

An Educational Experience to Address Age Segregation in the Contemporary United States

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jhp**Andrew M. Bland**¹ 

Abstract

Twenty years ago, Hagestad and Uhlenberg identified age segregation as a neglected dimension in the ageism literature, which they attributed to it having been accepted as natural in the cultural climate in which that research was situated. Because society cannot survive without interaction that challenges “us and them” polarization, the authors called for the reincorporation of intergenerational encounters. To that point, in this article I share the outcomes of an educational experience my students underwent 2 years ago in which they met weekly with an older adult via Zoom. The students expressed having found the intergenerational encounter eye-opening and transformative—confronting and transcending death anxiety and existential isolation. Also, the students articulated admiration for the older adults’ ability to resiliently make the most of their remaining time. In addition, the experience helped the students better appreciate the importance of authenticity and curiosity—as well as empathize with the lived experience of age segregation. Taken together, the students’ reflections greatly parallel those found in the humanistic literature on cross-cultural encounters, which emphasizes the role of truly personal human connection (I-Thou) in

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contradicting stereotypes and breaking down distancing (I-it) by confronting fear of difference both from and within oneself.

Keywords

age segregation, ageism, death anxiety, intergenerational encounters

Twenty years ago, Hagestad and Uhlenberg (2005) identified age segregation as a “neglected” dimension in the ageism literature (p. 343), which they attributed to the cultural climate in which that research was situated. In the context of ruggedly individualistic socioeconomic discourse (see Mondair & Masey, 2024) centered around technocratic values that have been accelerated via liberalism having become supplanted by neoliberalism in the last half-century (see Fukuyama, 2022), old age is regarded as a “separate country” and age segregation is thus accepted as natural (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005, p. 345). Rather than build upon an intergenerational legacy, old ways are continually shunned and replaced. With a blind eye turned to history comes alienation from both self and other—and, thus, individual responsibility to the collective becomes shirked. This leaves one flailing into the future, and a vicious cycle ensues. Relatedly, seeing adults remain fixated in adolescence, adolescents are left with minimal desire—or sense of how—to become adults themselves. Instead, they look to each other for guidance (see also Bly, 1996; Neufeld & Maté, 2004).

From the standpoints of existential psychology and terror management theory, younger adults’ aging anxiety—and, with that, ageism—is grounded in death anxiety¹ that, for generations, has run rampant in U.S. culture. Because older age² provides an inescapable reminder of one’s mortality (Bodner et al., 2015; Rababa et al., 2023), it becomes symbolically associated with death and enhances ageism by falsely associating the aging process with the dying process (Galton et al., 2020). Older adults are regarded as outdated, irrelevant, and burdensome, and their skill sets are dismissed as obsolete (Herrington & Both, 2022)—as witnessed in the ever-widening divide between digital immigrants and digital natives.³ This leads to efforts to distance themselves from elders via negative attitudes and behaviors (Herrington & Both, 2022) like the use of the “OK Boomer” catchphrase. Ironically, such digs are aimed at the generation that, 60 years ago, proclaimed, “I hope I die before I get old” (Townshend, 1965)! Once age segregation sediments, it blocks “essential opportunities for individuals to meet, interact, and move beyond ‘us and them’ distinctions” (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005, p. 349). For example, as intergenerational encounters are reduced by age-segregated

housing and activity, stereotypes abound. Stigma regarding old age by young people reflects a shadow projection of a negativistic view of their future self⁴—and as the lifespan progresses, this can become internalized, leading to self-ageism (Bodner et al., 2015). Reciprocally, older people also stereotype and discriminate against young people.

Thus, Hagestad and Uhlenberg (2005) argued that “society’s survival” is contingent upon surrendering the nuclear family structure as the dominant narrative and promoting more regular intergenerational interaction (p. 347; see also Maté, 2022). Accordingly, they call for “strong and concerted policy efforts to establish and maintain” an intergenerational community (p. 356). Indeed, in accordance with Allport’s *contact hypothesis*, interpersonal encounters effectively reduce ageism-related prejudice (Barnett & Adams, 2018; Cooney et al., 2020).

Intergenerational Connections

To that point, I will share the outcomes of an educational experience my students (all in their early to mid-20s) underwent 2 years ago as part of a service-learning project offered by our state government’s Department of Aging. For 2 months, each student met weekly with an older adult via Zoom. The Intergenerational Connections program offered a list of queries the students could ask; they were also encouraged to primarily use active listening. In their reflective writing assignments on the experience, several of the students expressed having found the intergenerational encounter both eye-opening and transformative. That is, despite initial apprehension, they ultimately found it enjoyable and meaningful. That shift was facilitated in part by their having actively confronted and transformed their death anxiety and existential isolation. For example, some students remarked that at first they were afraid of not knowing how to appropriately respond when faced with a lonely senior citizen with health problems. On the other hand, the actual encounter proved their concern to be unfounded as they came to see that the other was not very different from themselves. That realization thrust open the door to mutually beneficial, fruitful discussions that ended with a sense of peace.

Other students articulated their admiration for older adults’ abilities to make the most of their remaining time and to manage to thrive with a sense of confidence despite the constraints they face. In addition, still others noted that the experience prompted greater empathy with the lived experience of age segregation faced by older adults in contemporary U.S. society, especially regarding the numerous barriers to meaningful interaction with the outside world. Furthermore, by overcoming their initial hesitation to acknowledge the age difference, the students cultivated an enhanced understanding of the importance of authenticity and curiosity. Accordingly, they also expressed

feeling fortunate to have had the opportunity to both experience and offer that kind and that level of intimate engagement.

Conclusion

Twenty years ago, Hagestad and Uhlenberg identified age segregation as a neglected dimension in the ageism literature, which they attributed to it having been accepted as natural in the cultural climate in which that research is situated. Because society cannot survive without interaction that challenges “us and them” polarization, the authors called for the reincorporation of intergenerational encounters. To that point, I have shared the outcomes of an educational experience my students underwent 2 years ago in which they met weekly with an older adult via Zoom. The students expressed having found the intergenerational encounter eye-opening and transformative—confronting and transcending death anxiety and existential isolation. Also, the students articulated admiration for the older adults’ ability to resiliently make the most of their remaining time. In addition, the experience helped the students better appreciate the importance of authenticity and curiosity—as well as empathize with the lived experience of age segregation. Taken together, the students’ reflections greatly parallel those found in the humanistic psychology literature on cross-cultural encounters (DeRobertis & Bland, 2020), which emphasizes the role of truly personal human connection (I-Thou) in contradicting stereotypes and breaking down distancing (I-it) by confronting fear of difference both from and within oneself (see also Schneider, 2020, 2023). Accordingly, as young adults cultivate lived knowledge about aging and the lived experience of being an older adult, ageism can be prevented (Barnett & Adams, 2018; Cooney et al., 2020).

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Notes

1. This is especially the case when death anxiety is accompanied by low self-esteem—the combination of which fuels interpersonal reactivity (Rababa et al., 2023). In addition, aging anxiety correlates with (a) fears of getting older, not existing, leaving the known world, and facing the process of dying (Barnett & Adams, 2018; Galton et al., 2020) and (b) greater levels of death anxiety (Barnett & Adams, 2018), ageist attitudes (Bodner et al., 2015; Cooney et al., 2020), and hostile ageist microaggressions (Poon & Li, 2024).
2. It is important to note that definitions of older age vary in both research and public policy. The studies presented in Hagestad and Uhlenberg's (2005) article and in other literature reviewed herein defined older age as starting between the 50s and the 70s, with most at 65 years.
3. It is worth noting that, concurrently, Big Tech has profited from engendering an unprecedented degree of loneliness in young adults (see Bland, 2024).
4. Hagestad and Uhlenberg's observation is empirically supported by Cooney et al.'s (2020) finding that aging anxiety mediates the relationship between death anxiety and how one regards their own aging.

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