

Contested Language and the Study of Later Life: Forum Introduction

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Words have profound power to shape our world, influencing our ideas, relations, and interactions with people around us. The language of news outlets, social media, everyday speech, and even educational and health care messaging is rife with ageist rhetoric – this fact is well-known to us in age studies. Many researchers in the field are (and have been for some time) critically engaging with the question of language in important ways, and challenging ageist rhetoric is a core objective. However, even within age studies, differences in language use and notions of what is productive (or even acceptable), exist. Additionally, language, terminology, and the meaning of words are not static. In a field as interdisciplinary as age studies, the specific use of terminology is also not homogenous. For these reasons, paying close attention to the precise ways in which language use shapes broader images of age identities forms an essential part of age studies research.

This forum on Contested Language was first inspired by North American Network in Aging Studies (NANAS) Governing Council meetings during which we noticed that questions of language re-surfaced frequently. The council members, all researchers with a fair amount of exposure to and experience with age studies or cultural gerontology, still used certain words differently, preferred differing language choices, or had different opinions about the degree to which certain terms were acceptable or not, based on, for example, discipline, region, culture, or tradition. NANAS's stated mission is to “facilitate sustainable, international and multi-disciplinary collaboration among all researchers interested in the study of cultural aging” ([“Guiding Principles of NANAS”](#)). One of its guiding principles is explicit about the importance of language, stating the aim to “[s]upport inclusive language that avoids sexist, racist, ageist and ableist terms considered to be demeaning and offensive to others.” As an age studies organization, reflecting on our own mission and guiding principles, we recognized the need to pay ongoing critical attention to the language concerning age and aging, especially now as occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic and responses to it. We also acknowledged that

continuing conversation about language is necessitated by the very multi-faceted and interdisciplinary nature of the field of age studies. Therefore, we chose “contested language” as the theme of our 2021 NANAS symposium. The papers presented at that event, and the discussions that arose, strongly indicated the desire and need for further discussion, debate, and sharing around contested language in age studies; hence the idea for this forum emerged.

In this forum, we present seven pieces, each offering reflection on a contested term or terms within age studies. This introduction to the forum suggests a thematically informed guide to reading the articles. We propose to start with [Kate de Medeiros](#)’s discussion on the terms *elderly* and *senior citizen*. Tracing the history of both terms in language and popular media, de Medeiros demonstrates the negative value encoded in the way these terms are used to “other” a subset of the population.

The next group of contributions targets specific discourses and notions that are often unevenly dispensed to older adults. [Barbara Marshall](#) examines the rhetoric of *functionality* that is increasingly found in scholarship of social and cultural gerontology. Marshall identifies the normalizing impulse connected to the use of *functionality* and argues that aging is “far more complex than the binary of function and dysfunction.” [Julia Henderson and Kim Sawchuk](#) consider discourses connected to the terms *vulnerable* and *vulnerability*, which have proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic. While acknowledging that *vulnerability* can be a helpful concept in social justice frameworks, Henderson and Sawchuk call out an uncritical use of the notion and argue for a theoretical framework that carefully situates the idea of *vulnerability*. [Sally Chivers](#)’ contribution examines the neoliberal individualism that frequently underpins the idea of *age-friendliness*. Chivers discusses ways in which the term *age-friendly* often translates to mere lip-service instead of facilitating practical changes and proposes a way to use the notion to improve equity for all older adults.

Turning to terms applied to a specific group of older adults, [Birte Bös and Carolin Schneider](#) investigate the problematic labels of *dementia* and *dementia sufferer* and the critical history around the usage of these concepts in academia. Focusing on various alternatives to such terms, they offer insight into emerging conceptualizations surrounding dementia and their implications.

The final set of papers by [Margaret Morganroth Gullette](#) and [Stephen Katz](#),

tackles the implications of employing broad category markers that presumably encompass large and heterogeneous groups of older adults. Attending to the cultural rhetoric of stigmatizing an entire age-cohort, Gullette calls for a historicization of the term *baby boomer* and a deconstruction of its attributes. She argues for the abandonment of all cohort labels and the ageist constructions associated with them. Similarly, Stephen Katz problematizes the term *population* as applied to conceptualizing and studying older adults. He argues for a re-imagining of the ways in which we think about older people that acknowledges their interrelationships with human and more-than-human worlds.

On the whole, all authors emphasize the need for scholars, policy makers, journalists, media representatives, educators, and others to critically engage with the terms they use and avoid unscrutinized usages. They suggest a range of responses from discarding and replacing outdated terms, to carefully positioning terms within critical frameworks or discussions.

This forum contributes to the growing awareness of language use, both in humanities and social sciences research and in popular culture, and offers thoughtful considerations and guidance to scholars engaging with related topics. We are excited about the further conversations that this forum will no doubt inspire between different fields and disciplinary specializations. We hope that this extended reflection encourages age studies researchers to continue to negotiate and discuss the terms they use, the language they adopt, and the meanings they attach to concepts and expressions, all with the goal of redressing ageism and improving the quality of life of older adults.

WORKS CITED

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