A LINE ON LIFE

3/1/98

The Aging Revolution and Cultural Lag *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Psychologist James E. Birren is the associate director of the Center on Aging at the University of California, Los Angeles. He says that Americans are living 30-50 years longer than they did at the turn of the previous century. In 1900, the average life expectancy was 47 years. Today it is 76. When a person retires at 65, there is over a decade of active living ahead.

However, our society still has a **cultural lag**. Although some changes are occurring, when people pass the age of 60, our society still thinks that they become decrepit and frail. (This may be one reason why many older people – especially women – don't want to announce their ages when they have birthdays.)
Birren believes that our outdated thinking has not kept up with a population that is living longer. Our collective stereotype is that these later years are a time to slow down and prepare for death. This is no longer true. We often stay mentally sharp and physically healthy well into our 70s and beyond.

There is an increased vitality in our older citizens. Given this, even the field of psychology remains fixated on a theoretical model to help seniors "*cope*" as they ail. People don't typically plan beyond their retirement. In addition, advertisers and entertainment target young audiences. This needs to be changed.
Psychology needs to expand their model of aging to promote continued growth in later life. Younger adults need to plan for life beyond 65. Businesses need to serve an increasingly mature audience.

The U.S. Census Bureau indicates that birth rates have continued to drop. Meanwhile, the largest segment of our population is aging. In the early 1900s, young age groups swelled the population. Numbers thinned out steadily as people aged. In the next quarter-century, the population surplus will move into the 65+ age group. As Birren notes, "*We've turned the age pyramid upside down, and our institutions are not ready for it*."

As most people do, psychologists paid more attention to people with problems. As a group, psychologists considered older adults a population in need. With older people, the field was concerned with the coping styles, loss and emotional support.

Recently, Birren surveyed 2,500 seniors in Los Angeles. The survey indicated that more of them were "*growers*" rather than "*needers*." Birren concedes that some needed help – meals on wheels, transportation and support groups.

For many older people, life can still be full of adventure and wonderful growth.

However, a much larger group wanted adult education and travel. As an area of study, psychology also suffers from lag effects. According to Birren, psychology needs to consider "*that other and larger side of the mature population, whose personalities have to do with expansion*."

Birren started a local chapter of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). He brought in speakers. Not only did they tell members about money scams and retirement planning, but they enlightened them on continued growth.

Birren argues that we need to plan carefully for our "*second 50*" years. At middle age, we need to take an inventory of our lives. We need to list our priorities for our second half of life. Like an investment portfolio, we need to plan our investments in career, family, friends, leisure, money, love and spirituality. This is like a "*life portfolio*." It not only emphasizes financial security, but it is there to ensure our fulfillment in less tangible ways.

Some seniors may decide to devote themselves to volunteerism or family. Others may become "*late-life career bloomers*." They may make major scientific discoveries or publish prolific novels in their 70s or 80s.

Institutions in our society need to become more accommodating to maturing patrons. Especially entertainment and advertising need to shed their notion of "*once you're 40, you're over the hill*."
As one psychologist, I am trying to raise your awareness. Education continues throughout life. Vitality can extend well into our later years. Of course, there are many courses you can take at your local college or university to expand your abilities and awareness.

However, some of you may be more adventurous and have a little more money. If so, you may be interested in **Elderhostel**, a non-profit organization. It links people over 55 with growth experiences at educational institutions in all of the 50 states, Canada, and 45 other foreign countries. If you want more information, write to Elderhostel, 75 Federal Street, Boston, MA 02110-1941.

As Birren says, "*It's up to us as individuals to get the most out of our gift of life*."

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* Adapted from Bridget Murray's "Older people are often misunderstood," *The APA Monitor*, October, 1997, page 22. For more information, you can read James Birren and Linda Feldman's *Where to Go From Here: Discovering Your Own Life's Wisdom in the Second Half of Life*, Simon and Schuster, 1997.