Ageism (Stereotypes and discrimination)

Stereotyping of and discrimination against people because of their age.

Term coined by gerontologist Robert Butler in 1969

Media – changing roles – comical to neutral (effect of baby boomers?)
Literature, art, film – older adult has marginal or negative role
Birthday card – stereotyping is unchanged over the years

Types of Stereotyping:

Attitude – forgetful, confused and incompetent
Action – patronizing behaviour
Language – old geezer, over the hill, little old lady, cranky old man

Positive stereotyping – sage, guidance and Accomplished

Media: how the elderly are portrayed and what they are excluded from
Centrum Commercial of Strip Poker

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKEKF99Jq5U

Less than 2% of primetime characters on TV are 65+

Movies with adults 60+?

Movies worth watching –
• About Schmidt
• Gran Torino
• Blood Work
• Calendar Girls
• Something’s Gotta Give
• Driving Ms. Daisy
• Iris
Discrimination (formal ageism)

Opinion against seniors’ housing/care home in a community or renting to an old person

At workplace – getting a job, jobs with lower wages, etc.

Supervisors worry about how to manage older subordinates:

“How can I supervise someone who has more experience than I have?”

“Are you sure you can handle this job? It takes a lot of energy and enthusiasm, and we are looking for someone with career potential.”

“You don't need this training program. At your age, what would the benefit be?”

Perception that older workers may be unmotivated and inflexible

Perception that OW may be less worried about promotions or getting fired

Older workers have a lifetime of preferences and skills, but could also have a preset way of taking care of business

Need for a collaborative effort respecting their expertise and concerns

Age, ethnicity, education, gender, socio-economic status are all relevant

www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVJNiG7_op0
City Planning and Urban Design:

Our streets and cities do not support older people --
Recent study:

Survey with people ages 60 and older, nearly 80 percent of respondents reported experiencing ageism

-- being told a joke that pokes fun at older people
-- being ignored or not taken seriously because of their age

Effects on older adults:

It hurts! (emotionally, financially, etc.)

Negative stereotypes are not only hurtful to older people, but may even shorten their lives --

Older adults with positive self-perceptions of aging live 7.5 years longer than those with negative self-perceptions of aging.

Mental health problems (e.g., cognitive impairment or psychological disorders caused in part by complex pharmacological treatments) often go unrecognized and untreated

Self-stereotyping by older adults
(acting based on others’ perceptions)

A few reasons of age-stereotyping and discrimination:
• Lack of adequate knowledge about old age
• Gap in communication between generations
• Representation of older adults in media
• Social expectation about “productive life”
How do we fight ageism?

Know our seniors! Greater awareness of aging is important
  More aging content incorporated into school curricula.
  Intergenerational programs
  Mentorship
  Volunteering with seniors

Promote age-friendly environments for the growth and development of old
  Flexible work roles and policies
  Educating and expecting higher standards from employers

Increase the number of geropsychologists

Circulate petitions condemning ageism in general and specific offences.

Re-define aging for yourself. No matter your personal chronological age,
your outlook has an impact on others

What is a “theory”?

Qualities of a good theory:

1. Integrative: Links different empirical findings
2. Explanatory: Explains real life
3. Predictive power: Predicts how things might work
4. Applicability: Helps practical situations
5. Research strength: Suggests research directions
6. Universality: Applies to diverse populations/cultures
Theories in Aging

Micro-Level
Focus on individual aging process
e.g., social engagement and aging

Macro-level
Social structure, social processes,
and problems and interrelationships
e.g., effect of industrialization on older adults

Micro and Macro issues are integrated in real life experience

Micro-Level Theories
(focus on individual)

- Disengagement theory
- Activity Theory
- Continuity Theory
Micro-Macro Theories
(focus on individual and society)
- Subculture theory
- Exchange theory
- Social constructionism

Macro-Level Theories
(focus on society)
- Modernization theory
- Age stratification theory

Activity Theory
Robert Havighurst
1950s
- continued need and benefit from activities
- social isolation is not normal or natural
- may happen due to poor health, loss of friends, retirement, etc.
- “successful aging” means active aging
- extension of adult life
- new roles, friends and activities should replace lost ones
- <activity and roles> effect self-concept
- positive self-concept effect positively on life satisfaction

Activity types:

Solitary (e.g., gardening, knitting, reading, writing, solo visits to museums)

Informal (e.g., chatting with friends on the telephone, greeting fellow shoppers at the supermarket)

Formal (e.g., volunteering at the local hospital, neighbourhood organizations)

Critique of Activity Theory:

- Some support for AT.
- New activity may not replace the old activity, i.e., quality or personal meaning of activities/roles is not acknowledged
- Some people may be satisfied without activities, e.g., inner resources
- Psycho-social needs may change in later life, i.e., urge to focus more on inner/spiritual growth
- Resources vary across socio-economic groups
Disengagement Theory
Elaine Cumming and William Henry
1960s

According to Disengagement Theory – normal aging involves:
- old age is different than middle age
- natural and voluntary withdrawal of individual and society
- decreasing interaction with others
- mortality effect
- older adults do not necessarily have to be active and productive

Critique:
- disengagement is not universal or inevitable
- different types of disengagement (e.g., physical activities, mental engagement)
- intrinsic (biological versus social)?
Several studies looked at Disengagement and Activity Theories

Participation in informal activity associated with higher levels of life satisfaction

Support for the basic premise of Activity theory

Selective replacement of and disengagement from activities and roles

Continuity Theory

Robert Atchley
1970s

Internal and External Continuity

*Internal Continuity*
- remembered structure: ideas, experiences, affect, skills, etc.
- requires memory

*External Continuity*
- role performance, activities, relationships
Continuity is an adaptive strategy

- Continuity of activities
- Continuity of relationships
- Continuity of environment

However, CT assumes evolution, not 100% continuity

Too little, optimum or too much continuity

Critique:
CT does not consider social structural factors
- external factors affecting level of continuity

Suggests that mid-life is the standard for later life

Micro-Macro Theories
(Individual and Society)
- Subculture theory
- Exchange theory
- Social Constructionism
Subculture theory

Similarities with Disengagement theory and Activity theory
- change in roles
- activity can enhance life

Sub-cultural development

Older adults can form a subculture due to

-- physical conditions
-- isolation from mainstream society

Family, race, socio-cultural background are more important than age itself

Useful for studying lifestyles in identifiable communities, e.g., care facility, seniors housing, Naturally occurring retirement communities (NORC)
Exchange theory
- based on micro-economic theory
- social interaction is based on rationale calculations and resource exchange
- people want to maximize rewards and minimize costs (material and non-material)

Reduced interaction between old and young
Older people have fewer resources
- lower income, reduced health and less education

Experience of older workers
Negative experience of some older adults in institutional settings

More resourceful seniors remain more engaged

Critique:
- Social exchange theory ignores the value of non-rational resources, e.g., friendship, companionship, love
- focus on immediate interaction and ignores value of “social credit”
Social Constructionism

- Interpretive perspective
- We create our social reality – questioning our assumptions
- Understanding society as a process vs. structure
- Humans are free agents
- Social meanings of age are negotiated

Examples:
- Role of seniors in society
- Understanding behaviors in people with Alzheimer’s Disease

Macro theories --

Interested in broader social structures

Modernization Theory

- Historical perspective of society’s status
- Industrial revolution (1750) affected the social structure
- Technology, skills, organization and capital, urbanization, industrialization,
- Status of older adults high in less-developed (i.e., agriculture based) societies compared to industrialized societies
Types of social change:

**Health technology**
- population aging, competition in the labour market, retirement

**Economic modernization**
- new jobs requiring new training and expertise

**Urbanization**
- younger people moving to cities, establishment of new values and expectations

**Mass education**
- information replacing traditional knowledge

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Critique:

Effect of modernization on older adults is not uniform

Variation within a country/society, e.g., in China – Shanghai vs rural regions of China

In many societies, older adults are living more independently due to better health and services
Age Stratification Model

Flow of Age Cohort through life course
  childhood, adolescence, adulthood

Gender, race, wealth are influencing factors

Individuals embedded in a social structure
Critique:

Somewhat rigid view of the age-strata dimensions, e.g., growing number of older adults with high level of competence

Possible move to age-integrated society
Feminist theories

Gendered nature of the society
Social construction of gender
Social, economic and political power
Empowerment of older women – participatory research
Action-oriented perspective
e.g., retirement system based on men

Life-course framework/perspective

Historical events, personal decisions, early life experiences

Example: older homeless people

Transitions -- role changes, e.g., health crisis, retirement, caregiver, widowhood

Trajectory: series of transitions

Research Methods:

Quantitative and Qualitative methods
Quantitative research:

“Positivism” paradigm:
Reality can be objectively known

Deductive method

Mostly based on numerical data

Random sampling of respondents/participants

Quantitative research methods:

1. Survey
   face-to-face, mail, web-based
   cross-sectional, longitudinal

   Older adult issues:
   length of survey
   higher non-response rate
   web-based access limited

2. Secondary data analysis

   Use of existing datasets for analysis
   National datasets
   (e.g., GSS – General Social Survey
    CLSA – Canadian Longitudinal Survey on Aging)

   Strong generalizability of findings

   Limited by pre-set variables,
   e.g., Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS)
3. Experimental design

Intervention study --
Experimental and Control groups

Qualitative research:

Based on “Grounded Theory/Phenomenology/Interpretive Approach”

• Inductive method
• Reality is interpreted and constructed
• In-depth understanding of human experience
• Understanding and discovery
1. In-depth interview

- Multiple interviews/participant
- Open-ended questions or topic-based
- Example – Life History/Narrative Project

2. Ethnographic Observations

- Prolonged participant observation
- Understanding the “culture”
3. Focus Groups
- 6-8 people on any focus group
- Efficient process
- Group dynamics
- Multiple perspectives