

Images of aging:

Global efforts to challenge stereotypes gain momentum



Researchers, public health officials and older adults themselves uncover challenges and contradictions—as well as real potential for change—in efforts to represent aging more accurately

by Marilyn Larkin, MA

Throughout the world, the number of older adults is growing faster than any other age group, according to a report released in October 2012 by the United Nations Population Fund and HelpAge International.¹ Among the statistics:

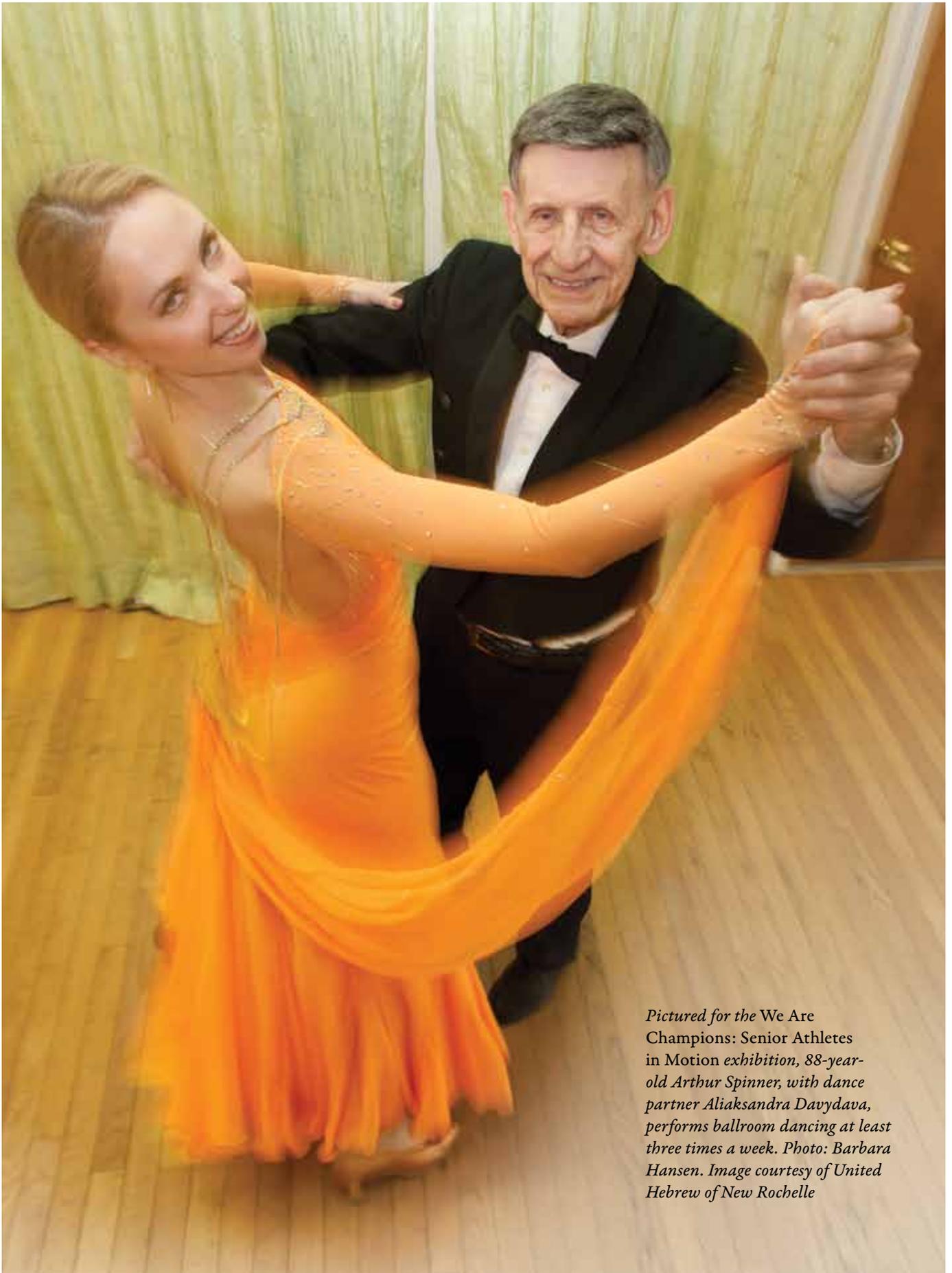
- Almost 810 million people were aged 60 and over in 2012. Their numbers are expected to increase to one billion within 10 years and double to two billion by 2050.
- In 2012, people aged 60 and older accounted for about 11.5% of the global

population. By 2050, that figure is projected to rise to 22%.

- About 1.6% of people worldwide are currently aged 80 and over, with projections of 4.3% (402 million people) by mid-century.
- People aged 60 and older now outnumber children under age 5 and, by 2050, are expected to outnumber children under age 15 as well.

“If you were to open a newspaper or watch television, you’d think the world’s rapidly aging population was something terrible,” John Beard, MBBS, PhD, director of the Department of Ageing and Life Course at the World Health Organization (WHO), tells the *Journal on Active Aging*®. “But we at WHO see it as a success and opportunity, because older people are a resource for the community. We know they contribute in many ways to their families, neighborhoods and

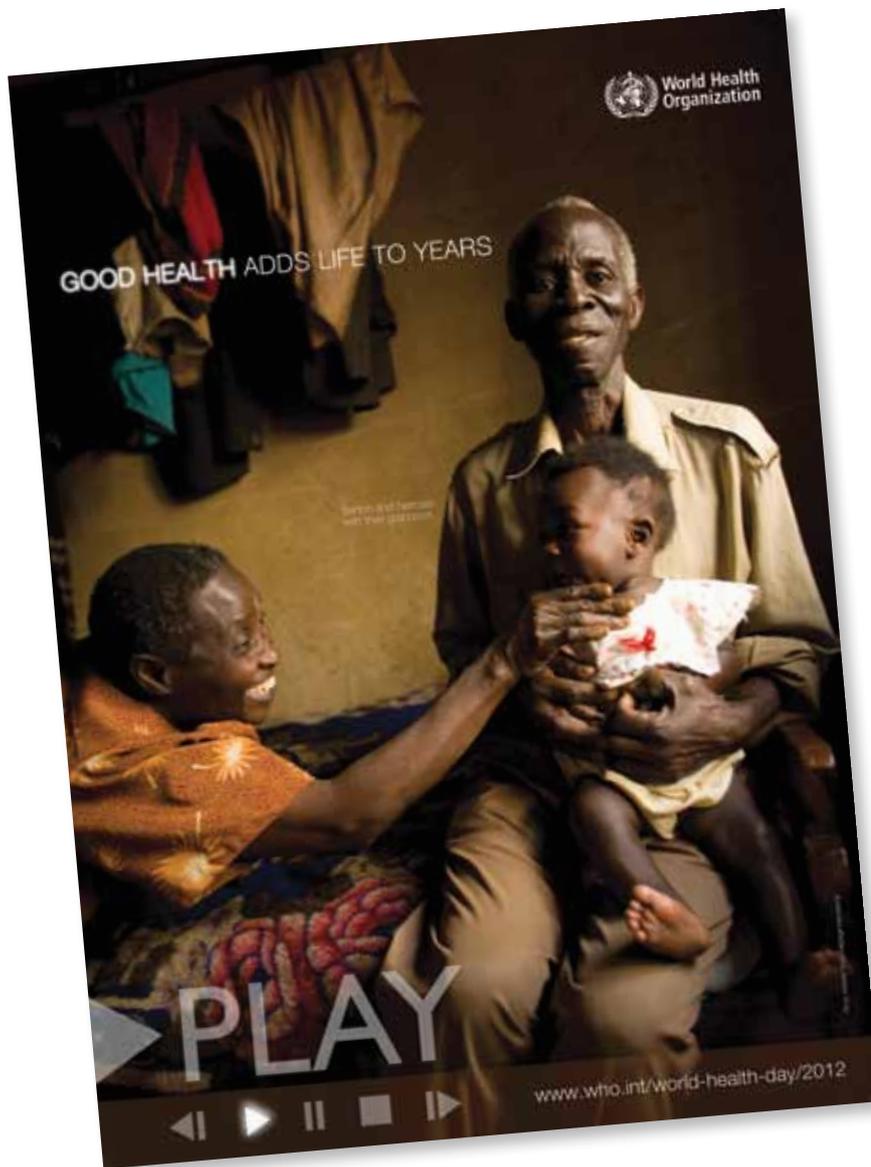
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Pictured for the We Are Champions: Senior Athletes in Motion exhibition, 88-year-old Arthur Spinner, with dance partner Aliaksandra Davydava, performs ballroom dancing at least three times a week. Photo: Barbara Hansen. Image courtesy of United Hebrew of New Rochelle

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World Health Day 2012, which focused on the theme “Ageing and health,” challenged current stereotypes of older adults with a series of posters. The above poster featured Barton and Namale Zazinga, who care for their ailing son and his two children in Uganda. Image courtesy of the World Health Organization

society in general, either informally or through the workforce. The challenge for us,” Beard continues, “is to break down barriers to those contributions and help older people maintain the lives they want to lead.” To that end, WHO chose “Ageing and health” as the 2012 theme for World Health Day—promoting the slogan “Good health adds life to

years”—and published a poster series² and news brief³ that challenge the “current stereotypes older people have to grapple with.”

“It turns out we’re in the curious position of wanting to live a long life, but knowing it requires moving into the most devalued stage of life—late old

age,” adds Anne Barrett, PhD, associate professor of sociology at Florida State University’s Pepper Institute on Aging and Public Policy in Tallahassee. Barrett’s research focuses on how and why age inequality persists and the strategies people use to retain positive views of themselves as they get older. Her current work on images of aging involves an analysis of more than 50 years of *Modern Maturity*/*AARP The Magazine* covers.⁴

In the United Kingdom, Lorna Warren, PhD, senior lecturer in social policy and director of learning and teaching in Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield, was principal investigator in a study that aspired to create alternatives to mainstream images of older women—but yielded surprising results.⁵ “We learned as researchers that visual images can be interpreted very differently by both study participants and people who view the results of the study,” Warren states. “You might try to present things one way, but you can’t guarantee they’re going to be read that way. There are more possible interpretations of visual images compared to text.”

Linda Forman, vice president of community relations at United Hebrew of New Rochelle, a continuum of care campus of residences and services for older adults in Westchester County, New York, organized a photo exhibit showing a wide range of older men and women involved in various athletic activities. “Everyone felt that staying active physically was also a way to stay active mentally, but even more importantly, it was a way to continue friendships and stay connected to other people,” says Forman. “And because the exhibition was open to the public, we were able to see how it helped decrease negative stereotyping among younger people.” The event can serve as a model for International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA) members who want to motivate and inspire their constitu-

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Hermione O'Connell by Monica Fernandez: 'before and after' photographs. Nine assisted-living residents had a 'riotous' time satirizing the British media's pervasive 'makeover' formats in a participatory visual arts project for the Representing Self-Representing Ageing initiative. Image courtesy of Representing Self-Representing Ageing

ents through positive imagery, and at the same time help change perceptions of aging. (For more information, see the sidebar, "Breaking stereotypes: how to create a photo exhibit to celebrate active aging," on page 45.)

Colin Milner, ICAA's founder and CEO, was inspired in part by the work of members of the association's network and by his own work with global organizations such as the World Economic Forum and healthy aging initiatives to launch ICAA's Changing the Way We Age® Campaign in 2011. The campaign's goals are to help change perceptions of aging and offer more realistic views of what it means to grow older in North America. "Media and marketing companies are specifically targeted in the ICAA campaign as contributing to ageist stereotypes through negative imagery,"

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Resources

Economic and Social Research Council (UK): Monday's Child is Fair of Face video

www.esrc.ac.uk/publications/videos/monday.aspx

Florida State University's Pepper Institute on Aging and Public Policy

<http://pepperinstitute.fsu.edu>

ICAA's Changing the Way We Age® Campaign

www.changingthewayweage.com

Look at Me! Images of Women and Ageing

www.representing-ageing.com

New Dynamics of Ageing Programme

www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk

United Hebrew of New Rochelle

www.unitedhebrewgeriatric.org

World Health Organization: 2012 World Health Day

www.who.int/world-health-day/2012/en/index.html

Print

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and HelpAge International. (2012). Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: A Celebration and A Challenge. Available at <http://unfpa.org/ageingreport>

Richards, N., Warren, L., & Gott, M. (2012). The challenge of creating "alternative" images of aging: Lessons from a project with older women. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 26(1), 65–78

Global Agenda Council on Ageing Society. (2012). *Global Population Ageing:*

Peril or Promise? Switzerland: World Economic Forum

World Health Organization. World Health Day 2012—Ageing and health: Toolkit for event organizers. WHO/DCO/WHO/2012. Available at www.who.int/world-health-day/2012/en/index.html

New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) Programme. (2012, January). Representing Self-Representing Ageing: Look at Me! Images of Women and Ageing. NDA Findings 10. Available at www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk/assets/files/NDA%20Findings_10.pdf

Lloyd-Sherlock, P., McKee, M., Ebrahim, S., et al. Population aging and health. *The Lancet*, 379(9823), 1295–1296

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At age 93-plus, Eugene Grant has been playing tennis for 82 years. The sport has helped Grant stay fit—and [it] gives you energy that you might not have otherwise,' he says. Grant was photographed for the exhibition We Are Champions: Senior Athletes in Motion. Photo: Susan Woog Wagner. Image courtesy of United Hebrew of New Rochelle

Milner notes. “Such images discount the vitality of many older adults and the contributions they make to society.” The campaign’s annual Rebranding Aging⁶ competition rewards businesses that present

“positive, realistic views of aging” in their Web, direct mail and print campaigns. [Ed. The article “Marketing matters” on page 50 showcases the winning entries from the most recent awards contest.]

Against the backdrop of ageist stereotypes that show older adults through a lens of decline and diminished value, our interviewees discuss their efforts to provide alternative perspectives—and some of the challenges involved in doing so.

Stereotypes deeply ingrained

In its World Health Day 2012 toolkit for event organizers, WHO identified and countered several stereotypes of aging that are common across cultures. Among them:²

- **Older people are “past their sell-by date.”** WHO notes that despite assumptions that older workers are less productive than their younger counterparts, “most individuals maintain mental competence and learning abilities well into older age” and also have the advantage of experience. Similarly, “deterioration in physical abilities may be much less than pre-

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A better way to calculate aging?

In a research letter published in *The Lancet*, Peter Lloyd-Sherlock of the School of International Development at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK, and colleagues write: “Depictions of older people remain stereotyped and generalized, distorting public opinion and skewing policy debates. For example, the use of economic dependency ratios, one of the commonest measures of aging, assumes that anyone aged 65 years or older is unproductive. Similarly, the use of disability-adjusted life years to capture the health of a population explicitly views older people as a social and economic burden. Yet many older people continue to make substantial social, economic and cultural contributions, which can be enhanced by

measures that improve their health and functional status.”

For these reasons, Lloyd-Sherlock suggests that “a more logical approach is to consider old age in terms of average remaining life expectancy, or average remaining healthy life expectancy.” In Japan, for example, a woman aged 60 can expect to live “reasonably healthfully” for another 20 years, whereas in Senegal, a 60-year-old woman can expect to live healthfully for fewer than 10 years, he says. “If we work backward, from likely time of death, then we can see that old age may begin much younger in a country like Senegal and later in a country like Japan. That makes more sense than counting forward from birth.”

Stating that on a specific birthday, a person becomes an older adult “is a starting point for stereotyping,” Lloyd-Sherlock emphasizes. “That’s a problem in many developed countries, because people conflate old age with retirement, and the standard retirement age as it used to be, and then get confused about whether it’s 60 or 65 or whatever. In less developed countries, the majority of people don’t retire at those ages anyway, so a specific age becomes a meaningless construct for starting to look at old age.”

Reference

Lloyd-Sherlock, P., McKee, M., Ebrahim, S., et al. (2012). Population aging and health. *The Lancet*, 379(9823), 1295–1296; doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(12)60519-4.

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Lillian Tootell by Laura Pannack: 'it represents my life—what I do.' The Representing Self—Representing Ageing research initiative found that participants want to see more representations of older women who are active, volunteering and/or still contributing to society. Image courtesy of Representing Self—Representing Ageing

sumed." As an example, they cite Fauja Singh, who became the first centenarian to complete a marathon by running the Toronto Waterfront Marathon in Canada on October 16, 2011.

- **Older people are helpless.** After describing how older adults came forward to volunteer at nuclear disaster sites following the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, WHO concludes, "It is not age that limits the health and participation of older people. Rather, it is individual and societal misconceptions, discrimination and abuse that prevent active and dignified aging."
- **Older people will eventually become senile.** Occasional memory lapses are common at any age, according to WHO, but signs of dementia "are not normal signs of aging ... In fact, some types of our memory stay the same or even continue to improve with age, as for example our semantic memory, which is the ability to recall concepts and general facts that are not related to specific experiences."

- **Older women have less value than younger women.** People often equate women's worth with beauty, youth and the ability to have children. The role older women play in their families and communities, caring for their partners, parents, children and grandchildren, is often overlooked.
- **Older people don't deserve health-care.** Treatable conditions and illnesses in older people are often overlooked or dismissed as being a "normal part of aging." WHO points out, "The right to the best possible health does not diminish as we age; it is mainly society that sets age limits for access to complex treatments or proper rehabilitation and secondary prevention of disease and disability."

Where did these common stereotypes originate? John Beard thanks ICAA's Colin Milner and colleagues for explaining in *Global Population Ageing: Peril or Promise*,⁷ published by the World Economic Forum in 2012, that the image we have in our minds of older people

was imprinted when we were very young. Says Beard, "In my case, when I was five, I saw my grandparents—and that picture is imprinted in my mind as what it is to be old. Such beliefs are reinforced when, throughout life, we see images that coincide with that early image."

Beard, however, recognizes that the image of his grandparents was imprinted in the 1950s. "I'm now aware that this image of aging is outdated and no longer represents what it means to be old," he acknowledges. "Somehow, we need to get everyone to understand that as well, because the impact of these outdated images not only affects the way society treats older people, but also influences how older people view themselves. As individuals become older," he adds, "they will tend to move into the image they've held unless they come to realize they're not limited in the same way their grandparents were."

One of the challenges in changing those ingrained perceptions is the diversity of aging, Beard explains. "We see some very fit 85-year-olds who essentially can do most of the things they were doing in their 20s and 30s; on the other hand, we have 65-year-olds who are quite unwell and disabled and need support. And we need to acknowledge and provide for both." The problem, in his view, is so much attention is focused on the latter. "While we must ensure that services are available for those who need them," Beard says, "we also need to help break down barriers for the others."

UK researcher Peter Lloyd-Sherlock, professor of social policy and international development in the School of International Development at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, sees challenges that result, paradoxically, from the way aging is studied. Lloyd-Sherlock observes that, overall, global agencies tend to use "an incredibly simplistic way of looking at population

aging” that can actually *reinforce* stereotypes.

“Simply put, according to these organizations, anybody aged over 60 years is an old person, and anybody aged 59 years, 11 months, is not an old person,” Lloyd-Sherlock states. “Then they produce studies about whether people over 60 are more likely to live alone or whatever it may be. Somebody who’s looking at global trends finds that very frustrating,” he stresses. “That’s because something like healthy life expectancy is hugely different in different parts of the world for people who are 60, and a simplified and

monolithic 60-plus approach is a very limited way of looking at things.” In a research letter published in *The Lancet* in April 2012,⁸ Lloyd-Sherlock and his colleagues point to the need to “challenge existing policy paradigms and the social attitudes that underpin them” when looking at population aging. (Refer to “A better way to calculate aging?” on page 42 to learn more.)

Countering mainstream media

In their chapter in *Global Population Ageing*,⁷ ICAA’s Colin Milner and co-authors write: “Mass media is a critical

platform for communicating the meanings and experiences of aging between generations, and plays a role in shaping the agenda for discussing aging issues. Media portrayals of aging not only reflect the widespread ageism in society, but also largely reinforce negative stereotypes. In addition, when aging is depicted in a manner that appears positive, the aim is often to push anti-aging messages and frame defying aging as the only example of successful aging.”

These realities drove our interviewees to develop research projects and initiatives to boost awareness of ageist stereotyping and show images of older adults that run counter to them. “The idea behind the WHO poster series developed for World Health Day 2012 was to confront people with images that portrayed older people doing what they were not traditionally expected to be doing,” says John Beard. The posters feature a “play” button similar to that found on videos to symbolize “the dynamism and enjoyment that older people can and should have in their lives.”

Examples include Helmut Wirz, who discovered a passion for bungee jumping at age 75 (he is now 87). “His photo conveys a magnificent sense of being at peace while doing something that, in a sense, is quite outrageous,” Beard notes. “Interestingly, one of the comments we got in social media was, ‘Helmut, are you single?’ I thought that was terrific!” Another example is Barton Zazinga and his wife Namale with their grandson in Uganda. The couple looks after their eldest son, who is too sick to work, as well as his two small children. “I like this poster because it captures the significant contribution older people make, particularly in poorer parts of the world, by heading a ‘skip-generation’ household—it’s an important role that many people tend to discount,” Beard says.

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Breaking stereotypes: how to create a photo exhibit to celebrate active aging

On September 30, 2012, more than 30 older athletes in New York’s Westchester County were honored at an event that featured *We Are Champions: Senior Athletes in Motion*, a photographic portrait gallery of them engaged in their sports of choice. Produced by United Hebrew of New Rochelle, a continuum of care campus of residences and services for older adults, the event aimed to show members of the organization and the general public that people over age 80 continue to stay active and participate in sports like their younger counterparts. “The exhibit was inspiring to people of all ages,” says Vice President of Community Relations Linda Forman, who helped organize the exhibit. Forman shares these tips for readers interested in setting up a similar event:

Give yourself plenty of lead time.

Forman started about six months in advance to make connections with participants. She put out a call to local photographers, and also to United Hebrew constituents, whom she asked to nominate candidates for the ex-

hibit—others, or themselves. She then personally interviewed the nominees, and ended up accepting all of them.

Strive for diversity. Plan to showcase people involved in a wide range of activities, regardless of their functional status. For example, the United Hebrew exhibit features a nursing center resident with Parkinson’s disease who continues to participate in Latin dance exercise by raising his arms and tapping his feet.

Be prepared for scheduling “challenges.” Forman acknowledges some difficulties in trying to match the photographers’ time with the times that the athletes were actually participating in their activities. “We were able to rise above these challenges because people were very generous with their time,” she says.

Make a special effort to invite members of the community—especially young people—to view the exhibit.

“There is nothing that decreases negative stereotypes like a program showing that older people can be as active as younger people,” Forman says. “It really serves as a bridge between the generations.”

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Anne Barrett of the Pepper Institute on Aging and Public Policy presented preliminary findings from her analysis of more than 50 years of covers and tables of contents from *Modern Maturity* (which became *AARP The Magazine*) at the annual scientific meeting of the Gerontological Society of America in November 2012. “We’re looking at how those images of aging have shifted over

time,” Barrett reveals. “And we’re finding more idealized images of aging presented in the magazines now—for example, cover images of people with fewer wrinkles and less gray hair.” In terms of content, she and her colleagues are also seeing fewer references to experiences such as “retirement, declining physical health, transitions to long-term care, and death.”

Barrett’s analyses also reveal a shift from aging well as a social issue to more of an individual responsibility that depends on individual effort. “We see this promotion of individual responsibility as part of the view of later life as an extension of middle age,” she explains. “Today, there’s less emphasis on the role that race, class, gender, and other parts of the social structure play in how we age. Instead, people are seen as aging well if they’re maintaining the same level of physical and social activity they had in their earlier years. And while on the one hand, the individual responsibility concept can encourage people to have a more elongated view of their lives and maybe encourage them to plan for the future,” Barrett notes, “it can also put unnecessary pressure on them—for example, 60-year-olds feeling as though they have to look like 40-year-olds and maintain a level of activity consistent with that. Not meeting these standards could make people feel like they aren’t aging well,” she adds. “So while the idea of ‘super-successful aging’ (and the images associated with it) is an interesting antidote to our negative stereotypes of older people, it could have some negative consequences.”

The University of Sheffield’s Lorna Warren was first motivated to research images of aging when the 2002 United Nations World Assembly on Aging highlighted the need to look at visual representations of older people, and emphasized the need for older people themselves to think about the ways in which they wanted their representations to be put forward. “Research has shown that older women are negatively stereotyped and are more often the butt of humor compared with older men,” she comments. “Older women are also targeted by the so-called ‘anti-aging’ industry, and may feel harshly judged as they age, buying into those stereotypes, which are reinforced in the media.”

As part of the UK’s New Dynamics of Ageing Programme, a seven-year col-

Key findings for Representing Self-Representing Ageing: Look at Me! Images of Women and Ageing

According to British researchers Lorna Warren, PhD of the University of Sheffield, and colleagues, “... women’s social status [in Western societies] is attendant on physical attractiveness, which is tied to a youthful and sexualized ideal of beauty. Older women can therefore feel harshly judged as they age and can end up buying into the stereotypes which are presented to them via the various media channels—newspapers, magazines, films and [television].”

The research team recently summarized the background, goals and key findings of its two-year study aimed at involving older women in creating visual images to counteract media stereotyping. Among the study findings:

- Women in their 50s and 60s felt more pressure [to look youthful] from media and advertising imagery compared with participants in their 80 and 90s.
- Study participants’ images showed that women experience aging as affecting their body—for example, in the form of wrinkles and graying hair.

- Participants’ images challenged stereotypes such as the “grumpy old woman,” instead often reflecting grief and loss. Participating in the project gave women a sense of solidarity and ownership of the research process, which had an impact on their well-being and conferred a feeling of public validation.
- Participants said they wanted to see more images of “ordinary” older women who were still “making a contribution.”
- Eighty-eight percent of visitors to the project exhibitions wanted to see more images of older women like those created through the project displayed in public.

Reference

New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) Programme. (2012, January). Representing Self-Representing Ageing: Look at Me! Images of Women and Ageing. NDA Findings 10. Retrieved from http://www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk/assets/files/NDA%20Findings_10.pdf.

laboration among five UK research councils, Warren led an initiative called “Representing Self–Representing Ageing,” facilitating older women in creating their own images of aging. The initiative, better known as “Look at Me! Images of Women and Ageing,” comprised four projects using a variety of participatory visual methods. In one, a specially commissioned photographer worked with participants to produce a series of “before” and “after” photographs satirizing the format of magazines and television shows like the UK’s *Ten Years Younger*. On the show, candidates are chosen for “makeovers,” and random members of the public are asked to guess their age before and after the experience. For the project, women in their 80s and 90s dressed up with wigs, sunglasses and brightly colored clothing. “They had an absolutely riotous time doing this,” Warren says. “We know from our research that appearance is not a priority for women in this age group in the same way as it is for women in their 50s and 60s—and I don’t think I’ve ever laughed with participants as much doing research as when we brought these images to the table.” (See the sidebar on page 46 for more research findings from the “Look at Me!” project.)

Warren cautions, however, that some people who looked at the images on display “felt the women demeaned themselves or presented themselves in a ‘carnivalistic’ way. Sometimes, using visuals alone, your message might not come through as intended,” she states, “as recipients may see the images through the lens of their own aging or their own stereotypes of aging. In this case, only a small number of respondents saw the images that way; the majority understood the project was a satire.”

Positive, realistic active aging

According to Lorna Warren, many of the women in all four research projects “said they don’t want to be represented climbing mountains, canoeing across oceans or doing other unusual things. They

also want to capture the happiness that comes with sitting down with a cup of tea and doing the crossword,” she says. “But they rejected the reverse stereotypes—the American ‘apple pie’ grandma with permed gray hair and spectacles who sits in a rocking chair. And they wanted more examples of women such as the British politician Shirley Williams and the feminist Germaine Greer, who are out there doing things and not stopping at a certain age.”

What makes most sense, according to WHO’s John Beard, is to take a “life course” view. “We tend to talk about ‘older people,’ but the reality is that we’re all people and we all have lives. In the past, we tended to categorize life into a study period, a work period and a retirement period. As we’ve started living longer, we’ve added those additional years only to the end of life—that’s a crazy way to do it,” he says. “In fact, by extending the length of life, we have options to redesign those categories, mix and match them, or simply get rid of them all together. For example, living longer doesn’t simply mean a long old age; it means that people at 40 or 50 have the opportunity to retrain, because they may have a quite long career ahead of them.”

With respect to images of aging in the media, says ICAA’s Colin Milner, taking a life course view “means older people should be featured naturally as part of an interest group, whether it be around a sport or other activity, a product such as an automobile, or a travel destination. As researchers, government entities, marketers and media put forth positive, realistic images of older people as part of the normal landscape of life, it is ICAA’s hope that these ageist stereotypes ultimately will wither away.”

Marilynn Larkin, MA, is an award-winning medical writer and editor, as well as an ACE-certified personal trainer and group fitness instructor. She is also ICAA’s Communications Director and a

regular contributor to the Journal on Active Aging®.

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