelihood of discrimination will increase.

Although older people also hold lower status than the middle-aged (Abrams et al., 2016; North & Fiske, 2015; Vauclair et al., 2015; Weiss & Kuball, 2025), they are often more affluent than younger adults (Taylor et al., 2011) and may benefit from the prestige of their previous occupational roles (Fujishiro et al., 2010) and accumulated wealth or resources. Thus, older individuals do not universally occupy low social status (Rudnev & Vauclair, 2024; Vauclair et al., 2015).

However, social status is multifaceted. Objective socioeconomic status (e.g., measured as a function of income and education) is different from both subjective social status (where people place themselves on a social ladder) and from how other people evaluate a person's social status. Specifically, education can be higher among younger cohorts, but they may still be perceived to have lower social status than older cohorts. How others evaluate a person's social position might be particularly influential for discrimination (Urbiola et al., 2023) but is difficult to assess in surveys that focus on individuals' reported experiences of discrimination. We investigate how discrimination experiences may be associated with either socioeconomic status or subjective social status. Subjective social status reflects social relations and people's perceived position in a social hierarchy (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

With the available data, we investigate socioeconomic status and the target's own subjective social status as predictors of discrimination experiences. We test whether age remains a substantial predictor when socioeconomic status or subjective social status is included as a covariate. We also consider whether the association between age and discrimination experiences varies across different levels of socioeconomic status or subjective social status.

The Current Research

We expand the literature on ageism and discrimination more generally by introducing a new perspective. We build on, but also

qualify, previous findings that younger people in highly modernized societies experience more ageism than their older counterparts (see Bratt et al., 2018, 2020). This study moves beyond simple age-based disrespect and considers how people at different ages experience generalized discrimination rather than discrimination based on age per se. We use CFA and structural equation modeling (SEM) to distinguish between two forms of discrimination: generalized discrimination experiences and discrimination directed specifically at an individual's age.

Our data include respondents aged 18–93, spanning nearly the full adult age range. Respondents report on discrimination experiences based on different characteristics: age, gender, race or ethnicity, religion, health or disability, sexual orientation, and financial situation, each assessed separately. We expect that reports of different types of discrimination experiences tend to co-occur and may converge statistically into a single latent variable. We examine this concept statistically as a one-factor model with CFA, and we compare the one-factor model with factor structures identified through exploratory factor analysis (EFA). We then test the CFA model on subgroups, including separate tests with younger, middle-aged, and older adults.

Provided adequate fit for the one-factor CFA model, we extend it by adding item-specific predictors. Specifically, we introduce respondent age as a predictor of age-based discrimination, respondent gender for gender discrimination, minority status for racial/ethnic discrimination, minority religious affiliation for religious discrimination, sexual orientation for discrimination based on sexual orientation, and so forth. We examine to what extent item-specific predictors alter the factor loadings and how strongly each predictor is associated with its respective discrimination item.

In the next step, we allow respondent age to predict not only age-specific discrimination but also the generalized discrimination factor. This SEM model separates how age relates to two distinct forms of discrimination: (1) generalized discrimination and (2) discrimination explicitly targeting a person's age.

We add separate analyses testing whether age remains a strong predictor of generalized discrimination experiences when socioeconomic status or subjective social status is added as a covariate, and we test whether the association between age and generalized discrimination experiences is similar across different levels of social status. We conclude with a set of robustness checks.

Method

Sample

This investigation relies on secondary analysis of a large-scale survey conducted in the United Kingdom during the COVID-19 pandemic, the "Beyond Us and Them" project (Abrams et al., 2021). The original data collection was approved by the ethics committee of the School of Psychology at the University of Kent (Ethics ID: 202015886922686497). Data collection spanned eight measurement occasions from May 2020 to July 2021. We focus on the five measurement occasions that included perceived discrimination experiences (May 2020 to March 2021). Some participants responded repeatedly, but these were too few to facilitate longitudinal analyses. For these respondents, we used the data from their first participation, removing repeated measurements of the same individuals. We

excluded respondents who failed an attention check in the questionnaire (5.8% of the overall sample). Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 93 years.

Data were clustered, with data collection targeted at three geographically and culturally distinct regions (Scotland, Wales, and the English county of Kent), a combined sample across six English local authorities (Bradford, Blackburn with Darwen, Calderdale, Peterborough, Walsall, and Waltham Forest), four larger combined authority areas (Greater London, Greater Manchester, West Midlands, and West of England), and a sample of community activists and members of Black or Muslim minority communities. [Supplemental Table S1](#) presents numbers of respondents in each cluster.

Participants were recruited through polling companies (Qualtrics Panels and Prolific) and for community activists and local authorities partnering local councils and charities which distributed the survey through their network. The Black and Muslim participants were recruited through Prolific using their screening function to invite participants based on either Black ethnicity or Muslim religious affiliation (nonoverlapping). All participants responded online via phone, tablet, or computer and were remunerated for their participation. For further details on the data collection, we refer to [Abrams et al. \(2021\)](#).

The data set included 14,371 respondents. A moderate degree of missing values on measured items reduced the sample size available for analyses; missing data showed no systematic patterns by key demographics. [Supplemental Table S2](#) shows the percentages of missing values for individual items in our sample; the results section and the [Supplemental Material](#) provide sample sizes for each CFA and SEM analysis.

Measurements

Respondents were asked how often they had experienced discrimination over the past month because of different category-based characteristics: “How often has anyone shown prejudice against you or treated you unfairly for each of the following?” (a) your age, (b) gender, (c) race or ethnicity, (d) religion or religious beliefs, (e) physical or mental health condition, impairment, or illness, (f) sexual orientation, and (g) financial circumstances (all items used a 5-point scale, 1 = *not in the last month*, 5 = *almost all the time*, with a “does not apply” option, which we coded as missing data).

We used background variables as predictors of discrimination experiences: age, gender, belonging to an ethnic minority group, belonging to a minority religion, and sexual orientation. We also included an assessment of having any health problems or disability. Gender was assessed with options for man, woman, and nonbinary/other, along with “prefer not to say.” Very few (0.36%) selected the “nonbinary/other” or “prefer not to say” options, so we used a binary variable for gender (0 = male, 1 = female). Ethnic background was dichotomized into 0 = White and 1 = non-White or mixed, where non-White or mixed collapsed the following options: Mixed or multiple ethnicities, Asian or Asian British, and Black, African, Caribbean, or Black British. The option “prefer not to say” for ethnicity was coded as missing data, resulting in 4.6% missing values. The questionnaire also included a list of possible religious affiliations. We created a binary minority religion variable (1 = Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh; 0 = Christian or nonreligious); “prefer not to say” was treated as missing data, resulting in 5.3% missing values for the minority religion variable.

Sexual orientation included hetero- and homosexual as options, as well as bisexual. We used a dichotomous variable for homosexuality (Score 1). We also tested an alternative coding where also bisexuals were coded as 1; this resulted in a moderately lower effect size. All recoding of variables is documented in an appendix to the [Supplemental Material](#) (section “Appendix: Code Used for Data Management and Analyses”).

Respondents’ self-reported *socioeconomic status* was computed by standardizing respondents’ income and education (z scoring each variable) and taking the mean of the two standardized scores. Income was measured using six ordinal categories ranging from “less than £15,000” to “more than £100,000”; education was coded as a 5-point ordinal variable with increasing levels of completed education. Twelve percent did not respond to the income item. *Subjective social status* was assessed by presenting a visual depiction of a ladder. Participants were asked to “Think of the ladder below as representing where people stand in society” and then indicate “where they would put themselves on the ladder?” using an 8-point response scale.

Analyses

The analysis first used graphical plots to examine how different types of discrimination experiences varied with age, treating age as a continuous variable to avoid bias from arbitrary age-group thresholds in descriptive analyses.

We then tested the one-factor CFA model (on the overall sample and separately on respondents who reported discrimination experiences) and contrasted it with two- and three-factor models developed exploratorily with EFA. Since EFA added further factors and used the data to develop a factor model, solutions from EFA were likely to have better fit. We compared the data-generated multifactor solutions with our one-factor model to assess how well our simple one-factor model performed.

We also conducted group-based CFA testing for approximate measurement invariance ([Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014](#)) across (a) women and men, (b) age groups (younger, middle-aged, and older respondents), and (c) sampling clusters in the data. A high degree of measurement invariance across groups would provide solid support for the hypothesized model. To achieve clear distinctions between younger, middle-aged, and older respondents, we allowed for gaps between ages of these age groups: Younger respondents were defined as up to 30 years old, middle-aged respondents were defined as 40–60 years, and older respondents were defined as 70+.

We then moved to analyses with SEM testing predictors of generalized discrimination experiences. Because age-based discrimination was included as an indicator of generalized discrimination experiences, any variance it shared with other forms of discrimination experiences would be captured by that factor, leaving a residual specific to age-based discrimination. The model thereby enabled us to contrast age as a predictor of age-specific discrimination and as a predictor of generalized discrimination experiences.

Separate tests with SEM considered socioeconomic status and subjective social status as predictors of generalized discrimination experiences. We then developed margin plots to examine potentially nonlinear associations between age and generalized discrimination experiences at different levels of social status. To construct margin plots, we again regressed the latent factor for generalized discrimination experiences on age and one of the two social status

indicators within the SEM model. However, age was now modeled with a natural spline ($df = 2$), allowing for a smooth nonlinear association rather than imposing linearity. Adding this spline substantially increased the number of parameters to be estimated. With only 10 sampling clusters, the sandwich estimator for cluster-adjusted standard errors could not be reliably applied, and the model did not converge with clustering effects included. We therefore estimated these nonlinear models without cluster adjustment. The confidence interval bands in plots visualizing nonlinear associations should be interpreted as model based and approximate.

Finally, we conducted a set of robustness checks:

1. Based on tests of local fit in our main SEM model, we added modifications in an exploratory manner, investigating whether the revised model corroborated findings for the association between age and discrimination experiences.
2. We added auxiliary variables to the SEM model using full information maximum likelihood estimation. Auxiliary variables included whether the respondent spoke English at home, degree of religiosity (7-point scale), interest in politics (5-point scale), political orientation from left to right (7-point scale), social trust (5-point scale), income (6-point scale), employment status, key worker status, education (5-point scale), number of children, wave of participation in the survey, questionnaire progress (ranging from 63% to 100% completion), and questionnaire duration.
3. We tested the SEM model on each sampling cluster separately to verify whether the findings were repeated across clusters, evaluating the robustness of findings across contexts. This test deliberately avoided imposing measurement invariance across the different clusters, thereby allowing for contextual nuances in the measurement model in replication tests of substantive findings (Bratt, 2025).

CFA and SEM were conducted with Mplus 8.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Modeling with CFA and SEM accounted for the clustering of the data and estimated discrimination items as ordinal. We used the default estimator for models with ordinal indicators: weighted least squares with mean-and-variance adjustment. The only exception was a robustness check adding auxiliary variables, which required defining discrimination indicators as continuous and used maximum likelihood with robust standard errors estimation. All analyses were run from R, integrated with Mplus by using the R package MplusAutomation (Hallquist & Wiley, 2024) to run CFA and SEM. Other R packages important to the current research included dplyr (Wickham et al., 2014), ggplot2 (Wickham et al., 2025), kableExtra (Zhu, 2017), and knitr (Xie, 2024).

CFA and SEM models were evaluated with common fit indices, specifically the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR). We adopted commonly cited criteria: CFI above .95; RMSEA below .06 and preferably below .05, with the upper limit for the 90% CI for RMSEA not above .08; and SRMR below .08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016). Since the data included a very large sample, we did not emphasize the chi-square as a fit statistic (Shi et al., 2019), but we ensured a narrow 90% confidence interval for the RMSEA.

Transparency and Openness

This research emphasizes transparency, openness, and reproducibility by making our data available and providing all code used for data management and analyses. We report effect sizes for all analyses and follow the Journal Article Reporting Standards for quantitative research. Since this study relied on secondary analysis of a large-scale social survey originally conducted for a different purpose, preregistration was not feasible. The [Supplemental Appendix](#) provides all code for data management and analyses. The [Supplemental Material](#) also provides detailed results from CFA and SEM analyses. The data are available at the Zenodo repository: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17659645>. To facilitate the reproducibility of our research, the repository also includes our Quarto markdown file used to automate data management and all analyses.

Results

The Relationship Between Age and Discrimination Experiences

[Figure 1](#) illustrates differences in reported discrimination experiences across age, treating ordinal items on discrimination experiences as continuous for visualization purposes. The figure uses smoothed means across age (a figure with means and 95% CIs by age groups is available in the [Supplemental Figure S4](#)). Younger respondents reported more discrimination experiences, regardless of discrimination type. Among women, reported discrimination experiences declined with age; among men the peak occurred around age 30 and then declined to levels below those of the youngest respondents.

Factor Analysis of Discrimination Experiences

Respondents who reported discrimination experiences did not merely report one form of discrimination. Nearly one in 10 (9.3%) of the sample reported experiencing all seven forms of discrimination to some degree ([Supplemental Figure S2](#) details intersections in discrimination experiences; the [Supplemental Material](#) also shows correlations between individual discrimination items).

We hypothesized that intersections between different discrimination experiences would support a single-factor model ([Figure 2A](#)). The model showed good fit both in the full sample, $N = 14,371$, $\chi^2(14) = 194.72$, $p < .001$, CFI = .994, RMSEA = .030, SRMR = .015, and among respondents who reported any discrimination experience, $N = 8,085$, $\chi^2(14) = 175.09$, $p < .001$, CFI = .971, RMSEA = .038, SRMR = .027. The standardized factor loadings were high in the full sample (.83 to .88) and .63 or above in the subsample reporting at least one type of discrimination ([Figure 2B](#)).

As expected, EFA with more factors improved fit over the one-factor solution. A three-factor solution (with all items loading on all three factors) demonstrated particularly good fit: $\chi^2(3) = 21.28$, $p < .001$, CFI = .999, RMSEA = .021, SRMR = .006 for the full sample and $\chi^2(3) = 21.29$, $p < .001$, CFI = .997, RMSEA = .027, SRMR = .010 for respondents reporting discrimination. However, factor loadings in EFA differed substantially between the two samples. In the full sample, Factor 1 loaded strongly on age, gender, and health/disability discrimination, with moderate loadings on sexual orientation and financial situation. Factor 2 loaded strongly only on race/ethnicity and religion, while Factor 3 showed no strong loadings. Among those

Figure 1*Discrimination Experiences Dependent on Age as a Continuous Variable***Discrimination experiences across age because of different group memberships**

Means with age-smoothed trends by testing ordinal measures as continuous. Visible range in plots: 0-1.5 or

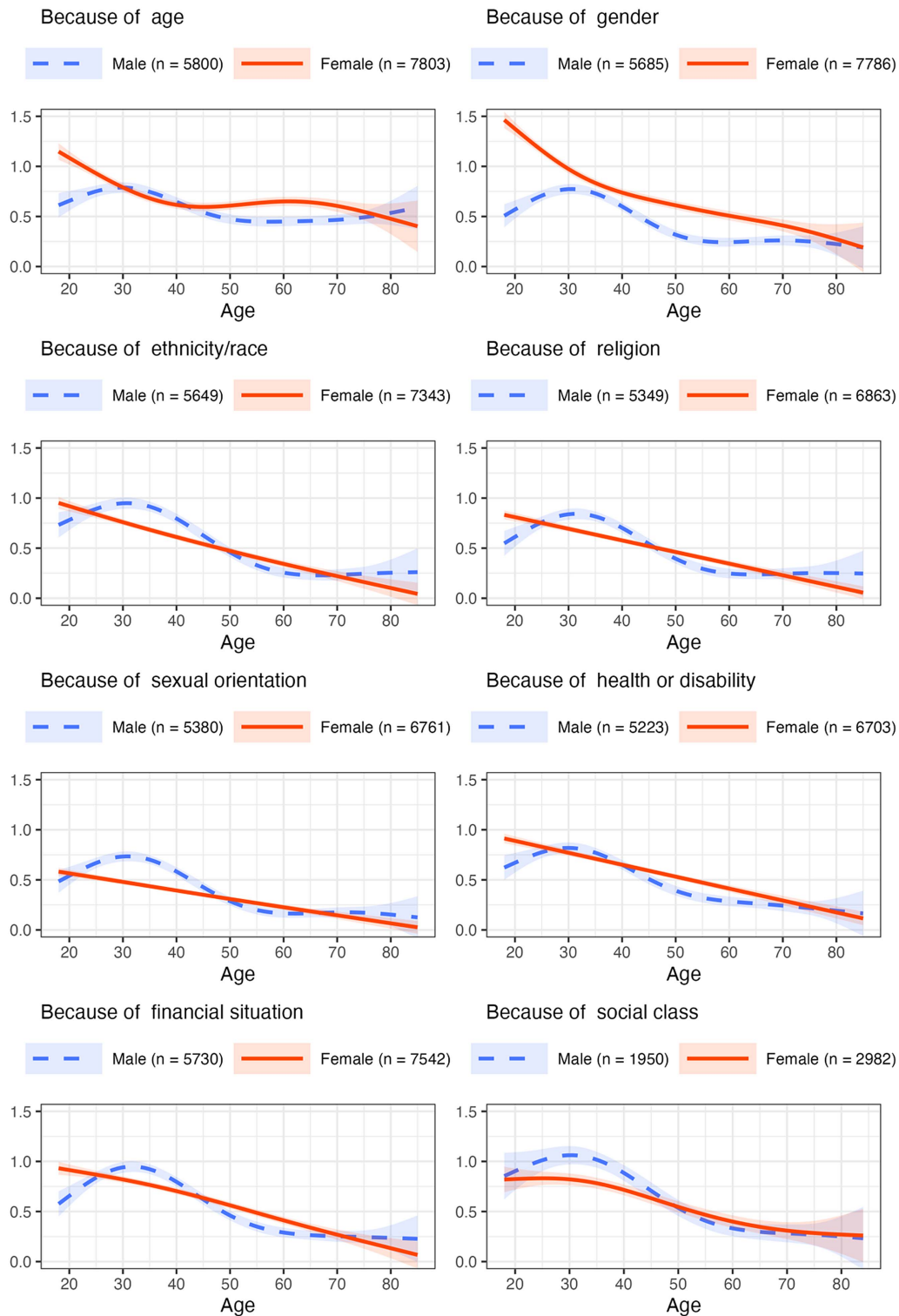
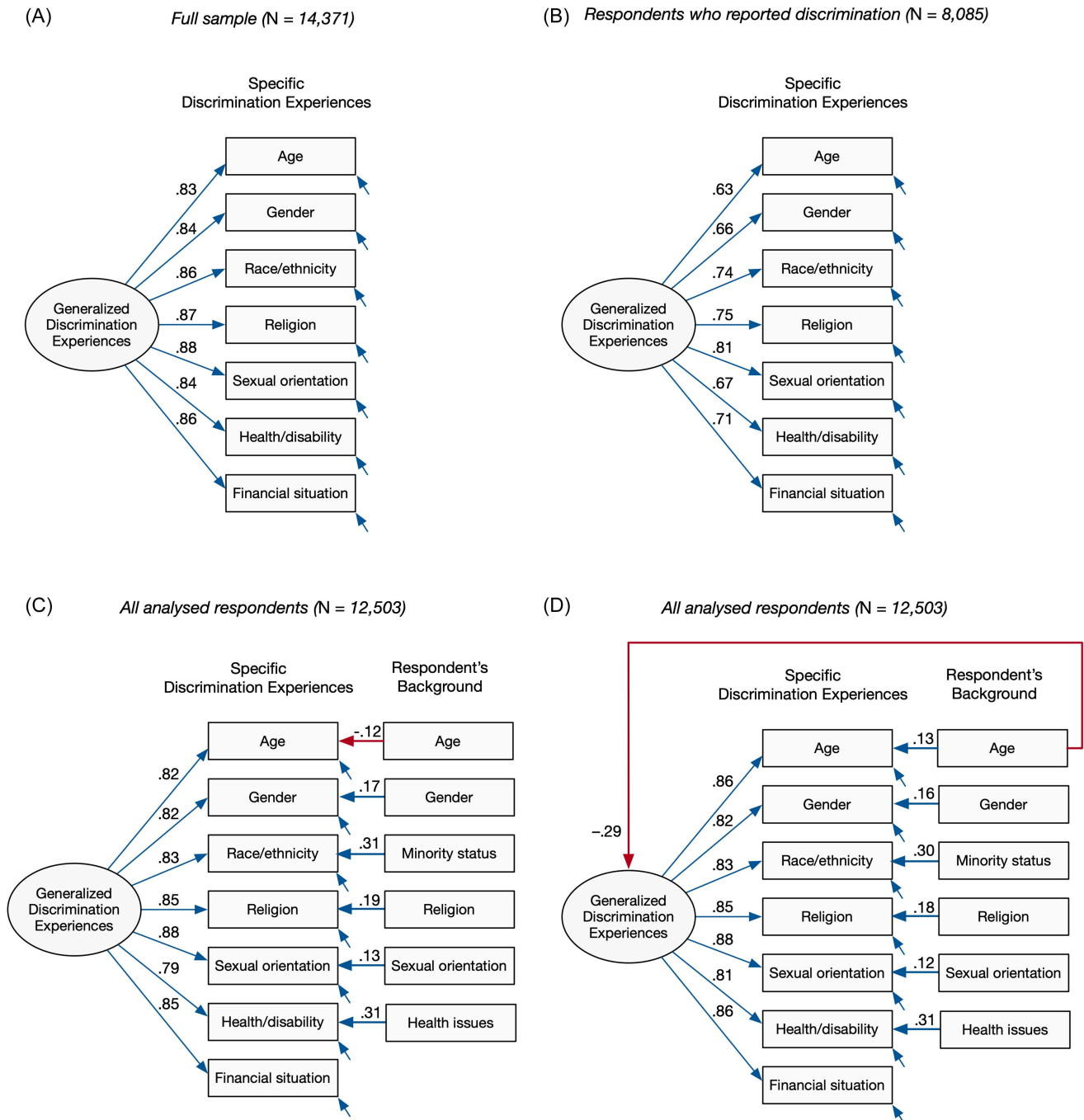
Illustrative only: items are ordinal. Own age restricted to 18-85. Smoothing method: gam, formula = $y \sim s(x, k = 6)$ *Note.* See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Figure 2
Structural Equation Modeling of Discrimination Experiences



Note. Parameters are standardized, and no 95% confidence interval included zero. Comparative fit index is consistently $>.993$, root mean square error of approximation consistently $<.033$, and SRMR consistently $<.042$, except for Model C with SRMR = .089. Details are available in the [Supplemental Material](#). SRMR = standardized root-mean-square residual. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

reporting discrimination, Factor 1 showed mostly weak loadings except for gender discrimination; Factor 2 loaded strongly on religion and moderately on race/ethnicity; and Factor 3 loaded strongly on health/disability and moderately on financial situation. See [Supplemental Table S7](#) for details.

Based on our aim to separate generalized and age-specific discrimination experiences and the good fit for the one-factor model across different subsets, we proceeded with this solution. Subsequent analyses included all respondents, regardless of discrimination experience.

Measurement Invariance and Age Group Differences

The concept of generalized discrimination experiences is more useful if applicable to subgroups, ideally with a high degree of measurement invariance. We tested for approximate measurement invariance (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014) across gender (women and men), age groups (younger, middle-aged, and older respondents), and sampling clusters. All these tests showed substantial measurement invariance; see the [Supplemental Material](#) Section 4.4 for details.

Tests of approximate measurement invariance also estimated group-specific means for the discrimination factor. This analysis showed no meaningful gender difference on the generalized-discrimination factor. With women's latent mean fixed at 0 for identification, men's mean was -0.07 [95% CI = $-0.35, 0.20$]. Among age groups, younger respondents (aged 18–30) reported the highest levels of discrimination (factor $M = 0.00$); middle-aged had a score half a standard deviation below younger respondents ($M = -0.49$); and older respondents had more than a full standard deviation below younger respondents ($M = -1.13$). The true differences in discrimination experiences may have been even larger. Whereas factor loadings in CFA were remarkably similar across age groups, the thresholds varied. Specifically, the first two thresholds for age discrimination (“rarely” and “sometimes”) were lower for older respondents (-0.34 and 0.21) than for younger and middle-aged respondents (with thresholds around 0.04 and 0.60). Thresholds were also lower among older respondents for the other items. The lower thresholds suggested that older respondents were more likely to report discrimination regardless of actual occurrences.

Background Variables as Predictors of Discrimination Experiences

We extended the one-factor model by adding predictors of specific discrimination experiences ([Figure 2C](#)): Respondents' age predicted reported age discrimination, respondents' gender predicted reported gender discrimination, and so forth. This model showed good fit according to most fit indices, $N = 12,503$, $\chi^2(50) = 224.10$, $p < .001$, CFI = .995, RMSEA = .017 [90% CI = $0.014, 0.019$]; however, its SRMR value was somewhat high (.089). The item-specific predictors showed small-to-moderate effect sizes; the largest were minority status for race/ethnicity discrimination ($b = 0.97$ [95% CI = $0.77, 1.16$], $\beta = .31$) and health issues for health/disability discrimination ($b = 0.75$ [$0.63, 0.88$], $\beta = .31$). The estimated effect of age on age-based discrimination was negative, indicating more frequent experiences among younger respondents ($b = -0.55$ [$-0.74, -0.35$], $\beta = -.12$). Adding these item-specific predictors had minimal effect on factor loadings ([Figure 2C](#) vs. [2A](#)).

Model fit improved when we added a direct path from age to generalized discrimination experiences, [Figure 2D](#), $\chi^2(49) = 161.24$, $p < .001$, CFI = .996, RMSEA = .014 [90% CI = $0.011, 0.016$], SRMR = .041. The direct path from age to generalized discrimination experiences was substantial and negative: Younger respondents reported more generalized discrimination experiences ($b = -1.16$ [$-1.51, -0.82$], $\beta = -.29$). However, adding this direct path made the path from respondents' age to unique age-specific discrimination positive ($b = 0.61$ [$0.40, 0.82$], $\beta = .13$). [Supplemental Table S12](#) provides details on these SEM models.

We also tested a model challenging our focus on age as a predictor of generalized discrimination experiences. This model added direct paths from all remaining predictors to generalized discrimination

experiences. Adding these paths reduced model fit (e.g., CFI = .992, RMSEA = .021), and the additional predictors of generalized discrimination experiences had low effect sizes; health issues had the largest effect size ($\beta = .09$) among additional predictors (see [Supplemental Table S12](#) for details). The estimated effect of age was nearly unaffected by adding the covariates; age predicted generalized discrimination experiences with $\beta = -.293$ before these additional paths were included and $\beta = -.289$ when they were added.

Social Status

In separate models, we tested socioeconomic status and respondents' subjective social status as predictors of generalized discrimination experiences, each alongside age as a covariate. When added as a covariate to age, socioeconomic status did not predict generalized discrimination experiences, $b = 0.085$ [95% CI = $-0.11, 0.28$], whereas age remained a substantial predictor, $b = -0.968$ [$-1.10, -0.83$] (both predictors were normalized; their respective standardized values were $\beta = .02$ and $\beta = -.25$). Subjective social status had only a minor association with generalized discrimination experiences when age was included as a covariate, $b = -.389$ [$-0.60, -0.18$], whereas age remained a substantial predictor, $b = -0.993$ [$-1.20, -0.79$] ($\beta = -.09$ vs. $\beta = -.25$). Details of these analyses are available in the [Supplemental Material](#), Section 5.

We then tested interactions, treating social status as a potential moderator of the link between age and generalized discrimination experiences. Moderation analysis assuming linear associations suggested a moderating effect only by socioeconomic status and not by subjective social status (details are in [Supplemental Tables S13](#) and [S14](#)). We followed up with tests of nonlinear associations ([Figure 3](#)).

The two social status indicators showed distinct age patterns ([Panel A](#) in [Figure 3](#)): Socioeconomic status peaked in the 30s, whereas subjective social status increased steadily with age.

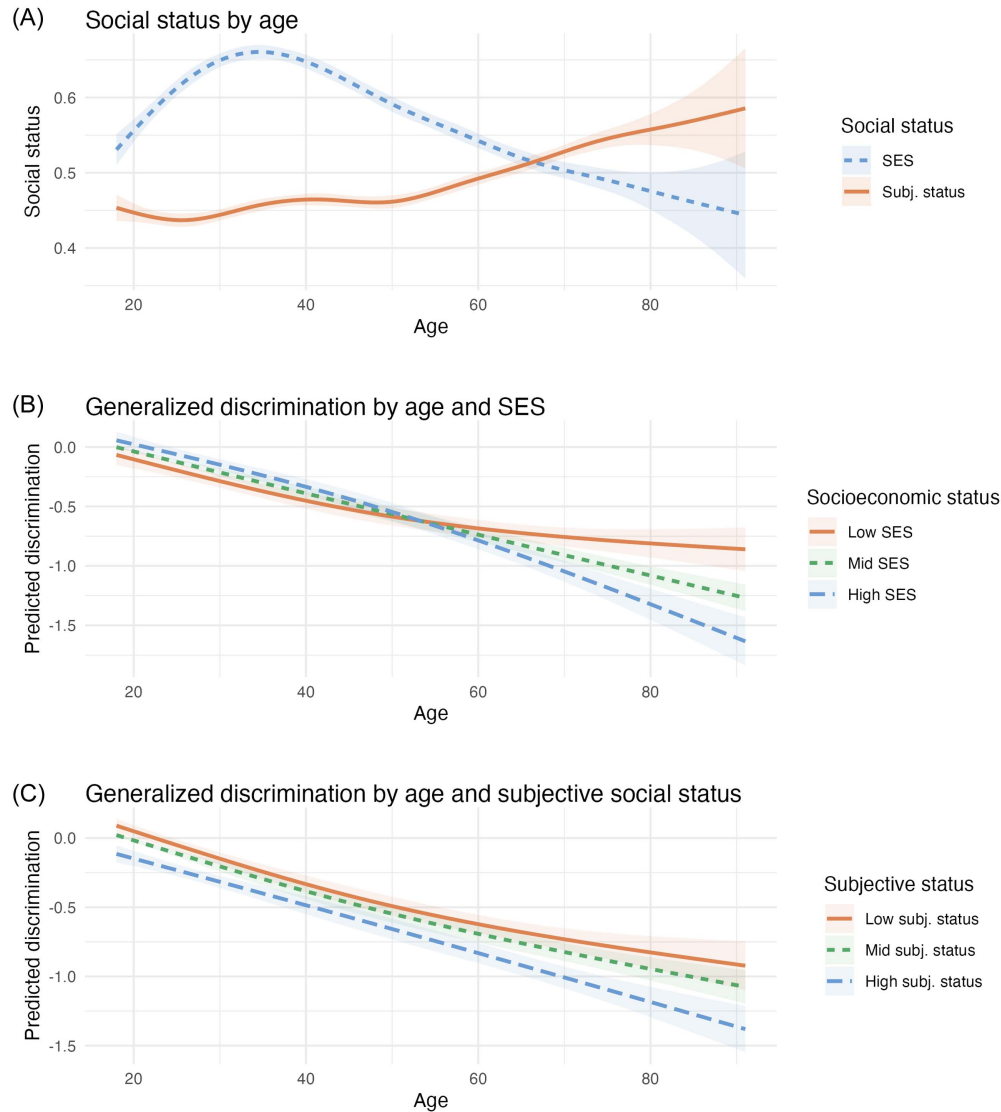
At younger ages, differences across status levels were either minor (subjective social status, [Panel C](#)) or absent (socioeconomic status, [Panel B](#))—for socioeconomic status, confidence intervals overlapped substantially, and the rank order of the three status levels was even reversed. However, among older respondents lower socioeconomic status ([Panel B](#)) and lower subjective social status ([Panel C](#)) were associated with more discrimination experiences.

Robustness Checks

We conducted three robustness checks to validate results from our SEM analysis of how age and other background variables predicted discrimination experiences. Based on local fit estimates ([Supplemental Table S15](#)), we added (a) a residual covariance between discrimination based on race/ethnicity and minority religion and (b) a direct path from one of the three most relevant additional predictors of generalized discrimination experiences: minority religion, minority ethnicity, or health issues. The original results ($\beta = -.29$ for age predicting generalized discrimination experiences and $\beta = .13$ for age predicting unique age discrimination) held. These two paths of interest retained their strength;

Figure 3*Social Status and Generalized Discrimination Experiences Across Age*

Age differences in social status and generalized discrimination



Age is modeled using a natural spline ($df = 2$). Predicted values are from single-step latent regression models. Shaded areas indicate pointwise 95% confidence intervals. Low, medium, and high social status correspond to the 10th, 50th, and 90th percentiles of the respective measures.

Note. Panel A shows smoothed age differences in SES and subj. status. Panels B and C show predicted generalized discrimination across age at low, medium, and high levels of SES (Panel B) and subj. status (Panel C). Shaded bands indicate 95% confidence intervals. SES = socioeconomic status; subj. status = subjective social status. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

each of the three alternative predictors had small effect sizes, with health issues having the largest: $\beta = .095$.

A second robustness check added auxiliary variables and used full information maximum likelihood estimation (estimating discrimination items as continuous), again with similar results: $\beta = -.26$ and $.08$ for the two paths of interest (Supplemental Table S17 provides details). The third robustness check, estimating the SEM model on each

sampling cluster separately, replicated the overall trend in each of the 10 sampling clusters (details are in Supplemental Tables S18 and S19).

Discussion

Recent research shows that teenagers and young adults in highly modernized societies report more experiences of age discrimination

than older adults. We propose that these reports reflect generalized discrimination experiences. We tested this hypothesis using a large data set from 10 sampling clusters across the United Kingdom, including boosted samples of Black and Muslim communities and community activists.

Younger respondents consistently reported more frequent discrimination experiences across all domains (age, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, health, and financial situation). Those reporting one form of discrimination were more likely to report other forms as well, suggesting a pattern of generalized discrimination experiences. A one-factor solution in CFA summarizing these experiences showed robust fit and demonstrated substantial measurement invariance across several subsamples (women vs. men, age groups, and sampling clusters).

Using SEM, we distinguished between generalized discrimination experiences and discrimination specifically based on age. Younger respondents reported considerably more generalized discrimination experiences, while older respondents reported moderately more age-specific discrimination. Adding the remaining background variables as predictors of generalized discrimination experiences underscored this finding's stability; younger age emerged as the only substantial predictor. Age was also a much stronger predictor of discrimination experiences than the available indicators of social status. A set of robustness checks corroborated the overall findings regarding how generalized discrimination experiences were related to background variables.

Respondents' subjective social status had a near-linear association with age; socioeconomic status had a clearly nonlinear association with age, peaking in the mid-30s. The association between age and generalized discrimination experiences remained substantial when either social status indicator was added as a covariate. Moderation analysis suggested that these status indicators affected the age and discrimination association primarily at higher age: Among the oldest respondents, those with lower social status reported substantially more generalized discrimination experiences.

Implications

Our findings suggest that what the literature labels "age discrimination" is different for younger and older adults. In their transition through adolescence and young adulthood, individuals expand their social networks, spend more time in heterogeneous social environments, and enter the labor market. As they enter diverse social situations where discrimination may occur, their risk of discrimination increases across multiple domains. Conversely, in late adulthood, discrimination seems more directly tied to age per se, partly because older adults participate less in diverse social settings.

By separating age-specific and generalized discrimination experiences, our study helps reconcile contradictory claims in the literature on ageism. Our findings indicate that discrimination against younger and older individuals manifests in qualitatively different ways: Younger people's discrimination experiences emerge as part of a broader pattern spanning multiple domains and—consistent with original claims in the ageism literature—unique age discrimination targets older people more than younger people.

Understanding Generalized Discrimination Experiences

Most research on discrimination has focused on a single dimension—such as age, gender, or ethnicity. The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1997) added nuance by emphasizing how various forms of discrimination can interact, for instance, by shaping the experiences of an individual who is both a woman and Black. The framework of generalized discrimination experiences goes beyond intersectionality theory by highlighting how discrimination experiences can converge rather than merely interact. Unlike intersectionality theory, which focuses on unique experiences created by interactions of specific social identities and stresses the consequences of such discrimination, our framework focuses on describing discrimination, suggesting that discrimination experiences are interrelated and often generalized: Experiencing one type of discrimination often co-occurs with experiencing others.

Our findings have broad implications for studies on discrimination. Most earlier discrimination studies have focused on one specific type of discrimination such as racism or sexism, but our findings suggest the need for comprehensive measures that capture how different discrimination experiences interconnect.

Younger People Experience More Discrimination but Seem Less Inclined to Report It

Studies conducted in modernized societies find that teenagers and young adults report more discrimination experiences than older adults (Abrams & Houston, 2006; Bratt et al., 2018, 2020). One objection might be that these reports by younger people exaggerate their actual experiences. In many countries, younger generations have been educated on antidiscriminatory norms (Beach et al., 2025; Chand et al., 2002), possibly making them more sensitive to discrimination when it occurs. Conversely, if people in older generations have not internalized modern antidiscriminatory norms, they might be less likely to notice and report discrimination (Major et al., 2002).

Our findings are inconsistent with this interpretation. Comparing younger, middle-aged, and older respondents, we found that older respondents reported the least discrimination, but their thresholds for reporting discrimination seemed lower. Factor analysis found that factor loadings for the seven discrimination items were similar across age groups, indicating that the discrimination items were interpreted similarly and were suited for analyzing discrimination experiences across the three age groups. However, the factor analysis identified much lower thresholds for the discrimination indicators among older respondents. The lower thresholds in factor analysis suggested it took less for older respondents to report discrimination, reflecting either higher sensitivity (noticing it more easily) or greater willingness to report discrimination in a questionnaire.

If teenagers and young adults have more generalized discrimination experiences than older adults, as we argue, they may perceive such rejection as a normal state and be less likely to acknowledge it in each specific case. Conversely, if older adults experience less discrimination, it might stand out when it occurs and motivate them to report such experiences. Moreover, increased awareness of discrimination as a societal issue has affected older people too (Abrams et al., 2015).

Furthermore, in the United Kingdom, from which our data were drawn, age-related discrimination is commonly presented as a problem for older adults only, a perspective promoted not only by authorities (House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 2025; Older People's Commissioner for Wales, 2025) but also by nongovernmental organizations (Age UK, 2023; Centre for Ageing Better, 2022) and by mass media (Hill, 2020; Jacobs, 2025; Patterson, 2023). When various sources repeatedly emphasize discrimination against older adults as a societal problem, people in that age group may more easily recognize it when it occurs. The one-sided view on ageism as old ageism criticized in earlier research (e.g., Bratt et al., 2020) seems to persist (e.g., Patterson, 2023), and if younger people are hesitant to report discrimination experiences, this biased public perception may continue.

Our analysis indicates that, if anything, younger people in the United Kingdom underreport rather than overreport their discrimination experiences compared to older adults. However, this interpretation is based on analyzing statistical patterns in survey data and not on observations of actual discrimination occurrences.

A perspective stressing social status as predictive of discrimination (e.g., Ridgeway, 2014) may suggest a different explanation. Discrimination might impose less psychological stress on younger than older adults. Younger adults might be more resilient toward discrimination experiences because they may see their current social status as preliminary, as a step toward higher social status in the future (Garstka et al., 2004; Weiss & Kuball, 2025).

Intersectionality of Old Age and Low Social Status

Allowing for nonlinear associations, we found that social status substantially moderated discrimination experiences among older respondents—but not among younger or middle-aged respondents. Findings were consistent across both measures of social status, suggesting that social status has a distinct effect on discrimination experiences among older adults. Reverse causation—discrimination experiences affecting social status—is plausible for subjective social status but less so for socioeconomic status as indexed by income and education.

As people age, the consequences of social disadvantages accumulate (Dannefer, 2020), and social inequalities are increasingly embodied in health and physical functioning (e.g., Steptoe & Zaninotto, 2020). An individual's objective social status may become more salient and more strongly affect how they are treated. Further, at younger ages, social status still retains potential for upward mobility. Such flexibility in social status is largely lost among older adults (Weiss & Kuball, 2025) and may therefore produce distinct intersections between low status and increasing age among older adults.

Policy Implications

The concept of generalized discrimination experiences is relevant for efforts to counter discrimination. Antidiscrimination policies are category based. These regulations and laws typically conceptualize discrimination as based on specific social categories (Fredman, 2016), focusing on issues such as ageism, sexism, or racism. This piecemeal approach risks being unwieldy and insufficiently parsimonious for addressing discrimination, particularly as it affects young people. Although such targeted policies may address some

wider aspects of discrimination (if only implicitly), they may overlook broader discrimination experiences among individuals with multiple low-status characteristics.

Efforts to counter discrimination will be strengthened if they are accompanied by strategies addressing underlying inequalities and general processes of prejudice (e.g., Council of Europe, 2022). For instance, employers could recognize that younger employees often face multiple forms of discrimination simultaneously. Although it is easier for antidiscrimination laws to point to specific characteristics that must not be discriminated against, implementing agencies (such as human resources departments) could increase their effectiveness by recognizing how different discrimination experiences converge.

Implications for interventions go further. The concept of generalized discrimination experiences among targets is related to generalized prejudice among attitude holders. Such generalized prejudice manifests not only among adults (Bergh et al., 2016; Zick et al., 2008) but also among adolescents (Bratt, 2005; Bratt et al., 2016). It may also emerge in childhood—as suggested by studies showing that improvements in attitudes toward one outgroup can extend to several others (Goodbun & Abrams, 2025; Vezzali et al., 2014). This interconnectedness of prejudices has important consequences for prejudice-reduction strategies: Learning about one group can improve attitudes toward other groups too (Vezzali et al., 2014). Even learning about one individual's discrimination experiences can reshape attitudes toward multiple outgroups, as Goodbun and Abrams (2025) found when children learned about Anne Frank's life and persecution. The children's willingness to have contact with Jewish people improved, and this effect extended to 11 other groups—including other religious and ethnic groups, age groups, both sexes, and sexual minorities. Interventions addressing discrimination are likely most effective when they illuminate broader patterns of how discrimination operates across multiple domains and groups.

Strengths and Limitations

The study leverages a large, diverse U.K. sample with respondents' age covering most of the adult life span. It has applied advanced statistical techniques to introduce the novel concept of generalized discrimination experiences across multiple domains. *Analyses with SEM were able to separate generalized from age-specific discrimination and examine how these forms of discrimination related differently to age.* Examinations of alternative explanations, including social status indicators and several robustness checks, strengthen confidence in the link between age and generalized discrimination experiences.

One limitation of our one-factor model of discrimination experiences and its extension into SEM is that it captures frequencies of discrimination but not qualitative differences in discrimination experiences. For example, ethnic discrimination experienced by minority versus majority members is different, as is gender discrimination experienced by women versus men. However, even with this caveat, the model fit well across genders and sampling clusters that included a boosted Muslim or Black sample.

Our study is also limited in space and time. Data are from the United Kingdom; it is not clear to what extent the current findings generalize to other countries. Also, the COVID-19 context of our data collection may have affected social interactions and thereby discrimination experiences. For instance, finding that nearly one in

10 (9.3%) reported experiencing all assessed forms of discrimination at least once in the last month might seem surprising. However, research conducted earlier in the United Kingdom corroborates the current findings.

Abrams and Houston (2006) conducted a large-scale survey in the United Kingdom two decades before the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing a similar pattern of discrimination experiences. Nearly half of their respondents reported discrimination. Abrams and Houston also found “a very clear trend for younger people to report experiencing more prejudice of all types than older people do” (p. 41), and the authors highlighted that “experiences of discrimination are additive, and the more minority groups a person may belong to, the greater are their chances of being a target of prejudice” (Abrams & Houston, 2006, p. 46).

We also suggest that applying the one-factor model to data from the pandemic may have provided a particularly strong test of the model. Age-based divisions in the United Kingdom were exceptionally prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic, both by descriptions of older people as particularly vulnerable to the virus (Whiteside & Garcia, 2020) and younger age groups sometimes being characterized as culpable for spreading the virus (Whiteside, 2020). If anything, the pandemic made age-based boundaries more salient and should probably have made it more difficult for our one-factor model of discrimination experiences to fit among younger, middle-aged, as well as older adults.

Future Research

Future research could test replicability in other countries. Also, longitudinal designs could determine whether individuals report less discrimination as they age. Particularly valuable would be longitudinal investigations that follow several cohorts as they transition through different life stages, allowing researchers to disentangle age effects from cohort effects. Even repeated cross-sectional studies with consistent measures would help in understanding developments over time. However, we are not aware of major surveys that include appropriate measures for tracking discrimination trends over time. This leaves a critical gap in discrimination research.

Apart from differences across age, the present research found gender-specific patterns: Men’s reported discrimination experiences peaked around age 30 and then declined to levels below those experienced by the youngest respondents. The pattern for women was different, with discrimination experiences showing a steady decline with age. Future research could investigate these gender differences and whether the distinct pattern for men reflects heightened status competition during early career stages when men still lack the status markers of their older counterparts (see Berdahl et al., 2018).

Indicators of social status available to this research (self-reported socioeconomic status and subjective social status) had no or only minor associations with discrimination experiences when added as covariates with age. We also note that the causality behind the minor association between subjective social status and generalized discrimination experiences is uncertain: Discrimination experiences might affect self-view and subjective social status (Leonardelli & Tormala, 2003). Future research might empirically investigate how offenders’ perception of the social status of the target affects discriminatory behavior. For example, vignette

studies could manipulate apparent status markers such as occupation or sociolect and assess their effects on discriminatory processes.

Like earlier research, we have used self-reports of discrimination experiences. The relationship between subjective discrimination experiences and objective discrimination remains unclear. Future research could employ mixed methods, comparing self-reported discrimination with observational data or experimental designs to clarify this relationship.

Our findings from factor analysis emphasize the need for such research. Apparently, older respondents were more sensitive to discrimination experiences, despite reporting far fewer occurrences. Since this particular finding comes from statistically decomposing response patterns in survey data, it needs further validation with observational measures. Investigating how different age groups react to discrimination would be a useful strategy for future research.

Finally, our analysis of generalized discrimination experiences describes discrimination but not its consequences. Whereas the one-factor model focused on the convergence of different discrimination experiences, the original intersectionality theory stressed psychological and social effects of discrimination across domains, with potentially multiplicative rather than merely additive effects. Findings are inconsistent across studies (Raver & Nishii, 2010; Rosenfield, 2012; Thoma & Huebner, 2013; Vaclair & Rudnev, 2024); perhaps the concept and the model of generalized discrimination experiences can contribute to these analyses in future research.

Conclusion

Ageism is not just about age. Age discrimination is interlinked with other forms of discrimination, and all forms of discrimination examined in our study seemed primarily to affect younger adults. Whereas younger respondents reported substantially more generalized discrimination experiences, older respondents reported moderately more age-specific discrimination when the SEM analysis separated the unique variance in age discrimination from the variance it had in common with other forms of discrimination. However, older people appeared more vulnerable to generalized discrimination experiences if they also held a relatively low social status—suggesting that common perceptions of age discrimination against older adults may need qualification.

The concept of generalized discrimination experiences is novel and can reconcile the apparent contradiction in the literature between scholars who focus on ageism as applicable only to older people and those who highlight that younger people report much more discrimination based on their age. The current findings also point to different response patterns dependent on age, with younger people being less rather than more prone to report discrimination—and still reporting more discrimination overall, suggesting their reports might underestimate these occurrences.

Our findings have implications well beyond age discrimination. Understanding how specific forms of discriminatory treatment generate a wide variety of discriminatory experiences—for example, for members of ethnic minority groups—can help build a more comprehensive framework for addressing discrimination in its many manifestations.

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