

Age-Friendly: The Pink Ribbon of Anti-Ageism?

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Why would *age-friendly* appear in a forum on contested language and later life? As a term, it is, as Amanda Barusch puts it, benign (183). Indeed, the motivations of the associated movement are convincingly well-intentioned. But its very anodyne character makes *age-friendly* a term worth challenging.

Age-friendly belongs in this forum because it risks becoming the pink ribbon of anti-ageism (Sulik). Similar to that immediately recognizable, but unfortunately commodified, symbol for breast cancer, *age-friendly* raises awareness about older people's unique needs, obligations, and desires. Never particularly robust, *age-friendly* loses semantic strength through its attachment to troubling concepts, disregard of its figurative resonances, and ultimately its codification, occasionally even commodification. Like donning pink garb from which a fraction of the profits goes to breast cancer research, labelling cities and communities—along with associated programs, practices, objects, and more—*age-friendly* suggests a problem has been solved when it has barely been named.

[Google n-gram](#)¹ reveals a smattering of appearances of *age-friendly* before the World Health Organization (WHO) adopted the term in the early 2000s. The WHO's launch of the 2007 "Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide" caused the term to proliferate. As that guide clarifies, the WHO's *age-friendly* movement encourages local responses that promote and facilitate "active aging" through policies and practices (5–6), which creates a troubling association with *age-friendly* from its defining moment. Age studies scholars robustly interrogate how active aging, as Kristi A. Allain and Barbara Marshall put it, "chimes with neoliberal individualization of care as it takes some of the responsibility for 'Third Agers' health off the state and places it in the hands of the individuals themselves" (403). Further, the link to active aging associates *age-friendly* with activities that fit "an educated middle-class lifestyle" (Jacobsen

¹Google n-gram tracks when and how frequently specific phrases have appeared in print. To search for a term, follow the hyperlink and enter the term in the search window.

6). In explicitly basing the guide on active aging, the WHO yokes *age-friendly* to productivity, capacity, employment, and normative health. The well-meant broader usage of the term *age-friendly* to indicate being generally welcoming to older adults at best skips over these implications and, at worst, feeds on them.

Age-friendly arrived on the anti-ageism scene as an already dead metaphor (Chivers 4). The camaraderie embedded within the term hides the more insidious resonances of the concept of *age-friendliness*. Who doesn't want the world to be friendly? The kindness implied by "friendly" obscures the intricate process of developing localized strategies to encourage ongoing full participation and meaningful engagement for older adults. Moreover, the term's gentleness offers the impression that cordiality can launch the profound social change that will undo not just ageism but also associated forms of discrimination and exclusion.

Notably, the friendly of *age-friendly* does not imply friendship or deep, sustainable social relations (Chivers 5). The affect of friendliness risks standing in the way of making real change, especially at the policy level. Linguistically, *age-friendly* joins a trend of naming as "friendly" practices that are not driven by policy (such as eco-, child-, family-friendly, etc.). The most potent analogy is perhaps "gluten-friendly" which refers to products without gluten but not to the extent of being formally recognized as gluten-free. If you're gluten-sensitive, you might be okay with "gluten-friendly" food. However, if you have celiac disease, you would require gluten-free sustenance (Chivers 5–6).

Similarly, those older adults who have never been positioned outside the norm and now find themselves within the category "old," might appreciate and even benefit from the *age-friendly* movement that is designed to include them. However, even *they* would still need to determine whether an *age-friendly* community has the services or structures they require. More worryingly, for older adults who experience discrimination and ongoing hostility throughout their lives (in terms of both physical and social environments), an *age-friendly* designation is, at best, not relevant (Buffel and Phillipson 187).

To become officially *age-friendly* as per public health agencies and/or the WHO, organizations must go through ornate, inefficient bureaucratic exercises that involve committees, local council approvals, planning, publicity, and accountability measures to demonstrate meeting milestones and/or filling out the checklist that accompanies the WHO guide (Public Health Agency of

Canada). Given this administrative burden amidst increasing scarcity, those responsible for developing *age-friendly* frameworks and implementing *age-friendly* practices tend to be too stretched to go meaningfully beyond the shallow WHO call to promote active aging and sustain what the communities create (Joy; Russell et al.). *Age-friendly* processes often avoid addressing inequities that further disadvantage older adults who have not experienced cumulative advantages throughout the life course, particularly people living outside the white, middle-class communities most likely to earn the branding *age-friendly* (Buffel and Phillipson 187).

To be sure, groups genuinely committed to improving equity for all older adults embrace the term *age-friendly*. Some officially designated *age-friendly* cities, such as Toronto, highlight equity throughout their planning documents. However, most entities working for justice distinguish themselves from the superficiality implied by *age-friendly* (examples include Justice in Aging and Edmonton Pride Seniors Group). Rather than elevate productivity, capacity, or functionality, they work for dignity, respect, and meaningful late lives. While their focus goes well beyond terminology, they deserve a better term for their work.

What is a worthier term for what *age-friendly* could accomplish? How better to capture the work age-related organizations are doing? What might appeal widely without ignoring the need for profound transformation?

Age equity? Age justice?

Age equity encompasses intersections of later life with other situations (Daly). Some age-focused councils adopt it (Tri-State Learning Collaborative on Aging). The term already circulates in workplace discussions of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) (Age Equity Alliance). EDI work can be fundamental to shifting workplace policies and practices, but it also risks launching superficial, unnecessarily bureaucratic processes (Ahmed). As such, age equity risks losing its potential potency.

Age justice shifts from individual advocacy to structural change (Burghardt et al.). Edgier forums of popular writing embrace it (City Limits; Sackman). The term appeals to the activist in me. But, sadly, the link to social justice may provoke critics of the so-called “woke,” muddying its effectiveness.

Maybe we *could* use a ribbon!

Both age equity and age justice better express the need for substantial change, but I accept that *age-friendly* has its place, as long as we don't continue to ignore the potential insidiousness of its benign façade. Age studies scholars should continue this conversation: notice how *age-friendly* creeps, contest when its usage implies a change still to come, and infuse friendliness with equity and justice.

Acknowledgements

Research funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, grants # IG 435-2015-1787 to S. C. and # PG 895-2018-1013 to T. D. Thanks to Tamara Daly, Susan Braedley, and the Imagine Aging research team for launching this conversation. Thanks also to the co-editors of this forum: June Oh, Linda Hess, and Julia Henderson.

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