

# AGING

## *Learning Outcomes*

At the end of this chapter you will be able to do the following.

- Define gerontology, life expectancy, and life course.
- Compare theories of aging for their usefulness today.
- Recall the stages of grief.
- Analyze inequalities related to aging.

## WHAT IS THE STUDY OF AGING?

The United States of America is inhabited by many diverse people, including distinguishable generations of society's members based on age. **Gerontology** is *the scientific study of the processes and phenomena of aging and growing old*. Gerontologists investigate age, aging, and the aged. Examples of questions that would interest a gerontologist include the following: What does it mean to be a particular age in a society? What does the age 21 signify in America? What is this process we call aging and how does it affect us and society? What does it mean to be old in the U.S.?

Definitions of being elderly vary. For example, the government typically sets 65 to be the elderly years, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) finds 50 to be the eligible age of membership, and many define their 70s or 80s as the time they begin to feel elderly. Gerontology is multi-disciplinary, involving medical and biological scientists, social scientists, and even financial and economic scientists all studying the processes of aging from their discipline's point of view.

**Social Gerontology** is *the sociological subfield of gerontology which focuses on the social aspects of aging*. Sociology focuses on the broad understanding of the experiences of people at specific ages, such as their health, their emotional and social wellness, and their quality of life, just to mention a few.

The future growth of the U.S. elderly population is immense in comparison to previous census tabulations and growth rates. Table 1 shows the number and percent of people in the U.S. by age category. Those 15 to 64 years old make up the majority of the U.S. population, 67.1% while the 65 and older age group only accounts for 12.7% in 2008. In Figure 1 you can see tremendous growth in the proportion of the elderly group. In 2000, they were only one in eight members of U.S. society, but in 2050 they are projected to be one in five. In Figure 2 you can see that the oldest old, 85 years and older, is also growing rapidly. This means that in general more people are living longer. In fact there are more centenarians than ever before. A **centenarian** is *a person who has had his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday*. U.S. census counts indicated about 37,000 centenarians in 1990 and about 50,000 in 2000.<sup>1</sup>

Table 1. Number and Percent of United States Population by Age Category, 2008.<sup>2</sup>

	65+	15-64	Less than 14	United States Total
Number	38,690,169	203,987,724	61,146,753	303,824,646
Percent	12.7	67.1	20.1	100

Figure 1. Estimated Percentage of U.S. Population that will be Elderly and Non-Elderly, 2000-2050.<sup>3</sup>

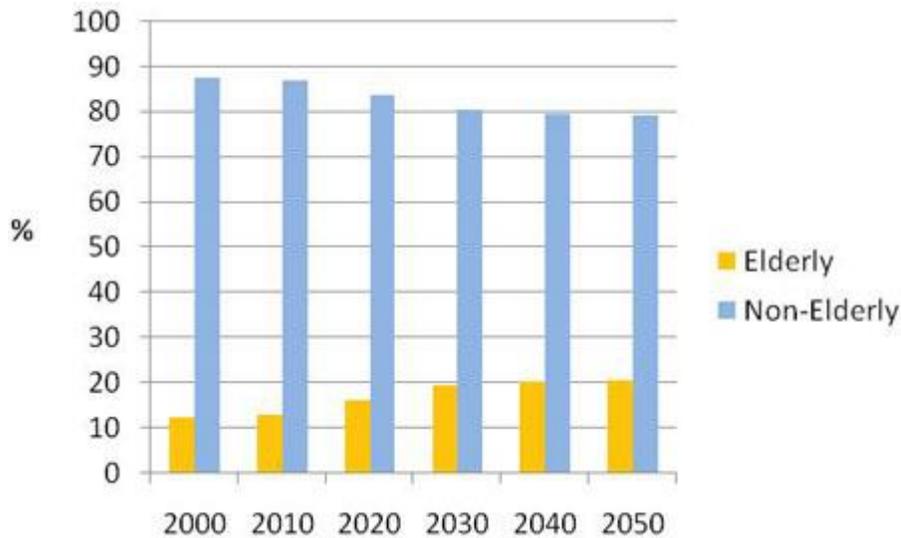
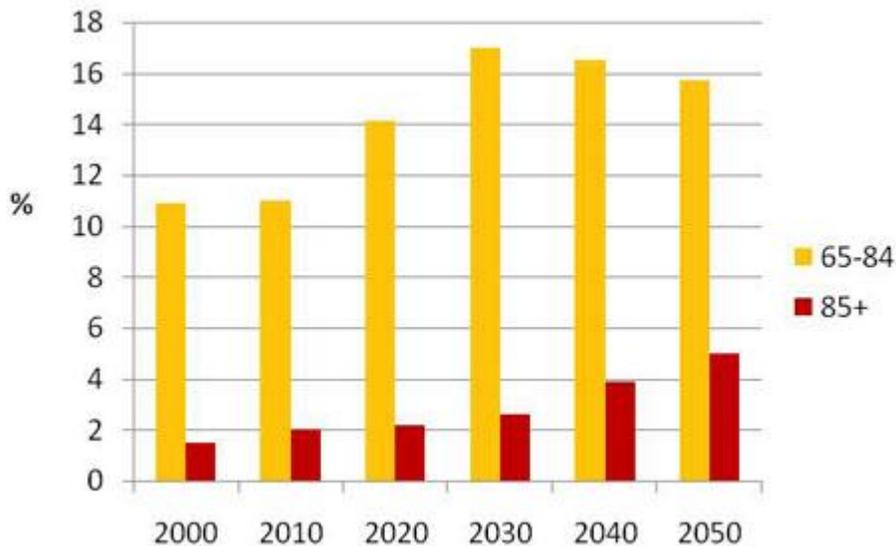


Figure 2. Estimated Percentage of U.S. Population that will be 65-84 and over 85, 2000-2050.<sup>4</sup>



In many societies the elderly are revered (especially Asian societies). **Filial piety** is the value, respect, and reverence of one's elderly which is often accompanied by care giving and support of the elderly. In Western countries, the elderly and their extended families are considered co-equals and mutually independent until circumstances necessitate assistance from children and other family members.

## UNDERSTANDING THE GENERATIONS OF LIFE

A **life course** is an ideal sequence of events and positions the average person is expected to experience as he/she matures and moves through life. Dependence and independence levels change over the life course. In Table 2, you can see that from birth to the teen years, children's levels of dependence are relatively high. Newborns have little ability to nurture others, but as they are socialized and grow into their later-teen roles things change. By young adulthood, independence is a prime value which leads many to move out on their own and gain their own experiences. A young adult's ability to nurture is moderate, but often dormant since most pursue avenues of preparation for their adult lives rather than immediately beginning their own families. Married and cohabiting couples are much more independent and capable of nurturing and remain so throughout the grand-parenting years. As the life course progresses into later life, the oldest elderly begin to lose their independence as their health declines to the point that their resources lag behind the daily demands placed upon them.

Table 2. Diagram of Dependence and Independence over the Life Course.<sup>5</sup>

STAGE	DEPENDENCE-INDEPENDENCE LEVEL	OWN ABILITY TO NURTURE
Birth to Preschool	Totally dependent	Low
Preschool	Mostly dependent	Low
School to Preteen	Somewhat dependent	Low
Teen to Young Adult	Increasingly independent	Moderate
Young Adult	Moderately independent	Moderate
Young Married	Mostly independent	Somewhat high
Young Parents	Independent	High
Parents	Independent	High
Grandparents	Independent	High
Great-Grandparents	Somewhat independent	Moderate

The loss of independence is a part of the process of senescence. **Senescence** is the social, emotional, biological, intellectual, and spiritual processes associated with aging. In U.S. society there are different meanings to being in a specific age group. The ages 18, 21, and 50 for example hold specific meaning. At 18 one can vote, enter into contracts, and join the military. At 21 drinking is added to the list. At 50 a person can join AARP and some businesses offer senior discounts, such as Holiday Inn, Banana Republic, and Dollar Rent A Car. These privileges are not the same in other countries. U.S. society has attached social importance to these age markers. Think of movies you have seen lately, are the stars old?

Are there love scenes between older men and women? Youth is associated with beauty and sexuality and old is associated with loss of beauty and lack of sexuality. In other countries the markers vary, for example drinking in European countries is socially acceptable at a much younger age than in the U.S. In some countries, the old are revered and valued and still seen as sexual beings.

For many people in modern societies, aging is feared, vilified, and surgically and cosmetically repaired. We do not like being “off our game.” Yet many elderly find their lives very satisfying and they tend to report higher levels of self-esteem than do younger members of society. Because we tend to value youth and youthful appearance, entertainment biases appear in the U.S. Many people hold biases and prejudices against the elderly. **Ageism** is *prejudice against a person based on chronological age*. But ageism is a unique form of bias. One may be prejudiced against another racial group, cultural or ethnic group, or religious group while never being at risk of becoming a member of that group. Ironically, ageist people are aging right now and will be until the day they die; they are essentially biased against their own future status.

## SOCIAL GERONTOLOGY THEORIES

**Disengagement Theory** claims that *elderly people realize the inevitability of death and begin to systematically disengage from their previous roles while society simultaneously disengages from the elderly person*. This was the first formal aging theory but it fell short because the scientific data did not support its assumptions. Most older people do not disengage from their society. There is quite a bit of support for Continuity and Activity Theories.<sup>6</sup>

For those who seek understanding of the elderly, there are three social theories that might help to understand later-life experiences. **Continuity Theory** claims that *older adults maintain patterns in their later years which they had in their younger years*. The elderly adapt to the many changes which accompany aging using a variety of effective personal strategies they developed earlier in their life. For example, those who participated in outdoor activities in their younger years tend to continue to do so as older adults, although they tend to accommodate their health and fitness limitations as they deem appropriate.



**Activity Theory** claims that *the elderly benefit from high levels of activities, especially meaningful activities that help to replace lost life roles after retirement*. The key to success in later-life is staying active and, by doing so, resist the social pressures that limit an older person’s world.<sup>7</sup>

To really understand the elderly today you have to understand the larger social changes that have transpired over the last century.

Around 1900, U.S. elderly held a more cherished place in the hearts of younger family members. Most homes were intergenerational with grandparents, parents, and children all living together.<sup>8</sup>

In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that there were 105.5 million households in the country with only 3.7% or nearly four million households multigenerational.<sup>9</sup> Today, not having older relatives live with their children and grandchildren is the norm; however, in years past elderly family members were considered a valuable asset with their wisdom and support of their children and grandchildren.

**Modernization Theory** claims that *industrialization and modernization have lowered the power and influence which the elderly once had and that this has led to much exclusion of the elderly from community roles.* Even though this theory is not as well established and is somewhat controversial, it has made a place in science for understanding how large-scale social forces have impacted the individual and collective lives of the elderly. In modern societies, the economy has grown to a state that has created new levels of prosperity for most, new technologies have outpaced the ability of the elderly to understand and use them, and the elderly are living much longer and are not essential to the economic survival of the family as was the case in the past. Modernization Theory can help us to understand why the elderly have become stigmatized and devalued over the last century.

**The Life Course Perspective** is prominent in the field of gerontology. It is *a lens with which to view the age-related transitions that are socially created and are recognized and shared by members of a society.* It aids in our understanding of change among individuals and populations over time by looking at the interrelation between individual biography and historical social structures.<sup>10</sup>

The life course perspective is a theoretical framework that focuses on the timing of events that occur in an individual's lifetime. A life course view of marriage is of an ongoing career that occurs within the context of other life course events.<sup>11</sup> The essential elements of the life course perspective include five themes: 1.) multiple time clocks, 2.) social context of development, 3.) dynamic view of process and change, 4.) heterogeneity in structures and processes, and 5.) a multidisciplinary view.

The first element is a focus on multiple time clocks or events that impact the individual. These multiple time clocks include ontogenetic, or individual, time which is comprised of personal events, generational time which consists of family transitions or events, and historical time which refers to social events. It is crucial to recognize the importance of the interactions of these time frames, since for instance historical events will impact individual's life trajectories, such as the events of war or economic depression. Changes over historical time, such as the advent of no-fault divorce interact with generational time to increase the number of children whose parents divorce, which in turn interacts with individual time and may bring about a personal choice to divorce.

Second, the social context of development is also a focus of this perspective. One's location within the broader social structure, the social creation of meanings, cultural context and change, and the interplay of macro- and micro-levels of development play an important

role in the life course perspective.

Third, the life course perspective has a dynamic view of process and change. It focuses on the dialectic of continuity and change in human development. Age, period, and cohort effects are linked by their interaction with one another link microlevel and macrolevel phenomena. This perspective allows the researcher to disentangle the effects of age, period, and cohort to obtain a more accurate picture of family dynamics. Age effects are an artifact of maturation of individuals while period effects influence the life courses of individuals across birth cohorts. Cohort effects cause a differentiation in life patterns of consecutive birth cohorts.<sup>12</sup>

The fourth theme of the life course perspective looks at heterogeneity in structures and processes. It acknowledges diversity across the range of patterns—increasing diversity over time with age at the cohort and individual level, and diversity over time with social change. The fifth theme emphasizes the utility of multidisciplinary perspectives on development. Development is biological, psychological, and social and all of these perspectives must be considered when studying human development.<sup>13</sup>

The life course perspective is not merely a variation of developmental theories since the latter emphasizes a normative sequence of stages in one's life. The life course perspective acknowledges the variance in the possible sequence of events, as well as, the omission of some events, such as not having children. This perspective also acknowledges the effect of social and historical events on the individual's life course (e.g., war). Life course scholars also are aware of the intra-cohort differences that are influenced by these social and historical events. The life course perspective views marriage as the uniting of two separate life histories which have been influenced by social events of the past and will be influenced by social events of the future.<sup>14</sup>

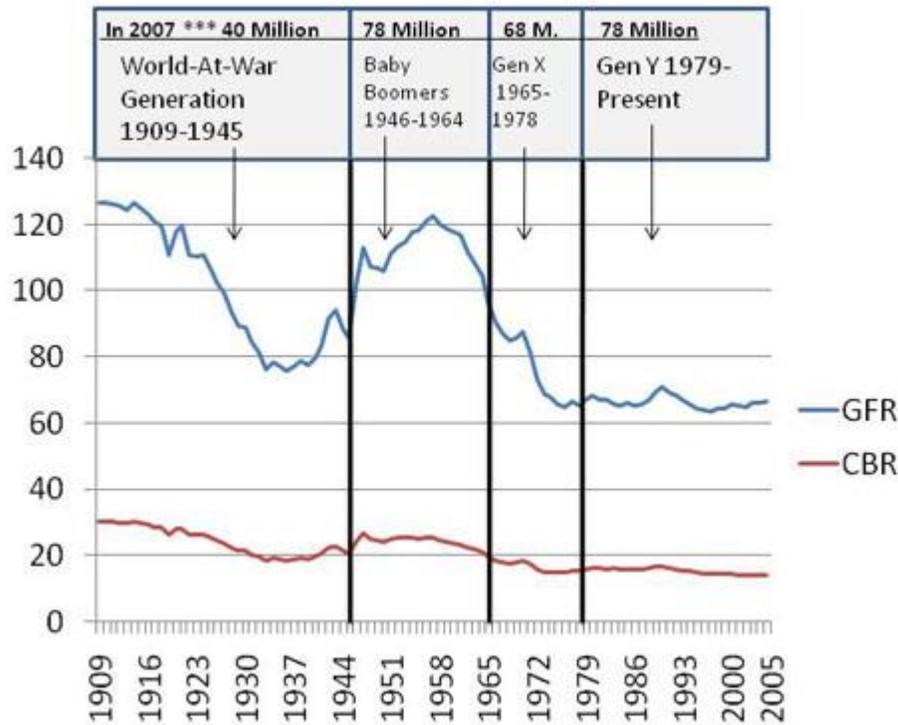
## WHO MAKES UP THE GENERATIONS?

Figure 3 shows birth rates and generation labels for the United States. The lower line represents the **crude birth rate** (CBR), a measure of *the number of live births per 1,000 people living in the population*. The upper line represents the **general fertility rate** (GFR), a measure of *the number of live births per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44*. Both CBR and GFR show a pattern of birth rates that were relatively high when the World-At-War Generation was born. Birth rates declined with the Great Depression until 1946 (the commencement of the Baby Boom). The **Baby Boomers** represented a *surge in birth rates from 1946 to 1964* and declined to pre-Boom rates in 1965. **Generation X** or "Gen X" represents *the children of the Baby Boomers born about 1964 to 1981* which spilled into **Generation Y** or the "Millennials" which were *born about 1981 to present*.

The World-at-War Generation is slowly disappearing from the U.S. population landscape. On the 18th of June, 2008, the last living Veteran of World War I was honored by the White House and Congress. Frank W. Buckles fought in WWI and was held prisoner in Manila during World War II.<sup>15</sup> Also the U.S. Veterans' Bureau reported that there were 2,911,900

WWII veterans as of the 30th of September 2007, with about 900 WWII veterans passing away each day. They also reported that 39.1% of all U.S. veterans were aged 65 and older.<sup>16</sup>

Figure 3. Crude Birth Rate (CBR) and General Fertility Rate (GFR) in the U.S., 1909-2005.<sup>17</sup>



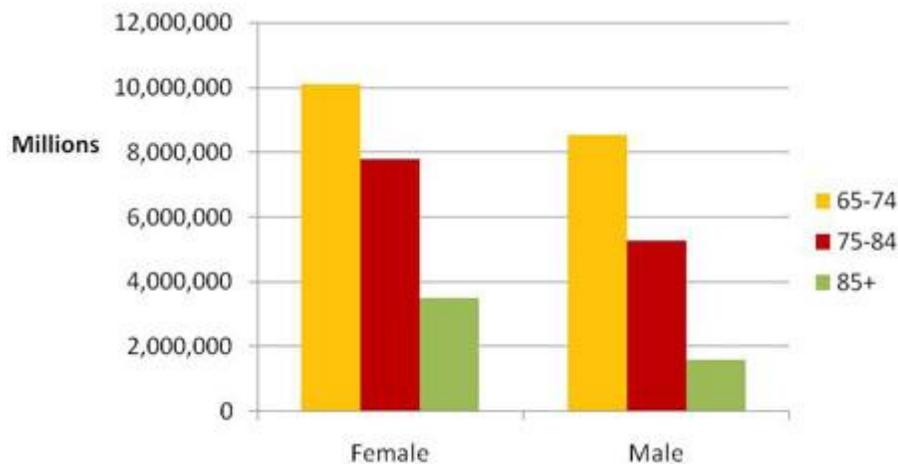
The majority of the elderly today are women. The elderly are divided into three life stages: the **young-old**=65-74 years; the **middle-old**=75-84 years; and the **old-old**= 85+ years. In 2005, there were more females in all three age categories because women, in most countries of the world, have a longer life expectancy than men (see Figure 4). **Life expectancy** is the average number of years a person born today may expect to live. The U.S. Life expectancy today is about 80 for females and 75 for males (worldwide it is 70 for females and 66 for males).<sup>18</sup> Life expectancies have increased dramatically over the last 50 years in Canada, the United States, Australia, Japan, and Western Europe. Overall, both men and women can expect to live longer today than they did in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

“The **sex ratio** [the number of males per 100 females in a given population] in the United States was 44 for persons 85 to 89 years old, and only 26 for persons 95 to 99 years old. In comparison, the sex ratio was 82 for persons 65 to 69 years old.”<sup>19</sup>

The Baby Boomers represent 78.2 million U.S. citizens as of July, 2005.<sup>20</sup> This large cohort is moving en masse into the ranks of the elderly. A **cohort** is a group of people who share a statistical or demographic trait such as the Baby Boomers born between 1946 and 1964. Nearly 8,000 Baby Boomers turned 60 each day in 2006. The U.S. Census estimates that 57.8 million Baby Boomers will be around in 2030 after they’ve all retired. One issue for

gerontologists is the financial strain the Baby Boomers will place on the rest of society once they are retired. Most speculate that Baby Boomers will not receive the same Social Security benefits that their parents and grandparents enjoyed.

Figure 4. U.S. Elderly Population Ages 65-74, 75-84, and 85+, by Sex.<sup>21</sup>



The children of the Baby Boomers are called Generation X or the “Baby Bust” because they were born in post-boom low fertility rate years. They were different from their parents. They grew up with the computer age and came to computer technology much like an immigrant comes to a new country. This cohort grew up in an economic state of greater prosperity than did previous generations. Generation Y, or Millennials, are also called the “Internet Generation” or “Screenagers” because they grew up with TV, video games, cell phones, PDAs, and movie screens. Each generation is culturally distinct compared to the previous ones even though much still remains in common. There is a good chance that children of Generation Y parents will be better skilled than their parents with a technology that has not yet been invented.

Tables 3 and 4 present life expectancies in the U.S. and the world. The elderly of the future will be expected to live longer than any elderly in history. Being born in the U.S. affords the average member of society a longer life. In Table 4 you can see that North American children are born with higher life expectancies than other children around the world. By far, being born in Japan and Hong Kong would provide the absolute highest life expectancy at birth (82 years).

## POPULATION AGING IS OCCURRING WORLDWIDE

Over the past half-century, both the worldwide drop in fertility and the concurrent rise in life expectancy have led to the gradual aging of the world’s population (see Table 5). Since 1950, the share of persons aged 65 and older has risen from five percent to seven percent worldwide. Europe and Japan have led the way with North America, Australia, and New Zealand close behind.

Table 3. United States Life Expectancies in Years.<sup>22</sup>

Year	Total	Male	Female
1970	70.8	67.1	74.7
1980	73.7	70.0	77.4
1990	75.4	71.8	78.8
2000	77.0	74.3	79.7
2010	78.5	75.6	81.4
2015	79.2	76.2	82.2

Table 4, 2007 World and Regional Life Expectancies in Years.<sup>23</sup>

Region	Total	Male	Female
World	68	66	70
Africa	53	52	54
N. America	78	70	81
L. America	73	70	76
Asia	68	67	70
Europe	75	71	79
Oceania	75	73	78

## DEATH AND DYING

As a young college student you probably don't worry about **widowhood** (*when one's spouse dies*). **Widows** are *surviving wives* and **widowers** are *surviving husbands*. Justifiably, you shouldn't have to worry about becoming labeled as either based on statistical probabilities. If you are female and marry a man two years older, and he typically dies 5-6 years younger than you, then you will be a widow at some time in your life and may live 7-8 years as such. One sub-discipline of gerontology is thanatology. **Thanatology** is *the scientific study of death and dying*. Thanatology informs those who provide support and counsel to the dying.

How we define death, both our own and the death of others, is very much influenced by the cultural definition of death we incorporated into our own values while growing up. It's very common for college students about your age to have lost a great aunt/uncle, great grandparent, and perhaps even a grandparent. It's not so common for you to have lost your own parent or a sibling. **Grief** is *the feeling of loss we experience after a death, disappointment, or tragedy*. When you experience grief you are said to be in bereavement. **Bereavement** is a name for *the circumstances and conditions that accompany grief*.

Table 5. Worldwide Percent of Persons Ages 65 and Older.<sup>24</sup>

	2007	2025	2050
World Total	7	10	16
Industrialized Countries	16	21	26
Developing Countries	6	9	15
Europe	16	21	28
North America	12	18	21
Oceania	10	15	19
Latin Am. & Caribbean	6	10	9
Asia	6	10	18
Africa	3	4	7

Dr. **Elisabeth Kübler-Ross** researched the **stages of grief**.<sup>25</sup> These include:

1. Denial - "All is fine." or "It didn't happen."
2. Anger - "Why me?" or "I hate God for this."
3. Bargaining - "I'll be a better person if you (God) will just let him live."
4. Depression - "All is lost." or "Why try?"
5. Acceptance - "I'll be okay." or "I can get through this."

We all grieve when things disappoint us, when someone dies, or even when we break up with someone. We all grieve in our own way. Some studies show that most people experience denial, anger, bargaining, depression, or acceptance, but there exists some disagreement on the part about cycling through Kübler-Ross' stages in any order. Some people even revisit stages later on and some people do not experience all of her stages.

The study of aging, the study of generations, the study of life course, and the study of death and dying are all part of the study of social gerontology.



<sup>1</sup> See Kestenbaum and René, 2006 Retrieved from the Internet 19 July, 2008 from [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa4030/is\\_200607/ai\\_n17183322](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4030/is_200607/ai_n17183322)

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved 17 June 2008 from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/us.html>

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved 18 June 2008 from <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/usinterimproj/natprojt02a.pdf> Table 2a. Projected Population of the United States, by Age and Sex, 2000 to 2050

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- <sup>4</sup> Retrieved 18 June 2008 from <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/usinterimproj/natprojt02a.pdf> Table 2a. Projected Population of the United States, by Age and Sex, 2000 to 2050
- <sup>5</sup> © 2009 Ron J. Hammond, Ph.D.
- <sup>6</sup> See [The Encyclopedia of Aging](#)
- <sup>7</sup> Google Robert Havighurst and Aging
- <sup>8</sup> See Dorian Apple Sweetser, 1984 "Love and Work: Intergenerational Household Composition in the U. S. in 1900" *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (May, 1984), pp. 289-293 retrieved on 18 June 2008 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/352460?seq=1>
- <sup>9</sup> report C2KBR/01-8 [retrieved on 18 June 2008](#), Table 2
- <sup>10</sup> Elder & O'Rand. (1995); Hagestad & Neugarten (1985)
- <sup>11</sup> Esterberg et al. (1994)
- <sup>12</sup> Elder & O'Rand. (1995)
- <sup>13</sup> Bengtson & Allen. (1993)
- <sup>14</sup> Liker & Elder. (1983).
- <sup>15</sup> See CNN, retrieved on 19 June, 2008 from <http://www.cnn.com/2008/US/03/07/war.veteran/>
- <sup>16</sup> See data sheet retrieved 19 June 2008 from [http://www1.va.gov/vetdata/docs/4X6\\_spring08\\_sharepoint.pdf](http://www1.va.gov/vetdata/docs/4X6_spring08_sharepoint.pdf)
- <sup>17</sup> Retrieved 19 June, 2008 from Table 77: Live Births, Deaths, Marriages, and Divorces 1960-2006 <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/08s0077.pdf> and Table 1: Live births, birth rates, and Fertility Rates by Race: United States Specified Years, 1940-1955 and Each year 1960-2005
- <sup>18</sup> See [www.prb.org](http://www.prb.org), 2007 Population Data Sheet , retrieved 19 June 2008
- <sup>19</sup> Retrieved 19 June 2008 from [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)
- <sup>20</sup> See [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)
- <sup>21</sup> Data retrieved 19 June 2008 from Table 1: Resident population, by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin: United States, selected years 1950–2005 from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/07/07.pdf#001>
- <sup>22</sup> Retrieved 19 June 2008 Table 98: Expectations of Life at Birth, 1970-2004, and Projections, 2010 and 2015; <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/08s0098.pdf>
- <sup>23</sup> [www.prb.org](http://www.prb.org), 2007 Population Data Sheet , retrieved 19 June 2008
- <sup>24</sup> Retrieved 19 June 2008 from [WWW.PRB.org](http://WWW.PRB.org) Population Data Sheet 2007: Sources: C. Haub, 2007 World Population Data Sheet, and United Nations Population Division
- <sup>25</sup> On Death and Dying, 1973, Routledge Press