

Why Age Matters

The United States is an age-conscious society. One of the first things we teach children is to tell their age. I cannot count how many times I have engaged in the ritual of asking a child, "How old are you?" Up to a certain age, children value being older—as seen in the tendency to proudly declare their age in half years ("I'm eight AND A HALF"). In addition, we socialize them to look forward to specific ages such as 13, 16, 18, and 21.

From the 20s through middle age, people rarely mention their age, except at certain milestones such as every ten years. Some women never tell their age, probably because we socialize each other not to ask a woman her age, which demonstrates the sex bias in negative connotations of aging. In contrast, people over 70 often disclose their age without being asked.³ For instance, in response to the everyday query "How are you?" an older person might reply, "Well, I'm fine for an 80-year-old." The listener usually takes the bait and responds with praise or disbelief: "Really? You don't look 80," or "That's great." Have you ever experienced that?

Marking a particular age sometimes intersects with other aspects of social identity, such as religion, gender, or ethnicity. Some Latino families celebrate their daughter's fifteenth birthday with a ritual known as *quinceañera*. When they turn thirteen, some Jewish youth engage in bat mitzvah (girls) and bar mitzvah (boys) ceremonies. Many teenaged girls have "sweet sixteen" parties. These rituals illustrate the significance of age in our society.

Similar to other social identity categories, demographics about age matter. Sheer numbers paint an unprecedented age landscape that matters for all ages. The percentage of older adults in the United States has tripled since 1900; in the history of the world, two-thirds of all people who ever lived past the age of 65 are alive today.⁴ As baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) like me assume senior citizen status, more elderly persons than ever will populate the United States. We will witness an exponential increase in numbers of growth of older persons, giving new meaning to the phrase, "Seniors Rule!"

Not only are older folks in the United States greater in number, they are living much longer. In 1900, the average life expectancy was 49; in 2001, it

was 76. The age 85-and-over population has grown 31 times larger since the beginning of the twentieth century. As of November 2008, the Census Bureau recorded 96,000 people who were 100 years or older. If that trend continues, the centenarian population may reach 600,000 by 2050.⁵

As longevity has increased, so has the health and vitality of the elderly (persons 60 years of age or older).⁶ Only about 5 percent of elderly persons reside in hospitals or require nursing home care. Most older people will continue to work, due to economic concerns such as maintaining their household and caring for aging parents and/or adult children, but also because of a strong work ethic. Potential policy and program effects of the aging of 76 million baby boomers are attracting the interest of both public and private sectors. Baby boomers may affect retirement and transform what it means to be old in the U.S. Baby boomers are likely to differ from current older adults by being more willing to advocate for programs, policies, and services.⁷

Matters of age differ according to other aspects of identity such as race, gender, and sexuality. Demographers have predicted dramatic increases in the number of minority elderly, the fastest growing segment of older Americans. In the 2000 census, racial-ethnic minorities comprised 16.4 percent of persons 65 or older; by 2050, over 35 percent of persons 65 or older will be people of color.⁸ In 2006, racial minorities accounted for nearly one-half of children under 5 years of age.⁹ Consequently, by 2030, a new type of generation gap will occur as most young persons will be people of color, and most elderly persons will be white. This divide will occur in part because of relatively high immigration rates among Hispanics and Asians of child-bearing age. All of these projections have implications for policy as well as how we interact with one another.

Women account for four out of five people 100 years of age and older. Women are more likely to experience chronic illnesses and disabilities because of their longer lives. They are more likely than men to be single, live alone, and be poor in their older years.¹⁰ As I noted in the chapter on sexuality, gay baby boomers will experience different challenges than heterosexual members of this cohort. GLBTQ seniors are twice as likely to live alone, and more than four times as likely to have no children. The bottom line is the older American population of the twenty-first century will look vastly different from the profile of older Americans at the turn of the last century.

These age distinctions matter because members of social identity groups who have been privileged throughout their lives tend to continue to reap benefits as they age, just as those who have been oppressed usually continue to suffer. In 1994, a retired man received \$785.24 in social security benefits, while a retired woman received \$602.26; similar distinctions occur in race-gender breakdowns, with white men at the top of the earnings chart, and women of color at the bottom.¹¹ Currently, women are less likely to receive pensions than men. Cumulative effects of disadvantage across life include chronic health problems, suffering from results of poor nutrition, living in substandard conditions, and chronic stress. These and other developments

can affect public policies related to aging, including public health concerns as well as employment policies and retirement benefits.

Another growing concern is *ageism*, "the systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old."¹² Ageism in the workplace has become more visible as members of the bulk of the workforce grow older. (The Bureau of Labor Statistics classifies workers as "older" when they turn 55.) However, age bias tends to be much more subtle than other -isms. Some people may not even realize that they are enacting age ideology. Age discrimination may well become the major civil rights issue during the early part of the twenty-first century. Workers filed a record number of age bias claims in 2008, up 30 percent from the previous year.¹³ Following the lead of other disenfranchised groups, some older people and their allies have created advocacy groups, such as the Gray Panthers and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), "a nonprofit membership organization dedicated to addressing the needs and interests of persons 50 and older."¹⁴

As numbers of older persons increase, the pool of younger persons is shrinking due to a drop in birthrate after the baby boom. Thus, the demand for older workers has increased as numbers of new labor force entrants decrease. Generation X (persons born between 1960 and 1980) will be the primary source of labor in the United States for the next 10 years. This group represents the smallest population in history, and the smallest number of entry-level workers. Thus, it is highly likely that intergenerational interactions will occur in workplaces. Some analysts believe that this situation borders on a crisis as members of different generations tend to have varying values and ideals related to work. Conflicting needs, as well as wary attitudes toward one another, may generate opposition between groups.

Children in elementary school today have the potential of living longer than any previous generation. To help prepare them for longevity, we need more formal education programs that focus on aging. Although we often hear about population trends and the increased life span, schools and colleges rarely educate or even orient students to prepare them for a long life.¹⁵ Indeed, "most young people still reach adulthood with little preparation for their own aging. Nor do they recognize the enormous implications of population aging as the longevity revolution of the twentieth century spills over into the twenty-first."¹⁶ When they reach their seventies, they may be seen as the "young-old" if we reach predicted numbers of centenarians.

In addition to changes in demographics and their potential consequences, age matters because we all confront its effects. Unlike the other categories of social identity we are exploring, which remain relatively fixed (except for ability, which can change in the blink of an eye), age identity changes across our life span. And, we are likely to deal with age-related issues for our loved ones. Each one of us can potentially become part of an age group and benefit or suffer accordingly. Therefore, age clearly matters for everyone.