



Do not let them know you are old

By **Sally Harris**

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In Brian Crane's comic strip, *Pickles*, Earl and Opal Pickles have made a choice many old people today are not allowed to make because of pressure from society. The Pickleses have chosen to live a quiet, sedentary, age-accepting life. Their grandson, Nelson, cracks jokes about Earl's bald head, and Earl jokes in return. Opal lets her hair go white. Earl often sits on a park bench chewing the fat with his friend, trading wry comments about getting old. Opal paints or knits and grumbles about Earl.

Earl never goes flying down a ski slope; Opal is not starving her pudgy body or getting cosmetic surgery; the two don't hold hands from separate bathtubs on a beach, staring meaningfully into each other's eyes. They are an old couple who have chosen to let their bodies age. They "observ[e] the differences between genders and generations or tak[e] a wry but sympathetic look at life in the twilight years," according to the Washington Post Writers Group. And readers have made the strip a national favorite.

But, as much as they might want to live like Opal and Earl, not many people in today's culture, with its angst about aging, feel that comfortable with being old. And with good reason: ageism.

Ageism is a blight on society

According to Robert Butler in his 1969 article in *The Gerontologist*, "Ageism: Another Form of Bigotry," ageism is "the systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender."

"We're used to our body responding in a certain way, and then it doesn't," says Toni Calasanti, professor of sociology. "We begin to worry that others will see us as old; and that is a problem, given ageism. When we reach a point where we can no longer pass as young, ageism will hit full force, but that tends to be a time of life when we are 'frail.' We get hit with bits and pieces of ageism along the road to frailty."

We tend to resist signs of aging and want to keep passing for younger, Calasanti says, since being old affects our social status. When a person says to another, "You don't look that old," he or she is expressing the idea that it is not good to be old, Calasanti says. "Even old people exhibit ageism when they say such things as 'I'm not yet on a walker.'" However, even sociologists who research inequalities have not proposed theories about "how ageism operates and why," she wrote in the article, "Bodacious Berry, Potency Wood and the Aging Monster: Gender and Age Relations in Anti-Aging Ads," published in the journal *Social Forces*.

Calasanti conducts interviews and studies Web pages, scholarly articles, and other research to look at ageism in a society urged to go at break-neck speed to delay or even defeat aging or face the fate of being among the invisible, sometimes denigrated old. Dye your hair. Use anti-wrinkle creams. Lift your face. Participate in death-defying sports. Work yourself to death to compete at the office. Take exotic and expensive vacations. Walk on a stunning beach most people can't afford, holding hands because with Viagra you can be ready when the mood strikes. Is it any wonder that Viagra is sold to the tune of "Viva Las Vegas," denoting never-ending fun?

Calasanti began her scholarly career studying gender. While still a gender scholar, she has embraced ageism as a subject worthy of study in itself. The fact that research into ageism is not yet quite received with the enthusiasm of other "isms" "implies that development stops in later years," Calasanti says. While people, including academics, do not want to think of themselves as growing old, "ageism oppresses the people we will become, cuts off our options for collective action now, and arms us for battles we cannot win alone, while leading us to ignore that which binds us."

She therefore began to study ageism and promote ageism studies by others. "A fruitful approach would be to focus on a wide range of bodily changes occurring from middle age onward, a time when individuals begin dealing with issues of bodily changes that mark them as 'getting old'," she says in her paper, "Theorizing Age Relations." Such studies "would seek to answer these questions with as diverse a lens as possible, by race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual preference."

But it was within herself that Calasanti found "a clue to the implicit ageism that keeps social gerontology so marginal." She discovered that even as she advocated for old people in her Sociology of Aging course, she maintained a subtle ageism. She used the less-offensive word "older" instead of "old." She tried to make students think of old people as the same as them so aging would be less objectionable. She became aware that she was comparing old people to people of other ages the same way sexism compared women to men when they say, "She thinks like a man," meaning it as a compliment. Calasanti realized that ageism is both deep and, even worse, accepted in society. Through her students, she realized that society wants the old to still act young and to look young, that there was no "positive content, or hope ... to being old in our society."

Men perform; women primp in sexist anti-aging ads

Society's attitude opened the door to anti-aging industries trying to persuade aging people to remain young by using their products. From 96 anti-aging websites chosen for their relevance to the subject, Calasanti found that, while they all promoted actions to stave off aging, while they emphasized that staying healthy and accepted meant staying young, they differentiated, through either photos or text, between the desired results for men and for women.

Calasanti developed a coding system to analyze the content of pictures and text on the websites, and looked at "the ways aging was depicted, how bodies were discussed, and how inequalities based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation might be shaped by these."

She analyzed the data and noted bodily characteristics. She looked for gendering in language and pictures. Finally, she looked at the perception that individuals must take advantage of all assistance in staying young or deserve the results of their dereliction.

The sites that were aimed at men dealt with increasing performance in athletics, work accomplishments, and "the power to turn women on," according to Calasanti and Neal King, associate professor of sociology at Virginia Tech. Those for women promoted the idea of making their bodies alluring to men. The sites showed pictures of youthful women whose bodies had been lotioned, carved, shrunk, de-wrinkled, toned, or made radiant so as to be attractive to men. They warned women that they had to compete with other, often younger, women. Men flexed muscles, women modeled beauty. Men did, women received.

Since signs of aging — graying hair, wrinkles, sagging — are viewed differently in men and women, and since women must remain sexually alluring to men without being overtly sexual, some women seem always to feel dissatisfied with their appearance and are willing to go to extraordinary lengths to avoid becoming invisible as sexual beings.

Because middle-class white women were able to afford remedies to looking old, the products were marketed to them rather than, say, to black middle-class women. Also, previous research suggested what Calasanti and King discuss in “Firming the Floppy Penis” — that middle-aged white women may be concerned more about outer signs of aging than some women of color, whose communities may see those signs more positively, as connoting such things as respect.

Gender-based ads not only reinforce women’s worry about their appearance, but also men’s insecurity. Ideas such as “dominance,” “total conquest,” and “conquering warrior” filled ads touting products marketed to men. According to Meika Loe in *The Rise of Viagra: How the little blue pill changed sex in America*, (New York University Press) products for men, such as Viagra, and those for women, such as antidepressants and estrogen, were designed to make men virile and women happy — and therefore receptive. (If this sounds familiar, think *The Stepford Wives*.) Men had to be able to “do it” as often as they had in younger years. Women had to entice them. All these advertisements base manhood on youthfulness and the continuance of manhood, creating for men “the perfect storm of insecurity,” Calasanti and King wrote.

For both men and women, the ads advocate “strenuous consumption” to combat sinking into old age and exclusion, according to Calasanti and King. The result of the difference in ads for women and men continues sexism as well as ageism, Calasanti says. “Such ads,” she writes, “reinforce age and gender relations by positing old people as worthwhile only to the extent that they look and act like those who are middle-aged or younger, by defining manhood and womanhood in opposition to each other, and by defining old age as an unhealthy loss of gender identity. These ads promote a reversion to middle age and white, middle-class, heterosexual norms of male performance and female beauty.”

The loss of masculinity is a major worry for aging men, and the advertisers had a solution for their fears. From their study of numerous websites, Calasanti and King deduce, as they report in their paper, “Beware of the estrogen assault: ideals of manhood in anti-aging advertisements,” that the marketers felt sure that using the helpful products advertised would allow men to continue to compete against men and also avoid becoming feminized. At one point, ads equated loss of testosterone with increase in estrogen and thus with the loss of manhood. Loss of testosterone was called an epidemic, although Calasanti says recent research shows few men actually experience abnormally low testosterone levels. Men’s products promised that men would remain masculine and not succumb to resembling women. Staying young was related to a firm penis and a receptive woman, regardless of what the couple might desire to be. Men’s products “linked old age as sickness or disease and femininity as threat to manhood.”

Shame on you. You’ve let yourself get old.

In the end, the effort to remain “not old” is futile, as some of the signs of old age can be delayed, but not old age itself, Calasanti says. The push to prolong middle age “simply forestalls the point at which individuals’ bodies become marked as old and hence deserving of exclusion.... It doesn’t eradicate ageism, but instead prompts people to expend increasing amounts of time, money, and effort into being ‘not old.’ Because this venture is doomed to failure, as bodies will age, it increases both the burden of activity and our guilt for having the bodies that we have.”

In fact, the insinuation is that “individuals not only can but should exert control over their aging: it is a moral issue,” wrote Calasanti and Kathleen Slevin, professor of sociology at the College of William and Mary, in *Gender, social inequalities, and aging* (Alta Mira Press). From her research of numerous scholarly articles and Web and print advertisements, Calasanti concluded that the ads made people feel they must use anti-aging

products, no matter the cost, to stay not-old and avoid becoming a burden to others — or they must feel guilty. They must remain productive or, upon retirement, be able to live a luxurious, healthy, youthful lifestyle, including sexual activity.

People who age from having refused life-altering products and activities are seen to exhibit lack of control and lack of discipline, which is a no-no in our society. Advertisers implant the notion that using their products gives one control over the body and that individuals must take advantage of the help offered them, even if it costs a fortune. If people give in to old age by being sedentary, contemplative, non-competitive, sexually inactive, unproductive, or unattractive, it is their fault if their health and crucial characteristics decline. They deserve to be subjected to the inequalities, marginalization, and exclusion that old people suffer. The attitude is “Shame on you! You let yourself get old!”

“The awful specter made of old age in the ads legitimates age discrimination and the power of younger groups,” Calasanti wrote in the “Bodacious Berry” article. And the urging by the anti-aging industry to buy and use the products “ultimately leaves ageism intact” in that people are advised to try to be sure their aging is not visible, to try to look young or middle-aged as long as possible. Like an antique car, the ageist ads suggest, a person can be refurbished, retooled, and restored into a show-class, not-old example for the rest of the aging population.

You can't be old and lucratively employed

Ads use the work place as a setting to play on the fear that looking old is a disadvantage, especially in the application process. Employers may indeed look negatively at old-aged job applicants for various reasons, many of which are myths, Calasanti says. It is a myth, for example, that the old can't learn new things or won't be as productive. On the other hand, experience can be a positive factor for men in applying for a job. For those who already have jobs, advertisers play on any fears they may have of getting pushed out.

Women, in particular, have to look younger for professional reasons. “For older women trying to get work, experience does not work for them,” Calasanti says. “Because of their domestic history, they have an intermittent work history” and lack the consistent experience of men. Research has shown that unpaid economic contributions of women and people of color tend to be ignored or devalued, Calasanti says, adding that “an understanding of ageism, if coupled with an exploration of the underlying age relations, can help us understand other social inequalities.”

Also, she says, things have not changed for women in the workplace as much as people think. “Things are better, but the pay difference has hardly changed. Although white professional women are doing well, others are not.”

Research reported by Madonna Harrington Meyer and Pamela Herd in 2007 in *Market Friendly or Family Friendly? The State and Gender Inequity in Old Age* (Russell Sage Foundation), has shown that women's role as the caretaker of children accounts for more of the pay gap than before, Calasanti says.

As for comparable work, which is supposed to bring equal pay, “comparable does not have to be the same work,” she says. The determining factors should be the amount and kind of education, objective scores, and skills. “Overall, predominantly male and female jobs do not differ in skills, except physical strength,” Calasanti says. But “work informs gender and gender informs work.”

Ageism is ageism no matter how you say it

In middle age, and throughout life, gender relations involve power that gives men advantage and women disadvantage, Calasanti says. Research shows that since gender and bodies, as outer evidence of the way people see themselves, determine the way people view old age, some people feel that “old = different = unacceptable.”

Period. Others look at Jane Fonda types who, though old, are active and successful, and say “old = the same = acceptable.”

But both attitudes are ageist, Calasanti says. Being acceptable only when you look and act the same as younger people (the ‘active’ and ‘ageless’ elder) is ageist because it still implies that being different — inactive or suffering physical problems — is not acceptable. Exercise for health is okay, she says, but exercise so as to “not be old” is ageist because it is an attempt to ensure that people do not treat us as old. For example, we don’t want to have doctors say, “You are old. What do you expect?” We want people to say, “You don’t look that old!” We also don’t want to be seen as dependent or a burden to our families.

The question remains, “What’s wrong with being old?” What’s wrong with being like Opal and Earl Pickles, who have their own well-established and enjoyable lifestyle that does not demean them, but that does not conform with the rigors of remaining not old and does not include purchasing a multitude of anti-aging products?

Calasanti hopes that future research will take into consideration the various ways that ageism interacts with other bases of inequality, such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual preference. “...Examining age relations and its intersections with other inequalities will allow us to explicate the structures that deny power to so many of the old for reasons having less to do with the aging of bodies and more to do with our construction of old age as sickness, dependence, lack of productivity, unattractiveness, and decline,” she wrote in “Theorizing Age Relations.”

Theories concerning age relations must include “breaking the ethical hold that ‘activity’ and ‘productive aging’” have on our opinions about aging. Feminist study must include the reasons “it seems denigrating to label someone old,” and the ways the advertisements promote animosity among age groups, racial groups, ethnic groups, and generations, Calasanti wrote in the paper “Ageism and Feminism.” Studies must also include such considerations as the ways old women react to being considered unattractive and useless.

“Just as feminists have argued for women’s emancipation and freedom — for their right to choose on a variety of levels — so too must the old be free to choose lifestyles and ways of being old that suit them, including inactivity as well as activity, contemplation as well as exertion, and acceptance that the old can be vibrant sexual beings,” she wrote. “Old people will achieve equality with the middle-aged when ‘old’ carries positive content rather than stigma as a disease, mortality, or the absence of value. Only then will old people no longer need to be ‘exceptional’ or spend their time ‘staying young’ to be acceptable; and only then will they be free to be frail, or flabby, or have wrinkles — to be old in all its diversity.”

Toni Calasanti, a professor of sociology, is a faculty affiliate of the Center for Gerontology and the Women’s and Gender Studies program at Virginia Tech. “My work occurs at the intersections of these three programs,” she explains.



Photo by Jim Stroup.