

Ageism: Looking Across the Margin in the New Millennium

By Jon Hendricks, *guest editor*

Those familiar signs of aging, wrinkles, gray hair, hearing aids, or more consequential changes, fuel a kind of pejorative imagery or stigmatization that has been labeled ageism (Butler, 1969). Age has always differentiated people, and there is no denying that real aging occurs or that changes can be problematic, but all too frequently these changes are perceived as either pathological or depreciatory. As many have pointed out, in large measure we are known to others through our bodies, which serve as a nexus within which identities are formulated. Whether dismissive or absolving, ageism intervenes in assessments of individual capacity. What is called benign or compassionate ageism, sometimes labeled the “poor dear” syndrome, is no less dehumanizing than its negative counterpart—either way people are viewed through a stereotypic lens, subverting personal characteristics to the point of invisibility (Gordon and Longino, 2000; Holstein and Minkler, 2003). Of course the same is true of virtually all typological images: for good or ill they obscure particulars. The way we use language, the way we characterize things, even if intended only as shorthand, evokes powerful connotations, and in all likelihood perceptions will follow suit.

*Stereotypes out of synch with
the aging of the population.*

It would be surprising if all ageism resulted from displaced anxieties or attitudinal abjection of individuals. If it did, we could deal with this “gerontophobia,” this age bias, and have a better sense of where intervention might be effective, whether completely successful or not. It is true that many individuals hold many misapprehensions and muddled views about what the term *old* means, but without reinforcement those views would likely be short lived. Some claim that such views stem from an innate fear of mortality, but at best that is but a portion of the picture (Levy, 2001; Nelson, 2002). As I have noted elsewhere, one of the paradoxes of our era is that our very successes and the shared values driving our cultural practices have set older people apart from their younger counterparts. “Live long and suffer” might well be an aphorism suitable for describing the situation of older people in our society. It is one thing to speak of respect and support when numbers are small and surpluses plentiful. It is quite another with burgeoning growth in the number of people surviving into old age when those espousals are being roundly challenged, even strained. Judging from the media mantra, the sacred cows of generations past are being cast as greedy overgrazers today.

The question of ageism is deserving of attention because it is woven into the woof of our social fabric. How is it that stereotypes and misapprehensions proliferate and are sustained? In the case of ageism, old age is cast as a territory apart, a country of the old, so to speak—inhabited by a bygone people. Part of the tendency to see decline, dependency, and disability as part and parcel of the aging process is an unintended consequence of otherwise well-intentioned interventions. We have made old age what it is by virtue of our normative views, by the analytic framework scholars use, and by virtue of some of the ameliorative attention focused in public policy. Without belaboring the point, social policies formulated from the 1930s onward to address abiding issues facing significant numbers of people also create boundaries and borders that impart emblematic credence to whatever commonalities or differences are perceived by those on one or the other side of the margin (Binstock, 2005; Hendricks, 2004; Johnson and Michaelsen, 1997; Wilson, 2001).

The effect is that cleavages endemic to eligibility requirements also produce opportunity or constraint, access or denial. Standing on one or another side of an entitlement implies access to resources or roles and results in imputed characteristics of those eligible for protections and benefits.

As these comments pass in review, it is essential to bear in mind that the social identity of those subjected to ageism suffer real consequences for personal well-being. Discrepancies and incongruities have human costs: as individuals are discredited, they are labeled and label themselves in uninviting terms, with dispiriting consequences (Goffman, 1963). If social participation is impaired, the effect is amplified several times over because feeling part of one's surroundings is more than merely pleasant; it provides protection against stressors of many stripes and thereby against the aging process itself (Poindexter, 1979; Rowe and Kahn, 1987).

Part of the reason entitlements for social programs in and of themselves proffer fodder for ageism is that many policies are responses to problems and thereby establish tacit but salient parameters for our perceptions about those who are covered while at the same time imposing a

relational framework on their lives. A case in point, and one that has been discussed at length, is the way in which gender enters into aging policy considerations and the relative valuing of pursuits normally relegated to one or the other gender (Calasanti and Slevin, 2001; Estes, 2001).

In even broader perspective, retirement policies may lead to exclusionary outcomes as older workers are disassociated from productive processes and the accompanying status appraisals integral to the way we assay one another (Tornstam, 1992). A comparable outcome accompanying all age-based public policies results in a codification of social provisions and age-specific social differentiation. It is appropriate to wonder whether policies and legal provisions might not contour how we conceive of others, ourselves, or the distance imputed between those eligible for coverage and their noneligible counterparts, or to the image of old people as wards of the government. Entitlement-linked identities and assumptions of vulnerability permeate virtually every aspect of life, for old people and for others, positive intent notwithstanding. Of course there are plausible differences between universalistic forms of social insurance and social assistance categorizations, but for now it is sufficient to consider whether or not the way we have organized support for older people in this society might not contribute to the sorts of ageist notions this issue of *Generations* addresses.

As Pampel (1998) and others have pointed out, there is a flip side of ageism, one that casts old people as selfish and affluent, gaining unfairly from public spending. Either image, poor and down-and-out or greedy geezers, is pernicious, even insidious, in its own right and puts older people in a perplexing dilemma. To the extent causes can be singled out, the stereotyping may be more due to a reliance on instrumental reasoning than for reasons having to do with their own competence. In his original formulation of ageism as systematic stereotyping and discrimination Butler (1969) also implied that normative provisions are predicates for individual predilections.

An interesting illustration is contained in the 2002 opinion of the Office of Management and Budget issued to the Environmental Protection Agency that older people are less valuable than

younger people and should be appraised at a 63-percent rate when calculating relative costs and damages at death due to environmental degradation (Borenstein, 2002). Whatever else the 63-percent valuation implies, and there is ample fuel there for a heated debate, it also reflects a substitution of age as a master status characteristic, eradicating a person's previous socioeconomic, demographic, and gender-related characteristics as bases for attribution of status. This sort of compositional fallacy, whereby presumed traits of the group are attached to individual members, notwithstanding, such consequentialist calculations are commonplace criteria, built on an estimation of remaining years of life (Harris, 1985; Leaman, 1999). In so doing they reflect a process that reproduces an implicit or explicit marginalization and disenfranchisement of older citizens based on future economic potential, not past contributions or any other calculus. Paradoxically, it is also one thoroughly out of synch with the aging of the population and all that portends for social participation as the size of the cohort considered old is about to spike.

The contributors to this issue of *Generations* speak of the confluence of ageism with other factors that give rise to differential attributions, which circumscribe the way older people are perceived and categorized and the basis for their self-perceptions. Looking at these factors one at a time will not likely yield insight into the constitution of the human condition or lead to an elimination of ageism (Levy, 2001). What follows in this issue of *Generations* is an effort to broaden the focus in order to address ageism in its many guises. ❧

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