

The Realities of AGING

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AN INTRODUCTION
TO GERONTOLOGY
FOURTH EDITION



CARYS. KART

THE REALITIES OF AGING: AN INTRODUCTION TO GERONTOLOGY

FOURTH EDITION

Cary S. Kart
The University of Toledo

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To the memory of my father

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PREFACE

Allyn and Bacon deserves a thank-you for providing me with a fourth opportunity to present *The Realities of Aging*. The field of gerontology continues to grow rapidly, and my efforts in this edition have been aimed at trying to keep pace. This has been a more difficult task than in the past as the field has strengthened its multidisciplinary identity, and gerontologists in this country and abroad seem more productive of research than ever.

A recent survey of gerontology programs carried out by the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) and the University of Southern California (USC) has identified four courses as most commonly offered in gerontological instruction programs in institutions of higher education in the United States. Some would describe these four courses as representing a core curriculum in gerontology. The courses are Social Gerontology, Psychology of Aging, Biology/Physiology of Aging, and Sociology of Aging. From my biased perspective, this edition of *Realities* remains the text of choice for an introductory course in gerontology precisely because it has strengths in the sociology of aging, the biology/physiology of aging, and the psychology of aging.

The basic structure of the book has been retained from the third edition. Part I introduces the study of aging and consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 discusses ten myths about aging. Chapter 2 defines the field of gerontology, presents a history of aging, and includes updated material on methodological issues current in aging research. Chapter 3 presents the population dynamics and demographic characteristics of the aged, updated to include the most current data. Part II presents material on the biomedical aspects of aging. Chapters 4 and 5 are devoted to the biological aspects of aging. Chapter 6 describes the health status of the elderly population.

Part III places aging in psychological and sociological perspective. Separate chapters are devoted to the psychological aspects of aging (Chapter 7) and to sociological theories of aging (Chapter 9). Chapter 8, entitled "Social Aspects of Aging," attempts to bridge the psychological and sociological approaches to aging. Part IV looks at the relationship between the aged and society. Chapter 10 presents material on the family life of older people. Chapters 11, 12, and 13 deal with the economics of aging; work, retirement, and leisure; and the politics of aging, respectively. Chapter 14 deals with the relationship between religion and aging.

Part V deals with special issues of concern for older people: the problems of aging for racial and ethnic minorities (Chapter 15), living environments (Chapter 16), long-term care (Chapter 17), health policy toward the aged in the United States (Chapter 18), and death and dying (Chapter 19). The future of the field and career opportunities are discussed in an epilogue.

Each chapter also contains a boxed insert expanding on some point made in the text or adding to the substantive content of the chapter. If there is a theme running through these boxed inserts, it is that concerns about racial, gender, and socioeconomic inequality and sensitivity to cultural diversity are not specific to the young and middle-aged. A number of the boxed inserts add cross-cultural flavor to the book, as well.

A special thank-you goes to Ruth E. Dunkle, Ph.D., Professor of Social Work at the University of Michigan; Eileen K. Metress, Ph.D., Professor of Health Promotion at the University of Toledo; and Seamus P. Metress, Ph.D., Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toledo. Revised chapters from the third edition were read in various stages of development by Ruth Dunkle, Carol Engler, Eileen Metress, Seamus Metress, and Neil Palmer. Much of what is good here comes from their collective wisdom. Errors of fact and judgment can only be attributed to the author. Finally, I wish to thank Kenneth F. Ferraro, Ph.D., of Purdue University; Ellen K. Page-Robin, Ph.D., of Western Michigan University; Peggy A. Shifflett, Ph.D., of Radford University; and Georgeanna M. Tryban, Ph.D., of Indiana State University for reviewing the manuscript for this edition.

The University of Toledo continues to be a productive environment for me. The Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work has new faces and a new spirit that make it an exciting and rewarding place in which to work.

By the time this edition appears, Michelle will have put up with almost twenty-five years of this—and it has not been easy! Through it all, she has remained a caring and loving partner in our “business,” while at the same time pursuing her own career. I really have been lucky! In the preface to an earlier edition, I wrote that Renee was old enough for me to start thinking about her using this text in a college course. That time has now come and gone, and the appearance of this edition should coincide with her mastery of a law school curriculum. Finally, there will be someone in the family to read the fine print in these book contracts! Jeremy is progressing through his college career, with errors of judgment, large and small, presumably behind him. Will it be psychology, anthropology, business, or some combination? In any case, I have reason to be a proud father!

I hope the publication of this book finds Grandma Eleanor maintaining health and spirits; Ina, Charlie, and the girls happy and prosperous; and Grandpa Max and Grandma Sylvia in good health. Finally, as with the earlier editions of this text, the fourth edition is formally dedicated to the memory of my father.

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CHAPTER 1

FIRST THE GOOD NEWS . . . THE MYTHS OF AGING

According to Greek mythology (Hamilton, 1942, p. 428), Aurora, the goddess of the Dawn, was in love with Tithonus, a Trojan. Aurora asked Zeus to make Tithonus immortal, and Zeus agreed. But Aurora did not think to ask Zeus to allow Tithonus to retain his youthfulness. For a while the lovers lived happily, but then the consequences of Aurora's error began to appear. Tithonus' hair turned gray, and soon he could move neither hand nor foot. He prayed for death, but there was no release for him. At last, in pity, Aurora left him alone in his room, locking the door behind her. As one version of the story goes, Tithonus still lies in that room, babbling endlessly.¹

The legend of Tithonus reflects a number of themes relevant to contemporary life in the United States, not the least of which is the prevalent fear of old age and its concomitant hardships and infirmities. Some see this fear of growing old as the root of a negative attitude toward aging and old age, and of the tendency on the part of many Americans to avoid the word *old* and substitute euphemisms such as "golden years." Surveys of individuals aged 18 years and over conducted in 1974 and 1981 by the National Council on Aging show that, on average, Americans believe that the problems of older people are more severe than their own problems (Ferraro, 1992). And, as Ferraro (1992) reports, both surveys show that most Americans believe the problems of older people are more serious than do older persons themselves.

Dr. Robert N. Butler (1975), winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his book *Why Survive? Being Old in America*, coined the term *ageism* to describe this negative attitude toward aging and the aged. He equates ageism with racism and sexism and

¹ According to another version of the story, Tithonus shrank in size until Aurora, with a feeling for the natural fitness of things, turned him into a skinny, noisy grasshopper.

defines it as “a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old” (Butler, 1987, p. 22). Just as racism has generated some unfortunate stereotypes of members of different racial groups, so too has ageism fostered some unfortunate myths about old people and the aging process. Moreover, like racism, ageism has roots in the early American experience.

According to the historian David Hackett Fischer (1977), colonial America was a place in which age, not youth, was exalted and venerated, honored, and obeyed. This respect for older people found expression in a variety of forms, including the iconography of Puritanism, the distribution of honored seats in the meetinghouses of Massachusetts, and the patterns of officeholding in church and state. Fashions were also designed to flatter age, and census data suggest that people attempted to enhance their status by reporting themselves as older than they actually were.

This era of *gerontophilia* was succeeded by a period of transformation (1780–1820) during which attitudes toward old age began to change. In the nineteenth century, Fischer argues, there was truly a revolution in age relations in the United States, evidenced by new expressions of contempt for the aged (such as *old fogey* and *geezer*), by the appearance of mandatory retirement policies, and by the development of a cult of youth in literature.

Fischer attributes the beginnings of this era of *gerontophobia* to two important factors. The first is demographic. Declines in both birth and death rates, along with increases in life expectancy—long-term trends beginning in the Colonial period—changed the age composition of the U.S. population. Old people increased in numbers as well as in the proportion of the population they constituted. Second, and perhaps more important for Fischer, is the radical expansion of the ideas of equality and liberty that occurred during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These ideas altered forever the conception of the world on which the old order had rested. Not only did the aged suffer the apparent misfortune of being identified with the old order, but they were also a constant reminder of what the new order hoped to avoid: dependence, disease, failure, and sin (Cole, 1983).

Ageism is a cultural phenomenon whose acceptance is long-standing and crosscuts differences in age, region, and social class. Some theories of prejudice against racial and religious minorities also seem to help explain ageist attitudes in the United States. According to Levin and Levin (1980), people who hold unfavorable attitudes toward the aged are also apt to be prejudiced against minorities, the mentally ill, and the physically disabled.

Ageism may be passed from generation to generation by means of socialization and other processes of transmission of culture. For example, Covey (1991) has analyzed the extent to which older people have historically been characterized as avaricious and miserly in Western art and literature. He reminds us of Dickens’s 1843 classic, *A Christmas Carol*, which introduces the character of Ebenezer Scrooge, who has become the contemporary archetype of the old miser. Cohen and Kruschwitz (1990) examined popular sheet music published in the

United States between 1830 and 1980 and found considerably more negative than positive sentiment about aging and old age. The 1912 song, "Old Joe Has Had His Day," reflects a sad acceptance of old age:

The marks are creeping on
My hair is turning grey
The springtime of life has faded
With the flow'rs that grow by the way
We, like roses must wither and fade
There's nothing comes to stay
The allotted time is drawing near
"Old Joe has had his day."

In a more contemporary vein, Paul Simon's song "Old Friends" presents an equally sad view of old age:

Old friends,
Sat on their park bench like bookends,
A newspaper blows through the grass
Falls on the round toes
Of the high shoes
Of the old friends . . .
Can you imagine us
Years from today
Sharing a park bench quietly?
How terribly strange to be 70,
Old friends,
Memory brushes the same years,
Silently sharing the same fears.²

How is ageism perpetuated today? One way is through so-called common-sense observations. Everyday aphorisms ("You can't teach an old dog new tricks") reflect a common sense that is negative as well as inconsistent with scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge can also reinforce negative stereotypes about old people. This was especially the case in the early post-World War II period, as the study of aging began to develop (see Chapter 2). As Steffl (1978) points out, "early research described characteristics of . . . aged congregated in poor farms, nursing homes, and state mental hospitals leading to a general picture of impaired elderly." Add to this picture the testimony of physicians and social workers, whose elderly clients were (and are) often physically and socially dependent. Finally, as Clark Tibbitts (1979) suggests, the private agencies and public program bureaucracies helped perpetuate negative stereotypes by pleading with Congress for legislation on behalf of "the impaired, deprived, dependent elderly."

² Copyright © 1968 Paul Simon. Used by permission of the Publisher.

Myths and stereotypes of the elderly may also be transmitted through the mass media. Virtually all analyses of the content of television programming show an underrepresentation of older people in comparison to their numbers in the total population, as well as a striking imbalance in the ratio of older males to females (Kubey, 1980). For example, Davis and Davis (1985) found only 10 percent of the people on television over 65 years of age to be female, whereas in reality, in the United States and virtually every other setting in the world, elderly women outnumber elderly men. Moreover, with some exceptions, the image of older people in television has been generally negative. Even network and TV news shows often portray the elderly as victims of disasters, such as Hurricane Hugo in 1989 or Hurricane Andrew in 1992, for example, or as having some serious problem (homelessness or lack of access to health care) that is the basis for a human interest story or editorial commentary (Atchley, 1991).

Public affairs and talk shows have been an island of exception in this sea of negativity. Generally, they have presented the greatest percentages of older people and the most positive image of the older person. This is reflected in high ratings of "authority" and "esteem" given to older politicians, journalists, and business executives who appear on such programs. These authoritative old people are overwhelmingly male (e.g., David Brinkley or Hugh Downs).

Television is not the only mass medium in which stereotypes about old people have been found. Researchers have examined aging in literature (e.g., Loughman, 1977; Sohngen, 1977), children's books (Peterson & Karnes, 1976; Robin, 1977), letters to "Dear Abby" (Gaitz & Scott, 1975), advertising (Francher, 1973; Smith, 1976), poetry (Sohngen & Smith, 1978), newspapers (Buchholz & Bynum, 1982), and fairytales (Chinen, 1987).

Some research does indicate a positive shift in attitudes toward older persons. Austin (1985) reports a sample of Midwestern university students more accepting of close relationships with older people than of close relationships with disabled people, including the blind, paraplegics, and the mentally retarded. Austin proposes that people have developed more positive attitudes toward old age in recent years as more older people have become visible in productive roles. This does not suggest that ageist attitudes have disappeared in U.S. society, only that, vis-à-vis other groups, older people are seen as more productive and more conforming to societal values.

Some exceptions to the generally negative television image of older people have appeared in recent years. Popular shows have included "The Golden Girls," "Murder She Wrote," "In the Heat of the Night," and "Dynasty." Elliott (1984) studied the treatment of aging in daytime soap operas and found the roles of older characters to be positive. Although older male characters were available in greater numbers than older female characters, their roles were often quite similar and included providing information and advice as both official and informal advisors. Also, during the 1980s, Hollywood put forth a number of successful films with themes related to aging (Cole, 1991). These included *Cocoon* (1985), *The Trip to Bountiful* (1985), *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), and *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991).

Each of these films also gave esteemed older actors and actresses an opportunity to display their creative talents.

Holtzman and Akiyama (1985) compared the frequency and quality of the portrayal of older characters on Japanese and U.S. television programs most often watched by children. They found that U.S. television portrayed older characters more frequently and more positively than did Japanese television. This was particularly surprising given commonly held beliefs about the importance of older persons in non-Western cultures.

Should we be concerned about the relationship between television viewing and ageism? Passuth and Cook (1985) offer a caution about exaggerating this relationship. In response to the question, "Does heavy television viewing make a consistently negative contribution to the public's knowledge and attitudes about older persons?," they answer "no." Only for adults under age 30 do Passuth and Cook report a modest relationship between heavy television viewing and low levels of knowledge about aging; for adults 30 years of age and older, they report no such relationship. From their point of view, we must examine other socializing institutions and contexts to understand how knowledge and attitudes about aging and older people are developed.

Whether television is implicated or not, some research does suggest that many young children already possess well-defined negative attitudes toward older people and the aging process (Corbin, Kagan, & Metil-Corbin, 1987). Programmatic efforts may be required, however, to overcome these negative attitudes. Aday and his colleagues (Aday, Sims, & Evans, 1991) matched fourth-graders with elderly subjects from a senior citizens center in a nine-month intergenerational project on aging. Students developed significantly more positive views toward the elderly, and these were maintained after a one-year follow-up. One student summarized what had been learned in the project as follows: "That older people are basically the same as us. They have a heart, they have feelings, and they depend on someone to help them when they need help" (p. 380).

Still, ageism can be a subtle and flexible foe. According to Robert Binstock (1983), past president of the Gerontological Society of America, new distortions of the reality of older people have appeared to provide the foundation for the emergence of the aged as scapegoat for a variety of economic and political frustrations in U.S. society. These distortions, identified by Binstock as classic examples of "tabloid thinking," include the belief that annual federal budget deficits in the United States—in the range of \$200 billion and more during the 1980s and into the 1990s—resulted from insatiable demands by older people for additional Social Security and health benefits. From this view, current generations of younger workers are taxed at a burdensome level in order to support social programs for the elderly (Villers Foundation, 1987).

According to the Budget Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives (1986), however, were it not for Medicare and Social Security, the budget deficit would have been *substantially greater* during the 1980s. The committee noted that Social Security and Medicare swung substantially out of deficit to balance during

Latin America faces an accelerated growth rate of the population reaching old age, with a corresponding decline in the proportion of children and youth. Such demographic changes pose challenges for the planning and organization of health and human services in those countries.

The SSM* Bridges International Center on Aging (SSM*BRIDGES) has designed *LinkAges* in an effort to promote intergenerational exchange and programs that engage older people in Third World countries in activities contributing to development. Planning *LinkAges* involved collaboration with the *Save the Children Foundation*, an organization committed to child survival and community development in over fifty countries. The program assumes that priority given to child survival and maternal and child health in these countries is quite compatible with programs to mobilize the elderly and provide them with opportunities to contribute to society as well as to their own well-being.

A pilot project in the Dominican Republic focuses on early childhood development and education in rural areas where early childhood education is still largely unavailable. The pilot is built on the experi-

ences and curriculum of UNICEF with two innovations: enlisting older people as an education resource and including specific activities to give children a positive view of older people and of the aging process. Retired teachers and community leaders will be employed to teach children in the 3- to 6-year-old group.

The gerontological component of the curriculum has as a core objective the development of positive attitudes and favorable concepts toward aging. This component will draw on the personal experiences of the enrolled children, their families, and their communities. Older people will be portrayed realistically as being active and capable of contributing to the well-being of their families and communities in a wide array of endeavors—agriculture, child care, health care, and the like.

The theory is that knowledge of the aging process and the development of positive attitudes toward old age can contribute to the improvement of intergenerational relationships, combat stereotypes that promote ageism, and prepare children and young and middle-aged adults for a more realistic approach to their own aging.

Source: A. Fernandez-Pereiro & M. Sanchez-Ayendez, "LinkAges: Building Bridges between Children and the Elderly," *Ageing International*, 19(2), 1992, 10–14. Used with permission of the International Federation on Ageing.

the 1980s, while the rest of the budget plunged deeply into deficit. Like many contemporary analysts, Martin Feldstein, former chairman of President Reagan's Council of Economic Advisors, has identified the major causes of the federal deficit increase since 1981 as including sustained increases in military spending and substantial federal tax decreases, *not* programs for the elderly.

The increase in the elderly population has created demand for federal, state, and local programs to benefit the elderly. It is important to remember, however, that the biggest of these programs—Social Security, Medicare, veterans' and civil service pensions—are not welfare programs. They are entitlements to which the elderly (and their employers) have contributed throughout their working years. Old people and the programs that benefit them cannot be