

Seventy-year-old Tesca Brady and her 74-year-old husband, James, have been married for 45 years. Both are active and healthy. Mr. Brady works part-time as a consultant, and his wife volunteers one day a week at a center for pregnant teens. The Bradys have 11 grandchildren with whom they spend much time, often caring for the youngest when his parents are at work. They have a beautiful home and are financially independent. Their one complaint about being older is that US culture portrays older people as seclusive and weak or as “greedy geezers” who do not want to pay taxes for school improvements.

Thomas Wayne is a 72-year-old patient in the geriatric unit of a veteran’s hospital. His right leg has been amputated as a result of complications from diabetes. His liver is damaged from a lifelong struggle with alcoholism. He has no living relatives and has been homeless for several years. Mr. Wayne does not know where he will go when he is discharged from the hospital. He can no longer function without considerable help.

Conchita Alvarez is 82 years old and has been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. For more than 40 years, cooking has been her favorite activity. She had never left the house without turning off the oven—until yesterday. Ms. Alvarez is forgetful and gets confused easily. She gets most upset when people think she knows things that she does not, things that she just cannot remember any more. Ms. Alvarez lives with her 60-year-old daughter, who worries that she can no longer safely care for her mother.

Barbara and Sam Howe, ages 80 and 81, live independently in the home they have owned for 30 years. Mrs. Howe is suffering from Parkinson’s disease and is no longer able to drive or prepare meals; she also requires some assistance with basic activities of daily living (bathing, dressing, etc.). Mr. Howe is finding it difficult to provide for all of their needs, so they have decided to move into a continuing care retirement community (CRC), where help such as meals, housekeeping, and medication management are available on-site. The community offers three advancing levels of service: independent apartments, assisted living apartments, and a skilled nursing facility that will be able to provide for increasing needs they may have as they get older. Although the Howes do not want to leave their home, their children live out of state, and they feel this is the best option to prevent more moves in the future.

Bob Williams, age 68, was a corporate law specialist at a large accounting firm until he was fired recently by the new CEO. 37-year-old Mark Johnson, Mr. Johnson told Mr. Williams that he was “over the hill” and that the company needed “young blood.”

In a world of 7 billion people, 8.5 percent (over 700 million) are 65 years of age or older. In the United States, there are more than 50 million people (15% of the population) over the age of 65 (Thompson, Potok, & Lamas, 2016). The vast majority of older Americans are economically independent (median worth of about \$200,000), active (45% report participating in regular leisure time activity), healthy, and most live in their own homes. Millions have part-time or full-time jobs or volunteer their time to important causes. In fact, in 2010, for the first time since 1948, when the Labor Department began to keep statistics on this issue, people over age 65 outnumbered teenagers in the workforce (Abate, 2010). By 2015, almost 19 percent of people age 65 and over (8.8 million) were in the labor force (Administration on Aging, 2016).

Box 8.1 More About...Age Discrimination

In 2014, Bobby Nickel was awarded \$26 million, the largest award of its kind in Los Angeles history, because he was harassed and discriminated against because of his age by his Staples supervisors. Mr. Nickel was 64 years old when he was fired in 2011. He alleged that he was frequently called

an “old goat” and an “old goat” and that he was fired because he was making more salary than his younger supervisors. You can read more about his case here: <http://www.dailynews.com/general-news/20140227/65-year-old-man-awarded-26-million-in-age-discrimination-lawsuit-against-staples>.



EP 2a

However, individuals over 65 are affected by ageist attitudes, and some are directly discriminated against. Ageism is prejudice against people based solely on age. The term is sometimes used with regards to young people, but it is generally associated with older people. Prejudice and rejection, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, are based largely on misconceptions and myths (see Box 8.1).

The social work profession is committed to preventing and fighting ageism, negative stereotypes, myths, and harmful practices that affect older people. A minority of older people, such as Conchita Alvarez and Thomas Wayne, are in need of more direct social work interventions. They may live in poverty or be homeless, suffer from depression, be victims of elder abuse, or have health-related problems and diseases associated with aging.

Gerontological social work—social work practice with people who are older—is a specialized area that requires extensive knowledge and a unique set of skills. Gerontology is the study of the biological, psychological, and social aspects of aging. The goal of gerontological social workers is to promote and advance older clients’ social, emotional, and physical well-being so that they can live more independent and satisfying lives.

Human Development within the Social Context **LO1**



EP 7b

When a social worker enters an older person’s life, the problems may seem overwhelming. Gerontological social workers use an ecological approach (see Chapter 1) to examine the context of an older client’s life. They analyze the dynamics between client and family, client and neighborhood, client and social supports, client and medical supports, and client and other systems. Extensive specialized knowledge is required to work effectively with clients who are older. Four major knowledge categories are relevant: (1) biological and physiological aspects of aging; (2) cognitive processes and emotional/psychological development; (3) sociological aspects of aging; and (4) legal, political, and economic aspects of aging.

Biological and Physiological Aspects of Aging

Social workers need to have a basic understanding of the effect of aging on the body’s systems in order to help older clients like Thomas Wayne, the 72-year-old veteran with health problems and no place to live, and Conchita