Baby Boomers in an Active Adult Retirement Community: Comity Interrupted

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Purpose of the Study: This article explores a clash between incoming Baby Boomers and older residents in an active adult retirement community (AARC). We examine issues of social identity and attitudes as these groups encounter each other. Design and Methods: Data are drawn from a multiyear ethnographic study of social relations in senior housing. Research at this site included in-depth, open-ended interviews (47), field notes (25), and participant observation in the field (500 hr). Research team biweekly discussions and Atlas.ti software program facilitated analysis. Findings: We begin with a poignant incident that has continued to engender feelings of rejection by elders with each retelling and suggests the power and prevalence of ageism in this AARC. We identify three pervasive themes: (a) social identity and image matter, (b) significant cultural and attitudinal differences exist between Boomers and older residents, and (c) shared age matters less than shared interests. Implications: Our data clearly show the operation of ageism in this community and an equating of being old with being sick. The conflict between these two age cohorts suggests that cohort consciousness among Boomers carries elements of age denial, shared by the older old. It also challenges the Third Age concept as a generational phenomenon.

Key Words: Third Age, Ageism, Ethnography, Communitas, Fourth Age, Ableism, Legend, Identity, Active adult communities, Age-restricted housing, Stigma, Generational consciousness, Cohort, Busy ethic

Over the last five decades, the number of U.S. households in age-restricted housing, including active adult retirement communities (AARCs), has increased steadily to nearly 2.7 million households headed by individuals 55 and older. Recent projections anticipate 54,000 new 55+ housing starts in 2011 and 79,000 in 2012 (MetLife, 2011). This growth is due, in part, to the Baby Boomers (hereafter Boomers) who in 2001 began turning 55, the minimum age for entry into most AARCs by the 1998 Fair Housing Act Amendments (42 U.S.C. §§ 3,601–3,619). Because of their numbers, Boomers will likely influence AARCs whether Boomers embrace age-restricted senior housing or not.

Based upon ethnographic research, this article examines the underpinnings of age-based social
dynamics, as older, established residents in an AARC encounter newly arrived Boomers. In a community where an active lifestyle is presumably shared, this paper explores the social construction of group identity and ageism. Comity, the harmony and camaraderie that develops among people who share experiences and activities, emerged as a strong theme within the social life of this particular community. We begin with a poignant incident that disrupts this community’s sense of comity and, more importantly, speaks to larger sociocultural understandings of aging and the power and prevalence of ageism, even in an environment where “everyone is old” (Kastenbaum, 1993). The incident reflects assertion by Gilleard and Higgs (2000, p. 8) that “age is more a site of contradiction than of community.” The conflicts between these “competing cultures of aging” indicate that Third Agers, those in an “era of personal fulfillment” according to Laslett (1989, p. 4), share a common disdain and dread of the Fourth Age, a period of “final dependence, decrepitude, and death” (4; for more information about the First and Second Ages, cf. Laslett, 1989).

In 2009, we began fieldwork in Woodhaven (all place and people names are pseudonyms), an AARC of several thousand people located on the east coast. Laid out in suburban-style cul-de-sacs, Woodhaven includes some rentals but is primarily privately owned housing including condos, town houses, and single-family homes. The ongoing need to attract new and most likely younger buyers prompted the community leadership to authorize a major renovation of the decades-old clubhouse that housed outdated fitness equipment and an inadequate pool. A number of established residents told us they looked forward to what some were calling “new blood,” anxious to hand over some leadership roles, and welcome the widely touted Boomer generation into the vibrant social life they had developed in the years they had lived there. In those first weeks of fieldwork, stories began to emerge indicating that the Boomers did not necessarily feel the same way. A key story, told primarily from the perspective of Woodhaven’s established residents, continued to engender feelings of resentment 2 years after the event: “The only problem we’ve had,” said Rita Hurley (age 79; Boomers during the time of our fieldwork would have ranged from 45 to 63 years of age), “is with the Boomers; they’ve been kind of rude.”

Rita was in the middle of a Drama Club rehearsal when she discovered the newly formed Boomer Club was meeting nearby. She thought it an ideal opportunity to welcome them. “Of course, good old charming me, I go in and said, ‘Would you mind if I just speak a few minutes to invite people to come and join [in the activities here]?’” She began her short, enthusiastic speech by telling the 10 people in attendance, “We’re so thrilled to have you. We’ve been waiting for you to come. We need you and your fresh ideas.” She was met with a silent and cold reception. “There was not a smile in the crowd.” She continued:

. . . this woman finally raised her hand and she said, “I just wanted to say, we’re not really interested in joining the old people. You can just save your breath. We didn’t come here to hang out with people old enough to be our parents.” I felt like I had been slapped. That was so rude and nobody spoke up to say anything different.

Rita left, stunned. After returning to rehearsal, she related the story to the Drama Club members who were shocked. “They were all just, ‘I can’t believe that! I can’t believe they said such a thing!’ I said, ‘I couldn’t either.’”

Despite the relatively small group of people involved, the story of the Boomer reaction spread “like wildfire,” as Rita described it. Early in our research, the effects of the Boomers’ comments remained palpable. Many older informants referred to this exchange and their consequent low regard for the Boomers as a group. Rita reflected on this incident in her interview:

It was terrible. We got off on such a bad footing with these people. Nobody wanted to have anything to do with the Boomers. Boomers didn’t want to have anything to do with us.

Complicated power and identity dynamics are evident in this exchange. The incident crystallizes ageist sentiments held by both Boomers as well as the established community members. Some older residents may have been guilty of overvalorizing the youth of the Boomers, desiring both to be seen as still active and “not old” or sick and hoping to be accepted by the younger residents. Not every Boomer held these ageist sentiments or belonged to the Boomer Club, and in some cases, significant friendships and bonds arose across these age groups. Nevertheless, the story confirmed deep-seated sociocultural attitudes about age and illness. It made a lasting impression and had become more than a story; it had become legend (Mullen, 1972). Legends, writes folklorist Tangherlini (1990, p. 380), gain power “by tapping already established beliefs and values” and “by constructing a symbolic reality which encompasses these values and beliefs.”
Background

Boomers were first identified as a socially constructed category by demographers and others concerned with how changes in population structure affect social life. Among gerontologists, debate has emerged over whether Boomers represent a generation, a cohort (i.e., simply those born from 1946 to 1964), a culture, or some other entity. Gilleard and Higgs (2007) examined age distinctions in relation to the characterization of the younger old as part of the Third Age, an inclusive category which early Boomers now occupy (Laslett, 1994). Gilleard and Higgs (2007, p. 13) note that a generational approach, rather than a focus on Boomers, “offers a broader conceptual understanding of the transformation of later life.” They identify the Third Age as sharing key elements of a generation: temporal, historical, and sociocultural location with generational consciousness. Boomers, they argue, are a subset of the Third Age. Indeed, elements that characterize the Third Age, including activity and good health, are shared by both the Boomers and many of the established residents of Woodhaven.

In this paper, we also view the Third Age generationally; within that view, the two groups of elders we are discussing, the Boomers and the active, established residents, are from distinct age cohorts. Especially significant at Woodhaven are the Boomers’ “generational consciousness” and shared culture (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002). Many Americans identify with the term “Baby Boomer,” reflecting “the role of the market and the media in shaping their social identities” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2007, p. 13). We view Boomers as a socially constructed category, sharing cultural and attitudinal similarities. We suggest that the Boomers’ introduction to age-restricted housing at Woodhaven prompted a bifurcation of the Third Age into two distinct, and sometimes opposed, groups.

Like many Americans, Woodhaven’s residents are steeped in ageism and negative stereotypes that lead to age discrimination and age-based stigma, that is, the assignment of negative value according to group or individual traits (Butler, 1969; Cuddy, Norton, Norton, & Fiske, 2005; Dobbs et al., 2008; Luken, 1987; Montpare & Lachman, 1989; Thornton, 2002). Consequently, there is a fear of being perceived as old—especially old and ill. Noteworthy is Butler’s (1969, p. 243) inclusion of “ableist” attitudes in defining ageism as “a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and a fear of powerlessness, ‘uselessness’, and death.” Though anxiety about age is somewhat lessened for those, like most Woodhaven residents, who are wealthier and more educated (Angus & Reeve, 2006), these fears appear widespread. So, although the more senior residents at Woodhaven were surprised by the overt ageist attitudes from the Boomer Club, the Boomers simply represented broad societal attitudes about age. Ageist attitudes are certainly intertwined with fears about physical and mental decline and are shared by both Boomers and more senior residents, some of who report not seeing chronological age (cf. Overall, 2006).

Boomers continue to be the focus of research as they travel through the life course. The same year they started turning 55, the American Housing Survey (AHS) began collecting information about the housing of older individuals. AHS survey data from 2001 to 2007 indicated nearly 30% of age 55+ heads of household lived in communities with a majority of residents 55+ (MetLife, 2011). Moreover, the popular press’ focus on Boomers conveys a concept of a distinct Boomer culture or social identity. Many are better educated, healthier, and likely to work longer than prior cohorts (MetLife, 2010). These changes will affect how society perceives retirement and old age (Freedman, 2007).

The first AARC was built in Arizona in 1960 by developer Del Webb. Lured by warm weather, amenities, and the promise of an active lifestyle, Sun City has been explored as a sociocultural phenomenon in both the popular and the academic literature (Jacobs, 1974; Laws, 1995; Luken & Vaughan, 2003; McHugh & Larson-Keagy, 2005; Trolander, 2011). Sun City’s success paved the way for the development of similar communities. Today, the steadily growing numbers of AARCs vary in size, location, amenities, and housing type and attract younger and more ethnically diverse residents (MetLife, 2011).

AARCs share a philosophy reflecting the cultural value of staying active into old age. This is familiar to gerontologists, who began writing in the 1940s about an activity-oriented approach to well-being in later life (Cavan & Burgess, 1949; Pollak, 1948). Remaining active and engaged may be a basis upon which people judge themselves and others (Ekerdt, 1986). McHugh (2003, p. 170) also wrote about the activity ethos in the Sun City AARC: “That the active lifestyle fostered in retirement communities lengthens and improves life is accepted as unquestioned fact by retirees.” Many older adults feel compelled to stay active by maintaining health and autonomy as a way to avoid becoming the victim of dependency (Katz,
2000). This cultural value also appeared in nearly every interview at Woodhaven.

Methodology

This article is based on ethnographic data from a multiyear study of how stigma is defined and operates within several types of multilevel senior housing. Long a topic of interest in social science, stigma as a theme emerged from previous studies in senior housing settings (Dobbs et al., 2008). To minimize the presumption that stigma is present, we broadly explored social dynamics between groups and among individuals residing in these settings.

Woodhaven was selected from 27 eligible AARCs for its varied housing stock and diversity in resident age, resulting from the community’s maturity. Woodhaven is a freestanding AARC with no particular affinity base. Its amenities include a large community center, recreational resources for a variety of activities, and a large number of organizations, clubs, and groups providing a lifestyle deemed richly social and fulfilling by most of the residents we interviewed. Over 15 months, two ethnographers (L. Keimig and E. G. Roth) spent nearly 500 hr conducting fieldwork, interviewing, and attending community events. We gained access through the community association and its elected officers and informed residents of the study in varied ways, including a community-wide newsletter. Field visits occurred at different times of the day and throughout the week. Interviews, ranging from 30 to 150 min with 35 residents and 5 family members, took place primarily in their homes. Nine staff and administrators, including property managers, in-home caregivers, and paid employees of community-based groups, were interviewed at their workplaces. Recorded, verbal consent was received for all interviews, per approved Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol (IRB # Y07JK40095). Researchers recorded written field notes of their experiences after each field visit; these were regularly distributed to the entire team for review, enabling informed discussion during project meetings.

Employing purposive sampling (Patton, 1990), we chose interviewees of varied ages, ethnicities, family structures, physical health, and gender. Excluded were those residents who were cognitively unable to undertake an interview. As a community, Woodhaven does not collect demographic data, nor was our intention to representatively sample for this study. Although no demographic data are collected at Woodhaven (minimum age is established only at home purchase), we estimate that about one fifth of residents are Boomers. Residents who were interviewed included military, government workers, teachers, and business owners, many of whom were retired. Income and education among residents are high, reflecting national trends (MetLife, 2011). Interviewees’ ages varied widely, with some spouses in their 40s to a handful of centenarians; 31 were non-Hispanic Whites, but we interviewed two African American and two Asian American residents.

Ethnographic interviewing and participant observation allowed us to understand residents’ perceptions and attitudes concerning life in Woodhaven (Keith, 1986; Wolcott, 2005). Ethnographers separately attended and wrote field notes on community meetings, dances, Bingo, Bible study, concerts, theater productions, and other activities. Ethnographic interviewing uses responses to initial questions as starting points for further inquiry (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Seidman, 1998). Questions in the open-ended interview guides included: “How did you come to live here?” and “What is life like here?” Stigma and social labeling were important themes in our inquiry, and we approached these with entry questions such as, “Are there people here that people tend to avoid?” Interviews with employees focused on their experiences working within this setting. To examine selected topics more deeply, some individuals were interviewed multiple times.

Each recorded interview and field note were transcribed verbatim, checked for accuracy by ethnographers, and team coded using a set of inductively derived codes developed by the research team. Both transcripts and field notes were entered into Atlas.ti software to assist in qualitative analysis (Muhr, 2008). To ensure coding integrity and reliability, rotating two-person teams coded each document and then met to reconcile differences. When coding discrepancies could not be resolved within the coding pair, they were brought to the larger research team for resolution.

Analysis involved running Atlas.ti queries using both code and word searches. For this particular analysis, codes included “age/age group differences/age-related changes,” “feelings of exclusion/inclusion,” and “belonging here/not belonging here.” We also conducted word searches for “Boomer” and drew heavily upon the two ethnographers’ collective, field-based knowledge of Woodhaven.

Findings

We have organized our findings for this paper around three themes: (a) social identity and image matter, (b) significant cultural and attitudinal
Social Identity and Image Matter

At Woodhaven, social identity and the images people cultivate and display matter a great deal to people of all ages with whom we spoke. Residents were quick to tell us that most people at Woodhaven are very active and busy, remarkably fit, “not sickly,” and “very with it.” When asked about life in this community, many expressed how busy they find themselves, sometimes busier than they were before they came to Woodhaven. “We have too many things going,” Conrad Lewinski (74) said in an interview shared with his wife, Shirley (65). “We’ve both decided, ‘Hey! We’ve got to slow down just a little so we can do some other things.’ It’s not a matter of stopping, it’s a matter of we want to do something else.” He was finishing a 2-year tenure as an officer of a community organization, and they were both very involved in the Music Club’s annual performances. “Our kids can’t keep up with us!” Shirley added with a laugh. Residents of this community admired those among them who were old chronologically but physically and mentally fit.

Apparent in responses like these is a tacit need to counter stereotypical ideas of old age. Lynn Guthrie (79) made a point of telling us that living in a place like Woodhaven is not “all doom and gloom.” Rob Wright (67), who described residents as “with it” and not sickly added, “I think there aren’t too many people who sit home and watch TV.” Larry Gray (86) said of his fellow community members, “They may be more mature, but they’re not old. They’re not old in their thinking. They’re not old in their activities.” He spoke of this time in life as a plateau, a vastly different view of old age than he held decades ago, when old age was a time to “retire and die.”

For many of the established residents, days were intentionally full. In part, this explains the presence of countless groups, clubs, and organized activities, all of which were resident initiated and directed. Rob’s (67) interview prompted him to reflect on his own need to stay busy:

Sometimes I ask myself a question, “Am I doing this because I’m just trying to avoid thinking about dying?” I don’t worry about [it] but the thought has popped into my head. If I’m keeping busy to avoid—is it because I just want to do a lot of things . . . ?

“ . . . before you go,” his wife Carolyn interrupted. “It’s called the bucket list. It’s the things you want to do before you kick the bucket,” she added with a laugh, moving talk away from the existential. Many of those we interviewed valued good humor, a critical aspect of this community’s way of relating and dealing with illness, decline, and death.

Further, image mattered in the community’s efforts to attract new residents. Many people spoke about the economical and social motivations to bring in younger people. Established residents expressed a desire to have friendships with younger people; some already sought such contacts outside Woodhaven. Although Larry said that the best thing about living in Woodhaven is the “intimacy and the commonality of interests of folks our age,” he enjoyed working with many young people as a Red Cross volunteer and in his digital photography class outside of the community.

The clubhouse renovation represented an image facelift, as the community intentionally sought to become more attractive to Boomers, AARC’s next group of potential buyers. Peggy Short (81) understood the need for the renovation. “We need to modernize it to entice people to come here.” But she was angry when tables and chairs not conducive to playing cards replaced the lobby furniture used by the regular bridge players. Peggy overheard someone say, “Nobody wants to see a bunch of old white-haired people out here playing cards.” She believed the new tables and chairs were selected in order to keep the card players out of the lobby. “They don’t use the tables and chairs. [. . .] So you won’t find those ‘old white-haired people’ in the lobby any more,” she said, quite displeased.

Indeed, one Boomer, Judith Owens (56), expressed such a reaction when she first visited the clubhouse on a weekend. She said she thought to herself, “My God! This place is like a mausoleum. Oh God, how creepy, you know? Just sitting there, and you think, is that what your life is going to be, sitting and playing cards?” After she retired and had more time to become involved, Judith’s initial impression of the bridge players changed: “My perspective changed . . . the strangest thing, because all a sudden, I thought about the people I’ve met in my classes, Tai Chi, Pilates, and yoga—I started seeing them as just people.”

The appearance of the community’s public space concerned some residents who resisted the addition
of grab bars or ramps in the clubhouse renovation. “It will damage the community,” Elisabeth Kingsley (70) said. “You have to continue to attract enough people who are in reasonable shape,” she continued. With great pragmatism, Elisabeth recognized the limits of an AARC, noting, “This community is built on volunteerism. Adding too many enhancements aimed at people with severe problems [. . .] will change the nature of the community.”

Artie Fisher, a Woodhaven employee, mirrored Boomer concerns. Responding to questions about residents’ desire to age in place by bringing in homecare, he commented, “This place is not really designed for that.” His concern, shared with others we interviewed, was partly financial. “If you don’t have younger people moving in, the property values are going to go straight down the toilet.” He emphasized his point by asking: “How are you going to get somebody that’s 55 years old that wants to move into the community that only has 90-year-olds in it?”

Cultural and Attitudinal Differences Between the Boomers and Older Residents

There were differences in how the Boomers and the established residents perceived themselves as groups and individuals. Overall, established residents perceived themselves as “just people,” a collection of older individuals residing in a community, not as a group. As one put it, “I don’t care whether you’re a Baby Boomer or you’re 90. I mean it doesn’t matter to me.” While realizing that they were older and that they were brought together through coresidence, established residents did not share a generational consciousness evident among Boomers. However, there were shared elements that were critical to their identities as both older people and as persons who adhered to “the busy ethic” (Ekerdt, 1986). They believed that health and independence were important in later life, so everyone should be as active as possible. This “just people” attitude was initially extended toward the Boomers; established residents expected newcomers to share their desire to be socially integrated and participate in the community’s activities.

Among established residents, however, there were divisions; but these hinged on one’s health status. For this group, once a resident declined significantly in physical or cognitive health, moving beyond the Third Age, they were “othered.” These sentiments were discussed openly by established residents in interviews as well as observed in the field. Remarks such as these, “I’m not getting into a pool with incontinent people” or “I know I’m old too, but she should not be on the road,” illustrate the divisions they made between themselves and those who had become too ill or impaired to maintain an active, engaged life in the community.

Judith (56) recognized the distinctions between the older people who had become her friends and her preconceived ideas of older people: “There’s a lot of older people here, but the ones that are active and enthusiastic, then the age is really irrelevant, I find” [emphasis added]. We found this view consistently throughout the community: those with the least cachet and greatest stigma had physical and/or cognitive impairments that prevented active participation in community life. Some of the impaired individuals we interviewed avoided community events, expressing shame and embarrassment when in public, cognizant of how others may be “averting eyes when the ragged tooth marks of time begin to appear around the edges of a neighbors’ mind or body” (Kastenbaum, 1993, p. 178).

Many Boomers identified themselves and were perceived by others as a deliberate age-based group. A separate email listserv of Boomers was developed to maintain separate communication. They resisted being considered part of “those old people” or participating in existing activities at Woodhaven. Some established residents said they felt that Boomers viewed them like they were their parents. In fact, many Boomers had priorities different from established residents, in that they continued to work full or part time, support young adult children, or provide parent care.

The Boomer Club was exclusive; to belong, its members must have been born between 1946 and 1964. Elisabeth Kingsley (70) admired these newest and youngest residents and understood the Club’s plan to exclude people beyond what she called their “legal definition.” Most non-Boomers we interviewed were less understanding of the Club’s age-based exclusivity. The Boomer Club initially met outside Woodhaven; according to rumor, they did so to limit membership. Judith, a Boomer who is married to an older, non-Boomer, perhaps bridges these two groups. She identified some of the generational obstacles and stereotypes held by each about the other:

Once I realized that they [the Boomer Club] really weren’t comfortable with this whole age thing—it may be a sort of denial of, like, we don’t want to be around people reminding us of what might be in store for us . . . I mean, just the fact that you’ve got a name: We are Boomers. It’s maybe a pride thing, you know? We want to be just us Boomers and we’re going to do
things our way. You keep reading how they’re going to re-define what retirement is. So maybe it's like, the rest of you all, you’re stuck in your ways and we’re going to show you how life really could be.

Other cultural traits were pointed to as the basis for age cohort difference. Lynn Guthrie (69) stated:

They [the Boomers] want convenience earlier than . . . past generations . . . Well, it’s a plastic world. You know they run their cards through continuously. My mother and father never owned a credit card, never even owned one.

Shirley Lewinski (66) said she never felt welcome to join the Boomers, even though the Boomer Club occasionally opened their events to the entire community. She knew she could “pass” as a Boomer, but she identified more with the established cohort perhaps, she said, because she had grown up surrounded by older people and her husband was several years her senior. Shirley was curious about the type of music Boomers would feature at one of their events, certain it would not be “our music.” Stating that she might try to “sneak around the edges” to listen, Shirley was surprised to learn from an ethnographer that the music would be from a band hired for other community-wide events—in short, “their music.”

Missing from the opening story repeated throughout the community are the words of Jean Carpenter (57), an active member of the Boomer Club. Jean, attending the night Rita Hurley gave her speech, volunteered in an interview a matching testament, volunteered in an interview a matching assessment. Elisabeth (70) admitted to some of the same tests. Elisabeth understood that social bonds based on age could be insufficient. In response to the Boomer Club forming, she said, “. . . just because you’re the same age doesn’t mean you like each other.”

Instead of using age or generation to connect with others when the earlier in-movers arrived, they had grouped themselves around shared interests. Elisabeth (70) admitted to some of the same attitudes when she first moved to Woodhaven:

To be honest about it, when I first moved here [ten years ago] I thought that there were too many people in their 80s. But then now that I’ve been here longer, well, I’ve gotten to know some people who are really nice people [ . . . ] regardless of age, because you might find different ages in different type exercise groups.

Elisabeth understood that social bonds based on age could be insufficient. In response to the Boomer Club forming, she said, “. . . just because you’re the same age doesn’t mean you like each other.”

Despite the differences between the Boomers and established residents at Woodhaven, there were times when common interests connected individuals of all ages. Carolyn and Rob Wright, a couple in their 60s, explained:

. . . not only are we finding people our own age here, but we’re finding people who are, I'll say, ten
years more than our age, are interested in the same things we are. So even though they are a little bit older . . . They're very with it . . . .

Shirley explained that she never really pays attention to anyone’s age: “I have found that 70 is no longer old, and 80 is no longer old either. When you’re working with people and talking to people and then you find out they’re in their middle or upper 80s and you’d never know it. Alert and quick and . . . .” Michael, her husband, finished the thought: “The activities keep them going mentally.” “And physically,” Shirley added.

Judith Owens, the Boomer whose first encounter with the clubhouse reminded her of a mausoleum, was initially thrilled when the Boomer Club was started. “I went to one meeting, thinking, ‘Oh! I want to get [to know other] Boomers.’” She called her first meeting with the Club an “eye opener.” “What in the heck are we meeting for?” she asked herself. “There was nothing in common other than age.” The Club spent a significant part of the evening complaining about the ballroom music at the dances and the big band music streamed over the community-wide radio station. Judith was turned off by the complaints: “I suddenly realized age is not important; it’s interests.” Yet, she could see the Boomers’ perspective: “I thought, ‘I agree! I can’t stand [the music]. It’s not our music.’ But so what? I’m not going to spend an evening talking about it.” Judith set out to follow through on what she felt was a more constructive approach by suggesting they play some Rolling Stones on occasion.

Judith’s experience attending dances and joining the choir gave her a different perspective. “I’m so valued here,” she said. “Here, you walk in and people come up to me and say, ‘Oh, we’re so glad you’ve come. We appreciate it so much.’ I’ve had people say that, ‘Gee, you’re different from these other young people. They don’t seem to want to join and socialize with us.’ Deep down, I’m thinking, ‘Golly, I was probably one of those people too, because you’re older and you might be sick.’” But Judith spoke about “getting past it” and is now “reaping the benefits.” She never attended another Boomer Club meeting.

Despite the rebuff from the Boomers, Rita Hurley still hoped they would become more involved: “Let them learn how stupid they are [for not participating].” Conrad Lewinski was confident that “eventually, they’ll come around.” Already, he noted, Boomers had formed bicycle and kayak activity groups. Some believed these more physically demanding activities were for Boomers only, but they included participants of all ages. Efforts were also being made to hold more activities and community events after work hours and on weekends. The Lewinskis recalled how their own social life had developed:

Conrad: One of the things it seemed, our groups of friends, for the most part, moved in approximately the same time we did.
Shirley: And then they’re all mostly older than us.
Conrad: Older than Shirley, not me. But I guess everybody was coming in sort of new, just getting involved with everything all at the same time, so that seems to be where our nucleus has formed. And naturally it’s spread out since then.

**Discussion**

The Boomer story that emerged in our first weeks of fieldwork at Woodhaven had persistent and widespread effects. The established residents believed this incoming group would react to their new environment and community in the same way they did—by joining its social life. They were disappointed by the overt rejection by some Boomers, as well as their apparent lack of interest in mixing with older residents. Age, it turns out, was not a stigmatizing issue for established residents as long as they were still active. And sometimes, even illness was not an issue if the person had not “given up” and remained socially engaged participants in Woodhaven’s Third Age ethos. The rumors between age-based groups only reified commonly held fears of the Fourth Age, in terms of illness, physical and mental decline, and death. By not including Jean’s apology for the rude behavior of her peers in the story, Boomers emerged monolithically ageist and ill mannered.

Ageism, differences in age identity, and denial of aging are all evident in these interactions. The devaluation of older adults is well recognized in our culture. What might have been dismissed as a rude comment made by one individual instead became a painful realization of the pervasiveness of ageism at Woodhaven. Although Boomers are predicted to change aging, here they ironically appear to be replicating ageism of the broader society, despite having chosen to move into an AARC. The Boomers deeply offended the established residents, injuring comity, and their desire for shared social identities as active, engaged adults who love the life they had created together.
older, established residents did not see themselves as “those old people.”

In our analysis, we identified three themes critical to understanding the social dynamics at Woodhaven. First, it is clear that social identity and image matter a great deal to the people who live there. Second, significant cultural and attitudinal differences are manifested between the Boomers and the older residents in many areas. And third, shared age does not necessarily lead to shared interests and comity.

The movement of Boomers into Woodhaven demonstrates ageism and reinforces the power of our dominant cultural narratives of aging. Thus, even established residents of Woodhaven, shunned by the Boomers, identified being old not by chronology but by the frailty, poor health, or failing cognition that characterizes the Fourth Age. Both groups shared views distinguishing the Third Age from the Fourth Age. At Woodhaven, fear and avoidance of illness and old age often resulted in a lack of preparation for the future, social isolation, and attempts to disguise decline. This was true for both Boomers and the older, active residents, but perhaps more acutely for the Boomers. For example, a community health association was created to support aging in place. Financed primarily by dues, it was struggling to attract new members because many residents believed they would not need its services anytime soon—or perhaps ever.

At Woodhaven, although both Boomers and established residents shared their decisions to live in an age-restricted setting, there was little evidence of Boomers adopting a shared Third Age identity. There was little mutuality between the two and, for some Boomers, an abhorrence of common identity. Whereas some Boomers crossed the age lines, others had begun to segment into a group with its own separate culture and social identity.

This study offers a glimpse into an established AARC in one particular location at a specific point in time as the Boomers’ arrival was being felt. There are consequently limitations to our study. Because people self-select into AARC residence, they share certain orientations and traits, such as high socioeconomic status and an endorsement of the active lifestyle and busy ethic (Ekerdt, 1986). Whereas the Boomer Club drew strong lines of separation, other Boomers were involved in the shared community life and activities. We recognize the need for additional interviews with Boomers, particularly those who were employed. Missing from this article are sufficient voices from the Fourth Age—older, ailing residents with minimal involvement with community activities.

Further study is needed to compare social dynamics among age groups in a range of diverse AARCs. Active adult communities may select for individuals who are particularly invested in Third Age notions of activity, “busyness,” and physical fitness. Newer AARCs may not yet be facing the age issues encountered at Woodhaven, but such challenges may become more common if Boomers choose to move into such residential settings in large numbers. Another suggested area of study is to examine the Boomers’ reasons for choosing age-restricted housing and contrast these with decisions of age peers not choosing age-restricted housing.

AARCs that have been built more recently may not yet share the age-based dynamics described here. Woodhaven is old enough to have seen people age into their 90s, die, or move to health facilities. Gilleard and Higgs (2000) recognized the diverse cultures of aging that are found within what is often thought of as a homogenous group of individuals who happen to share the same age. For example, there is broad acknowledgment that this community cannot support ailing and impaired people indefinitely. Indeed, AARCs were not designed to address competing cultures of aging. Although some tensions between age groups have been played out over the years at Woodhaven, we contend that Boomers have entered with a generational consciousness and social identity that differentiates them from previous groups.

Conclusion

Comity had been interrupted by the Boomers. Although the Boomers’ rejection of Rita’s initial invitation may have been a single incident, the power of that story and the legendary status it achieved through retelling reinforce ageist attitudes and stereotypes. To some degree, that initial rift has been countered over time by relationships that have developed across ages based on shared interests.

Boomers in this community appear to share a generational consciousness that has made social integration with established residents unexpectedly problematic. They seem to define old age in chronological terms, whereas the older, active residents use a Third Age basis of health and mental functioning. What both groups share is a dread of the Fourth Age. The age identity issues that have played out in such a public way at Woodhaven
may mirror what has played out many times before in more private ways. Small exchanges are common where age denial and social distancing are evident. It took the generational phenomenon of the Boomers to give a name and a public face to these dynamics at Woodhaven. In the end, it is ageism, more precisely fear of age-related illness and decline, that runs throughout this exploration—fears that are undoubtedly shared by all, regardless of age. Woodhaven’s established residents’ hopes for comity with their newest neighbors were in some ways dashed. Perhaps, these hopeful residents underestimated the powerful need among Boomers to find a group to “other” as the Boomers themselves confront old age.

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