

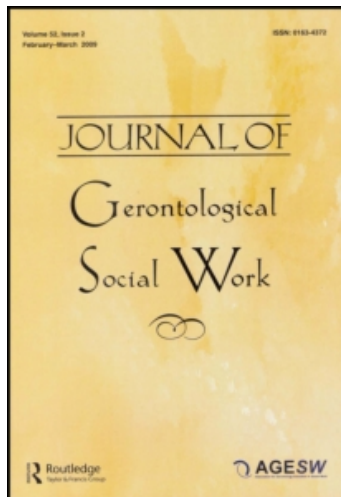
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### From the Editor

Amanda S. Barusch<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Editor-in-Chief, Journal of Gerontological Social Work,

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## EDITORIAL

### From the Editor

#### *Reflections on Age and Identity*

My father turns 85 this month and when I ask how he is, the invariable response is “old.” This gives me pause. “How,” I ask, “does it feel to be old these days?” He laughs and changes the subject.

Bernice Neugarten called age “an empty variable” (1977, p. 633) suggesting, along with Paul Baltes and others (1977) that chronological age has little explanatory or predictive value apart from the biological, psychological and social events that go with it. Culture seems to trump, defining the combination of markers that lead us to accept the “old” appellation (see Kaufman, 1981). Of course, G. H. Mead would remind us that individuals are not passive recipients of cultural dictums (see Johanki, Jylha, & Hervonen, 2000). Rather, we actively construct our identities, interpreting norms and events according to our inclinations, habits, and proclivities.

I wonder why, after 85 years, my father has finally embraced this “old” identity? It seems inconsistent with the way he has lived. When there was pain, he “walked it out.” He was not a complainer, and not much of a talker. He made it through retirement, cancer, loss of loved ones, and even his early 1980s as a poster child for Dylan Thomas. In his own way he did “rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

Some say continuity is key to successful adaptation in late life (Neugarten, 1968; Maddox, 1968; Atchley, 1989). Hold onto it while you can, despite life’s buffeting changes, and you will enjoy that sense of completeness to which so many aspire. Some people see continuity wherever they look—of the man who has lost his life partner they say, “he grieves as he lived, privately;” of the woman forced to move into a nursing home, “she is still a sweet little social butterfly”—all to persuade us that despite cataclysmic change some central part of human identity remains safe from deterioration. And when that something central yields to the “old” label? What then?

Realizing they are old, some people turn their rage against ageism and injustice. Maggie Kuhn (1991) comes to mind, but there are countless others – feisty ones who battle on. In her book, *Learning to be Old*, Margaret Cruikshank (2003) prescribed conscious struggle against stereotypes and the judicious application of “emancipatory hedonism” to free ourselves from the limitations

and demands our culture imposes on those identified as old. “Living well is the best revenge”— if you can.

Others turn their rage and indignation against themselves. The suicide rate among older adults is a national tragedy. We hear a lot about youth suicide, but Americans over 65 are considerably more likely to end their own lives (Bharucha, 2008). Social workers who practice with the elderly are well aware of the high prevalence of depression in this population.

All of which is not to universalize the experience. Some people refuse the “old” appellation. Some consider themselves old without missing a step. Masters of generativity, integrity or wisdom, some become models of productive aging (see Erikson, Erikson & Kivnick, 1994). These are the volunteers in hospitals and schools, the advocates and organizers, and the artists—signposts of what we would choose for our futures.

No one would choose my father’s latest diagnosis. Alzheimer’s strips away bits of his identity each day, leaving others in sharp relief. He may forget that he is a father, but at least for now, he knows he is old.

*Amanda S. Barusch*

*Editor-in-Chief, Journal of Gerontological Social Work*

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