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Advancing Age: Anthropological Perspectives on Being and Growing Older

The Editors' Note: Advancing Age: Anthropological Perspectives on Being and Growing Older
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“Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.” Attributed variously to Mark Twain, Jack Benny, and Satchel Paige, [the quote’s provenance](#) is uncertain—and a perusal of the anthropological literature might cause us to doubt its purported wisdom. Given the graying of the world’s population, age is indeed an issue that ought to be minded and it certainly matters. The news about being and growing old is that so many people today are living longer. Globally, life expectancy at birth now stands at 70 years. [According to the United Nations](#), people age 60 and over counted for 12 percent of the world’s population (901 million) in 2015. That number is projected at 2.1 billion by 2050.

The gaining of years represents both challenges and opportunities, as evidenced in the 10 articles and 6 book and film reviews included in this issue of *Open Anthropology*. In a youth-oriented society such as the United States today, being and growing older is not uncommonly talked and thought about in negative terms that emphasize decline and diminishment—in physical function and health, mental acuteness and capability, social connectedness, and cultural relevance. Not surprisingly, there is an emphasis on aging “well” or “successfully” that is generally modeled on more youthful conditions. Yet, seniority is also associated with knowledge, experience, and wisdom, and elder status is understood to be deserving of deference, respect, and even celebration. Aging might affect one’s activities, but this shift can be welcome as retirement, rest or relief from a set of expectations that defined adult life, as seen in the readings on older women’s and men’s experiences of the changes in their bodies.

At the same time, it ought to be recognized that people not only are living longer, but also working later into their lives—for example, the [Pew Research Center](#) reports increases in the number of older Americans in paid employment. The [U.S. Census](#) notes that most grandparents

living with their grandchildren are age 50-59 In addition, the number of [grandparents raising grandchildren](#) is also on the rise in the U.S., which is blamed on the problem of opioid addiction that is now being described as an epidemic or crisis. This kind of “[orphaning](#)” of older people and children has been witnessed in sub-Saharan African societies that have been most ravaged by HIV/AIDS.

The articles collected here provide a glimpse into the range of both the experiences of older people in diverse cultural and social contexts, and the approaches and insights that anthropologists have applied and gained in their studies of being and growing old. The experience of age is an issue of mind and matter, culture and biology, attachment and isolation, remembering and forgetting.

The first two pieces in this collection demonstrate the continuing importance of holism in an anthropology of aging.

For answers about the nature of being and growing old, anthropologists have looked to the behaviors of non-human primates, both in the wild and in captivity. A particular focus has been on social disengagement, which has been associated with older individuals among both humans and non-humans. [Mary S. McDonald Pavelka](#), in her 1991 *American Anthropologist* article, “[Sociability in Old Female Japanese Monkeys: Human versus Nonhuman Primate Aging](#)” reports no evidence of the social isolation of old female Japanese monkeys. The article is based on research with a semi-free ranging troop of Japanese monkeys relocated in the 1970s from near Kyoto, Japan to what was then known as the Texas Snow Monkey Sanctuary. Pavelka suggests that what distinguishes the aging experience of humans (from that of non-human primates) are menopause, awareness of mortality, and division of labor—and more particularly, the significant inter-individual dependence of humans. “However culturally and individually variable, dependence is central to aging in humans, and contributes to the social and behavior conditions of elderly and nonelderly adults” (93).

Assumptions about the nature of aging in terms of the physical body require re-examination, as [Sabrina C. Agarwal](#) demonstrates in “[The Past of Sex, Gender, and Health: Bioarchaeology of the Aging Skeleton](#),” which appeared in *American Anthropologist* (2012). Today, there is a popular understanding of osteoporosis as a problem of aging bodies, especially for older women. Thus, bone loss is considered both inevitable and connected to biological sex. Drawing from an analysis of skeletal remains recovered at two medieval sites (one rural and one urban) in England, however, Agarwal finds a starkly different pattern, with evidence of bone loss occurring at younger ages and equally among women and men. The skeletons bear evidence of life-history experiences, such as the foods eaten and the activities pursued, and of cultural and social gender, not biological sex. “The distinction is important, as sex-related aging implies a biologically certain and universal process, while gender-related aging implies a fluid and socially driven process” (331).

What constitutes the natural or normal aging of bodies has increasingly come under the purview of biomedicine, as the next two articles and three book reviews consider.

For women, menopause is not only a sign of age, but is also not uncommonly seen today as an occasion for pharmacological intervention in the form of hormone replacement therapy. However, the acceptance of (and compliance with) biomedical authority over aging (and menopause in particular) is not itself a foregone conclusion, as [Eve Agee](#) demonstrates in her 2000 article, “[Menopause and the Transmission of Women’s Knowledge: African American and White Women’s Perspectives](#),” published in *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. Based on a study comparing the narratives of Euro-American and African-American women, Agee argues that women’s decisions to follow medical advice were influenced by the information about menopause they received from their mothers. Euro-American women received less information from their own mothers and depended more on advice from their doctors than did the African-American women in Agee’s study. In contrast, African-American women described their reliance on information, advice, and support from their mothers and network of “othermothers” including other female relatives. Notably, they also had particular reason to be suspicious of biomedicine, given the history of medical mistreatment, which had personally affected some of the women’s mothers. Instead, the African-American women in Agee’s study described their exercise of “strength” to cope with the problems of menopause. Yet, as Agee also notes, “the very concept of ‘strength’ that many of these women rely on may leave them experiencing difficulties and pain, but feeling that to ask for help from either friends, families, or care providers would be incongruous given their roles as strong, independent women” (84).

Ideas about natural or normal aging and its biomedicalization also figure centrally in [Emily Wentzell](#)’s 2013 *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* article, “[Aging Respectably by Rejecting Medicalization: Mexican Men’s Reasons for Not Using Erectile Dysfunction Drugs](#).” The development and marketing of Viagra has driven a reconceptualization of decreased erectile function as a biomedical condition that is commonly known now as “erectile dysfunction” (ED). On the one hand, there is now a refutation of the notions that decreased function is unavoidable and that older people do not engage in sexuality. On the other hand, it is based on a narrow view of sexual practice and an attitude toward aging as decline. Interestingly, the working-class, urban Mexican men in Wentzell’s study did not regard the change in their erectile function as a biomedical problem. Although they had access to ED drugs, they did not seek treatment.

Instead, in a life-course shift so common that one study participant called it ‘the Mexican classic,’ most participants came to view decreasing erections as a physical prompt to renounce the frequent, penetrative sex the associated with youth and machismo, and to begin to live out a more ‘mature’ masculinity enacted through emotional interactions with family rather than sex (5).

Wentzell further discusses Mexican men’s experiences in her book, *Maturing Masculinities: Aging, Chronic Illness, and Viagra in Mexico*, which [Matthew R. Dudgeon](#) discusses in his 2013 *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* [review](#).

Nothing better illustrates the concerns of natural and normal old age today and the consequences of biomedicalized aging than Alzheimer’s disease, as [Margaret Lock](#) discusses in her book, *The Alzheimer Conundrum: Entanglements of Dementia and Aging*, [reviewed](#) by [Athena McLean](#) in *American Anthropologist* (2015).

Senility did not lose its stigma after being medicalized as Alzheimer's disease; it assumed a different kind of stigma. Families and those diagnosed may have escaped moral responsibility for causing the "disease" but the terror it has incited with images of socially "fading away" and losing one's dignity, social power, and sense of self may be provoking yet a deeper and totalizing stigma (194).

In the U.S., Canada, and U.K., Alzheimer's is understood as a disease of the brain that results in a loss of mind and in turn of personhood. These are the settings where Lock undertook her ethnographic research, and where the rates of disease are high. In contrast, in India, dementia is understood rather differently not as the result of specific and isolatable disease processes, but a manifestation of family and society in crisis, as [Lawrence Cohen](#) discusses in his book, *No Aging in India, Alzheimer's, the Bad Family, and Other Modern Things*, which is included with [Sarah Lamb](#)'s *White Saris and Sweet Mangoes: Aging, Gender, and Body in North India* in a [review](#) by [Judith Noemi Freidenberg](#) in *American Ethnologist* (2002).

Questions of personhood and identity loom large in considerations of being and growing old, as the next two pieces illustration.

Lamb, in her 1997 *Ethos* article, "[The Making and Unmaking of Persons: Notes on Aging and Gender in North India](#)" recalls her perception, as a child growing up in northern California, that older people lived in increasing isolation—and that this social disengagement posed a problem. This, however, is contradicted by the Bengali women she comes to know during her fieldwork. These women express concerns about maya or attachment. Specifically, as widows with children, grandchildren, and extended networks of kin and kith, they worry about being too tightly connected to other people and things.

The greatest problem of maya in old age is that of how people will free their souls when they die. Maya... can quite literally "bind" a person (or the person's soul, atma) to his or her body, habitat, and relationships, caught as in a "net" (jal), and thereby unable to die, even if very ill and decrepit, and unable to depart from his or her previous habitat and relations after death (285). Lamb describes the moves that senior members make to detach themselves from the rest of the family—physically retiring to the peripheries of household spaces and participating in activities, like visiting with others, which remove them from the family center. Lamb emphasizes the importance and necessity of attention to aging in studies of personhood.

Attachment and isolation are recurring themes in ethnographic studies on aging. [Elana D. Buch](#), in her 2015 *Annual Review of Anthropology* article, "Anthropology of Aging and Care," reminds us that "aging is not a uniform process, but rather one profoundly shaped by local environments, access to resources, and social relations. The experiences of those who survive into old age are shaped by the social roles available to elders, the depth and breadth of social support available to them, and their access to economic resources" (278). In her 2015 *Ethos* article, "[Postponing Passage: Doorways, Distinctions, and the Thresholds of Personhood among Older Chicagoans](#)," Buch considers the importance of home and its significance in marking and making independent personhood in the U.S. She tells a tale of two

doors, each one materially signifying the threats and attachments of the elderly woman residing in the apartment. There is the front door, with its multiple locks and alarm, which care workers (and an ethnographer) reached only after phoning ahead or buzzing from the building's entry—and the back door, which connected the woman to neighbors who visited (and checked on) each other. Inside the apartment itself are the material possessions of the now-deceased members of her family. “Once removed from these places, Mrs. Meyer feared that she would no longer be thought of as wise elder but rather as the person she feared becoming through the world of the front door—a vulnerable, sickly, dependent, and bureaucratically managed patient” (49). Of course, at-home care is what enables Mrs. Meyer to remain ostensibly independent.

In “[The Ties that Bind: Mexicana Caretakers and Aging Americans Construct Kinship](#),” published in *Anthropology of Work* (2016), [Maria Ibarra](#) examines the range of relationships that become established between Anglo-American seniors and the Mexican immigrant women employed as their care providers. She presents three case studies—one illustrating a “not family” situation in which a professional relationship between worker and patient is maintained; a “like family” situation that is marked by the care provider’s affectionate concern for the patient; and a “family” situation in which the senior and care provider not only regard and treat each other with love, but have incorporated each other into their larger social networks. Bobby, the senior, and Consuelo, the care provider, have taken each other to visit their respective friends and extended family members, and both have reached out to their networks for help and support on behalf of the other—for example, Consuelo asking her brother, a plumber, for a favor to help Bobby, and Bobby arranging for his friends to host Consuelo’s son and wife during a visit to another city. Ibarra notes that, most significantly, Consuelo has voiced her permanent commitment to Bobby: “With God’s favor, I will take care of him until he’s no longer with us. I told him that when he became very ill—he didn’t want me to leave him. I told him, ‘Bobby, what you have to worry about is getting well. I am not going to leave you here alone. You know that we’re always going to be together—I am not going to abandon you’” (86).

What growing old means especially for gay men participating in a public gay community and social gay world that attach particular significance to youth and attractiveness is explored in [Johnny Symons’](#) film, “[Beauty Before Age: Growing Older in Gay Culture](#),” reviewed by Jim Aull, [Jay Ruby](#), and Robert Trezevant in *Visual Anthropology Review* (2000). (A trailer for the film is available [here](#).) The topic is considered also in [Moshe Shokeid’s](#) 2001 *City & Society* article, “[Our Group Has a Life of Its Own: An Affective Fellowship of Older Gay Men in New York City](#).” Shokeid, an Israeli anthropologist who attended the meetings as participant-observer, describes the affective fellowship that older gay men seek and find through their participation in the weekly meetings of a support group, SAGE (Senior Action in Gay Environment), in New York City’s Greenwich Village. The men attending these meetings shared stories about their romantic wishes and relationship woes, exchanged advice and criticism. Shokeid, notes that aging itself rarely was discussed, except on the occasion of the June 1995 Gay Pride Parade. One SAGE member chided others for not marching with the group. “For Irving, the march represented the full cycle of gay life. And he was happy to take credit for his generation’s contribution to gay liberation. He ended triumphantly: ‘You walk with SAGE and young beautiful men on the sidewalks applaud proudly. They see what they are going to become’” (19).

The new and continuing social connections that older people make with younger people establishes and renews their cultural relevance. At the Yup'ik culture camp that is documented in [Ann Fiendup-Riordan](#)'s 2002 *Anthropology and Humanism* piece, “[‘We Talk to You Because We Love You’: Learning from Elders at Culture Camp](#),” the elders demonstrate their relevance as not only keepers of the past, but also as guides for the future. During the day, the youths learned from elders by working alongside them on tasks ranging from digging clams to stringing nets to cutting fish. During evening talks (in Yup'ik) elders dispensed their knowledge and advice, starting with the importance of listening. One of the elders, at the conclusion of the camp, tells the youths: “When you return home, if you forget the things that you learned at this place, it is like you are leaving them behind. But it will be good if you always try to put away what you learned in your pockets because as you are living your lives, if you reach that situation they told you about, it will be like you are taking it out of your pockets, shaking, and using it” (183).

[Barbara Myerhoff](#), in her book *Number Our Days*—[reviewed](#) by [Carol S. Holzberg](#) in *American Anthropologist* in 1980—presented a study of the social connections and activities of elderly Jews who had left the shtetls of Poland and Russia and made new homes and lives in Venice, California. In [Lynne Littman](#)'s documentary film based on the book, Myerhoff explained one of her motivations for undertaking the study: “An anthropologist, of course, tries to feel the inside of native's head. That's how in a way you know the culture, but in a sense, that's false. In a way, it's an exercise in imagination because you will never be that. But I will be old.” (A short clip from the film is posted [here](#).) The film, [reviewed](#) by [Riv-Ellen Prell](#) in *American Anthropologist*, won an Academy Award in 1977. (In this [clip](#) from the Oscars broadcast, host Jane Fonda introduces playwright Lillian Hellman, who presents the award to director Littman.) Myerhoff herself died in 1985 at age 50—too soon to have become the “little old Jewish lady” that she had imagined herself becoming—but many of us likely share our own anticipations, fears, and hopes that we, too, will grow and be old.

How to understand and approach aging not as a topic per se, but our own aging as anthropologists? This is the question that [Edward M. Bruner](#) ponders in his 2014 piece in *Anthropology and Humanism*, “[The Aging Anthropologist](#).” Bruner reflects on what he calls the anthropological life cycle, comparing his past experience as a graduate student with his status as a senior “icon” in the field.

For 66 years, I have defined myself as a working anthropologist; it has become part of my authentic self. What anthropological role will I construct for myself in the future? Old age is a role that one constructs, not a fixed slot that one just occupies, nor is it one defined entirely by biology. In a culture that worships youth, we choose how to perform old age. If they are fortunate enough to live into old age, all anthropologists, indeed all scholars in all disciplines, confront this predicament (27).

It might be that aging anthropologists are especially fortunate that the work of our discipline is to come to an understanding of such diverse experiences of being and growing old.

Additional resources. The [Association of Senior Anthropologists](#) is an active and thriving subsection of the American Anthropological Association.

Readers interested in keeping up to date with anthropological studies on aging will find an invaluable resource in the [Association for Anthropology, Gerontology, and the Life Course](#), which publishes the journal, [Anthropology & Aging](#).

[Michael Wesch](#)'s digital ethnography project offers an inspiring example of anthropology cultivating ties between older and younger people—and using new technologies to tell stories about aging. Wesch's students have been engaged in a continuing fieldwork project in a senior care and retirement community, which has so far resulted in this short documentary [film](#). In addition, [an interactive empathy game](#) is being developed from the study.

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[Sociability in Old Female Japanese Monkeys: Human versus Nonhuman Primate Aging](#)
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[Film review of Lynne Rittman’s “Number Our Days” \(based on Myerhoff’s book\)](#)

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