



Embracing Aging

How New Attitudes and Changing Lifestyles are Shaping Perceptions of Aging

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As an educator and gerontologist, I have been teaching courses on aging-related issues and topics for the past 15 years. When I teach introductory courses on gerontology and aging, I have students listen to and read the lyrics of the famous Beatles song, When I'm 64. The younger my students are and the older I grow, less and less of them know the lyrics by heart. All the while, it remains a useful exercise and suffices in illustrating major points that we cover in the course – age is socially constructed and we decide as social creatures living in society how to make meaning of age in all its forms, particularly chronological and functional age. In class we pour over the lyrics and deconstruct the meaning behind the song. Paul McCartney and John Lennon wrote When I'm 64 in 1966 and released it on their St. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band album in 1967; McCartney was 16 years old.

The lyrics illustrate a ballad by a young man to his lover as he imagines what it will be like to traverse a life course together in love. What is most pertinent about this exercise is our reflection on what McCartney imagined 64 would be like as a 16-year-old young man in 1967. He based much of that imagined reality of what he saw the 64 year olds in his world experiencing. Many of which were losing their hair, needing assistance with activities of daily living, and some simply wasting away [as referenced in the song lyrics].

In 1967, the average life expectancy at birth was 68 years and in 2015, it was 79. This dramatic increase in life expectancy is thought to be one of the greatest achievements of the 20th Century. More and more people are living longer and in greater numbers. Adding decades to the life course over the last 100 years has dramatically changed how we perceive and experience aging. The changes impact how we view and experience societal aging as well as individual aging.

We can look around and see that in many respects 65 is the new 50. People are continuing to retire at 65 and then many are reinventing themselves for their third act in life. Older adults are reimagining later life and redefining what it means to be old. Later life has become a time of contribution and productivity for many older adults. For example, many people are volunteering in later life or engaging in generative acts. Older adults are traveling in greater numbers, exploring the world, and returning to school to take advantage of late life learning opportunities. There is great potential in later life. Georgia O'Keefe reached her greatest creative potential and expression in her seventies. For many, later life is time where people blossom and successfully tap into creative insights, deep wisdom, and reach a place of perfectly wonderful and complete individuality, personal freedom, and solid sense of personhood. With advances in life expectancy, we are seeing the emergence of new life stages in old age.

The phenomenon of the Third Age is as a period of a healthy, productive, secure, and engaged retirement. This new life stage is the result of the 20th century demographic and social advances described earlier. Changes in the perceptions and realities of aging have transformed the very meaning of what it is to be old. With a growing proportion of the U.S. population realistically anticipating the ability to retire and yet remain active for a number of years, the Third Age has taken shape as an unprecedented opportunity to enrich the experience of aging by providing a new and expanded model of old age to precede and, in many cases, supersede a traditional view of a period of inevitable decrement and decline.

Older adults are reimagining their aging and old age in many ways. It was once that old age, marked by the initial transition into retirement, was once the start of the long period of decline and disengagement from society. That is no longer the case. It is now estimated that once a person retires they will experience several additional major life transitions. These transitions can include re-entry into the labor force or launching an entirely new encore career, moving and relocating, losing a spouse or other loved ones, re-partnering or remarrying, becoming a caregiver, managing on the onset of new and illness or diseases, transition in a state of impairment or disability, or learning to live on fixed income. In short, similar to earlier in the life course, there are many changing and fluid variables that invite opportunity for transition and growth well into advanced age. These realities also shape and change our perceptions and experiences of aging.

Part of reimagining old age is navigating these transitions and making meaning of these new life ages and stages. Later life has changed over the last decade. Older age is a time of life that holds the possibility for many older adults' continued development, personal fulfillment, and increasing levels of life satisfaction and well-being. McCartney, now 73, is enjoying opportunities that old age is affording him. He is living an old age reimagined as all older adults can do. The last decade has created a more affirming time for older age. As a gerontologist, I understand these changing perceptions to be positive and encouraging, giving us hope for what the next 10 years have in store for how we will understand, perceive, define, experience, and make meaning of old age and later life.

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