Elderly and Senior Citizen: Contested Terms

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Values are encoded in language (Ng 108–117). Terms used to describe individuals and groups – regardless of the user’s intentions – convey attitudes, prejudices, stereotypes, and perceptions of worth. Elderly and senior citizen are two contested terms. Although they are often believed to be respectful or polite names for people deemed to be “old,” they create a form of “othering,” especially when applied to groups (e.g., the elderly, our senior citizens). Both terms evolved as ways of negatively positioning older people within social structures that privilege younger age groups. In addition, elderly in particular reinforces age-based stereotypes of weakness and vulnerability, is rarely used in empowering ways, and is seldom taken up by the very people who are deemed to be elderly. In this contribution, I briefly examine the origins of elderly and senior citizen, highlight why these terms are contested, and point to guidelines in support of age-inclusive language.

The first term, elderly, is frequently mistaken for either an offshoot of or synonym for “elder,” a word that generally carries positive connotations. Although “elder” and elderly come from the tenth-century word “eld” (i.e., old age or late life) (“Eld”), “elder” was first used to denote one person’s age in relation to another’s (e.g., the elder sister) or to a person’s ancestors before later evolving into a description of one’s role within politics and religion (“Elder”). In contrast, “elderlie” (later elderly), an adjective first used in 1611, derived from “elderling” (1606), defined as “contemptuously for elder” (“Eldering”). Although elderly as an adjective (and later a noun in 1834) was technically defined as “rather old” or “past middle age,” its use was pejorative (Merriam-Webster). Today, it is often used to convey frailty and cognitive disability by virtue of chronological age or appearance, although the age at which one becomes elderly is unclear (Avers et al. 153; Covey 333). “Elder” and elderly, therefore, have very different meanings and are not interchangeable.

The question of who comprises the elderly is difficult to answer although it
appears to have first gained ground in medical writing as a relational category for patients. For example, in a letter from the *New England Journal of Medicine* from 1812, “Dr. Bree” used *elderly*, which he never defined, to compare outcomes for four patients over age fifty with his “young” patients who were under age thirty-five. Until recently, the term was still widely used in medical journals. For example, seventy-five percent of medical journals surveyed from 1996–2006 preferred *elderly* to the term “older adults” (Quinlan 1983). Many journals have since changed their position and call for a specific age range, as is the case for adult patients in other stages of life, rather than a vague label. In addition, as David Avers et al. have observed, “[t]he term elderly lacks an equal and opposite term *pederly*; unlike geriatrics versus pediatrics that describes an area of medicine and health care” (153).

In popular media, *National Public Radio* (NPR) writer Linton Weeks noted that *elderly* was a term praised by readers of the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1918 but reviled in 1956 by *The Washington Post* readers when used to describe a forty-year-old man, causing the editor to write: “A lot of us old folks in our 50s do not like to be called elderly.” This sentiment has been echoed numerous times in surveys with people aged 50 and over, whereby most reject *elderly* in favor of “older adult.” It is worth noting that *elderly* is still widely used in academic and non-academic media despite it being a contested term. Even *The New York Times*, which published a blog in 2012 (Graham) addressing problems with using *elderly*, still uses it from time to time, as do other prominent publications such as *The New Yorker* and *The Washington Post*.

The second contested term, *senior citizen*, emerged in the U.S. in the 1930s as a way to convince older workers to leave the workforce. It first appeared in print in a *Time* magazine article from October 24, 1938 that featured Senator Sheridan Downey’s response regarding challenges to the 1935 Social Security Act. According to the article:

Mr. Downey had an inspiration to do something on behalf of what he calls, for campaign purposes, ‘our senior citizens.’ It came at a very timely hour when far cannier politicians were beginning to see the possibility of making pensions for senior citizens a juicier political racket than the ancient political exploitation of pensions for war veterans. (“Social Security”)

The label *senior citizen* created a role for older workers within the new retirement scheme, thereby convincing them to leave the workforce to make
room for younger people. An example of a current definition of senior citizen is “an elderly person, especially one who is retired and living on a pension” (“Senior citizen, n.”), whereby the notion of retirement is key. Like elderly, though, most older people polled disapprove of the label, although many still do approve of the word “senior” without “citizen” (NPR). Some sources jokingly speculate that senior is still somewhat appealing since it is often paired with “discount,” an explanation that is itself ageist. The Centers for Disease Control suggest avoiding the use of elderly or “senior” and instead using either “older adults” or “adults aged xx to xx” if referring to a specific group of people by age (“Preferred Terms”). They also caution that “elder” should only be used in certain cultural contexts where appropriate, such as when referring to people designated as elders within indigenous communities (“Preferred Terms”).

Finally, several publishing style guides including the American Psychological Association (APA) and the American Medical Association have adopted guidelines for bias-free, inclusive language that addresses age labels. For example, the APA 7th edition states the following: “Avoid using terms such as ‘seniors,’ ‘elderly,’ ‘the aged,’ ‘aging dependents,’ and similar ‘othering’ terms. Do not use ‘senile.’ Use ‘dementia’ instead of ‘senility’ [and] specify type of dementia when known. Generational descriptors (e.g., ‘baby boomers,’ ‘Gen X,’ ‘millennials’) should be used only when discussing studies related to the topic of generations” (APA). The APA adds that such “othering” terms “connote a stereotype and suggest that members of the group are not part of society but rather a group apart” (APA). These and other editorial guidelines mark growing awareness of how nuanced terms based on age identities can be as disempowering as pejorative terms used for other marginalized groups such as “the poor.”

Overall, the language used to label people at any point in their lives reflects cultural attitudes about that age. “Othering” labels that invoke stereotypes of frailty, vulnerability, incompetence, and/or homogeneity reinforce attitudes that aging into older age is “bad.” Such attitudes can influence people to disassociate themselves from aging if possible, which can lead to further “othering.” As with other groups whose identities have been marginalized, perhaps the best course of action is to ask the person or group how they would like their age identity described.
WORKS CITED


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