Report on Intergenerational Relationships

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Abstract/Summary

As people live longer than ever before, we are experiencing an unprecedented level of age diversity around the world. Yet despite there being about equal numbers of people of every chronological age from 0 to 70+, cross-age relationships are extremely rare. This is an immense lost opportunity because intergenerational relationships can be a transformational tool for productivity, meaning, and justice. In this report, I review research describing just how uncommon intergenerational relationships are in our world, as well as what makes age-diverse interactions valuable or costly in families, communities, and workplaces. Then, I examine why intergenerational relationships are rare yet meaningful through a discussion of the myriad ways our social world is structured by age. I provide a framework for conceptualizing the meaning of mixed-age relationships in people's lives, in organizations, and in culture. Finally, I conclude by describing several existing programs that help to make the most of age diversity, as well as describing key action steps that individuals, firms, and governments can take to promote healthy and meaningful intergenerational relationships.

Introduction

Social connection is one of the most basic and crucial parts of human life. Humans are fundamentally social animals: we need other people to physically survive, to feel happy and purposeful, and even to define who we are as individuals. Social connection is necessary for humans from the day they are born until the day they die. Yet, the way that our culture sorts people into buckets of belonging can make it challenging for everybody to have access to meaningful connections with whomever they want, and therefore to feel like they truly belong in society.

Within half a second of meeting a new person, we have classified the person as 1) a man or a woman; 2) as a specific social location between very young and very old; and 3) (in the US) as a racial category (Brewer & Lui, 1989). We generally do this classification unconsciously, often without even noticing that we have done it, nor what information we used to make our decisions. We classify people into social categories because those categories are useful to us: in order to have any sort of social interaction, we must have a shared understanding of what our social status is in relation to the people we are interacting with (Ridgeway, 2019). Our culture has therefore developed a set of (largely unspoken) heuristics that help people absorb disparate pieces of information about a person (e.g. their skin color, wrinkles, clothing style, and social role) and use them to classify that person into a gender, race, and age category. The particular categories we use, while seemingly inherent and absolute, are in reality specific to our time and culture: for example, the category "Hispanic" didn't emerge in the US until about 30 years ago (Mora, 2014), and the category "child" was invented in the 17th century (Cunningham, 2012). Outside of the US, categories take on different meanings; for example, our racial classification system is unique in the world (some other societies use other systems that operate similarly to race, such as caste or religion or skin color), and while we divide the world into men and women, some cultures recognize genders beyond these two categories. Prior to the present day, people we now classify as "Hispanic," "child," or other new social categories would have been classified along with different groups of people through other labels, and they would have been understood as fundamentally different types of people than they are now. This is because once we do classify a person into social categories, we use that information to make sense of them and their behavior (Berger & Wagner, 2016). We also use the information to judge how we should treat the person, what we should expect of them, and what status they should have in society (Ridgeway, 1991). The classification of human beings into buckets of belonging therefore structures our very social world.

In this report, I will focus on one aspect of this type of social ordering: age. The family roles we take on, the jobs we have access to, our status in the workplace, the clothes we choose to wear, the activities we do, our legal rights like voting and obtaining government benefits, and our social networks all depend on how old or young we are. The logic of age as an axis of social difference orders nearly every aspect of our social world. This social ordering based on age is sometimes called *age structuring* or *age ordering*, which convey that age is a central organizing

principle of human societies. A key piece of the age structuring of society is how cross-age relationships are enacted and given meaning.

The topic of intergenerational relationships has been a popular one among scholars and practitioners who work with aging populations. This is in part because the concept of "successful aging" has for decades included the idea that social connection can help mitigate some of the age-related risks of cognitive and functional decline (Havighurst, 1961). For people of all ages, being socially connected, rather than socially isolated, is one of the strongest predictors of life satisfaction and both cognitive and physical health (Glymour, Weuve, Fay, Glass, & Berkman, 2008; Waldinger, Cohen, Schulz, & Crowell, 2015). As I will describe, connecting people from different stages of life can also provide opportunities for personal and societal transformation. In a world where everybody should have the chance to live a life that is 100-years long or longer, it is crucial to figure out ways to foster meaningful connections between people across the life course and to value age diversity.

In this report, I will start by describing the remarkable age-related demographic transition at play in our world, and what that means for age diversity. Then, I will review existing research on both the benefits and costs of intergenerational relationships. Next, I will address the question of *why* intergenerational relationships can be so beneficial, but also so hard to enact, due to the way that society is structured by age. I will describe two conceptual tools, *chronological essentialism* and a *multidimensional perspective on the meaning of age*, that can help clarify why and how age is important to the social world. Finally, I will discuss possible evidence-based ways to foster cross-age connection, many of which are already being piloted in programs across the country and world. I will end with a description of areas for future scientific research, and a summary of the findings of this report.

Unprecedented chronological age diversity

At the turn of the last century, 44% of the US population was under 20 years old, and 6% was over 60. About 120 years later, only 25% of people are under 20, and 23% are over 60. As shown in Figure 1, we now have relatively equal numbers of people of every age from birth to the 70s. This type of demographic change is what has led many to claim that we live in an "aging society."
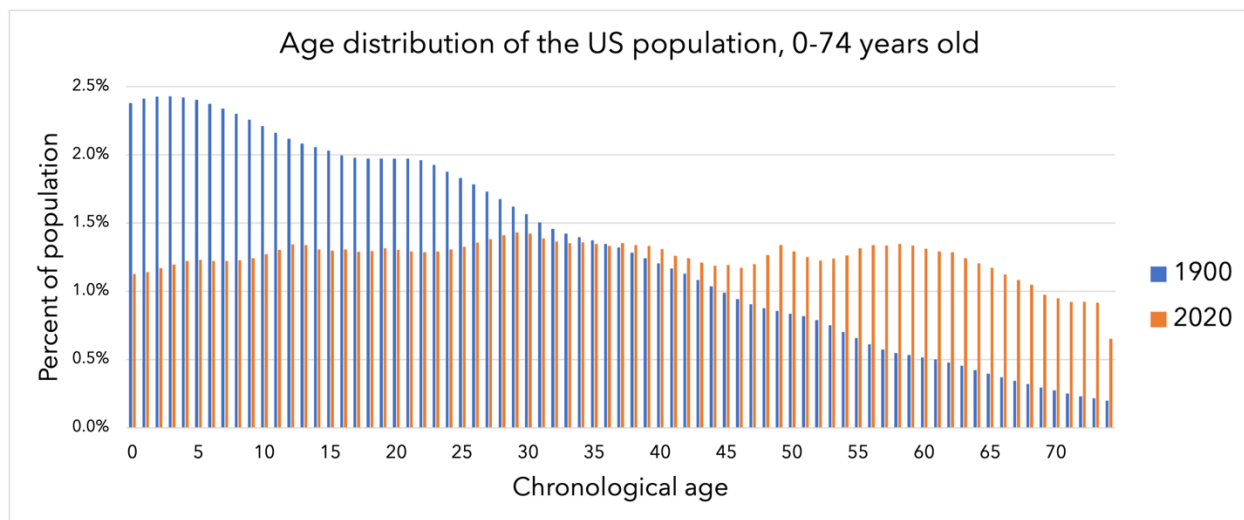
FIGURE 1: Age distribution of the US population, 0-74 years old, in 1900 and 2020. Data from US Census Bureau population counts and estimates; analysis by the author.

Economists have noted how this creates a new challenge for our economy: in a world where most people still only work between ages of 20 and 60, how does only 48% of the population financially support the other 51%? This is a challenge that gets at the heart of how we conceptualize both age, care, and work, and is considered more deeply in the *Work* report from the New Map of Life. Here, my focus is on a different reason these demographic shifts are important: the remarkable amount of chronological age diversity we now have in our society. As shown in Figure 1, the U.S. population is now evenly distributed across chronological ages through the eighth decade of life. And as people live longer and longer, the amount of chronological age diversity present in our society will just continue to grow.

Think about what this means in terms of intergenerational relationships: a century ago, you would have been unlikely to interact with anybody more than 50 years older or younger than you, because the average life expectancy in the US was 48 years old (Centers for Disease Control, 2010). Now, with life expectancy at birth reaching 79 years old, opportunities abound to meet, befriend, and learn from people who were born a half-century or more before or after you (Centers for Disease Control, 2010).

These cross-age interactions happen in families, where it's now common to have four or more generations caring for each other. As shown in Figure 2, in 1900, only 6% of American children had four living grandparents; one hundred years later, 40% of American children do (Uhlenberg, 1996). Adults also are more likely to rely on their relationship with their parents , in part because delays in marriage timing and increasing divorce rates make spouses a less ubiquitously-reliable family bond (Bengtson, 2001; Swartz, 2009). Among current US young adults aged 25 to 32 years old, 98% report having regular contact with at least one parent (Hartnett, Fingerman, & Birditt, 2018), reflecting a trend since at least the 1990s towards more frequent contact between generations in the same family (Fingerman et al., 2012; Hareven, 1994; Lye, 1996). Children, adults, and elders interacting within the family, be it every day under the

same roof, over text messages, or at holidays and family reunions has become not only possible but common.

Children who have four living grandparents:

In 1900:

In 1995:

FIGURE 2: American children with four living grandparents in 1900 and 1995. Data from (Uhlenberg, 1996).

Intergenerational relationships also happen in communities and in the workforce. Many workforces have members of the Gen Z, Millennial, Gen X, Baby Boom, and Silent Generations all working towards the same goal. Many neighborhoods have people of vastly different ages shopping at the same grocery stores, going to the same community centers, parks, and churches, and living on the same block. The unprecedented demographic shift towards longevity and therefore age diversity creates new opportunities for people to connect with and learn from people who grew up in drastically different economic, social, and technological contexts than themselves. As I will next describe, these opportunities can be hugely valuable, but they can also impose costs on individuals and organizations.

Benefits and costs of intergenerational relationships

Within families, research suggests that when older adults help their children and grandchildren they experience mental and physical health benefits (Fingerman, Huo, & Birditt, 2020). These benefits include increased feelings of usefulness (Gruenewald, Karlamangla, Greendale, Singer, & Seeman, 2007), self-esteem (Krause & Shaw, 2000), mental health (An & Cooney, 2006; Polenick, DePasquale, Eggebeen, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2016) and overall self-rated health (Polenick et al., 2016). Even among older adults with functional disabilities, such as vision loss or mobility impairment, giving emotional support to younger family members is common. This type of support can be deeply meaningful to both parties, perhaps explaining why older adults with disabilities actually report *more* positive physical and mental benefits than do

their able-bodied counterparts when they engage in such cross-generational support behaviors (Huo, Graham, Kim, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2018).

Developing social ties with midlife and older adults is good for young people as well, and for relationships outside of the family context. For example, young people who have a meaningful relationship with a non-parental adult (such as an aunt/uncle, sports coach, or minister) are more likely to do better in school, display less risky "problem" behaviors, be more independent, and have fewer depressive symptoms than those without (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Greenberger, Chen, & Beam, 1998; Kogan & Brody, 2010). Among youth who do have these relationships, the quality matters: young people who experience more warmth, closeness, and acceptance from adults around them have better outcomes (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005). These relationships seem to be most impactful for otherwise at-risk youth, who face barriers to success due to the resources in their family or community (Li & Julian, 2012).

However, intergenerational relationships within families and communities may also impose several types of negative costs. For example, grandparents who are primary caregivers for their grandchildren have poorer health, more functional limitations, and higher rates of depression, compared to grandparents who are not the primary caregivers (Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 1999; Minkler, Fuller-Thomson, Miller, & Driver, 1997). This effect is confounded by the fact that primarily-grandparent caregiving is more common among poorer families, who also often face higher barriers to good health (Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997; Williams, 2011). For people of all economic backgrounds, intergenerational relationships may also be costly to young people who feel rejected by adults who aren't accepting of their identities or interests. For example, LGBTQ youth are more than twice as likely to be homeless due to familial rejection, and to experience discrimination at school leading to higher rates of depression and suicidality, compared to straight- and cis-gendered youth (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Katz-Wise, Rosario, & Tsappis, 2016; Morton et al., 2018). Within community programs, older volunteers (who in many cases are predominantly White and middle- or upper-class) may struggle to understand the experiences of the youth they work with (who may be lower-class youth of color), potentially undermining the value of the relationship in the first place (Brown & Henkin, 2014). Finally, abuse within close relationships is disturbingly common – the CDC estimates that at least one in seven children and one in ten older adults experience sexual, physical, or emotional abuse from a caregiver (Centers for Disease Control, 2021b, 2021a); the WHO estimates that worldwide, three out of every four children and one out of six older adults face physical or emotional violence (World Health Organization, 2021a, 2021b). The experience of abuse by a caregiver is fundamentally about a harmful intergenerational relationship; because age is linked with status and power (with the young and old losing out; see section on "how age orders society"), many intergenerational relationships have asymmetric power dynamics and therefore room for abuse and mistreatment. Abuse and other harmful relationship dynamics may make some intergenerational relationships, especially ones like those within families that may seem potentially very beneficial, deeply harmful to engage in (Beitchman et al., 1992; Freyd, 1998).

Within the work context, research suggests that intergenerational relationships may be good for our economy. Among companies engaged in creativity-focused tasks (rather than routine tasks), age diverse workforces are more innovative and productive than age-segregated ones (Backes-Gellner & Veen, 2013). In general, when workforces can reduce within-workforce segregation and alienation, diversity across nearly any dimension has been shown to be beneficial because it increases the likelihood that new ideas or skills are available to the group (Aminpour et al., 2021; Herring, 2009). For people early in their career, having multiple older mentors predicts career success, satisfaction, commitment, and feelings of belonging (Baugh & Scandura, 1999; Burke, 1984). Even later-career workers experience benefits from being mentored by colleagues both older and younger than them (Finkelstein, Allen, & Rhoton, 2003).

At the same time, more age-diverse workforces sometimes also face challenges, including higher levels of reported ageism, resentment, absenteeism, and turnover intention (Joshi & Roh, 2009; Shore et al., 2009; Van Dijk, Van Engen, & Van Knippenberg, 2012; Van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004). One study examining over 8,500 workers across 128 companies found that workplaces perceived to have greater age diversity were also more likely to be perceived as having more age discrimination, which was associated with lower employee commitment and subsequent performance (Kunze, Boehm, & Bruch, 2011). As I will explore further later in this report, these findings show the importance of cultural contexts that change the *meaning* of age diversity and age difference: workplaces that are both age diverse and successfully value age diversity are among the most productive; those that are age diverse but don't successfully value that diversity face challenges and detrimental effects. Intergenerational relationships are a tool organizations can use to foster a productive and creative workforce, but it requires a commitment from leaders to create the formal policies and informal organization culture that successfully values those relationships in order for them to realize their potential (Boehm & Kunze, 2015).

Intergenerational relationships became simultaneously more costly and more important to people across the globe due to the COVID pandemic. In early 2020, before we were even used to phrases like "social distancing," we learned that older people were more vulnerable to contracting and dying from COVID than younger people. This made intergenerational relationships suddenly risky; but the potential for profound isolation also made them more important than ever. Intergenerational relationships were suddenly in the forefront of people's minds: should I take on some of my grandparents COVID "risk budget" by going to the grocery store for them? Should I hold my new great-grandbaby, when I know it risks exposing me? As the world population collectively shifted to new norms of physical-social distance and technology-mediated communication, the benefits and costs of mixed-age interactions became particularly salient.

The new salience of age in the era of COVID illustrates an important concept: "age," as a feature of individuals and a trait given meaning by culture, orders society. The meaning that age has for people, relationships, and society is a crucial piece of the puzzle of understanding *why* intergenerational relationships may be beneficial or costly. In the next section, I dive into just

that question by exploring why age difference is salient to people, and how that produces both meaning and barriers to successful intergenerational relationships.

How age orders society

Age is an example of a *status characteristic*: an apparent trait of a person that determines their position relative to others (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972). The most universally-salient status characteristics across the world are age and gender; in the United States, race is added to this list (Brewer & Lui, 1989). These "master statuses" move with people across every social context, and help others set expectations about a person's behavior and decide how to treat them in return (Ridgeway, 2019). The importance of the very concept of "age" in our social world is precisely why intergenerational relationships can be so beneficial, but it also sets the stage for immense structural barriers to meaningful mixed-age contact. In this section, I will discuss research on the way that age helps order the social world in order to provide conceptual tools necessary for understanding why intergenerational relationships matter for century-long lives.

Age structuring at multiple levels

In the US today, we think of the life course as fairly straightforward: infants grow into children, who turn into adolescents, who become young adults, middle adults, and finally older adults. These life stages feel like inherent parts of the human condition; and perhaps for good reason, because they are related to myriad psychological, physiological, and social development milestones. However, research suggests that these life stages are actually the product of our social world, and are given meaning through social institutions such as education and workplaces. For example, we might now feel that teenagers experience a uniquely challenging developmental period; but the concept of "adolescence" didn't enter the public consciousness until psychologists began labeling it as such in the last 100 years (Baxter, 2011). Even the concept of "childhood" didn't appear in Europe until the 1600s; before that, children were thought of as smaller versions of adults (Cunningham, 2012). The stage of life we now call "old age" only appeared after the rise of wage labor around the turn of the 20th century, which measured the life course through productive ability and set in motion the idea of retirement; before that, people over 60 years old were not seen as fundamentally different than those younger than them (Achenbaum, 1978). Once these age categories became salient to people, they became even more "real" because people expected them to happen. For example, most people under 18 are considered children in part because they are in school rather than the workforce; people over 65 might be considered old because they retired from a primary career; and developmental milestones in adolescence have continued to push back in the life course, such that even 25-year-olds now are often materially dependent on their parents. The changing meaning of age categories and life transitions therefore has also changed the meaning of intergenerational relationships over time (Hareven, 1994).

The age structuring of society is what produces both the benefits as well as the barriers to successful intergenerational relationships. The fact that people of different life stages, such as

children and older adults, are seen as different types of people is part of what makes cross-age relationships unique and valuable: it bridges divides and gives people the opportunity to learn from somebody from a different social position. However, the age structuring of society also produces barriers to having productive and meaningful intergenerational relationships, including age-based stereotypes, status, social roles, discrimination, and segregation. As I will next describe, and as visualized in Figure 3, the benefits and barriers of age difference occur at four levels of social analysis: individuals, interpersonal interactions, organizations, and culture. Thinking about the meaning of age diversity through the lens of these four levels help add precision to discussions of intergenerational relationships, age discrimination, age stereotypes, and ageism.
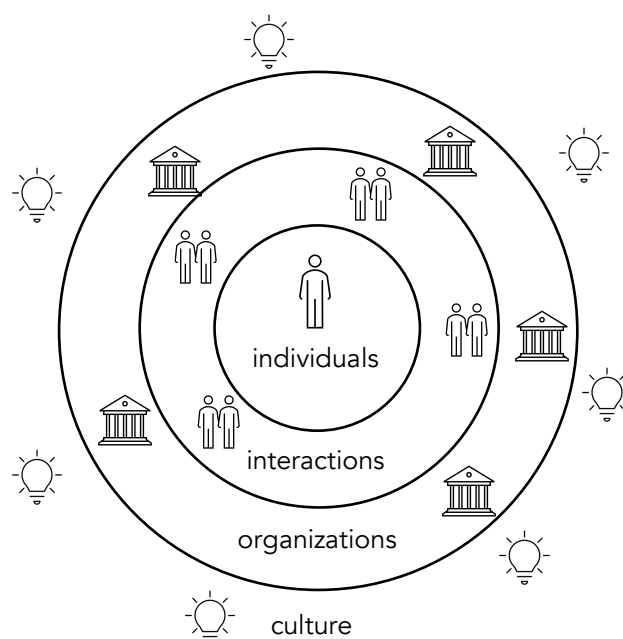

FIGURE 3: Multiple levels of social analysis. Age operates at individual, interactional, organization, and cultural levels of society.

The *individual* level refers to features of identity and individual experiences of aging. Most research on "aging," "adult development," or "gerontology" focuses on this level, by asking questions such as: how are people's identities different in different stages of life? How do they experience life (including their health, purpose, and place in the world) as they age? Age is an important determinant of individual outcomes, including self-conceptualization (Barrett, 2003, 2005; Levy, 2009; Logan, Ward, & Spitze, 1992), mental wellbeing (Carstensen, 1991; Westerhof & Barrett, 2005), and physical health (Ahadi et al., 2020; Laz, 2003; Pietilä, Ojala, King, & Calasanti, 2013). Most of us are highly aware of this level in our own lives. It is therefore likely rather uninteresting to point out that people of different ages do indeed experience life differently, and in this way, age orders individual experiences.

Age also operates at the *interactional* level of society in ways that are less often explicitly discussed, and therefore often more invisible to many of us, but no less real than individual-level effects. This level refers to whenever we are engaged in any sort of interpersonal interaction or a relationship with another person, be it a cashier at a market, a co-worker, or a close family member. Humans are fundamentally social creatures, and our interactions and relationships are crucial parts of our experiences. Research shows that when we meet a new person, we develop a general sense of their age within half a second (Brewer & Lui, 1989), and then change our expectations of and behavior towards that person based on our perception (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006). The status value of age means that once age is assigned to a person in an interaction, it can determine who gets respect and resources: think about which sibling is likely to get to ride in the front seat in the car, the fact that people under 18 years old cannot vote or be on juries, and whether an older or younger team member's comment in a meeting is most likely to be listened to. Perhaps in part because of this, friendship and social networks are often extremely age-homogenous. One large study of people across Europe in 2015 found that fewer than one in ten older adult had a close relationship with somebody outside their family who is more than 10 years younger or older than them (Sun & Schafer, 2019). In the US, research suggests that social networks are even more structured by age than they are by gender, and apart from relationships with direct descendants or parents/grandparents, age segregation in social networks is on par with segregation based on religion (Mcpherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Smith, McPherson, & Smith-Lovin, 2014). Furthermore, although social networks have become more gender-integrated in recent decades, they are just as age-segregated today as they were 40 years ago (Smith et al., 2014). One reason for this that researchers have identified is segregation in institutions such as schools, workplaces, and churches (Smith et al., 2014; Uhlenberg & Gierveld, 2004). As single-sex schools became co-ed and women entered the workforce in equal numbers to men over the last 50 years, men and women had the chance to meet and develop close relationships with each other outside of the family. The same has not yet occurred for age – because it is unlikely that we run into somebody much older or younger than ourselves through our daily life and interests, it is unlikely for us to develop friendships with people who are not our own age (Smith et al., 2014).

Many of these types of age-structured interactions are innocuous, or even preferable, given how we value both youth and experience in different contexts. However, some are also detrimental. In particular, research shows that *age discrimination*, or when somebody treats another person as less worthy based on their age, is rampant and harmful. For example, one study sent two fictional resumes to nearly 4000 firms in the Boston area that were rated by experienced hiring managers as identically-hirable except for one thing: the chronological age of the hypothetical candidate. The younger candidate was 40% more likely to be called back for an interview than the older identically-skilled candidate (Lahey, 2008; see also a replication in Neumark, Burn, & Button, 2017). This type of age discrimination is well-documented, and occurs across industries, job types, skill levels, and even beyond the employment context (Boehm & Kunze, 2015; Derous & Decoster, 2017; Fasbender & Wang, 2017; Giasson, Queen,

Larkina, & Smith, 2017; Kaufmann, Krings, & Sczesny, 2016; Krings, Sczesny, & Kluge, 2011; Kunze et al., 2011; Perry et al., 2017).

A third way age orders society is through *organizations*, be they schools, workplaces, families, or communities. Many institutions are strongly age segregated: for example, primary and secondary schools generally only have young people as students, and even within any given school, students are split into classes and grades based on their birth year. Residentially, although less extreme in extent than segregation by race or class, our neighborhoods are highly age-segregated. This is both because of the existence of explicitly age-specific residences such as college dorms and retirement communities, as well as age segregation that occurs more organically in neighborhoods and cities across the US. One study found that in order to achieve perfectly age-integrated neighborhoods, nearly half of Americans (43%) would have to move to a new area (Winkler & Klaas, 2012). Age is baked into our laws, such that people of different ages have different rights, privileges, and experiences with local, state, and federal government. Organizations in the US and across the world have age ordering sewn into the very seams of their operation.

Finally, age shows up in our *culture*. This level, the outermost-circle in Figure 3, sets of the context through which all the other levels operate. The types of cultural beliefs about age that are most important are *age stereotypes*, or any belief about a person's ability or traits based on their age. We use age stereotypes when we are deciding on our own age identity, when we determine how to interact with another person based on their age, and when institutions structure their organization based on age difference. Some of the most common age stereotypes include that children are too naïve to learn about certain topics and that older people are slow to learn new technology (Chiu, Chan, Snape, & Redman, 2001; Kite, Deaux, & Miele, 1991). The sticky thing about stereotypes is that they are also often rooted in some truth; however, they often distort the truth, and sometimes that "truth" may be a product rather than a cause of the stereotype. This is because once a stereotype becomes dominant in culture, it also very easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy given that people expect others to behave in stereotypical ways. In the case of age stereotypes, many have been found to be either overstated or false; for example, older workers do not cost more to employers than younger workers. Although they do tend to have higher salaries, they also have lower absenteeism and lower turnover, leading to overall lower firm costs (Posthuma & Campion, 2009; Schloegel, Stegmann, Maedche, & van Dick, 2018). Age stereotypes can be powerfully detrimental, because they can be used to seemingly justify mistreatment and inequity (Kruse & Schmitt, 2006; North & Fiske, 2013; Roscigno, Mong, Byron, & Tester, 2007; Rosen & Jerdee, 1976).

Ageism can be defined as an umbrella system that relies on and operates through all these types of orderings. It is something we do to other people, such as when we decide an older worker is too slow or too expensive for a job, when we tease a friend for wearing "grandma clothes," or we claim that COVID is no big deal because frail elderly members of our society are expendable. However, it is also something we do to ourselves, such as when we fret over developing wrinkles, tell ourselves we are too young or too old to try a new hobby, and decide

not to try to meaningfully engage in a conversation with somebody 60 years our junior or senior. In many cases, ageism harms older adults, who face the most negative stereotypes towards their stage of life. However, ageism can just as easily be directed towards younger people, such as when a political candidate is seen as too inexperienced (case in point: the average age of Senate members is 62 years old). "Ageism" as a concept refers to the way that many of us believe that people of different ages are fundamentally different and deserve different levels of respect or resources. Some versions of this may not conflict with our values; for example, we likely feel it is fair for a more experienced team member to get promoted before a newer employee. However, many ways that ageism operates is harmful to people and society more broadly in part because of how it makes it so challenging to develop and maintain meaningful intergenerational relationships.

The age ordering of society is complicated by the fact that the status value of age is intermixed with the status value of gender, race, and class. For example, research shows that youth of color are seen as actually *older*, and therefore more responsible and sexually mature, than their White counterparts. This interaction between race, gender, and age is part of why boys of color are so much more likely than White boys in the criminal justice system to be tried in adult rather than juvenile court, and why girls of color are often sexualized by people such as teachers at earlier ages than White girls (Myers, 2005; Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2013). Age and race interact in other stereotypes as well, such as the "mammy" archetype referring to old (but not young) Black women, the assumed aggression of young (but not old) Black men, and idioms such as "Black don't crack" which shows that White skin is the assumed "baseline" metric of aging. In the workforce, older women often feel "invisible" whereas some older men are able to achieve status as a wise and sought-after mentor (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001); although simultaneously, some research suggests that older women may be *less* discriminated against in hiring than older men, possibly because the stereotypes about older people are overall more aligned with stereotypes about women (e.g. having high warmth) than those about men (e.g. having high competence) (Martin, North, & Phillips, 2019; Ruggs, Hebl, Walker, & Fa-Kaji, 2014). In intergenerational relationships, women might have both more access and more burdens: because of gendered stereotypes of care work and structural labor market inequalities, it is much more standard for women than for men to care for children, grandchildren, parents, and grandparents in the family. In some cultures, daughters are not only responsible for their own parents and grandparents, but also for their spouses' (Glenn, 2012). These responsibilities might make intergenerational family relationships both more salient but also potentially more burdensome (Lye, 1996). The way that age governs our identities, interactions, organizations, and culture is deeply connected with the way that systems such as gender, race, and class also help order society.

What does "age" really mean?

The fact that age orders society raises an important question: what does "age" really mean to people and culture? In mixed-age relationships, what is it about people that is varying?

What are we really talking about when we discuss people of different "generations," such as in the very title of this report (Intergenerational Relationships)?

The most straightforward answer to this question is that age (and the related concept of generation) equals chronology: it is the amount of time a person has lived since their birth. Intergenerational relationships, then, would mean any relationship with somebody of a very different chronological age, such as a 7-year-old with a 77-year old. Extending this perspective, the age ordering of society would operate through differences in the amount of time since people's births.

There is obvious truth to this possible framework: check any dictionary and find chronology as the central definition of the word "age." Chronological age is also clearly involved in social ordering, in that it is baked into our institutions and laws: think about how 17-year-olds and 18-year-olds have vastly different legal rights, how 40-year-olds (but not 39-year-olds) are protected from some forms of age discrimination in hiring through the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, and how culture often defines 60 years as the beginning of "old age." Whenever we talk about somebody as a "Baby Boomer" or "Gen Z," we are acknowledging that because of the year in which they were born, we expect their preferences, knowledge, and culture to differ. In social scientific and medical research, age is nearly always operationalized in terms of one's chronological age. To a certain degree, it is perhaps painfully obvious that "age" means time since birth; after all, "age is just a number."

Yet, we also know that age can take on meanings above and beyond chronology. Whenever somebody proclaims on a dating app that they "feel younger" than they are, measures a medical patient's "biological age," or derides a young adult's fashion choices as "grandma clothes," they are behaving in ways that suggest that a person's "age" in fact encompasses several dimensions of variation. This tension has shown up in research as well: in the 1960s, health researchers struggled with the challenge that chronological age, while important, was not a reliable predictor of morbidity and wellbeing outcomes. Particularly for older adults, the variance in health status is greater within a chronological age than between ages – for example, the health difference between an infirm and healthy 75-year old is much wider than the difference between any given 75- vs. 85-year old (O'Rand & Henretta, 1999). Defining chronological age as the most important and fundamental aspect of a person's age is therefore culturally and empirically and incorrect: age truly is "more than a number." I term the perspective that age equals chronology *chronological essentialism* to capture the idea that the framework flattens the true social and biological meaning of age difference.

Research suggests that a more useful framework of the meaning of "age" considers age to be multidimensional. Chronological age is a piece of the broader construct of "age," but so too are attributes like appearance (e.g. wrinkles and hair color), health (e.g. mobility and telomere length), cultural consumption (e.g. what music somebody listens to or what clothes they wear), and their position within organizational hierarchy (e.g. their grade in school or tenure at a company). Chronological age is actually quite a poor predictor of several important health and wellbeing outcomes compared to alternate age operationalizations, including measures of

biological and subjective age (Ahadi et al. 2020; Sanderson and Scherbov 2013; Settersten and Mayer 1997). A person often experiences their life course through major life milestones (e.g. getting a first job or having children) and time horizons (e.g. believing they have a long vs. short time left to live) more so than their chronological age (Carstensen, 1991; Elder, 1998; Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Mayer & Tuma, 1990). In one study, Cheryl Laz (2003) found that older adults describe their bodies through four distinct dimensions: 1) activity, fitness, and health; 2) energy; 3) appearance; and 4) ailments and illness. In another, Christine Fry (1986) found that the dimensions of 1) engagement/responsibility; 2) reproductive cycle; and 3) encumberment better explained variation between people than did chronological age. Management scholars have also shown that in order to retain and utilize older workers, managers must take into account multiple types of age (Pitt-Catsouphes, Matz-Costa, & James, 2012). In one recent approach, the acronym "GATE" was created to refer to four theoretically independent dimensions of age: generation, (chronological) age, tenure, and experience (North, 2019; North & Shakeri, 2019).

The perspective that "age" refers to more than one dimension of variation has real implications for culture and policy. It suggests that whenever we use the word "age," we should be aware that the word itself means more than just chronological age. It also suggests that workplace age diversity initiatives should consider how to make welcoming and productive environments for variation beyond chronological age, including physical ability, personal interests, and professional experience. Within this framework, the very meaning of "mixed-age" or "intergenerational" connection refers not just to relationships between people of different chronological ages, but also between people who differ across other dimensions of age, such as an intern with an executive, an avocado toast fan with a prime rib connoisseur, and a basketball player with a golfer. Regardless of these people's chronological ages, their social position due to their jobs, hobbies, and bodies vary in ways that are stereotypically associated with age. That variation is important to consider in its own right when thinking about what age diversity will mean in a new era of century-long lives.

There is, however, a glaring challenge in implementing a truly multidimensional perspective on age in the real world: it opens the door for bias. While chronological age may not be the most accurate way to measure a person's age, it is accepted as a universal truth, which makes it possible to make objective decisions. In developed nations, most citizens have a concrete date of birth, tracked by their government and therefore legitimized on birth certificates, driver's licenses, and passports. It is extremely challenging to manipulate one's chronological age beyond just waiting for it to change with time; although plenty of people try to do this, including minors using fake IDs to buy alcohol, people lying about their chronological age on dating websites or immigration applications, or even people attempting to legally change their chronological age (Brenoff, 2019). People are accountable to their chronological age in their behavior with other individuals and with institutions. The benefit of this cultural acceptance of the "truth" of chronological age is that it allows for an objective measure of age that can help eliminate age-related bias. Deciding whether somebody is allowed to drive, vote, consume

alcohol, run for President, or access social security is not up to anybody's subjective decision about how old somebody seems; rather, it is up to the government's determination of when exactly in the past that person was born. This allows for an objective[1] (although not necessarily fair) distribution of age-based benefits. This is especially important because many non-chronological dimensions of age, such as perceived maturity, appearance, and health status, are intricately intertwined with systems of race, gender, and social class. This intersectionalist means that decision-making based on non-chronological dimensions of age is more likely to pick up other forms of bias than is decision-making based on chronological age. For example, if we choose to save otherwise-healthy people from COVID before we save otherwise-unhealthy people, we will end up saving White and wealthy people first because they were most likely to have access to good health in the first place (Antommaria et al., 2020). While making triage decisions based on chronological age has its own ethical problems (including it being blatantly age discriminatory), it is also less likely to be racially discriminatory than other possible triage algorithms, making it likely ultimately more preferable (White & Lo, 2021).

If governments and institutions want to deny people rights such as voting based on their age, there need to be clear cutoffs. While chronological age is a messy indicator of one's social, biological, or developmental age, it is the indicator that is reliably tracked by modern governments. Using any other metric of age, such as a measure of maturity or experience, would introduce more bias than it would solve -- at least until as a society we agreed on the validity of such a metric. Other metrics could be valuable: think about if voting rights were based on emotional maturity, or if "senior discounts" were based on employment status (e.g. being retired), rather than on chronological age. These changes might be transformational to create a better world, but they also would be challenging to implement fairly; for example, past attempts to limit voting rights to those who could pass a "literacy test" (which could theoretically be more objective a measure of voting ability than chronological age) were in reality a way for White supremacists to deny Black people their citizenship rights by relying on unequal access to schooling and corrupt examiners. While it therefore currently still makes sense to have some chronological-age-based rights, in order to truly embrace the full benefits of century-long lives, future research and thought leadership must consider how to build fair policies (both public and private) that utilize non-chronological dimensions of age.

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[1] In truth, it may be more accurate to describe chronological age as "nearly objective" than truly "objective" because while chronological age may seem like a universal truth in developed nations, it has not always been the case, and it is still not worldwide. Not all people in the world have reliable birth records and therefore whole communities of people don't know their chronological age (Cleland, 1996; Setel et al., 2007). In American history, enslaved people were often not told their birthday, and therefore never were never sure of their chronological age. In his memoir, Frederick Douglass (Douglass, 1845) poignantly described that this denial of knowledge was a tool that slaveowners could use to further subjugate personhood through making enslaved people unable to engage in some standard social interactions and bureaucratic institutions. Vital statistics such as birth year therefore help create the significance of the variation they are measuring in the first place (Kertzer & Arel, 2001; Starr, 1987). Chronological age is, in truth, neither universal nor objective: it is a product of longstanding and power-laden social processes.

Opportunities & Recommendations for Change

Current cultural models of age difference are both opportunities and barriers to successful century-long lives. While intergenerational relationships can be challenging to form and maintain due to the age ordering of society, they also are potentially valuable precisely because they bring together people that our culture conceptualizes as fundamentally different just because they are old or young. People in the U.S. and around the world need permission and opportunity to develop friendships (and other meaningful relationships) with people much older or younger than themselves. This will require three things: first, raise awareness about the value of age diversity and the harm of subtle agism (e.g. the "okay Boomer" meme); second, educating people that the concept of "age" encompasses more than chronological age; and third, implementing concrete policies to counter segregation (e.g. in education or housing) and discrimination (e.g. workplace hiring practices) and promote intergenerational connection.

Some organizations are already working hard to effect these types of changes. In this section, I will discuss four types of existing policies and programs (at work, in communities, and for awareness-raising) that promote age integration and social justice through prioritizing positive age diversity. I will describe examples of each, discuss why some programs succeed, and where there are opportunities for scaling solutions to reach more people worldwide. Finally, I will discuss several open scientific questions that social and biological scientists must answer in order to build a society full of healthy, meaningful, and productive century-long lives.

Policies at work

Workplaces are an ideal site for utilizing the opportunities of intergenerational relationships because they are highly intentional structural communities. Compared to many public sector or community solutions, firms have the flexibility and authority to implement policies quickly and universally. Furthermore, most people in the world will spend up to 80% of their living years working, and therefore engaged in a workplace community and organization. There are several types of policies in workplace organizations that can promote beneficial intergenerational relationships, and therefore promote productivity, wellbeing, and creativity amongst employees (Boehm & Kunze, 2015).

One type of solution is organizational practices that promote inclusion. For example, research shows that companies that enact HR policies that promote age diversity experience better firm-level performance and lower turnover among employees (Boehm, Kunze, & Bruch, 2013). Such age-inclusive polices can include: age-neutral recruiting activities, equal access to training and education for all age groups, manager training about needs of people across ages, and an open-minded and welcoming intellectual culture (Boehm et al., 2013). Training and growing managers to be aware of their own unconscious bias and to hold anti-ageist attitudes has also been found to help workplace climate and firm performance (Kunze, Boehm, & Bruch, 2013). Unconscious bias training (and other education about stereotypes and diversity) can be tricky to implement effectively (Dover, Major, & Kaiser, 2016), but when done well (such as when framed in contexts that reduce defensiveness but also make clear that bias is bad, such as

through saying "research shows that everybody is biased, and that most people try to do their best to reduce their own bias"), they can make small yet important differences among leaders and workforces (Duguid & Thomas-Hunt, 2015).

Another opportunity for positive change in workplaces is hiring and retaining workers of a variety of ages within a culture where age-related stereotypes and discrimination are common. As I discussed earlier, despite older workers often actually being less expensive and just as effective as younger workers (Posthuma & Campion, 2009), age discrimination against older workers in hiring, evaluation, and promotion is still rampant (Kaufmann et al., 2016; Kaufmann, Krings, Zebrowitz, & Sczesny, 2017; Lahey, 2008; Pritchard, Maxwell, & Jordon, 1984). Luckily, evidence suggests several possible solutions. For example, one study found that managers who had more frequent positive contact with people of very different ages than themselves were less biased in hiring decisions, thereby recruiting the most talented candidates (Fasbender & Wang, 2017). Furthermore, as I discussed previously, workplaces that create cultures that intentionally embrace diversity are more likely to benefit from the increased productivity possible on intergenerational teams (Boehm & Kunze, 2015). These findings suggest that engaging older and younger workers on the same teams can actually help feed the very culture necessary to make intergenerational connections more common and more effective at work.

Part of the solution to reduce bias in evaluation is to implement formalized metrics for evaluating workers and candidates. Research from workplace discrimination more broadly shows that when evaluation practices are highly subjective, bias by gender, race, and age easily creeps in, and firms fail to hire and promote the highest-quality candidates. Rather, when organizations implement clear hiring and evaluation systems, such as with standardized metrics and clear instructions, firms not only hire and retain more talented workers, but they do so with less status-based discrimination (Baron, Hannan, Hsu, & Koçak, 2007; Castilla, 2015; Reskin & McBrier, 2000). Furthermore, firms must ensure that the evaluation metrics themselves are not based on stereotypes of gender, race, or age. For example, in the past, fire departments often evaluated candidates based in part on their height, which served to disadvantage women firefighter candidates compared to men, despite the fact that height was later shown to be unrelated to job ability (Correll, 2017). In order to avoid age discrimination, workplace evaluation metrics should not rely on any apparent "traits" that may be linked with age-related stereotypes; for example, opinions about appearance for client-facing roles, or perceived ability to learn new technology. Instead, firms should consider how they could measure quality in ways that avoid any trait that might be connected to a stereotype, even if it might appear at first to be relevant to job performance. In order to reduce age discrimination in hiring and promotion, it is vital that firms enact formalized evaluation systems to evaluate candidates across metrics that close rather than open opportunities for bias in order to make the most objective and fair decisions.

Lastly, from a public sector perspective, anti-age discrimination laws in countries worldwide have changed the name of the age diversity game in firms since they began to be enacted in the second half of the 20th century (Lahey, 2010). Anti-age discrimination laws have

had both positive and negative impacts. On the one hand, they create a formalized system by which employees can keep workplaces accountable to age inclusivity through the justice system. On the other hand, they may contribute to age becoming a taboo discussion topic in many workplaces and HR departments because of the fear of possible lawsuits from employees should any discussion of age difference emerge. Research suggests that on the whole, anti-age discrimination laws are effective in reducing age discrimination in hiring (Neumark, Song, & Button, 2017), and states with stronger laws see lower levels of discrimination against older workers (Neumark, Burn, Button, & Chehras, 2019). Furthermore, people in states with stronger anti-age discrimination laws also on average work longer and start taking social security benefits later (Neumark & Song, 2013). However, the laws clearly are not fully effective, given the continued high rate of age discrimination overall, and the effort and fear they produce within firms about developing age-relation workplace initiatives (Grossman, 2005). Federal, state, and local laws against age discrimination are a crucial tool to create healthy intergenerational workplaces, but they must be combined with policies and programs that incentivize healthy age-related conversations and diversity amongst colleagues.

Programs in communities

One of the most popular avenues for intergenerational programming is within communities, including neighborhood centers, faith organizations, school districts, and real estate development. There are several types of programs, policies, and businesses who focus on increasing opportunities for and strength of intergenerational relationships in these contexts.

Perhaps the most iconic type of intergenerational programing is volunteer-based mentorship programs, such as those that pair older adult volunteers with children needing reading help or with college students isolated from their families. For example, AARP's Experience Corps program connects volunteers over 50 years old with children in public schools to provide tutoring and mentorship support. Beginning in the 1990s as an initiative run by Encore.org, Experience Corps is now a multi-million-dollar program with branches in 22 cities across the US. A recent audit of the program found that children who were mentored by Experience Corps members showed significant improvement in academic and socio-emotional competence outcomes compared to children who weren't in the program (Porowski, De Mars, Kahn-Boesel, & Rodriguez, 2019). Similar types of initiatives are run by school districts and local governments across the US and worldwide, as well as through technology start-ups such as Big & Mini, which often connect adolescents or young adults with older adults. Especially in contexts where public education is under-resourced and teachers over-burdened (such as in much of the US; see the NML Education report), creating opportunities for students to learn from people who are neither parents nor teachers is an invaluable opportunity for education and growth. It also engages older adults in a meaningful and purposeful activity that can utilize their own strength and expertise. In all successful cases, the programs provide some sort of structure for interactions to occur, be it through a physical location and school system to meet, or an app to help connect people virtually.

Demand for intergenerational connection is evident in the housing market as well. While intergenerational living has the norm in many parts of the world and even in some parts of the US for years, the mainstream housing model in the US has been a two-generation nuclear family since the post-World War II housing boom. Figure 5 shows how this trend appears to be (slowly) changing, in that intergenerational housing appears to be growing in popularity within the mainstream US housing market. Between 2009 and 2016, intergenerational living grew by 18 percent, resulting in 64 million Americans living in multigenerational housing (Cohn & Passel, 2018). Rates are markedly higher among Asian, Latinx, and Black Americans compared to White Americans (Figure 6). Others have noted that particularly in high-cost areas, Americans appear to have a growing appetite for houses that can comfortably accommodate three or even four generations (Virgilio, 2018). Builders and real estate developers have observed that buyers are increasingly searching for houses that have both communal spaces and private spaces for different generations (Campbell-Dollaghan, 2019). Architectural and design firms that specialize in multigenerational living are cropping up worldwide. These trends suggest that more people might be interested in living in multigenerational households, or in more age-diverse neighborhoods, if they had the choice – and suggest that design and business solutions could help change the framework of who interacts on a daily basis within families.

One-in-five Americans live in a multigenerational household

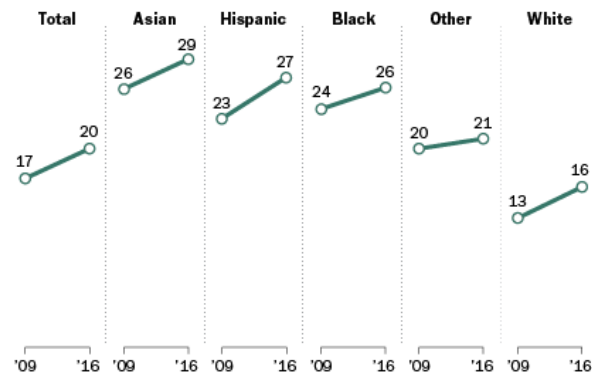*% of population in multigenerational households*
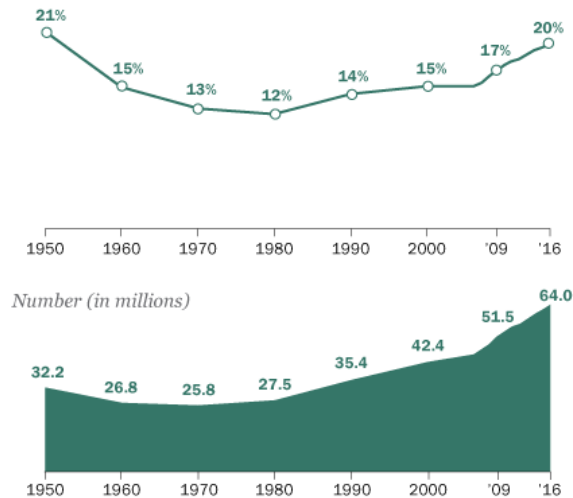
Number (in millions)

Note: Multigenerational households include at least two adult generations or grandparents and grandchildren younger than 25.
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1950-2000 decennial censuses and 2006-2016 American Community Survey (IPUMS).

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Figure 5: American population living in households with two or more adult generations. From Pew Research Center (Cohn & Passel, 2018)

Whites less likely than other racial and ethnic groups to live in multigenerational households

% of population in multigenerational households

Total   Asian   Hispanic   Black   Other   White

Total: 17 ('09), 20 ('16)
Asian: 26 ('09), 29 ('16)
Hispanic: 23 ('09), 27 ('16)
Black: 24 ('09), 26 ('16)
Other: 20 ('09), 21 ('16)
White: 13 ('09), 16 ('16)

'09   '16   '09   '16   '09   '16   '09   '16   '09   '16   '09   '16

Note: Multigenerational households include at least two adult generations or grandparents and grandchildren younger than 25. Hispanics are of any race. Asians include Pacific Islanders. Whites, blacks and Asians are single-race only and include only non-Hispanics. "Other" includes non-Hispanics in remaining single-race groups or multiracial groups.
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2009 and 2016 American Community Surveys (IPUMS).

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FIGURE 6: Percent of Americans of different racial groups living in homes with two or more adult generations. From Pew Research Center (Cohn & Passel, 2018)

Build incentives that help raise awareness about age diversity

A third type of solution is to develop campaigns that raise awareness, share insights, and change incentive structures in order to prioritize age equity and intergenerational connection. Numerous nonprofits, including Aging 2.0, the AARP Foundation, and the Stanford Center on Longevity, strive to change the very culture of aging and longevity through programs such as partnerships with organizations, funding for innovation and design, and research and outreach about longevity. In one example, Changing the Narrative, a Colorado-based nonprofit dedicated to reducing agism in Colorado and beyond, commissioned artists to create "anti-agist" birthday cards, and sell them on their website. Rather than reify negative stereotypes of aging, these cards prioritize positive messages about growing older. Although a small initiative on the grand scale of things, this type of program creates opportunities for culture to "catch up" to anti-agist attitudes by providing alternative cultural scripts. More of this type of incentive-modifying and innovative program is crucial in order to create meaningful cultural change around age and cross-age interaction.

Anti-ageism campaigns are an example of "consciousness-raising" projects, which have been particularly popular within social movements fighting for social justice and equity. For example, feminist movements in the 20th century focused on raising awareness about sexism, and about the social construction of gender (including with catch phrases such as "the personal is political"; Hanisch, 1970). Much of the diversity and unconscious bias trainings I described above, whether they be about gender, race, class, age, sexuality, or other types of identities, are

further examples of consciousness-raising interventions. Awareness raising is a highly effective strategy at social change, and is used in initiatives from identity politics (Whittier, 2017) to road safety (Hoekstra & Wegman, 2011). In the case of ageism, awareness-raising may be particularly important, given that research suggests that younger people who say they prioritize gender and racial equality are actually *more* likely to also be openly ageist (Martin & North, 2021). Ageism is a form of oppression that is linked to racism, sexism, and classism, and it's time for anti-ageism to be part of the intersectional egalitarian ideology. Intergenerational relationships may even be a tool that organizers can use to promote gender- and race-based justice in the US and around the world. Providing laypeople and influencers with key concepts in order to help them better understand their world can be transformative and is crucial for effecting social change. It is very hard, but very important, to effect change that challenges our very conception of things. Future efforts that raise awareness of issues such as chronological essentialism and alternative concepts such as the multidimensionality of age have the potential to reduce agism, help people better understand their own life and relationships, and promote positive intergenerational connection.

Opportunities for future research

While there is much known about the costs and benefits of intergenerational relationships and about the processes of ageism more broadly, there is still scientific work left to do. Some particularly-fruitful areas for future research and innovation include:

- Identify how people conceptualize age, beyond the number of years since they were born.
- Find ways to design workplaces so that they are set up for age diversity from the start.
- Identify what new family norms are emerging in multi-generational households.
- Uncover why some intergenerational programs are so effective at their goals, while others struggle.
- Identify how people of different races, genders, and socioeconomic positions experience different ages differently and how they are treated differently by others.
- Design ways to encourage intergenerational relationships outside of families or formal mentorship programs.
- Articulate the ways in which ageism operates against people across the life course.
- Discover better ways to use intergenerational connection to prioritize social justice in communities around the world.

Top Action Steps

1. Make **anti-ageism** a focus of education, policy, and conversations around the world. Raise awareness about the value of age diversity and the harm of subtle agism (e.g. calling somebody's outfit "grandma clothes" or the "okay Boomer" meme). Educate people that the concept of "age" encompasses more than chronological age. Create and celebrate anti-ageist images of all stages of life, including through graphic design, entertainment media, and social media

2. Organizations should implement **workplace policies** that create cultures that intentionally embrace diversity, such as age-neutral recruiting activities, formalized metrics for evaluating workers and job candidates, equal access to training and education for all age groups, manager training about power and bias, and an open-minded and welcoming intellectual culture. Research shows that such workforces are more likely to benefit from the increased productivity possible on intergenerational teams.

3. Change zoning laws and developer incentives to encourage the building of more affordable **multi-family and multi-generational housing**. This will serve to increase access to mixed-age living arrangements, and help fight racial and age segregation in communities.

4. Push for stronger and broader **anti-age discrimination laws** across US states, federally, and worldwide. For example, the legal definition of age discrimination should not be limited to those over 40, and workers and companies should have more tools to point out and correct biased decisions (be them intentional or unintentional).

5. Scale **community programs** that connect older and younger people, often through volunteering or learning activities. Formalize these programs into public schools, municipal community programs, and neighborhood associations.

Conclusion

We are living in an era of unprecedented opportunities for long life, and with it, the most chronologically age-diverse planet our species has ever experienced. Yet, people of different ages face stereotypes that depict them as fundamentally different, and are often derided just for how many years they have been alive. The dominant cultural framework of *chronological essentialism* reifies the idea that the number of years a person has lived is a true and accurate description of how old they are, without taking into account other types of age, such as experience, health, and social role. "Age" is in reality a multidimensional system of social difference that operates within individuals, interactions, organizations, and culture. Structural

barriers that place young people in school, middle adults in workplaces, and older adults in senior care facilities divide our population into age segregated institutions, neighborhoods, and friendships. Fostering meaningful age diversity in workplaces, families, and communities is crucial to ensure that all people have the opportunity to have meaningful social connection, personal growth, and access to social resources. While many programs exist that purposefully connect people of different ages, in order to truly scale them up to reach more people, we need a shift in our culture. Combating ageism has the opportunity not just to help older and younger people feel more welcomed in our world, but help fight inequities based on gender, race, and social class. Initiatives aimed at increasing intergenerational connection can help rectify the very reason such relationships are hard to develop in the first place: fostering intergenerational relationships can help reduce age-related bias and make our culture more aware and accepting of the people around us.

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