

English Native: Getting Down

This longer life span is one result of the Industrial Revolution, greater material wealth and advances in medicine have raised living standards so that people benefit from better housing and nutrition. In addition, medical advances have almost eliminated infectious diseases—such as smallpox, diphtheria, and measles—that killed many infants and children a century ago. Other medical advances help us prevent or treat cancer and heart disease, which claim most of the U.S. population, but now later in life.

As life becomes longer, the oldest segment of the U.S. population—people over eighty-five—is increasing rapidly and is already about ten times greater than in 1900. These men and women now numbers will grow to almost 21 million (about 5 percent of the total population) by the year 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

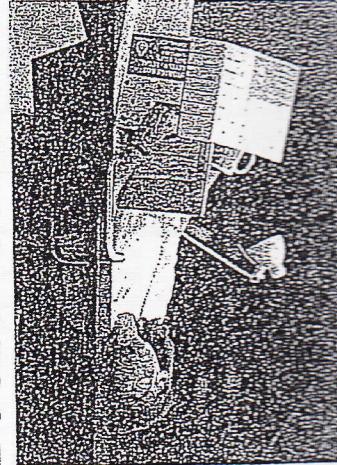
This major increase in the elderly population will change our society in many ways. As the number of older people retiring from the labor force goes up, the proportion of nonworking adults—based on ten times greater than in 1900—will demand ever more health care and other resources. The ratio of working-age adults to nonworking elderly people, called the old-age dependency ratio, will fall from the current level of five to one to about three to one by the year 2050. With fewer and fewer workers to support tomorrow's welfare system the elderly population, what society can today expect to take a toll on page 392 looks at a country where the aging of the population is taking place faster than in the United States; Japan.

The Expectancy: Getting Up

Finally, as more and more women work outside the home, they choose to have fewer children. This trend reflects both the rising standard of living and the availability of birth control technology over the past century.

For Lynn Stock, it had been a bad week. On Monday, she was notified by her employer, the electronics retailer Best Buy, that she was being laid off. Stock had until the end of the week to clean out her office and be out the door. It was now Friday, and on her final day at work she was to sit down what the company called an "outpatient session," an hour's coaching for the people being let go on how to improve their chances of finding another job.

When Stock walked into the room, she was stunned. There were about thirty people in the session, and three-fourths of them were older workers. Stock, who is fifty-one, began talking with others who had been fired. The average age of employees at the company was thirty-five; but 68 percent of those fired were forty or older. This did not seem right, so she and forty-three other workers decided to sue Best Buy for age discrimination. Officials at Best Buy denied the charge and said that the company will defend itself when the case comes to court (Aldster,



The Grayling of the United States

Law suits such as this one illustrate an important truth in U.S. society: Social stratification is not just about class, gender, and race; it is also about age. This chapter explains that older people face a number of disadvantages, including lower income, prejudice, and discrimination. In the workplace, these facts are becoming more important all the time because the number of older people in the U.S. population is greater than ever and rising rapidly.

The birth rate has been falling for more than a century. This is due but powerful revolution is reshaping the United States. As shown in Figure 15-1, in 1900, the United States was a young nation, with half the population under age twenty-three; just 4 percent had reached sixty-five. But the number of elderly people—women and men aged sixty-five or older—increased tenfold during the last century. By 2003, the number of seniors exceeded 36 million. Seniors make up almost half the country's population. By 2030, the number of seniors will double again to 71 million, and almost half the country's people will be over forty (Himes, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

In nearly all high-income nations, the share of elderly people is increasing rapidly. There are two reasons for this increase: low birth rates (people are living longer). In the United States, the ranks of the elderly will swell even more rapidly as the first of the baby boomers—some 75 million strong—reach age sixty-five in 2011. As recent political debate shows, there are serious questions about the ability of the current Social Security system to meet the needs of so many older people.

Birth Rate: Going Down

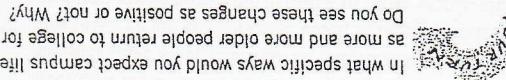
In the U.S., birth rate has been declining for more than a century. This is the usual trend as societies industrialize. Why? Because in industrial societies, children are more likely to survive into adulthood, and so couples have fewer children. In addition, although to farming families add to their family's financial income but instead are a major expense.

In the United States, the ranks of the elderly will swell even more rapidly as the first of the baby boomers—some 75 million strong—reach age sixty-five in 2011. As recent political debate shows, there are serious questions about the ability of the current Social Security system to meet the needs of so many older people. People are living longer.

In nearly all high-income nations, the share of elderly people is increasing rapidly. There are two reasons for this increase: low birth rates (people are having fewer children) and increasing longevity.

A quiet but powerful revolution is reshaping the United States. As shown in Figure 1-1, in 1900, the United States was a young nation, with half the population under age twenty-three; just 4 percent had reached sixty-five. But the number of elderly people—women and men aged sixty-five or older—increased tenfold during the last century. By 2005, the number of seniors exceeded 36 million. Seniors outnumbered teenagers, and they account for 12.4 percent of the total population. By 2030, the number of seniors will double again to 71 million, and almost half the country's people will be over forty (Himes, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

Do you see these changes as positive or not? Why?



In what specific ways would you expect campus life to change

as more and more older people return to college for retraining? Is there long? Elders in the United States are women and men of all classes, races, and ethnic backgrounds.

"Elderly" is a category open to everyone; if we are lucky enough to ways of life, keep in mind that seniors are socially diverse. Being When thinking about how an aging population will change our in National Map 15-1 on page 393.

section, from North Dakota and Minnesota down to Texas, as shown greater share of the population in some regions, especially in the mid-dead on where in the country you live. The elderly represent a far Of course, the extent of contact with older people depends a great "career" programs that attract older people (Wilson, 2006).

As the average age of the population rises and the share over age sixty-five climbs ever higher, cultural patterns are likely to change. Through median age of the U.S. population rises and the share over age sixty-five.

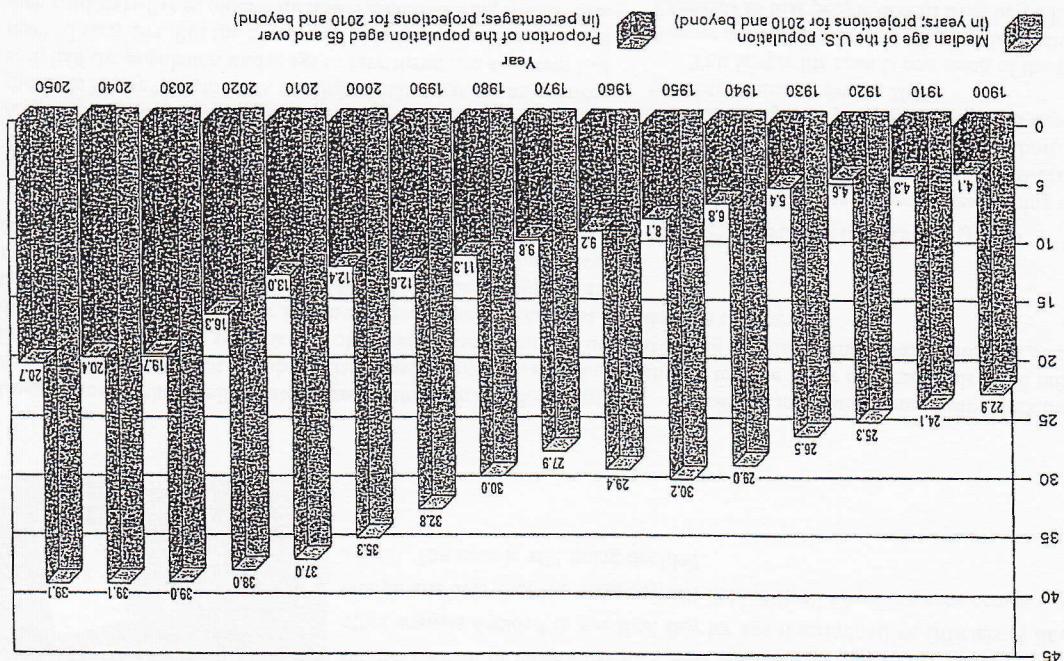
multidisciplinary colleges, which offer extensive programs that prepare people are deciding to put off retirement and train for new careers. Coming boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964) enter old age, many and seniors are becoming familiar with on campuses. As baby boomers are also opening their doors to more older people, colleges are also access for older shoppers, sports fans, and students to change in homes, stores, and studios, and college classrooms—likeley including malls, and its sporting events. In addition, the design of buildings younger people will see more seniors on the highways, at shopping malls, so most people learned little about old age. But as this country's elderly population steadily increases, age segregation will decline. much of the twentieth century, the young rarely mixed with the old, so most people learn little about old age. But as this country's elderly population steadily increases, age segregation will decline. younger people will see more seniors on the highways, at shopping malls, and its sporting events. In addition, the design of buildings including homes, stores, and studios, and college classrooms—likeley including malls, and its sporting events. In addition, the design of buildings

An Aging Society: Cultural Change

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2006).

The proportion of the U.S. population has now passed thirty-five years and will continue to rise.

FIGURE 15-1 The Graying of U.S. Society



This chapter explores the process of growing old and explains why aging is a dimension of social stratification. The importance of understanding aging is increasing along with the elderly share of our population.

Chapter Overview

Aging consists of gradual, ongoing changes in the body. But how we experience life's transitions—whether we welcome our maturity or complain about physical decline—depends largely on how our culture takes a positive view of the various stages of life. In general, U.S. culture tends to emphasize the later stages of life, while other cultures emphasize the earlier stages. This through childhood and adolescence, people look forward to expand their opportunities and responsibilities.

Biological Changes

investigate not only how people change as they grow old but also the different ways in which societies around the world define old age.

An analysis of the elderly, roughly equal in size (Himes, 2001), The younger elderly are between sixty-five and seventy-five and typically live independently with good health and financial security; they are likely to be living as couples. The older and more problems and to be dependent on others. Because of their greater longevity, women outnumber men in the elderly population, and many problems and are more likely to have health issues over age eighty-five, 69 percent are women.

Growing Old: Biology and Culture

The "Old Old" and "Young Old" cohorts of the elderly are both significantly larger than the "Old" cohort. The "Old Old" cohort is projected to grow from 14.5 million in 2001 to 20.5 million by 2050, while the "Young Old" cohort is projected to grow from 11.5 million in 2001 to 18.5 million by 2050. The "Old" cohort is projected to grow from 10.5 million in 2001 to 14.5 million by 2050.

The "Young Old" and the "Old Old"

¹Source: Based on Porter (2004) and Population Reference Bureau (2006).

- **WHAT DO YOU THINK?**
- Is it not unique? Other nations, including Japan's, have populations almost as large as Spain, but they will race each other to the finish line.
- In the United States there are more problems. The United States is the "youngest" of the high-income countries. But what happens elsewhere will depend, too, for it is just a matter of time.
- Living longer is generally thought to be a good thing. What are some of the problems that come with an aging population?
- When a nation's average age passes fifty, what changes to popular culture might you expect?
- How might immigration be a strategy to raise the old-age dependency ratio?

Can Too Many Be Too Old? A Report from Japan
Thinking Globally

chappter were, first, how fast the elderly population is increasing and, second, how ageing is actually a part of social inequality.”

A detailed black and white illustration of a horse's head, facing slightly to the left. The drawing uses fine lines and cross-hatching to create a textured, realistic appearance.

Chapter were, first, how fast the elderly population is increasing and, second, how quickly it is least into the elderly.

Aging and Culture



November 1st, Kandy, Sri Lanka. Our little van
trudges up the steep mountain incline. Breaks in
the lush vegetation offer spectacular views that
interrupt our convolution about growing old.

We all wonder if we will think or feel differently as we get older. Gerontologists report that for better or worse, the answer is usually Batailles & Schaele, 1974; Metz & Miner, 1998). The most common personality changes with advancing age are becoming less materialistic, more meliorist in attitudes, and more thoughtful. Generally, two elderly people who were childhood friends would recognize in each other the same personality traits that youngsters as teenagers (Neugarten, 1977; Wolfe, 1994).

If we measure skills like sensorimotor coordination—the ability to arrange objects to match a drawing—we do find a steady decline after middle. The ability to learn new material and to think quickly also declines, although not until around age seven. But the ability to apply familiar ideas holds steady through age nine, and the capacity for thoughtful reflection and spiritual growth actually increases by age ten.

just as we tend to overstate the physical problems of old age, we some-times exaggerate the psychological changes that accompany growing-old. The common view about life little emerges over the life course can be

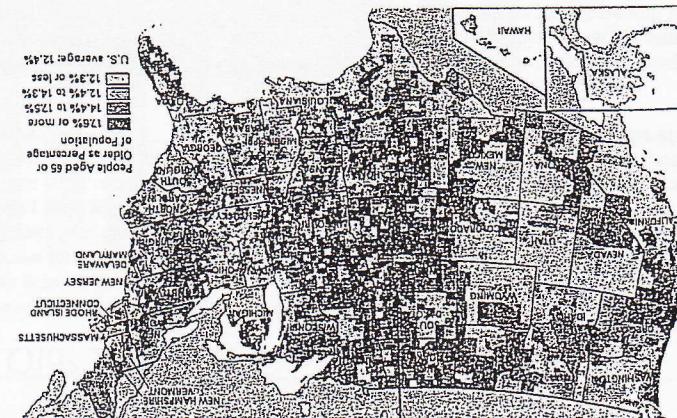
Syndromes

ssesses their health in positive terms, compared to 76 percent of elderly white people (Ferguson, 1997; Federal Interagency Forum, 2006).

Of course, some elders have better health than others. Health problems are more common over age seventy-five. In addition, because women typically live longer than men, they suffer more from chronic disabilities like arthritis. Well-to-do people also fare better because they live and work in safer and more healthful environments and can afford better medical care. Almost 80 percent of elderly people with incomes over \$35,000 assess their own health as "excellent," but that figure drops below half for people with incomes under \$20,000. Lower income and stress linked to geographic and ethnic isolation also explain why 60 percent of older African Americans

Growing old brings on predictable changes: gray hair, wrinkles, age spots, and weight loss, and declining strength and vitality. After a lifetime, bones become more brittle, so injuries take longer to heal, and the odds of developing chronic illnesses (such as arthritis and diabetes) and life-threatening conditions (like heart disease and cancer) rise. The senses—taste, sight, touch, smell, and especially hearing—become less sharp with age (Treas, 1995; Metz & Ahme, 1998).

Through health becomes more fragile with advancing age, most older people are not disabled by their physical condition. Only about one in ten seniors reports trouble walking, and fewer than one in twenty needs intensive care in a hospital or nursing home. No more than 1 percent of the elderly are bedridden. Overall, only 30 percent of people over age seventy-five characterize their health as "fair" or "poor"; 70 percent consider their overall condition "good" or "excellent." In fact, the share of seniors reporting good or excellent health "lent,"



heilia Markham and her many elderly friends in rural Boyd County, Nebraska, have a hard time finding young people to shovel their snow.

The Elderly Population across the United States

SEEING OURSELVES

most people think of getting older just in biological terms, but the experience of being old (or any age) is largely shaped by the culture in which we live.

tip

Hunting and Gathering Societies

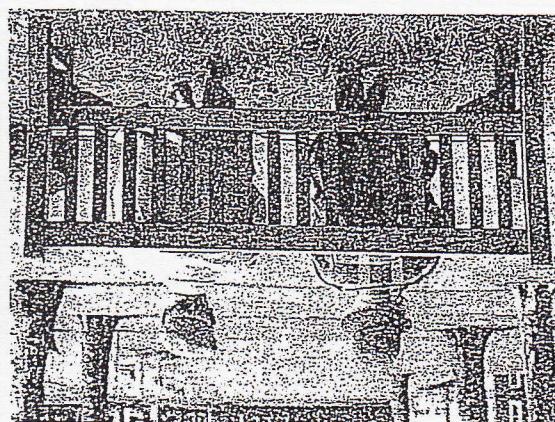
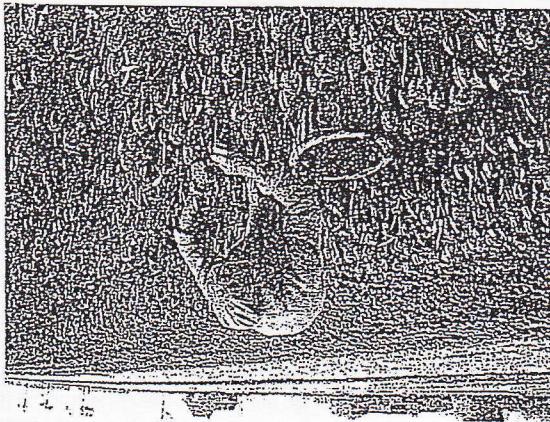
As Chapter 4 ("Society") explains, without the technology to produce a surplus of food, hunters and gatherers must be nomadic. This means that survival depends on physical strength and stamina as members of these societies grow old (in this case, about age thirty). They become less active and may even be considered an economic burden and, when food is in short supply, abandoned (Sheehan, 1976).

Age Stratification: A Global Survey

extended longevity to about age fifty. As Global Map 15-1 shows, this pattern, however, is many low-income countries today. In high-income nations, however, increasing affluence has added almost thirty years to the average life span.

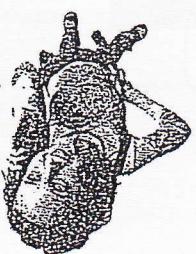
Just as important as longevity is the value senior societies attach to their senior members. As Chapter 10 ("Social Stratification") explains, all societies distribute basic resources unequally. We now turn to the importance of age in this process.

In the United States,
e world, elders often



"It's amazing to learn that little expectation in the poorest countries of the world is only about half of what it is in the United States."

student



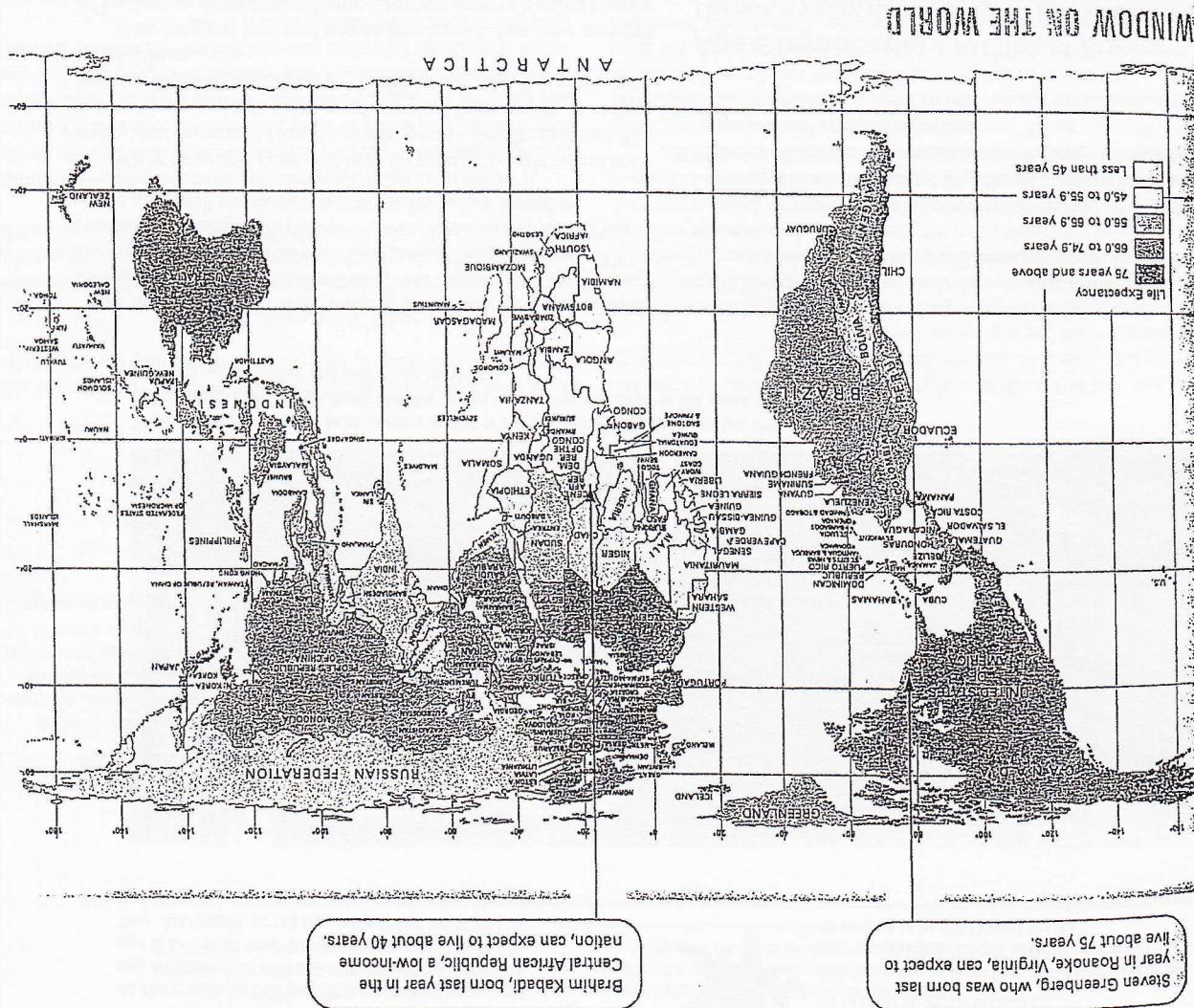
As the Producers on this People Show, one essay way to see differences in how a society constructs old age is to look at what old people do living—arе they disengaged, or are they active?

tip

Most privileged are typically the elderly, a pattern called gerontocracy. In such societies, some individuals build up considerable wealth over a lifetime. Of all age categories, the most privileged are typically the elderly, a pattern called gerontocracy. Diverse societies develop the technology to raise their own crops and sometimes practice ancestor worship in agarian societies. Some individuals, they produce a surplus. In such societies, some individuals build up considerable wealth over a lifetime. Of all age categories, the most privileged are typically the elderly, a pattern called gerontocracy.

Source: Population Reference Bureau (2006). Lives are correspondingly shorter, especially in parts of Africa, where life expectancy may be less than forty years. The greater still were it not for the high risk of death among infants born into poverty. Because poverty is the rule in much of the world, life expectancy shrank during the twentieth century in high-income countries, including Canada, the United States, Western Europe, Japan, and Australia. A newborn in the United States can now expect to live about seventy-eight years, and our life expectancy would rise if we could eliminate poverty. Lives are correspondingly shorter, especially in parts of Africa, where life expectancy may be less than forty years. The greater still were it not for the high risk of death among infants born into poverty. Because poverty is the rule in much of the world, life expectancy shrank during the twentieth century in high-income countries, including Canada, the United States, Western Europe,

GLOBAL MAP 15-1 Life Expectancy in Global Perspective



Throughout the last century Japan stood out as an exception to the rule that industrialization lowers the social standing of older people. Not only is the share of seniors in Japan increasing as fast as anywhere in the world, but Japan's more traditional culture gives older people a greater importance. Most elders in Japan live with an adult daughter or son, and they play a significant role in family life. Elderly men in Japan are also more likely than their U.S. counterparts to stay in the labor force, and in many Japanese corporations, the oldest employees may further weaken the traditional importance of elders (Yates, 1986). In addition, a long economic downturn has left Japanese families less able to care for their older members, which may further lessen the traditional importance of elders (Yates, 1997; Ogasawa & Betherford, 2006).

Our society is sometimes described as a "youth culture." Why do people say this? Do you agree? Explain your answer.

In rapidly changing sectors of the economy, especially the high-tech fields, many key executives are younger still, sometimes barely out of college. Industrial societies often give older people only marginal participation in the economy because they lack the know-how and training demanded in a fast-changing marketplace. Some occupations are dominated by older people. The average farmer is fifty-three; the average age of the entire U.S. labor force is only thirty-nine. More than one-third of today's farmers are over the age of sixty-five. Older people also predominate in other traditional occupations, working minimum physical activity, such as clerks, and in jobs that involve minimal physical activity, such as barbers, tailors, and shopkeepers.

The long-term effect of all these factors transforms elders (as very young play nonpolitical roles, world with positive connotations) into the elderly (a term that carries far less prestige). In postindustrial societies such as the United States and Canada, economic and political leaders are usually people between the ages of forty and sixty who combine experience with up-to-date skills. Even in the United States, population executives are getting younger.

To better understand the types of societies described here and on the previous pages, review the last section of Chapter 4 ("Society"). After reading this page, be sure you understand why Japan is an exceptional case.

get it right

tip

Social isolation

Table 15-1 Living Arrangements of the Elderly, 2006

Living Alone		Living with Spouse or Nonrelatives		Living with Relatives or Nonrelatives		In 2000, % People of Elderly People Lived in Nursing Homes		From All of These Categories.		Sources: U.S. Census Bureau (2001, 2007).	
	Women	Men		Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
19.4%	38.4%	17.9	41.9	8.7	19.7	4.5	5.0	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5
Living Alone			Living with Spouse or Nonrelatives			Living with Relatives or Nonrelatives			In 2000, % People of Elderly People Lived in Nursing Homes		
Men			Women			Men			From All of These Categories.		

Work provides us not only with earnings but also with an important part of our personal identity. Therefore, retirement means not only a reduction in income but also less social prestige and perhaps some loss of purpose in life.

Extreme net

For most older people, family members are the major source of social support. The majority of U.S. seniors have at least one adult child living no more than 10 miles away. About half of these nearby children live in the same city as their parents. About one-third of children living in another city visit their parents at least once a week, although research shows that daughters are more likely than sons to visit regularly (Lin & Rogerson, 1994; Rimer, 1998). In addition, older people are also playing an increasing role in the lives of not only their children, but also their grandchildren, and even their great-grandchildren. "In the Times" on page 38 takes a closer look.

The problem of social isolation falls more heavily on women than men (Lund, 1993). Women (especially the "older elderly") live alone, compared to 19 percent of older men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

But the greatest cause of social isolation is the death of a significant other, especially the death of a spouse. One study found that almost three-quarters of widowers and widows died loneliness as their most common cause of death.

Being alone can cause anxiety at any age, but isolation is most common among elderly people. Retirement closes off one source of social interaction, physical problems may limit mobility, and negative stereotypes of the elderly as "over the hill," may discourage younger people from close contact with them.

Social isolation

Transitions and Challenges

The need to keep gender in mind when studying differences between the everyday reality of growing old and differences for women (who are as likely to live longer than men) makes more likely to live with a spouse than to live alone).

tip

In a classic study of people in their seventies, Bernice Neugarten (1971) found that some people cope with growing older better than others. Worst off are those who fail to come to terms with aging; they develop *disintegrated personalities* marked by despair. Many of these people end up as passive residents of hospitals or nursing homes.

They have little confidence in their abilities to cope with daily events, sometimes seeking help even if they do not really need it. Always in danger of social withdrawal, their life satisfaction level is relatively low. A third category develops *dependent personalities*, living independently but fearful of aging. They try to shield themselves from the reality of old age by clutching to stay youthful and physically fit. Although this good to be concerned about health, setting unrealistically standards breeds stress and dissatisfaction.

Most of Neugarten's subjects, however, displayed what she terms integrated personalities, coping well with the challenges of growing old. As Neugarten sees it, the key to success is a sense of belonging. Personal dignity and self-confidence while accepting growth and change are important factors in maintaining a positive meaning of life.

Chapter 5 ("Sociabilization") presented Erik Erikson's theory that elderly people must resolve a tension of "integrity versus despair". No matter how much they still may be learning and achieving, older people recognize that their lives are nearing an end. Thus elderly people spend more time reflecting on their past, remembrance dissipating as well as accomplishments. In addition, to Erikson (1963), old men assesses life's meaning without such honor. In this stage of life many turn into a time of despair—a dead end which little positive meaning.

In a classic study of people in their seventies, Bernice Neugarten (1971) found that some people cope with growing older better than others. Worst off are those who fail to come to terms with aging; they develop disintegrating and disorganized personalities marked by despair. Many of these people end up as passive residents of hospitals or nursing homes.

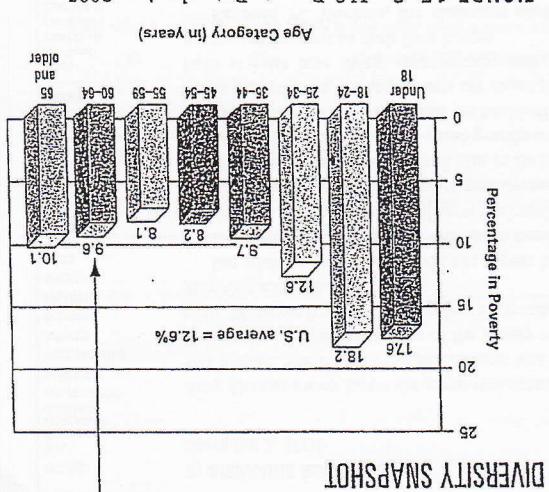
Finiding Meaning

By the time they reach sixty-five, most people have paid off their home mortgages and their children's college expenses. But the costs of medical care, household help, and home utilities (like heat) typically go up, at the same time, retirement often means a significant decline in income. Even so, today's seniors have more wealth than ever before, with a median net worth of about \$160,000 in 2000. Most of this wealth is in the value of their home, however, and many do not have enough savings or pension benefits to be self-supporting (Himes, 2001). For most people over age sixty-five, the major source of income is Social Security. Not surprisingly, then, the risk of poverty rises after age 65, as shown in Figure 15-2.

Aging and Poverty

Some treated people, including many whose investments decided to make ends meet, they may have to go back to work. The Seeling Society in value or who face higher-than-expected expenses, realize that to make every little box on page 400 takes a closer look.

FIGURE 15-2 U.S. Poverty Rates, by Age, 2005



Growing old means increased risk of poverty because after age 60, average income goes down.

"I thought retreat always existed. I never realized that retirement was invented."

student 2

205

The argument supporting a mandatory retirement age for airline pilots rests on the fact that the lives of hundreds of people are literally, in their hands. What about surgeons, who currently are not subject to mandatory retirement? Should there be such a requirement or not? Why?

Although the concept developed only within the past century or so in high-income countries, High-income societies are so productive that not everyone needs to work in addition, advanced technology places a premium on up-to-date skills. This, therefore, creates a market for younger workers—presumably those with the most current knowledge and training—to have the largest presence in the labor force. Fifty years ago, most companies in the United States even had a mandatory retirement age, typically between sixty-five and seventy, although Congress enacted laws phasing out such policies in the 1970s so that few exist today (one exception is airline pilots, who must stop flying at the same time). Generally speaking, when economic times are good, people save more and think about retiring early. Such has been the case in the United States: As the economy expanded during the 1980s and 1990s, more people retired earlier, causing the median retirement age to fall from sixty-eight in 1950 to sixty-three by 2000. The economic downturn that began in 2000 has had the opposite effect. Today we hear talk about “staged retirement,” in which hours as they build ing well past the age of sixty-five, reducing the number of hours worked by half. In addition, “staged retirement” is what people continue working well into their late sixties.

Because seniors are socially diverse, there is no single formula for successful retirement. Part-time work occupies many people either old age and provides some extra cash as well. Grandparenting is an enormous source of pleasure for many older people. Volunteer work is another path to rewarding activity, especially for those who have saved enough so that they do not have to work—one reason that volunteerism is increasing more among seniors than in any other age group.

Some organizations help ease this transition. Cougars and Univer-
sities, for example, confer the title "professor emeritus" (emeritus in
Latin) on retired faculty members, many of whom
are permitted to keep library privileges, a parking space, and e-mail
accounts. These highly experienced faculty can be a valuable resource not
only to students but to younger professors as well (Parini, 2001).



Because of personal pride and a desire to remain independent, many finally, poverty among the elderly is often hidden from view.

Rubin, & Piscard, 1995).

In the past, growing old (especially for women and other minorities) still increases the risk of poverty. One study found that poor elderly households typically spend three-fourths of their income on basic necessities, which means that these people are just getting by (Koella,

In the United States, although the elderly are doing better than

households in the rest of the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

In light of these low averages, it is easy to see why seniors are concerned about the costs of health care and prescription drugs, both of

which are rising fast (Fetto, 2003a).

When we include both those who are working and those who are not, median individual income is far lower: \$12,495 for women, which is 57 percent of the \$21,784 earned by men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). In the United States, although the elderly are doing better than

households in the rest of the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

But because most elderly people have retired from the labor force,

much less schooling than men—their age, so they hold lower-paying jobs.

Several factors have boosted the financial strength of seniors. Be-

cause older people live longer than average, many more elderly people are in better health than ever before. Thus the income gap linked to gender is greater among older people than among younger people

percent as much as comparable men. This shows that these older full-time working women earned just 68

in 2005, compared to 55.3% for men over sixty-five. A quick calcu-

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Source: Radice (2002).

3. Do you know anyone who has had a pen-

retirement?

2. Why does "phased retirement" for many

older people mean

ment plans?

1. What is the relationship between how well

the economy is doing and people's rete-

rement plans?

The economy did begin to improve after

about 2003. But few analysts predict that

investment gains will return to the double-

digit levels of the 1990s. The bottom line:

less talk about "early retirement"

and more about "double dip."

4. Do you think that retirement variabil-

ity has increased over time?

5. Do you think that people are saving

more now than they were ten years ago?

6. Do you think that people are saving

more now than they were ten years ago?

7. Do you think that people are saving

more now than they were ten years ago?

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more now than they were ten years ago?

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37. Do you think that people are saving

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38. Do you think that people are saving

more now than they were ten years ago?

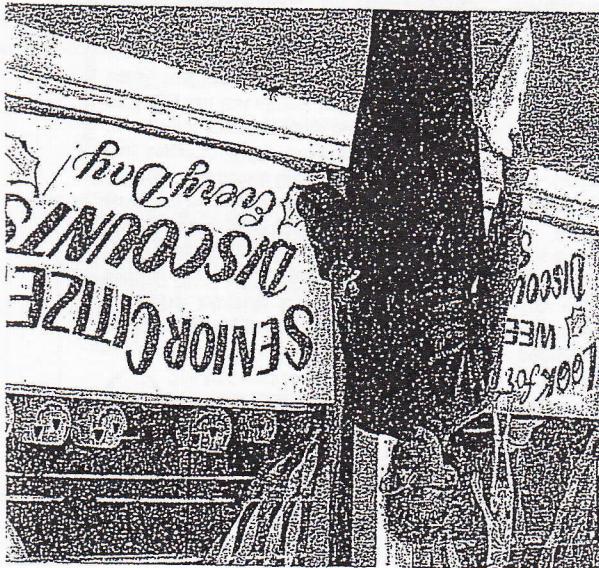
39. Do you think that people are saving

more now than they were ten years ago?

40. Do you think that people are saving

But the relatively small share of cases involving abuse should not overshadow the positive side of caring giving. Helping another person is a selfless act of human kindness that affirms the best in us and provides a source of personal enrichment and satisfaction (Lund, 1993). In the same way, sociologists use the term *agelism* for prejudice and discrimination against older people. Elderly people are the primary targets of ageism, although middle-aged people can suffer as well. Examples of ageism not to hide a sixty-year-old professor because of her age! Other chapters explain how ideology—including racism and sexism—serves to justify the social disadvantages of minorities. In the same way, agelists use the term *agelism* for prejudice and discrimination against workers over 65, as described in the opening to this chapter.

In the United States, it is common for businesses to offer a "senior discount" to people over sixty-five (or sometimes even fifty-five). What is the reason for this practice? Would you prefer a policy of offering discounts to single parents with children, a category of people at much higher risk of poverty?



Caregiving

or why not?

expected to help with the financial needs of their parents? Why do why not?

People who have supported their children for years find it difficult to admit that they can no longer provide for themselves.

between racism (page 366), sexism (page 332), and ageism.

between racism (page 366), sexism (page 332),

get it right

Many caregivers experience fatigue, emotional distress, and guilt over not being able to do more. Abuse is most likely to occur if the caregiver not only finds the work difficult but also (1) works full time, (2) has to take care of children, (3) has to take care of elderly parents, (4) has to take care of disabled adults, or (5) has to take care of a partner who is physically or mentally ill (Himes, 2001).

Abuse of older people takes many forms, from passive neglect to active torment; it includes verbal, emotional, financial, and physical harm. About 1 million elderly people (3 percent of the total) suffer serious maltreatment each year, and three times as many (about 10 percent) suffer abuse at some point. Like other forms of family violence, abuse of the elderly often goes unreported because the victims are reluctant to talk about their plight (Holmstrom, 1994; M. Thompson, 1997, 1998; National Center on Elder Abuse, 2005).

Many caregivers experience fatigue, emotional distress, and guilt over not being able to do more. Abuse is most likely to occur if the caregiver not only finds the work difficult but also (1) works full time,

This discussion of caregiving is based on Lund (1993) and additional information provided by Dale Lund.

Drawing on the ideas of Talcott Parsons—an architect of the structural-functional approach—Elaine Cumming and William Henry (1991) explain that the physical decline and death of an elderly population can disrupt society. In response, society designs packages that gradually transfer roles from the old to the young so that tasks are performed with minimal interruption. Designagagement theory is the idea that society functions in an orderly way by removing older people able to perform them. Another benefit of designagagement is that it makes room for young workers, who typically have the most up-to-date skills and training. Designagreement provides benefits to aging people as well. Although most people aged sixty-year-olds in the United States wish to keep working, most begin to think about retirement and perhaps cut back a bit on their workload. Exactly how people begin to disengage from their careers, depends on their health, enjoyment of the job, and financial situation.

Structural-Functional Analysis:

Let us now apply sociology's theoretical approaches to gain insight into how society shapes the lives of the elderly. We will consider the structural-functional, symbolic-interaction, and social-conflict approaches in turn.

Theoretical Analysis of Aging

Do you think elderly people should be considered a minority? Explain why or why not.

If so, old people are not a minority in the same sense as other age groups. It might be better to say that the elderly are a part of our population than that faces special challenges as they age.

Second, the seniors at highest risk of being poor or otherwise disadvantaged fall into categories of people—women, African Amer-
icans, Hispanics—who are at highest risk of being poor throughout
the life course. As Sterk sees it, this is not so much that the old grow

An open status because people are elderly for only part of their lives, and everyone who has the good fortune to live long enough grows old.

...and the world will be at peace.

The Elderly: A Minority?

Betty Friedan (1993), a pioneer of today's feminist movement, believes that sexism is deeply rooted in our culture. She points out that few elderly people appear in the mass media; only a small percentage of television shows, for example, feature main characters over sixty. More generally, when most of us think about older people, it is often in negative terms. This older man lacks a job, that older woman has lost her vitality, and seniors look back to their youth. In short, says Friedan, we often treat being old as if it were a disease, marked by decline and deterioration, for which there is no cure.

Even so, Friedan believes that older women and men in the United States are discovering that they have more to contribute than others give them credit for. Advising small business owners, design-
ers, less ways in which older people can help others and at the same time bring housing for the poor, teaching children to read—there are count-
less ways in which older people can help their own lives.

On your campus, are the most popular faculty members younger instructors or older professors? Do you think age plays into a professor's student evaluations? If so, how?

Some people feel a sense of pride in their physical traits, while others feel embarrassed by them. This can lead to different levels of self-esteem and social interaction. For example, some people may feel uncomfortable around others who have physical disabilities or health problems, while others may feel more accepting and supportive. These attitudes can affect how individuals perceive themselves and interact with others.

"As a white male, I never thought of myself as a minority. But there are good reasons to call elders a minority, which will make me a minority some day."

student 2

A social-conflict analysis is based on the idea that access to opportunity and resources differs for people in different age categories. For this reason, age is a dimension of social stratification. In the United States, middle-aged people enjoy the greatest power and the most opportunities and privileges, and they have a higher risk of poverty. Employers who replace senior workers with younger men and women in order to keep wages low may not intend to discriminate against older people. However, according to recent court rulings, if such policies are always an individual matter (Neugarten, 1973; Moen, Dempster-McClain, & Williams, 1992).

Activity theory also recognizes that elderly people who pursue them are activities that people choose and the pace at which they pursue them varies by interests, needs, and physical abilities. For this reason, the activity theory also recognizes that the elderly are diverse, with high activity level and the most satisfaction in their lives. Simply says that people need to find new roles to replace those they leave behind. Research confirms that elderly people who maintain a variety of interests and hobbies are more satisfied with their lives. Activity theory does not reject the idea of job dissatisfaction that is associated with years of life (Smart, 2001; Walsh, 2001).

Activity theory does not reject the idea of job dissatisfaction that is associated with years of life (Smart, 2001; Walsh, 2001).

Social-Conflict Analysis: Aging and Inequality

YOUR LEARNING EXPLAINS WHAT ACTIVITY THEORY SAYS ABOUT AGING.

A limitation of this approach is that it assumes that elders are both healthy and competent, which may or may not be the case. Another problem with this approach is that it ignores the fact that many of the problems older people face—such as poverty—have more to do with society than themselves. We turn now to that point of view: social-conflict theory.

Drawing on the symbolic-interaction approach, activity theory is the idea that a high level of activity increases personal satisfaction in old age. Because everyone bases social identity on many roles, designageme-

CRITICAL REVIEW Activity theory shifts the focus of analysis from the needs of society (as stated in designagement theory) to the needs of the elderly themselves. It emphasizes the social diversity of elderly people and highlights the importance of choice in any government policy.

Drawing on the symbolic-interaction approach, activity theory suggests that society gradually removes responsibilities from people as they grow old. Activity theory counters that, like people at any stage, many older men and women seek out new jobs, hobbies, and social events.



GET IT RIGHT In one important sense, activity theory, which says that people must be active to find meaning in life, is a direct challenge to designagement theory.

Designagement theory is one example of the structural-functional approach emphasizing how social patterns (in this case, retirement of the elderly) help keep society orderly.

Retiring does not mean being inactive. Some people start a new career or a different job, and others pursue hobbies or engage in voluntary margin. But there are several limitations to this approach. In high-income societies tend to define oldest members as

First, especially in recent years, many workers have found that they cannot designage from work because they need the income. Second, some elderly people—whether they are rich or poor—do not want to take care of people who might other-

Third, it is not clear that the loss of human benefits of designagement may also mean losing friends and social prestige.

Fourth, it is not clear that the loss of social benefits of elderly people is greater for today's sixty-five-year-old, who might include the loss of social costs, which include the loss of independent is a high priority. Fourth, any rigid system of designagement does not take account of the widely differing abilities of the elderly.

This concern leads us to the symbolic-interaction approach.

Designagement theory clearly states behind the basic idea of designagement theory.

YOUR LEARNING EXPLAINS WHAT ACTIVITY THEORY SAYS ABOUT AGING.

in a society, in which econometrics gives us the power to prolong life, moral questions about when and how people should die are more pressing than ever. For example, the national debate in 2005 sur-

Ethical Issues: Controlling Death

Dearth is also physically removed from everyday activities. The clearest evidence of this is that many of us have never seen a person die. Our acquaintances typically died at home in the presence of family and friends, but most deaths today occur in impersonal settings such as hospitals and nursing homes. Even in hospitals, dying patients occupy a special part of the building, and hospital mortgues are well out of sight of patients and visitors alike (Arlts, 1974; Lee, 2002). Ask members of your class if they have ever seen a person die. Do the responses support the idea that modern society separates death from life?

The Modern Separation of Life and Death
Now removed from everyday experience, death seems somehow unnatural. Social conditions prepared our ancestors to accept death, but modern society's youth culture and aggressive medical technology foster a desire for eternal youth and immortality. Death has become separated from life.

The Modern Separation of Life and Death

As societies gradually learned more about health and medicine, death became less of an everyday experience. Fewer children died at birth, and accidents and diseases took a smaller toll among adults. As a result, most people living in high-income societies today view dying as extraordinary, something that happens to the very old or to younger people in rare and tragic cases. Back in 1900, about one-third of all deaths in the United States occurred before the age of five and half of our population die after the age of fifty-five. Death and old age are closely linked in our culture.

Some months ago shortages forced societies to protect the mega-
city by sacrificing the least productive members. Insanityicide is the
killing of newborn infants, and geronticide is the killing of the elderly.
Because death was commonplace, it was readily accepted.
Medieval Christianity asserted belief in the divine plan for human existence. Here is how historian Philippe Ariès describes Sir Lancelot, one of King Arthur's knights of the Round Table, preparing for battle: "In such a way that his head faced east toward Jerusalem, (1974-78) he spread his arms out his body form -
like a cross . . . in such a way that his head faced east toward
quietly upon the ground. . . . He removed his weapons and lay
carried out where he is about to die. He removed his arms out his body form -
His gestures were fixed by old customs, ritual gestures which must be
carried out when one is about to die. He removed his weapons and lay

whether one or two years old. For those fortunate enough to survive infancy, illness, accidents, and natural catastrophes made life uncertain at best.

In the past, death was a familiar part of life. Many children died soon after birth, a fact that led many parents to delay naming their children until shortly after the birth of the next child. Many children died soon after birth as the result of complications during birth or from diseases such as whooping cough, diphtheria, and measles. Death was a common occurrence in the past because medical knowledge and treatment were limited. In the early 1900s, the discovery of penicillin and other antibiotics revolutionized medicine and greatly reduced the number of deaths from infectious diseases.

A time to be born and a time to die . . .
And a time for every matter under heaven:

Death and Dying

CRITICAL REVIEW The social-conflict approach adds to our understanding of the aging process by highlighting age-based inequality and explaining how capitalism develops elderly people who are less productive. But critics claim that the real culprit is industrialization. As evidence they point to the fact that the elderly are not better off under a socialist system, as a Marxist analysis implies. Furthermore, the idea that either industrialization or capitalism necessarily causes the elderly to suffer is challenged by the long-term rise in income and well-being experienced by seniors in the United States.

The social-conflict approach claims that our industrial-capitalist economy creates an age-based hierarchy. In line with Marxist thought, Steven Shipter (1980) points out that a profit-oriented society creates many categories of people that is less productive. To the extent that older people do not work, our society labels them as mildly deviant. Social-conflict analysis also draws attention to various dimensions of social inequality within the elderly population. Differences of class, race, ethnicity, and gender divide older people as they do every one else. For this reason, some seniors have far greater economic security than others. Elderly white people typically enjoy personal advantages denied to older minorities. And women—men increasing majority as people age—suffer the social and economic disadvantages of sexism in old age more than others. Elderly white people typically enjoy better medical care, and more options for personal access to better medical care, and more options for personal

In his paper "A Sociology of Childhood", Philippe Ariès described how childhood was much shorter in traditional societies before the Industrial Revolution. Here he explains that attitudes toward death also are different in traditional and modern societies.

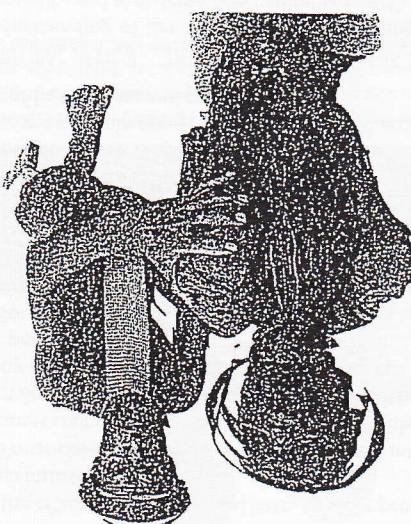
tip

Should the United States hold the line on euthanasia or follow the lead of the Dutch? Right-to-life advocates maintain that a person facing extreme suffering should be able to choose to live or die. And if death is the choice, medical assistance can help people toward a "good death." Surveys show that a majority of U.S. adults support giving people the option of dying with a doctor's help (D. E. Rosenthal, 1997; NORC, 2005). On the other side of the debate, opponents fear that laws allowing physician-assisted suicide invite abuse. Pointing to the Netherlands, critics cite surveys indicating that in most cases, the five conditions for physician-assisted suicide are met. In particular, most physicians do not consult with another doctor or even report the euthanasia to authorities. Of greater concern is the fact that in about one-fifth of all physician-assisted suicides, the patient never

Supporthers of the right-to-the movement hold up as a model the Netherlands, which has the most permissive euthanasia law in the world. How does the Dutch system operate? The thinning Globality box on page 406 takes a closer look.

assisted in thirty-eight suicides (McCall, 2003). In 1997, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Vacco v. Quill*, declared that the U.S. Constitution

the elderly but also for their ancestors, people express great respect not only for their traditional customs, people especially feel this presence in their daily lives.



The decision not to take "electric measures", to keep a person alive, physicans may and family members may decide to issue a "do not resuscitate" order, which will allow a patient who stops breathing to die. Living wills—documents stating which medical procedures in individual wants and does not want under specific conditions—are now widely used.

After the lengthy discussion points were settled over their lives (Geden, 2001).
Skeptical responses to her surroumdings for fifteen years following a heart attack that cut off blood to her brain. Debate surrounding this case, which ended when her feeding tube was removed, shows that many people are less afraid of death than of the prospect of being kept alive at all costs. In other words, medical technology that can sustain life also threatens personal freedom by letting doctors or others rather than the dying person decide when life is to end. In response, people who support a right-to-die movement now seek control over their deaths just as they seek control over their lives (Geden, 2001).

The Right-to-Die Debate

Perhaps the most basic question is: Is the most difficult breath the deepest breath? Common sense suggests that life ceases when breathing stops and heartbeat stops. But the ability of medical personnel to resuscitate someone after a heart attack and artificially sustain breathing makes such definitions of death obsolete. Medical experts in the United States continue to debate the meaning of death, but many now consider death an irreversible state involving no response to stimuli, no movement or breathing, no reflexes, and no indication of brain activity (Wall, 1980; D.G. Jones, 1998).

undertaking the death of Leticia Schiavo, kept alive by mechanical means for fifteen years, was not just about the fate of one woman; many people feel we need a better understanding of what the "right to die" rules should be.

"I remember her using about the Terri Schiaavo case when I was in high school. Now I have a much better understanding of the bigger right-to-life issues."



GEREAVEMENT

Sources: Dell'Acaja (1997), Mauro (1997), and Bar (2004).

such cases? If so, when and why?

to die? Should euthanasia be permitted in all and cannot state the desire to die or not

3. What about cases in which a person is very ill and cannot express their desire to die or not

such a law?

such disadvantages or dangers of such a law?

2. What are the disadvantages of dangerous or such a law?

such a law?

such disadvantages and benefits do you see in the Dutch law permitting physician-assisted suicide?

1. What advantages and benefits do you see in the Dutch law permitting physician-assisted suicide?

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

controversial in the Netherlands. It remains unclear if euthanasia enjoys widespread popularity of their desire to die. Although the Dutch due to their illnesses, were not able to clearly decide that in the death of people who have brought about the death of their doctors over recent years, Dutch doctors have reacted in the last few years, Dutch doctors would of three times as high. Critics point to the actual number may be more than expected, but because many cases are about steadily, but rising slowly.

and the number has been rising slowly,

lands

Marcus snuffled his nose and belched his brother's Argo phone into his face. "It's Friday at five o'clock." When the time came, Arjen was there, having driven to his brother's farm. house south of Amsterdam. They said their final good-byes. Soon afterwards, Marcus's physician arrived. Marcus and the doctor spoke for a few moments, and then the doctor left to prepare a "cocktail" of barbiturates for other drugs. As Marcus drank the mixture, he made a face, joking, "Can't you make this sweater?"

As the minutes passed, Marcus lay back and his eyes closed. But after half an hour, he was still breathing. At that point, according to their earlier agreement, the physician administered a lethal injection. Minutes later Marcus's life came to an end.

Events like this take us to the heart of the belief that people have a "right to die." Marcus's death was nothing but a waste of his body and his life.

Eric was dying of AIDS. For five years, he believed that people have a "right to die,"

Thinking Globally

Ask the questions in the box below in class to see what other students think.

५४

Another positive sign is the growing financial strength of the elderly. Although the recession after 2000 was stressful and many elderly people have lost pensions as the result of corporate scandals, it is likely that boomers will be more affluent than ever before. The baby boomers will be the first generation of U.S. seniors with effective savings and pensions. Women who have been in the labor force most of their lives, a fact that may have contributed to the skills they will need, one day to care for us.

Most of us need to learn more about caring for aging parents, which involves communicating, expressing love, and adapting to eventual death. More important lessons include far more than meeting physical needs. More important lessons involve communicating, expressing love, and adapting to eventual death.

In caring for our parents, we will also teach important lessons to our children, including the skills they will need, one day to care for us.

Unlike a hospital, which tries to save and extend life, the hospice movement strives to give dying people greater comfort, including the companionship and support of family members.



This chapter has explored the graying of the United States and other high-income nations. By 2050, the number of elderly people in this country will exceed the entire country's population in 1900. In addition, one in four of tomorrow's seniors will be over eighty-five. In gerontology—the study of the elderly—are sure to gain in importance. With more elderly people living longer and longer, will our society have the support services to sustain them? Remember that as the needs of the elderly increase, a smaller share of younger people will be there to respond and pay the bills with their taxes. What about the spiraling medical costs of an aging society? As the baby boomers enter old age, some analysts paint a doomsday picture of the United States, better than ever: Smoking is way down, and more people are becoming non-smokers—yet, today's middle-aged adults—will be rows of elderly people—that is, today's middle-aged adults—will be better off than ever. Such trends suggest that the elderly may well become healthier, such trends suggest that the elderly may well become more wealthy. Such trends suggest that the elderly may well become more wealthy. Such trends suggest that the elderly may well become more wealthy. Such trends suggest that the elderly may well become more wealthy.

The controversy over the benefits of steady-state medicine technology, although it is a relatively new field, is also enjoyed by many seniors. Tomorrow's seniors will also enjoy the benefits of steady-state medicine technology, although it is a relatively new field, is also enjoyed by many seniors. The benefits of steady-state medicine technology, although it is a relatively new field, is also enjoyed by many seniors. The benefits of steady-state medicine technology, although it is a relatively new field, is also enjoyed by many seniors.

Aging: Looking Ahead

Many young people find support in the hospice movement. Unlike a hospital, which is designed to cure disease, a hospice helps people have a good death. These care centres for dying people try to minimize pain and suffering—either at the centre or at home—and encourage family members to stay close by. Most hospices also provide social support for family members who are experiencing bereavement (Pohar & Clouston, 2001). Under the best of circumstances, bereavement often involves profound grief. Research documents that bereavement is less intense for some people who accepts the death of a loved one and has brought about satisfaction. One study of middle-aged women who had recently experienced loss found that many felt they had lost not only a spouse but also their reason for living. Therefore, dealing successfully with bereavement requires the time and social support necessary to form a new sense of self and recognize new life options (Aitchley, 1983; Danforth & Glass, 2001). With the number of older people in the United States increasing so fast, understanding death and dying is taking on greater importance.

The Kudler-Hoss theory of counteracting death is a "stage theory". Like many of the theories presented in Chapter 5 ("Socialization").

Controversy & Debate Setting Limits: Must We "Pull the Plug" on Old Age?



SIMONE: I'm almost sixty now. When I'm eighty, why should I want the best medical care I can find.

JUAN: I'll tell you why—because our society can't spend more and more money on elderly people when so many children are at risk.

SO CALLAHAN: I guess the answer depends on whether you're young or old. . . .

America's elderly population soars, as new technology gives us more power to prolong life, and as medical care gets increasingly expensive, many people now wonder just how much old age we can afford.

Carefully, about half the average person's lifetime spending for medical care occurs during the final years of life, and the share is likely to extend their lives even further to "pull the plug" on old age forces us either to "pull the plug" on old age and eager to extend their lives will eventually force us either to "pull the plug" on old age or to shorten this issue. Callahan admits, "To even raise this issue, Callahan admits, seems cold and heartless. But consider that

SOURCES: Callahan (1987), Kapp (2001), and U.S. Census Bureau (2004).

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Should doctors and hospitals use a double standard, offering more complete care to the youngest people and limited care to the oldest members? Why or why not?

2. Do you think that a goal of the medical establishment should be to extend life at all costs?

3. How should society balance the needs of high-income seniors with the needs of low-income seniors?

THIRD, WE NEED TO RECONSIDER OUR VIEW OF DEATH AS AN ENEMY TO BE CONQUERED AT ALL COSTS. Rather, he suggests, a more realistic position for an aging society is to treat death as a natural end to the life course. If we can't make peace with death for our own well-being, we need to accept it.

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3. Obtain a copy of a living will (do an online search), and try to respond to all the questions it asks. How does filling out this form affect your thinking about death?
2. Look through an issue of a popular magazine, such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *People*, and study the pictures of men and women in news stories and advertising. What share of the media are they featured?
1. Ask several faculty nearing retirement and several who have already retired about the practices and policies of your college or university for helping older faculty when they retire. Based on what you learn, decide whether retiring from an academic career is harder or easier than retiring from other types of work (say, construction work or a job as a corporate manager), and explain why.

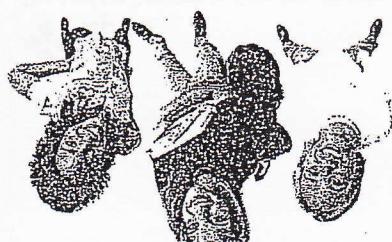
Applying Sociology in Everyday Life

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MAKING THE GRADE

CHAPTER 15 Aging and the Elderly



The Graying of the United States

- The "graying of the United States" means that the average age of the U.S. population is steadily going up.
- In 1900, the median age was 23, and elderly people were 4% of the population.
- In 1990, the median age was 23, and elderly people were almost 12% of the population.
- By 2030, the median age will be almost 40, and elderly people will be 20% of the population.
- Elderly people from all walks of life are more likely to be infected with diseases such as Alzheimer's disease.
- Standards of living have improved and medical advances reduce deaths from infectious diseases.
- Life expectancy has been rising as living standards improve and medical advances reduce deaths from infectious diseases.
- Birth rates have been falling as families choose to have fewer children.
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The "graying of the United States" means that the average age of the U.S. population is steadily going up.

Growing Old: Biology and Culture

- Although aging is a biological process, how elderly people are regarded by society is a matter of culture.
- With advancing age, affluent elderly people experience fewer health problems than poor people, who cannot afford quality medical care.
- Psychological research confirms that growing old does not result in overall loss of intelligence or major changes in personality.
- In hunting and gathering societies, where survival depends on physical stamina, both the very young and the very old contribute less to society.

AGE STRATIFICATION: A GLOBAL SURVEY

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Transitions and Challenges of Aging

- PERSONAL CHALLENGES that elderly people face include:
 - the realization that one's life is nearing an end
 - a social isolation caused by the death of friends or a spouse, physical disability, or retirement from a job
 - reduced social prestige and a loss of purpose in life due to retirement
- Economic downturn.
 - some retired people have had to return to work in order to make ends meet, a result of the recent high risk of poverty at any age.
 - the aged poor include categories of people—such as single women and people of color—who are at greater risk of poverty than the elderly population as a whole.
- A person's risk of poverty rises after middle age.
 - although life expectancy has risen since 1960, the poverty rate for the elderly has fallen and is now below the poverty rate for the elderly members of their relatives, other relatives, or friends provided to a dependent person by family members, other relatives, or friends
 - ageism (p. 401) prejudice and discrimination against older people
 - ageism (p. 401) prejudice and discrimination against older relatives, other relatives, or friends
- The need for CAREGIVING is increasing in our aging society.
 - most caregiving for the elderly is performed by family members, typically women.
 - About 1 to 2 million elderly people are victims of ELDER ABUSE each year.
 - Like racism and sexism, ageism builds physical traits into stereotypes that make unfair generalizations about all elderly people.