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# Ageing

## Opening Question

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Which of the following is true about older adults (persons age 65+) in the United States today?

- A. Physical illness and senility are inevitable aspects of aging.
- B. Older adults are economically well off because benefits such as Social Security and Medicare provide a stable income and free health insurance.
- C. The most common residence for older adults is nursing homes.
- D. Older adults are a highly heterogeneous group, with their health and well-being varying widely by age, race, gender, and social class.

## Learning Objectives (1 of 2)

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- Learn some basic facts about the increase in the proportion of population that is age 65 and older. Recognize that aging is a combination of biological, psychological, and social processes. Understand how technological advances affect each of the three aging processes.
- Understand key theories of aging, particularly those that focus on how society shapes the social roles of older adults and that emphasize aspects of age stratification.

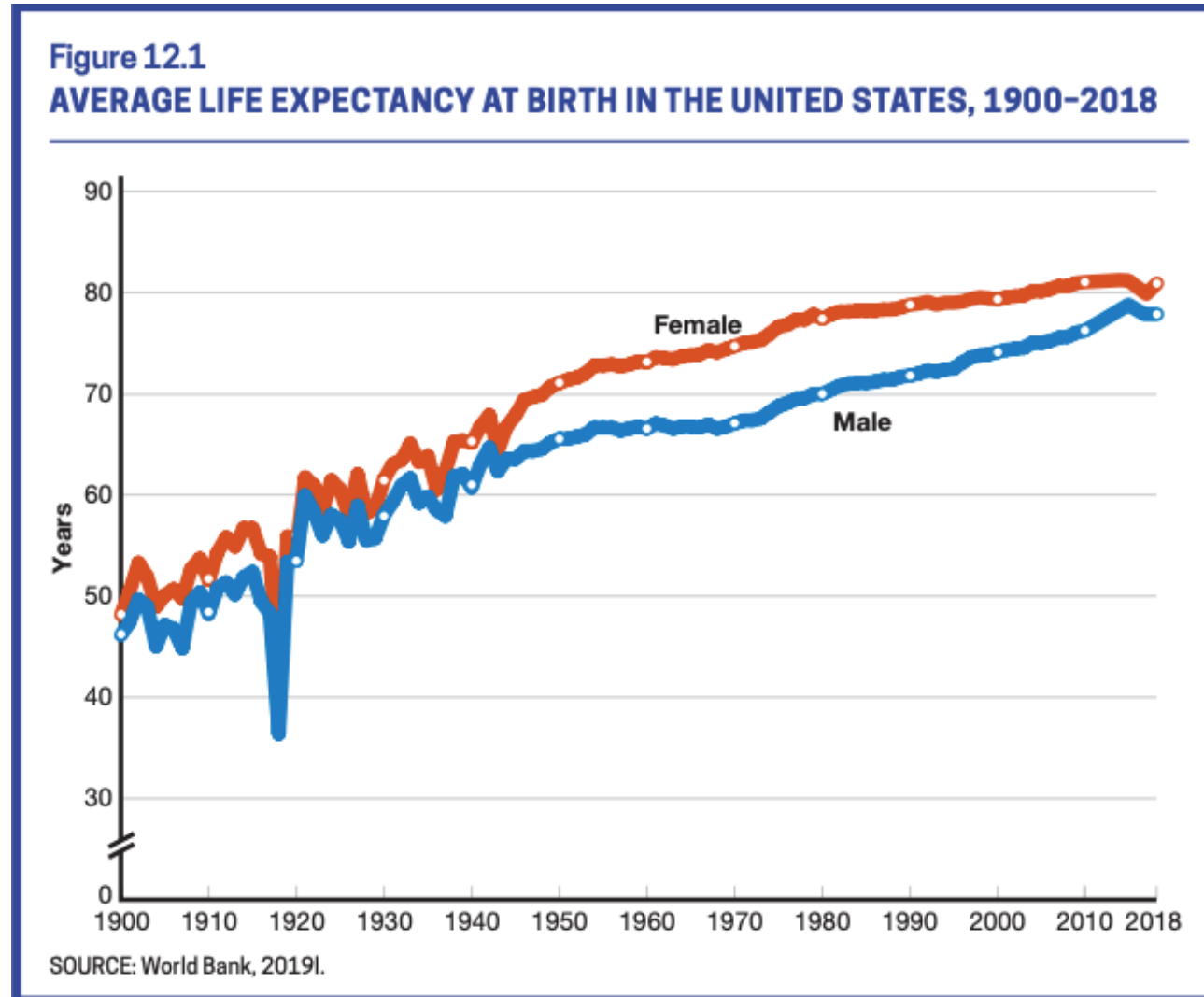
## **12.1 Basic Concepts**

# The Graying of Society

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- **Graying:** A term used to indicate that an increasing proportion of a society's population is older.
- **Older adults:** Adults ages 65 and older.
- Graying is the result of two long-term trends in industrial societies: the tendency of families to have fewer children and the fact that people are living longer.

# Average Life Expectancy at Birth in the United States, 1900–2018



# Aging in the United States

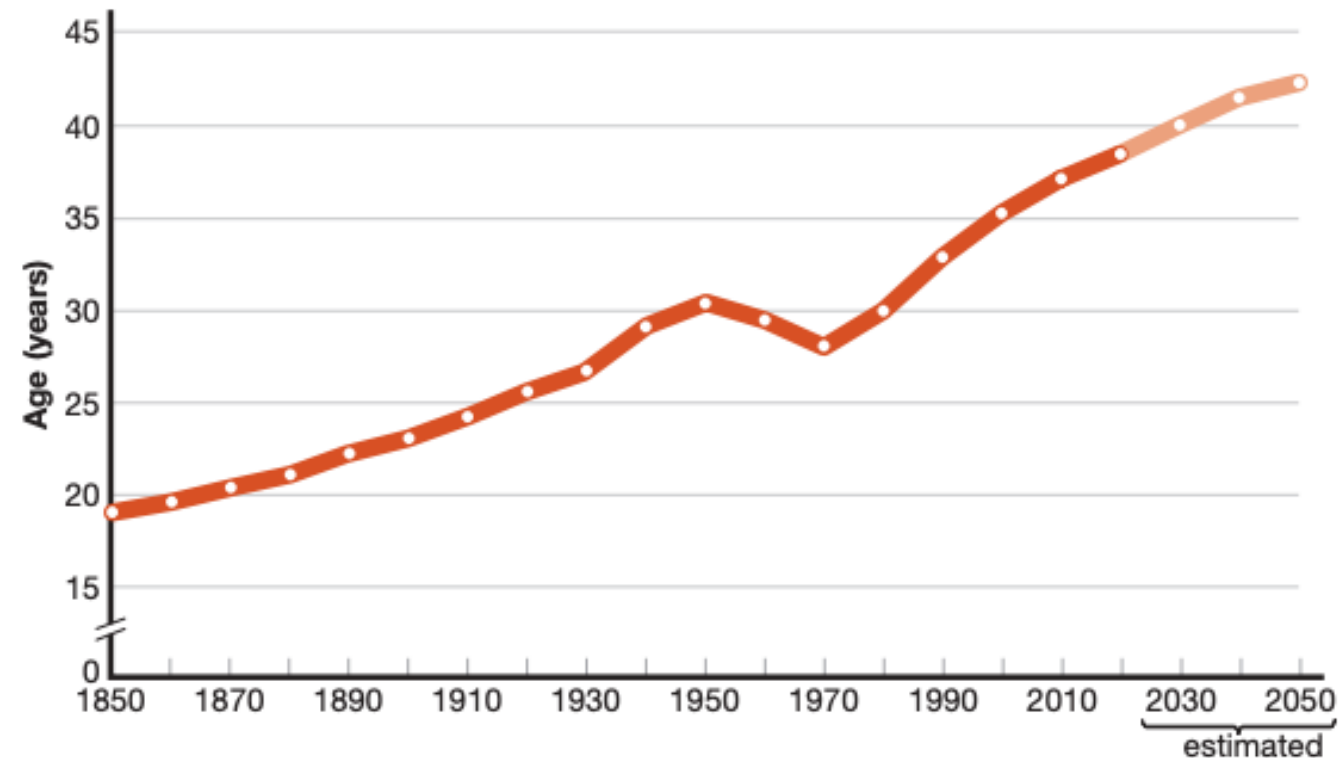
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- Modern agriculture, sanitation systems, epidemic control, improved nutrition, and medicine have all contributed to a decline in mortality and an increase in life expectancy throughout the world.
- In most societies today, fewer children die in infancy and more adults survive until their seventies, eighties, and even older.
- The U.S. population, like that of other industrial societies, is aging even faster than that of less industrialized nations.

# Median Age of the U.S. Population, 1850–2050

Figure 12.2

## MEDIAN AGE OF THE U.S. POPULATION, 1850–2050



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2014p, 2019g.



# How Do People Age?

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- **Social gerontology:** The study of aging and older adults.
- **Aging:** The combination of biological, psychological, and social processes that affect people as they grow older.
  - Biological: The physical body.
  - Psychological: The mind, including one's mental, emotional, and cognitive capabilities.
  - Social: Cultural norms, values, and role expectations related to age.

# Biological Aging

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- The exact chronological age at which the biological effects of aging occur vary greatly depending on one's genes, lifestyle, and luck.
- Senescence is inevitable, but today's older adults now have unprecedented access to many assistive technologies that enable them to live full and active lives.



# Psychological Aging

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- For most people, memory and learning ability do not decline significantly until very late in life, although the speed with which one recalls or analyzes information may slow somewhat.
- **Alzheimer's disease:** A degenerative disease of the brain resulting in progressive loss of mental capacity.
  - It is relatively rare in noninstitutionalized persons under 75, although it afflicts about one-third of all people over 85.

# Social Aging

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- **Social aging:** The norms, values, and roles that are culturally associated with a particular chronological age.
- Historically, social roles in the United States have been closely tied to one's age, but this relationship has become more tenuous over time.
- Having children later in life, “nontraditional age” students, delayed retirement, early retirement, and medical technology are some factors that have disrupted the historical relationships between age and social roles.

## **12.2 Growing Old: Theories of Aging**

# The First Generation of Theories: Functionalism

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- Functionalist theories emphasized how individuals adjusted to changing social roles as they aged and how the roles older adults fulfilled were useful to society.
- Talcott Parsons, one of the most influential functionalist theorists of the 1950s, argued that U.S. society needs to find roles for older persons that are compatible with their advanced age.

# Disengagement Theory

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- **Disengagement theory:** A functionalist theory of aging that holds that it is functional for society to remove people from their traditional roles when they become older adults, thereby freeing up those roles for others.
- Disengagement is assumed to be functional for older adults, who can leave potentially taxing social roles and instead invest their energies in more private introspective activities.
- **Socioemotional selectivity theory:** The theory that adults maintain fewer relationships as they age, but that those relationships are of higher quality.

# Activity Theory

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- **Activity theory:** A functionalist theory of aging that holds that busy, engaged people are more likely to lead fulfilling and productive lives.
- **Continuity theory:** The theory that older adults' well-being is enhanced when their activities are consistent with their personality, preferences, and activities earlier in life.





## The Second Generation of Theories: Social Conflict

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- **Conflict theories of aging:** Arguments that emphasize the ways in which the larger social structure helps to shape the opportunities available to older adults. Unequal opportunities are seen as creating the potential for conflict.
- According to this view, many of the problems of aging—such as poverty, poor health, or inadequate health care—are systematically produced by the routine operation of social institutions.

# The Third Generation of Theories: Life Course

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- **Life course:** The various transitions and stages people experience during their lives.
- According to the life course perspective, the aging process is shaped by historical time and place.
- The most important theme of the life course perspective is that aging is a lifelong process.

