# Aging: A Discussion of Intergenerational Obligations, Rights, and Responsibilities

# Molly F. Prues

# Concordia University - Chicago

# **Introduction**

The major ethical concerns related to aging are significant and profound. With regard to aging and growing old, philosophers grapple with questions like: What does it mean to be old? What is the essence of old age? What contribution do old people make in society? How does society weigh the needs of the young against the needs of the old? Do older individuals have the ability to exercise autonomy throughout the lifespan, despite failings and decline? Do older people have the right to decide when their life should end? While the answers to these questions vary in time and place according to each individual, they are an essential part of the discussion of aging for society.

Within the last twenty years, the field of gerontology has shifted the focus of aging from decline and diminishment, to a “vigorous emphasis on the potential for and indeed the likelihood of a healthy and engaged old age” (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). It would appear that this viewpoint has led to an over-simplification of the experience of aging. All at once, there has been a shift from the belief of aging as a process marked by change and uncertainty, to a normative phase known as “successful aging” (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). Not all individuals fit in this tidy bucket. The concept of successful aging does not adequately take into account the complexity needed in thinking about aging in terms of relationships among individual biography, social and cultural norms, and public policy (Holstein & Minkler, 2003).

**The Growth of the Aging Population**

In order to understand the scope of the challenges that face the global community, it is important to understand the factors that have contributed to the “graying” of the planet. Within the last century, human life expectancy in many parts of the industrialized world has increased by nearly thirty years. Even in countries where the life expectancy is not as high as the mid-seventies, as in the United States, there has still been some increase.

Medical advances to treat age-related diseases have played an important part in helping people to live longer. Social interventions, such as improved sanitation, diet, and public health measures accounted for a significant drop in mortality as well (Moody & Sasser, 2012). Advancements in the area of immunizations have contributed to the increase in longevity. Major diseases, such as polio, which accounted for death in childhood and early adulthood, have been eradicated through the widespread use of childhood immunizations.

The number of older people is increasing in many countries because there are fewer people being born. The lower birth rates are due to a decline in fertility. As a result of people having fewer children, traditional family sizes and structures are changing.

The growth of the aging population began in the 19th century in industrialized countries as birthrates declined and life expectancies began to increase. While the demographic shift began later in developing countries, the growth in the aging population has happened at a much faster rate. It is projected that soon there will be more people age 65 and over living in China alone than in all of Europe (United Nations, 2009). This trend poses a threat for developing countries, as there has been less time to make adjustments and develop policies to address the social implications for supporting an older population. Interestingly, in an effort to address this issue, China has relaxed its one-child policy (Pew Research Center, 2014).

**Changes in Attitudes on Aging**

By and large, aging is considered a problem in many cultures. The degree to which varies by country. Those countries with an older population consider aging a bigger problem than those countries with younger populations. The concern centers around the perceived amount of resources needed to sustain an aging population. Interestingly, it is the older members of the population that are more concerned about aging (Pew Research Center, 2014). This attitude is partly driven by personal concerns for financial well being in later years. In countries with the economic resources to help its older citizens, an older individual’s concern about aging declines.

From a societal perspective, aging is still looked at with fear and trepidation. Many countries have youth focused cultures that view old age as a time of illness and decline. Even in cultures with long-standing positive traditions around aging, there is beginning to be a shift towards negative attitudes towards aging.

There has also been a rise in ageism or the discrimination of people based on age throughout the world. Older people are discriminated against because of their age in the work force; they are presented in a humiliating way in various popular media platforms; they are invisible to many key cultural institutions; and they are marginalized in major social activities. (Doron, 2013)

**Compassionate Ageism**

From a public policy standpoint, ageism has evolved quite markedly, particularly in the United States. The politics of policies on aging- the organized interest and advocacy groups active in this arena, the tone of the discourse about the older population as beneficiaries of policies on aging, the national political agendas regarding public old-age benefits, and the broader and the overall political economy, has changed dramatically over the last fifty years (Binstock, 2010). Throughout history, the tendency has been for society to take a homogenized view of the old and ignore the tremendous diversity within the elderly population, especially with regard to ethnicity and income (Minkler, 1992).

Over the course of the years during the Great Depression, public policy shifted from individual rights to the care and compassion for the collective. Since the enactment of Social Security in 1935, public policy issues concerning older adults were framed by a concept that has become to be known as “compassionate ageism”. Compassionate ageism is a result of the stereotype of “the aged” as poor, frail, dependent, objects of discrimination, and most importantly, deserving and worthy of governmental assistance (Binstock, 2010).

Compassionate ageism was interwoven into the political policies of the 1960’s and 1970’s, and unlike other forms of discrimination, it was far from prejudicial to the well-being of older Americans (Binstock, 2010). Any issue or problem affecting older individuals that could be identified by advocates for older persons became identified as a governmental responsibility to some extent (Binstock, 2010). As an example, Medicare was enacted in 1965, and provided older Americans with government-financed health insurance. The Older Americans Act, The Age Discrimination in Employment Act, The Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974, and The Research on Aging Act are examples of other legislative landmarks during this same time period that provided governmental benefits and resources for the benefit of older persons.

**Emergence of the “Greedy Geezer” Stereotype**

The aging policies of the 1960’s and 1970’s finally gave way to an unprecedented attack on elders (Moody, 2007). During the course of the 1980’s, a new old age stereotype began to emerge that depicted aged persons as “prosperous, hedonistic, politically powerful, and selfish” (Binstock, 2010). During this time, several prominent publications published pieces portraying a new negative and unflattering stereotype of older adults, including the New Republic (1988), with its iconic cover that included the caption, “greedy geezers”. This depiction gave rise to worldwide attention regarding the claim that older people were gaining too many resources at the expense of the young (Moody, 2007).

As is true with the compassionate ageism ideology, the all-encompassing stereotype of the oldest population as greedy and self-interested does not give justice to the complexity and diversity of cohorts. For example, most women and minorities are often living far less than a comfortable and excessive life in their later years. There are many factors that influence the economic wellbeing of women and minorities in later life and leads to the greater reliance upon social benefits in retirement.

Over the course of their working life, women typically earn much less than men. Many women take time out of the work place to raise children or provide care for a relative. Women are also often unmarried for a longer period of their lives either due to divorce or death of a spouse. Therefore, a woman’s ability to accumulate enough assets to support themselves in retirement is much more difficult. Understanding that any cohort is a complex makeup of individuals of different races, ethnicities, and genders is important in the hopes of diffusing hostility and competition between generations.

**Conflicts and Solidarities Between Generations**

A key element in the current concept of generational conflict is the consciousness of a divide or split in the experience and outlook of one cohort from those of earlier cohorts (Higgs & Gilleard, 2010). Higgs and Gilleard (2010) differentiate this interpretation from the more traditional generational conflict associated with clashes between parents and their adult children. The problem of justice between generations encompasses both social expenditures for an aging society and policies for environmental protections and fiscal integrity (Moody, 2007). As Moody (2007) notes, the principals that frame the problem of social justice are rooted in broader social values that pertain to duties to future generations or posterity.

Each generation feels a duty or obligation to manifest progress for the benefit of future generations and for most of the history of mankind since the Middle Ages, progress from one generation to the next has been sustained. However, since the fiscal and environmental issues that have come to light in the last century, a sense of progress for the benefit of the next generation has begun to be tested. It is at this point, with the decline of the idea of progress, that the ethical problem of justice between generations becomes acutely felt (Moody, 2007).

From a political perspective, the Baby Boom Generation has been feared in some regard because of the sheer size of the cohort. Many fear that the Boomers have the potential to influence political agendas for their own benefit. However, just as the baby boomer cohort is not a homogenous group with regard to race, ethnicity, or gender, it also does not participate in the electoral process as one block. Overall, older individuals continue to vote for funding for the education of children and do not in any way sway the vote on social welfare policies in their favor (Bengston & Oyama, 2007).

**Intergenerational Solidarity**

Intergenerational solidarity is best understood within the context of shared expectations and obligations regarding the ageing of individuals and the succession of generations (Bengston & Oyama, 2007). Williamson, McNamara and Howling (2003) assert that the claim that each generation has more in common than they do competing interests centers on three types of common interest. The three areas of support for the intergenerational solidarity argument are: (1) public welfare policies, such as Social Security and Medicare afford older adults the financial resources to remain independent and less of a burden on the younger generations; (2) the elderly have a stake in policies, such as education, that target the young and produce a future productive workforce, and (3) there is a two way flow of services and support between generations (Williamson, McNamara & Howling, 2003).

Throughout the work in this course, the inherent flaw in the persistent pursuit of autonomy as applied to aging, has been discussed. One might argue that the same philosophy of autonomy drives a portion of the debate on intergenerational equity. Should generations be self-sufficient and not rely upon the collective for assistance and support? As Holstein, Parks & Waymack (2011) assert, public policies should “represent a commitment to intergenerational solidarity” and discard the idea that individuals, families and markets have the ability “if left alone” to rectify the profound economic, social, and existence difficulties of our time.

**Intergenerational Conflict**

The growth of the aging population around the globe has caused many governments to develop policies and programs to address the economic implications of having an older society. Some of the economic implications of global aging are the cost of supporting of an older population that is no longer participating in the workforce and providing medical care to that same population. The root of generational conflict lies in the ability of a nation state to provide for all its citizens and the growing fear that there will not be enough financial or natural resources for all.

The crisis of old age policy is shaped around two major premises. First, it is based on the fear that longevity increases the risk of the older population consuming the resources at the expense of the young. Second, it is based on the fear that the healthcare system will collapse under the weight of a chronically ill aging population (Estes, 2011). The crisis of a large aging population can be analyzed from the perspective of the power struggle that ensues over resource allocation and how the social institutions are organized to address this.

On a macro level, aging is often equated with the loss of power and economic dependency that results from the implementation of governmental policies. The establishment of social welfare systems, such as Medicare and Social Security, helps to reinforce this conceptualization. On a micro level however, an individual’s experience of aging may be quite different. A person’s aging experience often depends on race, social class, and gender. Aging policies have historically benefited those who were already privileged, which in many cases are upper class white males. Those who have greater socioeconomic advantages during their lifetime tend to have a better experience of aging overall.

**Political and Social Responses to Aging**

The challenge of justice between generations is not limited to competition between generations for diminishing resources, but extends to a range of challenges that appear to put future generations at risk (Moody, 2007). Even though the specific programs and policy proposals at the core of the debate shift every few years, the central themes that influence the generational equity debate continue to influence the framing of the old-age policy issues (Williamson, McNamara & Howling, 2003). The attitudes towards the experience of aging play an important role in the development of public policies and social responses to support the aging population.

**Successful Aging and Productive Aging**

The model of successful aging proposed by John Rowe and Robert Kahn (1987) nearly thirty years ago, is perhaps one of the most widely known and cited models in the field of gerontology. This model uses three components to gage successful aging: avoiding disease and disability, high cognitive and physical function, and active engagement with life (Rowe & Kahn, 1987). At that time, this model marked the turning point that enabled the gerontology community to move away from thinking as old age solely as a period of disengagement. It provided an opportunity to explore the valuable possibilities that elders bring to the “societal table”.

Rowe & Kahn (1987) created groundbreaking work highlighting the benefits of healthy lifestyles and behaviors and its effect on aging. The successful aging concept, which equates to a healthy and engaged lifestyle, put the person in the center of the paradigm. Individual behavior was believed to be the key to aging well. However, this theory focuses almost exclusively on health status and leaves out many other factors that come in to play as a result of the aging (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). As Holstein and Minkler (2003) argue, the very heart of the issue with the successful aging concept is that it suggests that the “great majority of elders in wheelchairs could indeed have been on cross-country skis had they but made the right choices and practiced the right behaviors can burden rather than liberate older people." Further, Rowe and Kahn’s model of successful aging “fails to honor the many ways in which individuals face the psychological, emotional, or contextual changes that accompany aging (Holstein & Minkler, 2003).

While the idea of successful aging is an aspiration for many, it is not a platform on which to base social or public policy with regard to aging. Aging is a personal phenomenon and it is subject the individual circumstances of a person’s life. Many in our society can be “successful” in aging, but may still be in need of support from society. Public and social policies should be designed in such a manner to take care as a central fact of human life and dependency as the heart of human condition (Holstein, Parks & Waymack, 2011).

**Worldview of Intergenerational Obligations, Rights, and Responsibilities**

While the “generational equity debate” has not disappeared since it began in the 1980’s, it has assumed new forms in different countries (Moody, 2007). There are four global trends that suggest the contract across generations is changing globally: (a) the extension of the life course; (b) changes in the age structures of nations; (c) changes in family structures and relationships; and (d) changes in governmental responsibilities (Bengtson, Lowenstein, Putney, & Gans, 2003 as cited in Bengston & Oyama, 2007).

As a growing global issue, intergenerational equity is viewed primarily in terms of economic support and caregiving for the elderly, however, the degree to which it is viewed as conflict varies by nation (Bengston & Oyama, 2007). Historical context or existing social policies play a role in determining the degree to which the obligations and responsibilities to the older generations is viewed in a positive or negative viewpoint (Bengston & Oyama, 2007).

Nations with bustling or stable economies view intergenerational relationships less as in conflict with the greater good than nations with struggling economies.

Industrialized nations have distinct advantages over developing countries in the area of support for aging populations. Available economic resources, political infrastructure and stability, as well as cultural constraints all play an important role in the development of social policies to address the complexities of an aging population. However, beyond the biological aging process and the growth of the aging population, aging policies are inevitably affected by a wide variety of emerging trends—regional issues, disease patterns, rapid changes in the health sector, globalization, urbanization, new family roles, and persistent inequalities—necessitating review and revision of those policies (Serrano, Latorre, & Gatz, 2014).

Developing nations are facing vast healthcare challenges. One of the greatest issues is the fact that populations in developing countries are growing old at a pace that exceeds the accumulation of financial resources available to support the costs of an aging population. Communicable and chronic diseases are already placing significant strain on existing healthcare systems. Along with these constraints, developing countries do not have the political infrastructure available to help support the healthcare system. Given these hurdles, the pressures of an aging population will be difficult to respond to. Many countries will not have the resources to adapt, improve, or expand their healthcare systems (Beard, Biggs, Bloom, et al., 2011). It will be an uphill battle as developing countries are advised to follow the same recommendations as industrialized countries to improve their health care system, however, with far fewer resources to do so.

In both industrialized and developing nations, prolonging life seems a desirable goal, but it comes with high costs. With the rising costs and new advances in expensive medical technology, decisions about life prolongation are no longer questions just for medical practitioners. Who will get access to valuable healthcare resources? The common stereotype of old age as a time of sickness and decline perpetuates the fear and denial of aging process. This mindset also exaggerates the expectations of the demand placed on society by an aging population.

**VI. Conclusion**

The challenges that the newest generations of older adults face, may simply best be addressed by looking to the development of a better world for the future in whatever way this is possible and within whatever contexts older persons live (Rubinstein & Medeiros, 2015).

In devising global policies for an aging society of the future, the challenge between generations assumes unprecedented importance on a historical scale, both in aging policy and in concern over the environment (Moody, 2007). With regard to impending generational conflict, current theory challenges this position, arguing that both younger and older groups find themselves working out their circumstances in conditions determined more by the contingencies of the market than by social policy (Higgs & Gilleard, 2010).

An ethical consideration of the intergenerational obligations, duties, and responsibilities provides an opportunity for all members of society to hear each side of a debate without pre-conceived ideas or solutions (Holstein, Parks & Waymack, 2011). In this light, members of each generation can work for the common good and take part in developing the means to get there. Ethics can guide individuals, especially policymakers, to know when to make compromises in order to achieve the overarching goal.

In much of the debate about the obligations, rights, and responsibilities toward the elderly in the population, the old are viewed as the “other”. The debate is framed as “the old” versus “the young.” However, in my opinion, generational debate should really be looked at as “us” against our “future selves”, for we will all one day be a member of the oldest generation in society. It is vitally important to frame the discussion this way in order to promote public policies that mirror the beliefs of a society that values all members of society and recognizes the contributions of each generation.

**References**

Beard, J., Biggs, S., Bloom, D. E., Fried, L. P., Hogan, P. R., Kalache, A., & Olshansky, S. J. (2012). *Global population ageing: peril or promise?* (No. 8912). Program on the Global Demography of Aging.

Bengtson, V. L., & Oyama, P. S. (2007). Intergenerational solidarity: Strengthening economic and social ties. *New York: United Nations Headquarters*.

Binstock, R. H. (2010). From compassionate ageism to intergenerational conflict?. *The Gerontologist*, *50*(5), 574-585.

Clark, P. G. (1991). Ethical dimensions of quality of life in aging: Autonomy vs. collectivism in the United States and Canada. *The Gerontologist*, *31*(5), 631-639.

Doron, I. (2013) International rights of older persons: Ageism, justice, and social policy. American Bar Association Journal BiFocal, 35(2) p. 52-55.

Estes, C. L. (2011). Crises and old age policy. In Handbook of Sociology of Aging (pp. 297-320). Springer New York.

Higgs, P., & Gilleard, C. (2010). Generational conflict, consumption and the ageing welfare state in the United Kingdom. *Ageing and Society*, *30*(08), 1439-1451.

Holstein, M. B., & Minkler, M. (2003). Self, society, and the “new gerontology”. *The Gerontologist*, *43*(6), 787-796.

Holstein, M., Parks, J., & Waymack, M. (2011). Ethics, Aging, and Society: The Critical Turn. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company.

Minkler, M. (1992). Generational equity or interdependence. *Diversity: New approaches of ethnic minority aging*, 65-72.

Moody, H. R. (2007). Justice between generations: the recent history of an idea. *Critical perspectives on ageing societies*, 125-137.

Moody, H.R. and Sasser, J.R. (2012). Aging Concepts and Controversies. Los Angeles: Sage.

The New Republic (1988). Magazine cover.

Pew Research Center, Attitudes about Aging: A Global Perspective. January, 2014.

Rowe, J. W., & Kahn, R. L. (1987). Human aging: Usual and successful. *Sci- ence, 237,*143-149.

Rubinstein, R. L., & de Medeiros, K. (2014). “Successful Aging,” Gerontological theory and neoliberalism: A qualitative critique. *The Gerontologist*, gnu080.

Serrano, J. P., Latorre, J. M., & Gatz, M. (2014). Spain: Promoting the welfare of older adults in the context of population aging. *The Gerontologist*, *54*(5), 733-740.

United Nations. Department of Economic. World population ageing 2009 (Vol. 295). United Nations Publications.

Williamson, J. B., McNamara, T. K., & Howling, S. A. (2003). Generational equity, generational interdependence, and the framing of the debate over social security reform. *Journal of Society & Social Welfare*, *30*, 3.

Wisensale, S. K. (1988). Generational equity and intergenerational policies. *The Gerontologist*, *28*(6), 773-778.