Ways of Aging

Edited by Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein

Blackwell Publishing
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Introduction
People think of growing older and being old as universal experiences. We all get older; we simply can’t avoid aging. Because these experiences seem so familiar and inevitable, we tend to regard aging as something that we all share in common. We’re inclined to figure that “old age” is pretty much the same for everyone – except, of course, for the particular details of individual lives and relationships.

*Ways of Aging* takes a different perspective. While it appreciates those things we share in common, the book highlights the ways in which we might age differently. Diversity is the watchword. Stressing the variety of contemporary aging experiences, *Ways of Aging* considers the distinct and assorted identities that people develop as they grow older under different circumstances. The various social, cultural, and material contexts of everyday life provide the bases for these considerations.

The theme of *Ways of Aging* is that the category “old” and stereotypes of old age belie the varied ways people experience the later years. This contradicts the prevailing view that “old age” is a distinct stage of life, with common characteristics that contrast with those of earlier life stages. Stereotypes of aging make it seem that growing old is a uniform occurrence – a singular way of life. Instead, as the chapters of this book richly illustrate, the experience and meaning of being old are amazingly varied and multifaceted.
Categories and Stereotypes

People categorize things in order to make sense of them. We use categorical labels to help us distinguish between different objects and experiences. As useful as they are, however, categories have a way of making things within them seem more alike than they actually are. Because categories often come in pairs – such as child and adult, men and women, or dependent and independent – differences between categories overshadow differences within them. This is in the nature of categorization; it doesn’t necessarily depend on what the categories are about. Regardless of whether the pairs are, say, Republicans and Democrats, or rock 'n' roll and jazz, paired categories tend to divide their respective members into homogeneous collections of polar opposites. We accentuate the common ground among Republicans, for example, while simultaneously emphasizing how different they are from Democrats. Categories underscore similarity and subtle variation can get lost in the shuffle.

Consider how this can happen with the categories of child and adult. People use the term “child” to cover a wide age-range. Understandably, it’s applied to youngsters from the earliest years. But it’s also used to categorize persons in their 20s – even their 30s – when they aren’t gainfully employed, are still in school, or are otherwise dependent on their parents for support. Applying the category across the board conveys common characteristics, even though toddlers are clearly distinct from 20- and 30-year-olds. Regardless of age differences, persons called “children” are taken to share characteristics that, for the most part, don’t apply to persons we categorize as adults. By the same token, “adult” is a category whose characteristics we take to be the opposite of children. Characteristics of “children” are uncharacteristic of adults. To be an adult – the opposite of a child – one should be gainfully employed, finished with school, and no longer materially dependent upon one’s parents, for example.

Of course, in actual practice, there are many exceptions. Young people often hold paying jobs; teenagers are sometimes able to support themselves. In contrast, some young people “never grow up” and continue, well into their 20s and 30s, to “live at home” with their parents. Yet, notice the effect of categorization when we refer to the former as being “just like adults” or the latter as “childish.” Despite the way they contradict empirical fact, categories can sustain exceptions to what they otherwise mean. As counterfactual as categories may be, they nonetheless provide contrasts for understanding the varied, even nonconforming, characteristics of the world we live in.

Stereotypes operate in a similar fashion, except that they exaggerate differences even more. Stereotypes are sets of categories that take differences between categories to extremes. At the same time, they accentuate
Beyond Stereotypes

similarities within categories. For example, to label individuals as men and women is one thing, but to then go on to describe the “typical” male or the “typical” female is stereotypic because it greatly exaggerates differences and overstates similarities. The exaggeration can be so extreme that exceptions to the rule seem impossible. Through stereotypes, every man, in effect, becomes a typical male, and every woman becomes a typical female. The outcome is all black-and-white, with no variations, no shades of gray.

Stereotypes of Aging

Just as men and women are opposing categories with contrasting characteristics, old age and aging have their associated categorical distinctions. Old age, of course, is commonly distinguished from other life stages such as childhood and middle adulthood. We differentiate the process of aging from what we call “development” in childhood. “Growing up” is center stage in early life. Maturation, or “coming of age” and “coming into one’s own” are characteristic developmental achievements a bit later in life. Against this background, old age takes on its opposite characteristics. By sheer categorical contrast, old age is a time when growing up and coming of age are over. Things that might be considered developmental achievements are overshadowed by their opposites – growing and being elderly. The emphasis shifts from growth and accomplishment to hanging on to life satisfaction and taking stock of life gone by. If the younger years center on getting ahead and carving out a place for oneself in the world, old age is categorized as a time of contemplation and resignation. The categorical characteristics of old age are construed in opposition to the categorical characteristics of earlier life stages. Older people are decidedly different from children and younger adults – by categorical definition. Our notions of the life course are suffused with such polarities. They are stereotypes of the aging process – empirical exceptions notwithstanding.

As a stereotype, the category “old” takes these differences to extremes. It’s as if the aging process unfolds uniformly, without exceptions. The stereotype of “old age” signals any and all characteristics that aren’t typical of younger persons. Older persons come to be seen in familiar stereotypic terms – physically declining, psychologically frail, and socially retiring. In contrast to younger persons, who are healthy, old people are sick. If the young have their wits about them, the old are demented, or senile. The list is nearly endless, with stereotypes of old and young starkly contrasting with each other. Getting up in years makes one distinctively old, in diametric opposition to the stereotypic youthful scheme of things. This produces a persistently negative portrait of aging – as a matter of becoming sick,
impoverished, cognitively impaired, and, perhaps most salient, socially dysfunctional and disengaged.

An Uphill Battle

It’s hard to defy the representational force of categories. They are like eyeglasses and contact lenses. They literally affect how the world appears to us. Put on proverbial “rose-colored glasses” (or contact lenses, if you prefer) and the world comes into view as warm and cheery. Insert gray-colored and uncorrected lenses, and the world is somber and blurry. Stereotypes make matters worse. In one sense they are like lenses we can’t remove. We’re stuck with them, yet often we don’t know that we are. Because we haven’t seen the world from any other perspective, we take for granted that the world appears to be exactly as we see it. In another sense, stereotypes are like funhouse mirrors, exaggerating everything about us, distorting things to the extreme. But, like unremovable lenses, if we haven’t seen things in any other way, the distortion appears “only natural.”

Altering stereotypes is an uphill battle. It’s difficult to convince those who hold them to view things differently. It’s hard to introduce a more nuanced perspective. Such a view at the very least would entertain exceptions to what stereotypic categories crudely represent. Yet stereotypes persist, captioning experience in overly broad and excessive terms. The resulting representational dilemma regarding categories is a version of the old cliché, “You can’t live with them, you can’t live without them.” We can’t do away with categories; they are the way we come to understand the manifold features of our lives and experiences. This-or-that detail is an instance of such-and-such a category of things or actions. It’s how we construct meaning. Without categories, we wouldn’t know what a particular detail meant to us, where it fit in a scheme of things.

What can we do to make ourselves and others aware of the effects of categories and stereotypes on the way we view the world and its members? In particular, how can we refigure the categories of aging and old age with richer understanding? As a first step, we need to understand how categories and stereotypes take things to extremes. This is not to suggest that we can do away with categorization. As we noted earlier, that’s simply impossible. Instead, we must vigilantly monitor how categorization influences our views of experience, ourselves, and each other. Following this, we need to entertain new, more nuanced categories that allow us to understand and appreciate objects and experiences differently, more in keeping with the complexities of everyday life. This moves us beyond stereotypes, limiting categorization’s homogenizing tendencies.
Considerating Context

Refiguring stereotypes of old age is a point of departure of *Ways of Aging*. While we often categorize older people as sick, dependent, and otherwise resigned to their circumstances, it’s not the only interpretive possibility. The authors of the book’s various chapters present some fascinating alternatives. Rather than using shop-worn categories to convey what old age is like, the authors open our eyes to varied ways of experiencing aging. The ways of aging they describe incorporate positive sentiments and achievements directly into the characteristics of later life, rather than viewing them as atypical of older people. This casts the later years with much more diversity.

None of the chapters suggests that old age is a bed of roses. But, taken together, they send the strong message that later life is a configuration of experiences that transcends stereotypes. The chapters suggest that we use more contextually sensitive terms of reference as we consider aging and the lives of older people. The authors of these chapters change our interpretive lenses, so to speak, to present alternative perspectives on how aging and old age are constructed. They expand the range of possibilities for appreciating how it feels to grow older. They open our eyes to the variety of things that can matter most and matter least in the context of the aging experience.

The authors do this by considering the aging experience contextually. They give more weight to variable characteristics than to the crude categories that ostensibly organize them. Rather than ask what the later years are like categorically, they present the particulars of later life in relation to contexts such as historical circumstances, cultural backgrounds, and biographical experiences. In the context of history, for example, old age is not simply a conglomeration of common experiences and characteristics that contrast with those of the younger years. Rather, old age takes on particular meanings in relation to the specific historical era in which one came of age or became old. The categories of age – both old and young – come alive as times of life that have characteristics that reflect historical understandings in this instance. They are not simple polar opposites.

Cultural background and biographical experiences are contexts that operate similarly. Race and ethnicity, for example, don’t necessarily organize the characteristics of age in the way the polar categories might. In some cultural contexts, for instance, aging is viewed as the final accomplishment of life rather than as a time following one’s peak achievements. In others, the triumphs of later life might be characteristically balanced against late-life failures, producing complex configurations of meaning that don’t simply contrast with those of the early years. Biographical context adds elements of lifelong experience, instructing us that the later
years can only be understood in relation to times of life that came before. Experience isn’t left behind when we check into the later years. Instead, it’s continually taken up and transformed as the issues of later life come into play.

Persistence, Adaptation, and Change

*Ways of Aging* is divided into three parts, each of which takes up questions of how context affects the relationship between personal experience and the social world. The chapters of Part I focus on the persistence of lifelong meanings and claims to personhood into the later years. The leading concern of these chapters centers on how circumstances of later life relate to configurations of meaning drawn from earlier periods of life. The chapters make it clear that biography influences later life in manifold ways. The category of old hardly does justice to the many ways that the meanings of the later years resonate with experiences earlier in life. The chapters convey the impression that old age is not a distinct developmental stage but instead is a time of diverse meanings tied to persistent, if malleable, features of biography.

In “Narratives of Forgiveness in Old Age,” Helen Black discusses the seemingly unshakable belief that old age is stage of life when people right old wrongs and forgive old grievances. Black presents a more complicated picture of a period of life that may still be riven with perceived and remembered injustices and mixed emotions that can’t easily be put aside. The following chapter, “Elderhood in Contemporary Lakota Society” by Joan Weibel-Orlando, places personal identity squarely into cultural context. Weibel-Orlando’s portrait of a momentous ceremonial event in Charlotte Standing Buffalo Ortiz’s later years poignantly illustrates how Charlotte achieves the meaning of her old age. Charlotte combines elements of Lakota culture and a life of meaningful sacrifice to her community to construct a Lakota way of aging. The next chapter, “Claiming Identity in a Nursing Home” by Debora Paterniti, offers virtual outbursts of personhood in the context of a familiar institution. While residents suffer from aches, pains, illness, and disability, they also lay claims to identities that reflect preferred biographies. In portraying who they once were and now are, residents fend off unwanted institutional categories and definitions.

Part II moves the focus from persistence to issues of adaptation. Here, the personal and social sides of life are presented as adjustments to one another. These chapters highlight the many ways that older people adapt to their circumstances. The chapters challenge the view that older people are the helpless puppets of situations, a perspective that stereotypically contrasts the stagnation of old age with the activeness of earlier stages of life. So often, public perception homogenizes older people into groups of sick or
worn-out individuals gathered together into senior housing or retirement communities, or existing at the margins of family life. The leading theme in this view is that old people passively give in to the problems and isolation of the later years. While there’s a grain of truth in this—as there is in most perspectives—it’s far from the whole picture. Yes, there’s a significant number of older persons residing in what are called “geriatric ghettos,” but their lives aren’t necessarily dominated by passive resignation. As the chapters of Part II illustrate, older people actively construct their ways of life.

Tanya Koropeckyj-Cox’s chapter, “Three Childless Men’s Pathways into Old Age,” shows how childless men build meaningful lives in old age in the absence of an intergenerational legacy. The lifestyles of these men come alive, but not in terms of domestic deficits or psychological disadvantage. Instead, the men forge complex ways of organizing later life as husbands who are not fathers. In “Constructing Community from Troubles,” Christopher Faircloth takes us to a senior public housing complex, which, for all intents and purposes, appears to house the languishing poor. A closer look reveals a vibrant community, whose “troubles talk” produces a distinct way of aging centered on interpersonal complaints. Despite the troubles theme, the community and its way of life are remarkably alive and supple. The last chapter in this section, “Family Lives of Aging Black Americans” by Colleen Johnson and Barbara Barer, presents a surprisingly broad range of domestic arrangements for elderly African Americans. The adaptive strategies of these elderly persons show that they play both stereotypically passive and uncharacteristically active roles in the context of their domestic lives. Their lifestyles defy the stereotypic, one-dimensional view of their place in the black family.

Part III focuses on change. In contrast to Part I, which highlighted the persistence of personhood into old age, the chapters of Part III show us various ways in which change affects how older people manage their identities. Each chapter places us in the context of a particular kind of change, illustrating how, in the later years, change can alter and diversify understandings of who individuals figured they were all their lives.

Sarah Matthews’s chapter, “Aging and Change in a Religious Community,” poignantly describes how, in old age, a group of nuns confronts the issue of who they are as religious women. While this is something that we would expect to be resolved much earlier in life, social change makes it the center of the aging nuns’ lives. Changes in the Catholic Church, which decloistered these women, confront the nuns with altered identities, seriously questioning the persistence of earlier understandings of who and what they are. Dana Rosenfeld’s chapter, “Identity Careers of Older Gay Men and Lesbians,” also considers social change and personal identity. In this case, Rosenfeld focuses on how a changing climate of acceptance of sexual nonconformity affected the identities of aging gay men and lesbians.
Here again, we find that identity can emerge as a significant issue of the later years, altering what it means to come of age and grow old in the context of one’s sexuality. Finally, in “Expectations and the Experience of Widowhood,” Deborah Kestin van den Hoonaaard discusses how widowhood comes to be experienced and understood in light of widows’ expectations of significant social relationships. The author shows that expectations, as much as actual social interactions, figure into how older women view themselves in their new roles as widows.

The book concludes with an epilogue by Mary and Kenneth Gergen entitled “Positive Aging.” It’s a fitting final reminder that, despite their advanced years, older people can, and do, continue to construct their lives in affirmative ways. The Gergens provide an optimistic turn to the story of aging that is too often told in terms of pessimistic categories. “Living well,” to paraphrase the Gergens, is the best corrective for pernicious stereotypes. Of course, very real material constraints on everyday life pose ubiquitous and enduring challenges to “living well.” Still, as the book’s theme suggests, we need to find new and varied ways of meeting these challenges for positive aging to become an attainable goal for everyone.

Taken together, the contributions to Ways of Aging offer a compelling lesson in diversity. Their combined portraits and vivid descriptions urge us to go beyond stereotypes of aging. They invite us to look around traditionally narrow depictions of what it means to be old, views which portray older people as if they were all the same. From this perspective, the aging experience is varied, complex, and heartening, far more promising than stereotypes would lead us to believe.
Part I

Persistence
Chapter 1

Narratives of Forgiveness in Old Age

Helen K. Black

A common assumption about the aging experience is that forgiveness of self or others should or must occur toward the end of life. The end of life is the last opportunity to put negative experiences to rest. Forgiveness is a special challenge to the aged because they are viewed as engaged in life review (Butler and Lewis 1982), which presses elders to supply endings for incomplete or problematic chapters in their lives (Koenig 1994). Notions such as finitude (the sense that human life is limited) and the developmental tasks of aging (attaining ego integrity; demonstrating generativity) have been associated with acts of forgiveness in elders. Perceived nearness to death is considered to invite elders to clean the slate on their own or others’ misdeeds in order to achieve peace of mind.

Research, however, shows no evidence that older age in itself demands forgiveness of self or others in order to achieve a sense of equanimity, or even that equanimity is a desired state for elders (Black 2001). Rather, an elder’s need to resolve wrongs is mediated by his or her personal past, a cohort history, and the cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious traditions to which the elder adheres (Snowden 2001). Most importantly, the concrete incident or event that raises the issue of forgiveness is central to whether an elder forgives or withholds forgiveness (Calhoun 1992).

The immediate circumstances in which a person finds herself in the later years – such as being impoverished, in good or poor health, being alone or being part of a network of supportive others – also influence the choices she