

## Chapter 6

### Aging and Ageism

#### 1. The Concept and Experience of Aging

- Define social gerontology.
- Distinguish biological aging, psychological aging, and social aging.

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#### Section Outline

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- Age and aging have four dimensions; chronological age, biological aging, psychological aging and social aging.

#### Key Takeaways

- The study of the elderly and aging helps us understand problems in a state of the life course we all hope to reach.
- Biological aging refers to the physical changes that accompany the aging process, while psychological aging refers to the psychological changes that occur.
- Social aging refers to the changes in a person's roles and relationships as the person ages.

### For Your Review

1. Think about an older person whom you know. To what extent has this person experienced psychological aging? To what extent has this person experienced social aging?
2. The text states that the perception of aging in the United States is not very positive. What do you think accounts for this?

### Key Terms

- **Gerontology** - The study of aging.
- **Chronological Age** - The number of years since we were born.
- **Biological Aging** - The physical changes that “slow us down” as we get into our middle and older years.
- **Psychological Aging** - The psychological changes, including those involving mental functioning and personality, that occur as we age.
- **Social Aging** - The changes in roles and relationships that occur as people age.

## 2. Perspectives on Aging

- State the assumptions of disengagement, activity, and conflict theories of aging.
- Critically assess these three theories.

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### Section Outline

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- Social gerontologists have tried to explain how and why the aging process in the United States and other societies occurs. Their various explanations help us understand patterns of social aging. They fall roughly into either the functionalist, social interactionist, or conflict approaches.

### Key Takeaways

- Disengagement theory assumes that all societies must find ways for older people’s authority to give way to younger people. A society thus encourages its elderly to disengage from their previous roles and to take on roles more appropriate to their physical and mental decline.
- Activity theory assumes that older people will benefit both themselves and their society if they remain active and try to continue to perform the roles

they had before they aged.

## For Your Review

1. Which theory of aging—disengagement theory, activity theory, or conflict theory—makes the most sense to you? Why?

## Key Terms

- **Disengagement theory** - The view, now largely abandoned, by some past social gerontologists that a society needs to encourage its elderly to disengage from their previous roles and to take on roles more appropriate to their declining physical and mental abilities.
- **Activity Theory** - The view by social gerontologists that older people will benefit both themselves and their society if they remain active and try to continue to perform the roles they had before they aged.
- **Conflict Theory** - The view by social gerontologists that ageism and structural obstacles pose several problems for the elderly and prevent them from realizing their potential and for achieving the best physical and mental health possible.
- **Ageism** - Negative views about and prejudice and discrimination against older people.

### 3. Life Expectancy and the Graying of Society

- Describe the differences in life expectancy around the world.
- List the potential problems associated with the growing proportion of older individuals in poor nations.
- Explain the evidence for inequality in US life expectancy.

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## Section Outline

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- Life expectancy has been increasing in the United States along with the rest of the world. It rose rapidly in the first half of the twentieth century and has increased steadily since then. From a low of 47.3 years in 1900, it rose to more than 78 years in 2010.
- In most countries, race and ethnicity combine with social class to produce longer life expectancies for the (wealthier) dominant race, which in the Western world is almost always white.

### Key Takeaways

- Life expectancy differs widely around the world and is much higher in wealthy nations than in poor nations.
- Life expectancy has also been increasing around the world, including in the United States, and the increasing number of older people in the decades ahead will pose several serious challenges.
- Inequality in life expectancy exists within a given society along gender, race/ethnicity, and social class lines.

## For Your Review

1. As our nation and the world both “gray,” what do you think is the most important problem that will stem from the increasing number of older people?
2. Write a short essay in which you discuss the problems that an elderly person you know, perhaps a grandparent, has

experienced related to being older.

## Key Terms

- **Life Expectancy** - The average age to which people can be expected to live.

### 4. Biological and Psychological Aspects of Aging

- Describe any four biological changes associated with aging.
- List any three steps that individuals can try to undertake to achieve successful aging.

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### Section Outline

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- The steps highlighted in the gerontological literature are by now almost a cliché, but regular exercise, good nutrition, and stress reduction stand at the top of most gerontologists' recommendations for continued vitality in later life. In fact, Americans live about ten years less than an average set of genes should let them live because they do not exercise enough and because they eat inadequate diets.

### Key Takeaways

- Certain biological, cognitive, and psychological changes occur as people age. These changes reinforce the negative view of the elderly, but this view nonetheless reflects stereotypes and myths about aging and the elderly.
- Regular exercise, good nutrition, stress reduction, involvement in personal networks, and religious involvement all enhance successful aging.

## For Your Review

1. Do you think the negative view of older people that is often

found in our society is an unfair stereotype, or do you think there is actually some truth to this stereotype? Explain your answer.

2. Referring back to Chapter 1's discussion of Émile Durkheim, how does research that documents the importance of personal networks for successful aging reflect Durkheim's insights?

### **5. Problems Facing Older Americans**

- Present a brief sociodemographic profile of the US elderly.
- Discuss the several problems experienced by the US elderly.
- Describe how the social attitudes of older Americans generally differ from those of younger Americans.

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### **Section Outline**

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- Slightly more than half the elderly are 65–74 years of age, and about 57 percent are female, reflecting males' shorter life spans as discussed earlier.
- It is true that many older people remain in good health and are fully able to function mentally and physically (Rowe et al., 2010). Still, the biological and psychological effects of aging do lead to greater physical and mental health problems among the elderly than in younger age groups.
- About 16,100 nursing homes exist, and 3.9 percent of Americans 65 or older live in them. About three-fourths of all nursing home residents are women.
- Earlier we noted that the elderly are less likely than younger age groups to live in poverty and that their financial status is much better than that of previous generations of older people. One reason for this is Social

Security: If Social Security did not exist, the poverty rate of the elderly would be 45 percent, or five times higher than the actual rate.

- Most older Americans do have adequate social support networks, which, as we saw earlier, are important for their well-being. However, a significant minority of elders live alone and do not see friends and relatives as often as they wish. Bereavement takes a toll, as elders who might have been married for many years suddenly find themselves living alone.
- Accurate data are hard to come by since few elders report their abuse, but estimates say that at least 10 percent of older Americans have suffered at least one form of abuse, amounting to hundreds of thousands of cases annually. However, few of these cases come to the attention of the police or other authorities.
- Several organizations have been established since the 1980s to act as interest groups in the political arena on behalf of older Americans. One of the most influential groups is the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), which is open to people 50 or older. AARP provides travel and other discounts to its members and lobbies Congress and other groups extensively on elderly issues. Its membership numbers about 40 million, or 40 percent of the over-50 population.

### **Key Takeaways**

- The US elderly experience several health problems, including arthritis, high blood pressure, heart disease, hearing loss, vision problems, diabetes,

and dementia.

- Nursing home care in the United States is very expensive and often substandard; neglect and abuse of nursing home residents is fairly common.
- Despite help from Social Security, many older Americans face problems of financial security.
- It is difficult to determine the actual extent of elder abuse, but elder abuse often has serious consequences for the health and lives of older Americans.
- During the last few decades, older Americans have been active in the political process on their own behalf and today are an important political force in the United States.

## For Your Review

1. What do you think is the worst or most serious problem facing the US elderly? Explain your answer.
2. The text suggests that the lives of the US elderly would be improved if the United States were to adopt some of the policies and practices that other nations have for their elderly. Explain why you agree or disagree with this suggestion.

## Key Terms

- **Elder Abuse** - Physical violence, mental and emotional abuse, neglect of care, and financial exploitation committed against the elderly, most often

by their relatives who are caring for them.

- **Generational Equity** - The argument by critics of political activism on behalf of older Americans that programs for the elderly threaten to take money from programs to help younger Americans either now or as they age.

## 6. Reducing Ageism and Helping Older Americans

- Understand the contradictory impulses that make it difficult to predict the future for older Americans.
- Discuss any two programs or policies that should help address some of the problems facing older Americans.

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### Section Outline

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- Large number of baby boomers will combine with increasing longevity to swell the ranks of the elderly; this process has already begun and will accelerate during the coming years. The inevitable jump in the size of the aged population may strain Social Security, Medicare, and other programs for the aged. On the other hand, the baby boomer generation will reach its old age as a much better educated and more healthy and wealthy group than any previous generation.

### Key Takeaways

- Although the number of older Americans will be increasing in the years ahead, the baby boomers who are now reaching old age will be better educated and wealthier than older Americans of past generations.
- Efforts to help older Americans would benefit from relying on the models practiced by other Western democracies.

## For Your Review

1. What do you think is the most important action the United States should take to help older Americans?
2. Does it make sense for the United States to follow the example of other democracies as it tries to help older Americans, or is the United States different enough from these nations that it does not make sense to do so? Explain your answer.