

How We Talk About Aging Matters

Ageism, Language, and Older Adults

Presentation at the Meeting of the Commission
on Older Adult Rhode Islanders

September 18, 2024

Phillip G. Clark, ScD
Professor and Director
Program in Gerontology and
Rhode Island Geriatric Education Center
University of Rhode island

Copyright © 2024 by Phillip G. Clark

Not for copying or distribution without permission of the author.

**A story about my double experience
of aging on the way to Boston**

**We are constantly making
assumptions about aging and older
adults**

**These are shaped by the society in
which we live and its social, economic,
and political institutions**

**We must analyze the meaning of
words and the wording of meanings**

My First Class in a Course on Gerontology

- I ask the students to think of 3 words that first come to mind when I say, “older adults”
- Results
 - Negative words
 - Frail, sick, dementia, dependent, nursing home
 - Positive words
 - Grandparent, wisdom, experience
 - Neutral words
 - Retirement, Florida, golf

**If you've seen one older person,
you've seen one older person**

**Older adults are more unique
than any other age group; they
have had a whole lifetime to
become who they are**

Why Language is Important

- How we talk about older adults shows how we think about them
- Stereotypes of aging are revealed in our language
- Language is used in everyday conversation as well as program descriptions and policies

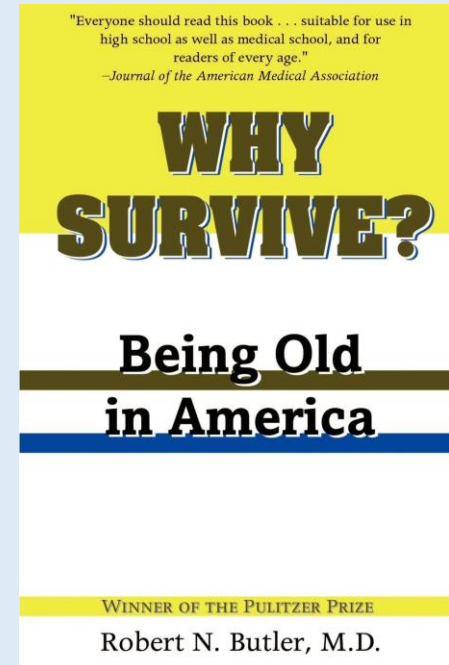
**Ageism is the last of the “ism’s” to be
recognized and confronted as
discriminatory**

**Even older adults themselves fall
victim to ageist attitudes and beliefs**

Definition of Ageism

“ A process of systematic stereotyping or discrimination against people because they are old.”

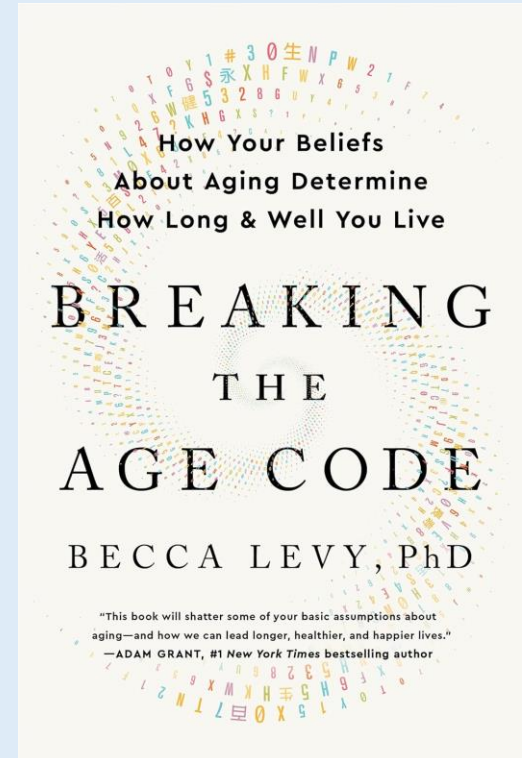
- Robert Butler, 1975



Impacts of Ageism

Ageism contributes to chronic disease, reduces the quality of life, and shortens the life expectancy of older adults.

- Becca Levy (2022)



Four S's of the Geriatric Ageist Apocalypse

Older adults are:

- Sick
- Senile
- Sedentary
- Sexless

Where our language matters

- Everyday interactions with older adults
- Program development and implementation
- Public policies and the problems they address

Potentially Problematic Terms to Describe or Address Older Adults

- As a group
 - Seniors
 - The elderly
 - Golden agers
 - Boomers
- As individuals
 - “Honey”
 - “Sweetie”
 - “Dear”

Microaggressions on Aging

- Microaggressions
 - Commonplace verbal, behavioral or environmental slights, whether intentional or not, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward people of different races, cultures, beliefs, genders, or ages
- Language
 - Infantilizing older adults
 - Using humor and jokes
- Behavior
 - Patronizing
 - Dismissive

Program and Policy Development

- Factual information
 - What data are used to support a program or policy?
- Values
 - What is the importance of the program or policy goal and for whom is it important?
- Assumptions
 - What assumptions about older adults are being made and who made them?

Some Questions to Summarize

- Are we looking below the surface and behind the reasoning for programs and policies?
- What ageist assumptions about older persons are being made, often subconsciously?
- What characterizations of older adults are being presented?
- Are older adults seen as a problem?
- Have older adults been included in the development of these programs and policies?