Box 4.3 **Intergenerational Equity or the New Ageism?**

Older people are being made into targets of what I call the "New Ageism." I refer to, among other things, journalistic-hype articles in respectable publications bemoaning the growth of an elderly population as a drag on younger Americans and on our economy.

Indeed, the elderly of America are being made into scapegoats for many of the alleged ills of our society. For some exponents of the "intergenerational equity" movement, the elderly are resented because of the presumed burden they impose on others. For another group of exponents, the elderly are envied because of the progress made in lowering the poverty ratio among them, progress often believed to have been achieved unfairly. Yet, some of the most vocal organizations and spokesmen for this New Ageism—despite their complaints of public and private discrimination against the young in favor of the old—have rarely been among the advocates for legislation or funding aimed at improving services and policies for the young. It seems, therefore, that "equity" is to be achieved through lowering the socioeconomic status of the elderly, rather than by working to improve the lot of all age groups.

In the perspective of the New Ageism, an aging society is synonymous with insurmountable problems and decline, not with challenges and new solutions. Rather than devote their energies and fervor to "solutions" based on pessimism and notions of a permanent downward trend in our economic and technological capacities, the proponents of the New Ageism should be persuaded to concentrate on the search for greater progress on remedies and on creating effective policies for prevention. This search is the essence of the history of bio-medicine, technology, and social inventions.

Proponents of the new ageism should also consider whether the facts support their notion that the progress of the older population has been made at the expense of young Americans. Richard Easterlin of the University of Southern California has examined this proposition and found it to be without empirical foundation. Writing in the June, 1987, issue of *Population and Development Review*, he makes clear in his empirical analysis that the divergent trends in the progress of the old and the young "reflect two different and largely independent causes." Even without government programs benefiting the elderly (notably Social Security), the rise in the poverty rate among children, for example, would still have taken place. "This is not to say there is no need for improving government programs for children."

So far, at least, the New Ageism does not appear to have penetrated very deeply into the public mind. As a matter of fact, public opinion polls seem to show the very opposite. One study, by the Commonwealth Fund, even contradicts the widely accepted image of older Americans as "takers" and not "givers." The proportion of the elderly giving to children and grandchildren turns out to be four times the proportion of young people helping out their elderly parents!

Unfortunately, little has been done to disseminate such findings in the mass media. The question also remains whether the media would give these and similar findings the level of attention they deserve, as a means of presenting to the public a balanced perspective on the aging population. In the meantime, the scapegoating of the elderly in the name of "intergeneration equity" continues, and these notions and values may eventually gain influence if allowed to persist without challenge.

Source: Harold L. Sheppard, "Intergeneration Equity or the New Ageism." *Aging and Vision News* (1), July 1988, p. 6.