

Reflections

The ethnographic self is not separable from the Self. Who we are and what we can be—what we can study, how we can write about that which we study—are tied to how a knowledge system disciplines itself and its members and to its methods for claiming authority over both the subject matter and its members (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005: 965).

In undertaking a doctoral project on ageism that involved interviewing both older and younger adults, it was essential to uncover my own biases and assumptions about the aging process. Consequently, self-reflexivity is key to an examination of the complex processes and historical and sociopolitical contexts that have formed my own perceptions on age and aging (Richardson, 2005). But to do so means having the willingness to reveal openly and honestly the personal experiences that have shaped my perceptions – both negatively and positively.

My perceptions on age and aging to a large degree mirror the literature's emphasis on the formation of attitudes about aging and older people through personal experience. Like most people today, my earliest perceptions of aging and older adults, which had both positive and negative aspects, were formed through my relationships with family members. As I grew older, I had personal interactions as a young person with older adults that were outside of my family. In addition, because I was very much a product of the historical and political climate that I grew up in, I also absorbed societally constructed ageism through: 1) the segregation of older and younger cohorts in North American society (Hagestad & Uhlenberg 2005; Gilleard & Higgs, 2016); 2) popular culture depictions of youth and older age (Chivers, 2011; Gullette, 2004, 2011; Blaikie, 1999); and 3) a North American fear of illness and death (Greenberg, et al, 2002; Higgs & Gilleard, 2019). While fortunately I did not personally experience discrimination in the workplace or housing as I have grown older, in non-workplace settings (such as in theatres and stores, on public transportation, or even simply walking on a sidewalk) I have certainly felt the invisibility assigned to older people (particularly women), along with an assumption that I am incompetent and have nothing to contribute.

Additionally, I have come to realize that I certainly have not been immune from *internalizing* negative attitudes and ideas about aging and older adults presented and reinforced in popular culture. I became even more aware through the interviews with my participants of the mechanism of the internalization process, when I realized that while you may be aware of ageist images and ideology on the one hand, you can also easily absorb it at the same time due to its insidious and often subliminal

messages. In addition, because the internalization process begins in childhood (DePallo, et al., 1995; Gullette, 2004; Hurd Clark, 2010) and reinforced throughout our lives, it is in many ways, impossible to recall what the societal and/or popular culture messages of ageism were at that time in our lives. I understood through the interviews with my students that I had undoubtedly internalized many ageist ideas that I was still not aware of.

Returning to influences: I am aware though that I was very much influenced by the cultural and historical time period that I grew up in as well as by popular culture as a teenager and young adult. Until I was in my mid-twenties however, all of my personal experience with older adults came from childhood encounters with my grandparents and my parent's family friends. As a young woman in my late teens and early twenties, I was part of the 1960s-70s counterculture, which included 'sex, drugs and rock and roll' as well as Vietnam protests, feminism, and the civil rights movement in the US. But this was also the era in which the slogan "don't trust anyone over 30" was a key component. It was essential to be 'young' in the 1960s and the designation of youth only applied to people in their teens or twenties.

My opinions towards age and older people only started to change, when at 25 years of age I found myself teaching weaving to adults who were mostly 'older' women between 50 to 80 years of age in small rural villages throughout Prince Edward Island. It was in this context of working and living in these rural environments for three years that the stereotypical ideas I had developed of an 'older' person were strongly challenged by the women I met on the Island. I discovered very quickly that rather than being a homogenous group of people, characteristics of older people varied greatly. The women I taught were individuals, just as people were in my age group. Some were married, some widowed, some lived in clandestine common-law partnerships because of the unofficial relationship codes in their communities. Some of the women were very conventional, and others very curious and adventurous.

Nevertheless, despite my positive interactions with these older rural women, my perceptions about older people and aging did not really change in my personal life for many years. Over the course of my life I had internalized ageist attitudes and assumptions, which I expressed through 'humorous' remarks, 'over the hill' parties, and dismissive thoughts about aging. For example, during the time I was a weaving instructor in PEI, I remember having an "over the hill" party for my Charlottetown friends. On another occasion, friends held an "over the hill" party for my 30th birthday, complete with birthday gifts to match the

theme: bags of prunes and boxes of Ex-Lax for constipation; Pepto-Bismol for digestive problems; creams to prevent wrinkles; unattractive stockings; and kitschy kitchen aprons (an item I appreciate very much now). None of the positive qualities of the older women I encountered or any positive aspects of getting older (continued curiosity in the world; trying new things, like weaving; or resisting the pressure to conform that they were subjected to in their small communities) were represented in these gifts. I am embarrassed to say, that at that time in my life, aging was something to mock and laugh at, but underneath the laughter was fear and avoidance of aging, illness and death.

It was many decades later, when I myself was an 'older' adult before I realized that I had absorbed an extremely ageist perspective over the course of my lifetime, and a perspective that only shifted marginally because of the opportunity I had in my twenties to work and live with a varied group of older rural Prince Edward Island women. But even then, it took years after I left the Island to understand that my perceptions on age had been positively affected as a direct consequence of meeting those amazing women.

Over the course of my lifetime through personal experience, academic study, and work-related interactions I have learned that aging is not a homogenous or negative process but rather one that varies greatly by individual, society and culture. Through the many positive experiences I have had with older adults (and as an older person) I see the possibilities and opportunities that aging provides. However, I am also not immune from the overt and covert widespread ageism that permeates North American society, as well as the gendered aspect of ageism. An insidious process that is largely hidden in our society, ageism is easily internalized. As an older person, and specifically as an older woman, I know what it is to feel "invisible" in society, not noticed at all. Returning to university in 2005 as a 'mature' or older student offered an unexpected benefit. Although I had felt the effects of the invisibility factor as early as my mid 40s, when I walked into university classes I suddenly became visible again. Surrounded by young people in their late teens and early 20s, I stood out and was always noticed, particularly by professors. It was a very odd, but not unpleasant feeling to become visible again after many years of invisibility.