

WORLDS OF DIFFERENCE

INEQUALITY IN THE AGING EXPERIENCE

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Worlds of Difference

Inequality in the Aging Experience

Second Edition

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Preface

Worlds of Difference is designed to enhance the inclusiveness of the undergraduate curriculum in social gerontology. We believe this is important for two reasons. First, undergraduate students today represent greater diversity in gender, race, and social class than did undergraduates in previous decades, and pedagogical research has demonstrated that students become engaged in curricula that “give voice” to their experiences. Second, projected increases in diversity within the elderly population over the coming decades demand that people working in the field of gerontology be knowledgeable about the experiences of people of different genders, races, ethnic groups, and social classes. Designing an inclusive curriculum is not just a matter of fairness or affirmative action; it is a central component of educating people to live and work in the twenty-first century (Moses, 1992).

In preparing the introductory essays and selecting the readings, we were guided by several principles. First, we believe it is essential to move beyond conceptions of gender, race, and class as attributes of individuals that must be controlled statistically or experimentally (J. S. Jackson, 1989). Instead, we conceptualize these categories as social constructs, as classifications based on social values that influence identity formation, opportunity structures, and adaptive resources. We visualize these social constructs as interlocking hierarchies that create systems of privilege as well as disadvantage. Too often, the experience of people who are disadvantaged along one or more hierarchies is contrasted with the experience of the dominant group, which is presented as the “norm.” Supported by the ideology of a meritocracy, this approach masks the structural foundations of privilege. Too frequently, it is assumed that only people of color have “race,” that only women have “gender,” that only the poor have “social class,” and that only recent immigrants have “ethnicity” (Higginbotham, 1989). Our emphasis on the intersections of these multiple systems of inequality is designed to help students understand that older people can experience disadvantage along one dimension but privilege along others. As Margaret Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (1992) explain, “Race, class and gender are part of the whole fabric of experience for all groups, not just women and people of color” (p. xiii).

Second, we have attempted to supplement the “social problems” approach implicit in the multiple jeopardy perspective on gender, race, and class by emphasizing strengths as well as deficits. We selected readings that depict older people as active creators of culture rather than as merely passive victims. We emphasized the

adaptive resources people develop across a lifetime of disadvantage and the ways in which these adaptive resources help people cope with the challenge of old age.

We minimized simple comparisons (e.g., female versus male, African American versus white) in which the dominant group is an implicit standard against which other groups are “compared” to see how they “differ” (Stanford & Yee, 1991). Instead, we explored diversity in the experience of aging along any one dimension. We selected readings to introduce students to African American women who are wealthy as well as others who are poor, and to poor women who are white as well as poor women who are Native American, African American, and Latino American. As the anthropologist Johnetta Cole (1986) explains, gender is experienced differently depending on one’s race and social class, and the experience of race and class is mediated through one’s gender.

Third, our exploration in *Worlds of Difference* has been guided by a life course perspective. A number of the readings introduce students to the historical conditions different categories of people experienced at particular chronological ages. People who are elderly today lived through the Great Depression of the 1930s, World War II, postwar prosperity and optimism, and the Civil Rights movement. Elderly African Americans grew up in a legally segregated world that not only limited their economic options but also provided a particular worldview and encouraged special adaptive resources. Exploration of the diversity in the social and historical contexts within which today’s cohorts of elderly people experienced significant life course events is essential to understanding their experience of old age. We chose to explore these contexts by providing views of social reality through the eyes of young and middle-aged adults in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, those cohorts that make up the older population today.

The book is organized by topic rather than by group or by dimension of inequality. We want to emphasize diversity in older people’s encounters with negative images, in their experience of family, and in their productive activities. We want students to understand that the impact of gender, race, and class cannot be understood in additive terms; we are less concerned that students master a catalog of descriptive characteristics of each particular group. The aging experience of an affluent African American woman and a working-class white woman are very different, even though both are disadvantaged on two hierarchies and privileged on a third. To achieve this understanding, we have chosen readings that give voice to people whose perspectives have been overlooked. The readings emphasize what Johnetta Cole describes as “commonalities” as well as differences, that is, recognition that part of the social construction of gender, race, and class involves emphasizing differences and suppressing similarities (Hess, 1990). We also highlighted these issues in the discussion questions at the

end of each part and in the test bank, which is available to instructors.

We met several challenges in compiling this anthology. We were unable to include a number of excellent readings that provide compelling glimpses of social reality; we share these with our readers through the list of supplementary readings at the end of each part. Our attempt to provide multiple lenses was sometimes hampered by a shortage of writings about particular categories of older people. Locating readings about older men of color that illustrated our themes was especially difficult. We hope that greater interest in an inclusive approach to the study of aging will make this task easier for editors in the future.

Worlds of Difference reflects the work of more than two people. The idea for this anthology emerged from a roundtable, Innovations in Courses on Aging in the Undergraduate Curriculum, organized by Pine Forge President Stephen Rutter during the 1991 meetings of the Gerontological Society of America. We are grateful to Steve for providing the catalyst for the book. We learned from each other and emerge from this collaborative venture with an understanding of aging that is greater than the sum of the knowledge we brought to the project.

Ingrun Lafleur merits our special thanks for introducing one of us to the meaning of an inclusive curriculum. Over the past five years, she was a mentor, a colleague, and, most important, a friend. For those who knew Ingie, her influence will be obvious throughout the anthology.

Many other people contributed to the project. We are indebted to Penny Dugan for her creative lending library of literary anthologies, to Susan McKie for her efforts in obtaining permissions, to Lesa L. Ball for her diligent work in preparing the bibliography, to Jeff Stoller for his double role as student reader and editor, to Amy Stoller and Charmaine Judon for helping us complete the manuscript on schedule. Most of all, we want to thank our husbands, Michael A. Stoller and Ralph M. Gibson, and our children, Jeffrey Mark Stoller, Kirsten Elin Stoller, Ralph M. Gibson, Jr., and John S. Gibson, for giving us the love and understanding—and time—we needed to finish *Worlds of Difference*.

E.P.S.

R.C.G.

Introduction

Different Worlds in Aging: Gender, Race, and Class

Gerontologists have long stressed the heterogeneity of the elderly population. People enter old age with an accumulation of experiences gained over six or seven decades, experiences that influence their attitudes, behaviors, and resources. Some of these experiences, such as wars, economic fluctuations, technological developments, and cultural change, are shared with other people in their age cohort. Others emerge from biographical experiences unique to the individual. The strength of a social gerontological approach to the study of late life is that it enables us to understand the ways in which what is occurring within the larger society shapes the life course of individuals. As the sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) put it, social gerontology allows us to see the link between history and biography.

Even though older people today have lived through the same historical period, the impact of that history on their individual biographies varies with their position in society. Some characteristics of individuals and of their personal histories may appear unique, but there are also discernible patterns in the experiences of different segments of the older population. These patterns reflect social structural arrangements and cultural blueprints within society both today and during the decades in which people lived and grew old. In this book, we will examine three dimensions of experience that structure both allocation of resources and expectations about old age: gender, race or ethnicity, and social class. We frequently think of these factors as attributes of individuals. In classifying people into categories based on gender, race or ethnicity, and social class, people often emphasize biological characteristics. Clearly, there are biological differences between men and women. We often try to classify people into racial or ethnic groups on the basis of skin color or facial features. Some people have even argued that differences in intelligence determine social class placement. Social Darwinists, for example, applying the “survival of the fittest” principle to human societies, attributed the failure of the lower classes to improve their socioeconomic status to their natural inferiority.

Without denying that there are differences among individuals that are grounded in biology, our emphasis will be on gender, race or ethnicity, and social class as social constructs, or classifications based on social values. The sociologist Beth Hess (1990) describes the process through which the biological category of sex is transformed into the social construct of gender:

Layers of meaning have been wrapped around the distinguishing feature of biological sex to produce a palimpsest of gendered reality-socially constructed systems of thought and action that organize perception, identities, and the allocation of scarce resources. Thus, rather than being a property of the individual, maleness and femaleness are products of the operation of social systems on both the variability and similarities provided by nature. . . . Gender is created by suppressing similarities, and it is maintained by a deep ideological commitment to differences between women and men. The basic process is categorization, the establishment of a gender hierarchy in which a superstructure of social, political, and economic differences have been superimposed on the biological. (pp. 83-84)

The social process of categorizing people that Hess describes is also evident in racial and ethnic labels. A child whose mother is African American and whose father is white is considered African American, whereas a child whose mother is white and whose father is Japanese American is considered Asian (Cyrus, 1993). Jews have traditionally traced group membership through the mother. A person was considered Jewish if his or her mother was Jewish, regardless of the background of the father. In the United States, a person with any African heritage has been classified as black, whereas the U.S. Census Bureau requires at least one-eighth native American lineage to qualify as Native American (Cyrus, 1993).

These labels not only influence the way people are counted in social surveys but also structure the opportunities and constraints people encounter as they move throughout their life course. They shape our self-concepts and the ways other people respond to us. There is no biological reason for classifying a child according to the racial status of the minority parent rather than the white parent or in determining what percentage of lineage is required for identification with a particular group. These distinctions reflect the social process Hess described: a process of categorization that superimposes social hierarchies on biological differences.

Our exploration of gender, race, and class as social constructs will emphasize these variables both as labels attached to individuals and as properties of hierarchical social structures within which people form identities and through which they realize their life chances (Hess, 1990). We will also investigate the ways in which

chances (Hess, 1990). We will also investigate the ways in which people's positions along these multiple hierarchies generate diverse views of social reality. This involves listening to descriptions of aging and old age from multiple perspectives, of "giving voice" to people whose perspectives have been overlooked. Integrating this chorus of voices will enrich our understanding of aging by highlighting common motifs as well as the tonal and rhythmic complexity that characterize the experience of aging in the contemporary United States.

Our journey through the "worlds of difference" shaped by these social constructs will be guided by several themes. We begin by emphasizing that hierarchies based on gender, race, and class create systems of privilege as well as of disadvantage. When we think about these hierarchies, it is often easier to recognize elements of discrimination. Gerontologists have documented multiple ways in which discrimination throughout the life course translates into an accumulation of disadvantage in old age. We know, for example, that legally segregated school systems and legally sanctioned discriminatory hiring practices limited the opportunities of today's elderly African Americans to accumulate financial assets during their younger years. Research has demonstrated how a lifetime of poverty translates into poor health in later life. Other studies have shown how the rules regulating pension benefits increase the financial risks associated with widowhood for older women. The concept of "multiple jeopardy" reminds us that occupying several disadvantaged positions simultaneously compounds the risk of negative outcomes in old age. For example, both African Americans and women face higher risks of being poor in old age than do white men, but the probability of poverty is even higher for elderly African American women.

This emphasis on disadvantage, however, sometimes masks the ways in which these same hierarchies create systems of privilege. By focusing on the discrimination experienced by people at the lower end of these hierarchies, we sometimes overlook the ways in which being white, being male, and being middle or upper class provide unearned advantages. Being able to ignore issues surrounding race is one aspect of privilege, an advantage denied people of color, who are constantly reminded of their disadvantaged status. The political scientist Andrew Hacker (1992) reminds us that "what every black American knows, and whites should try to imagine, is how it feels to have an unfavorable—and unfair—identity imposed on you every waking day" (p. 21). Because white Americans spend most of their time in environments in which being white is taken for granted, they need pay little attention to race. Advantages associated with one's race, class, or gender are taken for granted by members of the dominant group. Hacker (1992) suggests a parable to elucidate the often overlooked advantages of being white. He asks his white students to imagine that tonight:

You will be visited by an official you have never met. He begins by telling you that he is extremely embarrassed. The organization he represents has made a mistake, something that hardly ever happens.

According to their records, he goes on, you were to have been born black: to another set of parents, far from where you were raised.

However, the rules being what they are, this error must be rectified, and as soon as possible. So at midnight tonight, you will become black. And this will mean not simply a darker skin, but the bodily and facial features associated with African ancestry. However, inside you will be the person you always were. Your knowledge and ideas will remain intact. But outwardly you will not be recognizable to anyone you now know.

Your visitor emphasizes that being born to the wrong parents was in no way your fault. Consequently, his organization is prepared to offer you some reasonable recompense. Would you, he asks, care to name a sum of money you might consider appropriate? He adds that his group is by no means poor. It can be quite generous when the circumstances warrant, as they seem to in your case. He finishes by saying that their records show you are scheduled to live another fifty years—as a black man or woman in America. (pp. 31-32)

How much financial recompense would you request?

Most of Hacker's students report that "it would not be out of place to ask for \$50 million, or \$1 million for each coming black year," a calculation he interprets as clear evidence of the value that white people place on their race.

Peggy McIntosh (1988) draws another analogy in illustrating the privilege dimension of systems of inequality. She explains: "As a white person, I realized that I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage" (p. 4). She equates white privilege with an "invisible package of unearned assets," and provides a number of illustrations of the ways in which her everyday life is made easier because of her race. For example:

I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me. . . . I can go shopping alone most of the time, fairly well assured that I will not be followed or harassed by store detectives. . . . Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance that I am financially reliable. I did not have to educate my children to be aware of systematic racism for their

own daily physical protection. . . . I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race. (McIntosh, 1988, pp. 8-82)

These advantages or assets are unearned, because access to them is determined by an ascribed rather than an achieved status. They are rendered invisible by the ideology of a meritocracy and a classless society, which teaches us that the United States is a land of equal opportunity where ambition, intelligence, and hard work are responsible for success. This is a comfortable explanation for people who are successful, because it tells them they deserve the advantages they enjoy. Affluent retired people pursuing a life of leisure in the Sunbelt can tell themselves that they earned their piece of "the American Dream," a lifestyle available to anyone with talent, intelligence, and the willingness to work hard. At the same time, this explanation holds less affluent elders responsible for their lack of success. If only they had worked harder or been more clever or intelligent, they would have reaped more rewards. In explaining poverty in old age, it is an example of an explanation that "blames the victim."

Sorting out privilege and disadvantage is sometimes complicated, because people can experience disadvantage along one dimension but privilege along others. To assume that all men are privileged over all women or that all whites are advantaged relative to all people of color is to ignore intersections among multiple hierarchies. A woman who is married to a wealthy industrialist can express dissatisfaction with the expectation that she accommodate her life to the demands of her husband's career, with her unequal voice in family decisions, and with her sole responsibility for managing home and family (Ostrander, 1984), but it is difficult to argue that she is disadvantaged relative to an African American man struggling to escape poverty as a sharecropper in the rural South or a Mexican American agricultural laborer as he follows the demand for migrant workers. As we explore the impact of gender, race, and class on the experiences of older Americans today, we will look for evidence of these intersections. We will learn that race, gender, and class represent interlocking systems of experience that affect all aspects of human life, not simply separate features of experience that can be understood in additive terms (Andersen & Collins, 1992). Gender is experienced differently depending on one's race and social class (Cole, 1986). Analogously, the constraints or privileges of race and class are mediated through one's gender. A lifetime of experiences at various points along these hierarchies contributes to diversity in old age, diversity not only in the quantity of resources people have accumulated but also in their relationships, the meanings attached to aging, and their definitions of social reality.

As we explore these worlds of difference, we will emphasize strengths as well as deficits. The "multiple jeopardy" approach to

studying inequality in old age has emphasized the negative outcomes of occupying disadvantaged positions along several of these hierarchies. Social gerontologists working from this perspective have documented the accumulation of deficits across the life course that produce poverty, poor health, and inadequate living conditions in old age. Although it is important to recognize the problems faced by older people coping with the effects of disadvantaged status, it is equally important to learn how these older Americans create meaning in their lives despite barriers based on gender, race, and class. Through the readings, we will meet older people who are active creators of culture and not merely passive victims reacting to systems of oppression. We will learn to view social reality from multiple perspectives and discover that particular institutional arrangements can provide protection against oppression in some segments of society while simultaneously reinforcing oppression in others.

To illustrate this seeming contradiction, we will consider the role of religion in the lives of older African American women. In many respects, religion as an institution appears to reinforce these women's subordinate position in society. Religious doctrines defining women's proper place emphasize their role as mothers and justify their subordination to men. Although black churches are estimated to be 75% female, and women perform the majority of the work in local congregations (Gilkes, 1985), women are selected for leadership positions less often than men. The African Methodist Episcopal Church, which began ordaining women in 1948, was the first denomination in the United States to accept women into the clergy, but interviews with male clergy reveal continuing prejudice against women in the ministry (Grant, 1982). Some critics have argued that although religion can serve as a coping mechanism for adversity, dependence on prayer can serve as a substitute for direct action (S. Taylor, 1982). The dominance of European imagery and an emphasis on rewards in the afterlife also have been criticized for reinforcing racism and fostering passive acceptance of inequality in this life.

A more complex view of religion in the life of older African American women is provided by Johnetta Cole (1986). Cole, an anthropologist who is currently president of Spellman College, describes the Southern A.M.E. congregation in which she grew up and its role in the life of Sister Minnie:

In this black church where we sang "Jesus will wash me whiter than snow" in Sunday school, the superintendent was my great-grandfather but most of the teachers were women. We looked up at stained glass windows depicting a blond, blue-eyed image of Jesus and showing Mary as a white woman. However, as the choir my mother directed sang "Amazing Grace," Sister Minnie would begin to twitch as the spirits moved her, and she began to speak in tongues and shout and dance in expressions of

“getting happy.” Her religion, its imagery as Eurocentric and male as it was, also involved the retention of elements of an African religion. And importantly, it was obviously a source of tremendous relief and satisfaction to a woman who somehow had to support herself and several children on the less-than-minimum wages she received as a domestic for a Southern white lady, living in a city where even the water fountains were marked “white” and “colored.”

Sister Minnie was never in the pulpit, nor did anyone who shared her gender ever hold forth as a preacher. Yet she and other women were always frying chicken and preparing the potato salad that were essentials for many church suppers. Without defending this division of labor, it is necessary to note that on those Sundays when Sister Minnie’s usher board served and she brought men and women to their seats, or even more so, when, with one arm folded behind her back, she brought some of the collection plates to the minister, one saw a woman who in Mt. Olive A.M.E. church was able to play a public role of dignity and consequence denied her in much of the racist, sexist, and elitist southern United States. (pp. 309-310)

For Sister Minnie, the church was a source of recognition and self-esteem. But this is only one way in which churches have provided support in African American communities. The black church also provided both emotional and material support at a time when these were not available to African Americans through public services (R. J. Taylor & Chatters, 1986; Walls & Zarit, 1991). L. Steinitz (1981) concluded that churches served as surrogate families, offering both concrete help and psychological assurance, especially to older people without family nearby. In addition to religious activities and social support, black churches have had a major role in political mobilization (Walls & Zarit, 1991) and provided a strong foundation for the Civil Rights movement that emerged during the 1950s and 1960s.

We will see similar contradictions in our examination of family and of productive activity, including paid employment and unpaid assistance to family and friends. Listening to Sister Minnie and to the voices of other people introduced in the readings will help us begin to answer a question Ralph Ellison (1952) posed over four decades ago: “Can a people . . . live and develop for over three hundred years simply by reacting? Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them?” (pp. 316-317).

Recognition of the adaptive strategies of elders of color, however, should not blind us to the societal arrangements that demanded these strategies. For example, sharing resources across networks of extended kin and fictive kin enhance survival among poor women, but this strategy does not eliminate the economic barriers that maintain economic inequality. The increasing number of elderly

people who are assuming the role of surrogate or custodial parents for their grandchildren cannot reduce the prevalence of unemployment, substance abuse, or incarceration in the middle generation. And the ability of families of color to teach children to survive prejudice and discrimination while maintaining their self-esteem does not alter the strains of everyday racism. In periods of fiscal restraint and political conservatism, gerontologists must remain alert that these celebrations of strength are not redefined as rationales for not providing much needed services.

In addition to issues of social inequality, we also will explore variations in cultural meanings and the dynamics of aging both among and within different population categories. Often this requires moving beyond research, which tends to reflect the experiences of the dominant group. Recognizing this limitation in the gerontological literature does not mean that researchers are purposely distorting information or are insensitive to concerns of older women or older people of color. Biases and oversights reflect the fact that knowledge is socially constructed. Gerontologists, like other scientists, approach their research from a specific social location that shapes what they know about the world (Andersen, 1992). The past experiences and current attitudes that researchers bring to their subject shape the questions they ask, what they observe, and how they interpret their observations.

Listening to diverse voices enriches our perspective by giving us new lenses through which to view the multiple social worlds that can exist within a particular setting. Trying on lenses can bring into focus dimensions of social reality that were overlooked from the perspective of the dominant group. Feminist research on family care of the elderly provides an example of this process. When one of the editors of this reader was in school, she was taught that many traditional functions of the family had been shifted to specialized, bureaucratic institutions. One example used to illustrate this shift was the growth of nursing homes. As she heard about the decline in family care of the elderly and the plight of older people isolated in nursing homes, she watched her own mother struggling to meet the expanding physical and emotional needs of her increasingly frail, elderly grandmother. The contradiction between the stereotype of abandonment of older people and the strains experienced by family caregivers is more evident to women than to men. Adult daughters are more likely than adult sons to provide care to older relatives. Furthermore, they tend to absorb the costs of that care themselves, struggling to meet the demands of their other roles both within and beyond the family. Jane Lewis (1986) reports that caregiving daughters struggle to “keep life as ‘normal’ as possible for their own family, . . . [which] entailed assuming the whole burden of care themselves and keeping it as unobtrusive as possible” (chap. 6, p. 10). We should not be surprised that male researchers were slower than women to design research projects exploring the burdens and rewards of family care of frail elders. This aspect of the aging

experience was less likely to be visible to men than to women. Dorothy Smith (1987) notes that all research is done from a particular standpoint or location in the social system and is shaped by the perspective of the researcher. Throughout this reader, we will introduce examples of the ability of diverse perspectives to yield new insights. We will see, for example, how abandoning definitions of kin based on white families makes visible the richness and complexity of kin and kinlike relationships within African American communities. We will discover how expanding definitions of productivity based on the paid employment experience of white men reveals unpaid productive work performed by people throughout their lives. We will uncover the biases in retirement research that emphasize pension income and explore a variety of strategies people use in reinterpreting negative stereotypes based on age, gender, race, and class.

A final theme shaping our journey through different worlds of aging is an emphasis on the life course. A life course perspective, which we will explore in detail in the next chapter, highlights the ways in which people's location in the social system, the historical period in which they live, and their unique personal biography shape the experience of old age. This perspective allows us to explore how occupying different positions along dimensions of gender, race, and class over one's lifetime can lead to different aging experiences. It also reminds us of the importance of the historical period in which people live. People who are the same age experienced particular segments of history at the same stage of life. They experienced life transitions within similar sociohistorical contexts. The intersection of historical trends with hierarchies based on gender, race, and class produce variation both among older people from different population categories and among people of different age within particular categories. To illustrate this process, consider the historical context experienced by a particular set of elderly Americans: African Americans who will be 80 years of age in the year 2000 were born in 1920. Most completed their education in racially segregated schools, many similar to the one Maya Angelou (1969) describes in her autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*:

Unlike the white high school, Lafayette County Training School distinguished itself by having neither lawn, nor hedges, nor tennis court, nor climbing ivy. Its two buildings (main classrooms, the grade school and home economics) were set on a dirt hill with no fence to limit its boundaries or those of bordering farms. . . . Rusty hoops on the swaying poles represented the permanent recreational equipment. . . . Only a small percentage [of the graduates] would be continuing on to college—one of the South's A & M (agricultural and mechanical) schools, which trained negro youths to be carpenters, farmers, handymen, masons, maids, cooks, and baby nurses. (p. 163)

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* declared separate but unequal treatment unconstitutional and overturned segregation laws officially sanctioned since the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling in 1896. But these African American elders were 34 years old in 1954, and they had long completed their formal education. Despite the limited opportunities constraining their own youth, many foresaw possibilities of change for their children. Barbara Smith (1983) describes this vision in the introduction to her anthology *Home Girls*:

The women in my family, and their friends, worked harder than any people I have known before or since, and despite their objective circumstances, they believed . . . that Beverly and I could have a future beyond theirs, although there was little enough indication in the 40s and 50s that Negro girls would ever have a place to stand. (p. xxi)

African Americans born in 1920 witnessed the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s—some were among its leaders—but they witnessed these events as adults in their thirties and forties. Their childhoods were lived within a racially segregated world in which they struggled to maintain self-respect while avoiding direct challenges to the rules for “living Jim Crow”:

There were many times when I had to exercise a great deal of ingenuity to keep out of trouble. It is a southern custom that all men must take off their hats when they enter an elevator. And especially did this apply to blacks. One day I stepped into an elevator with my arms full of packages. I was forced to ride with my hat on. Two white men stared at me coldly. Then one of them very kindly lifted my hat and placed it upon my armful of packages. Now the most accepted response for a Negro to make under such circumstances is to look at the white man out of the corner of his eye and grin. To have said: “Thank you!” would have made the white man think that you thought you were receiving from him a personal service. For such an act I have seen Negroes take a blow in the mouth. Finding the first alternative distasteful, and the second dangerous, I hit upon an acceptable course of action which fell safely between these two poles. I immediately—no sooner than my hat was lifted—pretended that my packages were about to spill, and appeared deeply distressed with keeping them in my arms. In this fashion, I evaded having to acknowledge his service, and, in spite of adverse circumstances, salvaged a slender shred of personal pride. (Wright, 1937/1991, p. 50)

A life course perspective also reminds us to expect diversity among today’s older population. Although all people celebrating