

# The Anticipated Old Age

The sense of remaining time until death shapes the psyche—and changes the view on modern societies

By Ferdinand Knauss/DUESSELDORF

Beggars are obviously good psychologists. As is well known, they prefer to beg from older people with whom they have obviously their best success. “We also know that older people fell prey more frequently to a series of fraudulent e-mails from allegedly suffering people from Nigeria,” says Laura L. Carstensen, Psychology Professor at Stanford University in California and founder of the “Socioemotional Selectivity Theory”.

Carstensen knows how to explain this behavior of older people caused by a feeling of compassion: “As people age and they feel they have a limited time left, they put lesser value on goals which broaden their prospects and more and more value on goals which are emotionally meaningful to them.” New friendships become uninteresting, old connections ever more important, their interest in new experiences—be they private adventures such as parachuting, or challenges like the establishment of a company decrease while their interest in a quickly attainable emotional well-being—the sunset over the ocean—increases.

## Age Changes the Goals

Will modern societies, since they grow ever older, then be determined by harmony-seeking sentimentality? Will we Europeans become unambitious souls? Not necessarily. Because for Carstensen and her followers “age” is not an absolute number which increases after birth, but rather a span of time which decreases daily. The life reservoir, however, from which we all feed tends to become ever longer because the biological life expectancy increases. A 50-year old person today is psychologically not as old as a 50-year old person of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who could look forward to only a short lifetime ahead.

In her “Life Span Development Laboratory”, Carstensen examines aging as a social, emotional and cognitive process. The theory of Socioemotional Selectivity developed by her bases the shift in goals and interest during the

course of one's life on a "sense for time". Mark you, not the time that lies behind a person, but that which in all probability still lies before him. "Already with my earlier inquiries into the social isolation of older people in the 1970's, I found that they often had really no interest in new acquaintances. 'I have no time', they say and mean, not per day, but in their life." Goals, preferences and even cognitive processes such as politeness and memory change systematically with the declining time horizon according to this theory.

Therefore, the absolute age can be unimportant for one's psychological state if the possible end of life is near. If death threatens, young people become psychologically "old". In studies Carstensen could show that middle-aged HIV-positive men (before there were effective drugs available) had a very similar perception of their social environment, as did old men. This should also be true for people in extremely dangerous situations, such as in war. Even the news of threatening events like the terrorist attacks of 9/11, or the SARS epidemic in Hong Kong, obliterates the age disparities in what motivates people when they are interviewed.

In view of the progressively increasing life expectancy, Carstensen's theory has political, social and economic implications: "It could help us to present information for old people in such a way that they could retain it better". But also to better design political or other messages. Advertisements for an "energy tonic" like "Doppleherz" (Double Heart) should therefore depict no young people white water rafting, but a married couple on a harmonious walk on the beach.

To view people's age not starting at birth but retrospectively from death, is not only of interest to psychologists. Warren C. Sanderson and Sergej Scherbow of the Vienna Institute for Demography demand a reorientation of the thought process for their profession: "We stay young longer than our birthdays indicate," they wrote in the journal "Demografische Forschung" (Demographic Research). In addition to the conventional "chronological age" they developed the concept of "prospective age" based on the presumably remaining years of life. "A measure of remaining life expectancy is important not only because many behavior patterns are determined by the number of years a person counts upon that he will still be alive, but also because many economic and social values depend on it." For example: "forecasts of medical costs on the basis of chronological age alone result in estimates which are too high and consequently lead to incorrect

decision making.” Therefore, demographers demand that by 2050 the age of pension recipients be raised to 73 because “people who retire today at 65 have the same number of years left as people who will retire in 2050 at the age of 73.”

## Menopause remains unchanged

We live thus longer not only in absolute terms but also stay younger psychologically without the labor market and pension politics really having taken notice of this so far. Today Human Resources departments still consider a 50-year old person old.

But reproductive behavior of Western societies has long reflected the shift, or better, the lengthening of the human lifespan. Between 1970 and 2000, in the OECD countries, the average age of a woman at the birth of her first child has risen from less than 24 years of age to over 27 years. One crucial occurrence for each woman--and ultimately for demographers and societies generally--bucks the trend.

“Menopause, the end of female fertility has stayed constant for centuries”, says Hans van der Ven, gynecologist at the University Hospital in Bonn. It occurs, taking individual but also ethnic differences into account, at approximately age 50. But with improved living conditions (primarily nutrition) the female reproductive age (Menarche) starts earlier and earlier. Just in 1840, Norwegian women experienced their first period at 17 years of age.

Thus, astonishingly, this lengthening of the fertile period has occurred not in the later years but rather in the earlier years at the expense of childhood. Research has not been done into why the age of Menarche changes but the age of Menopause has not. Our physiological development as a species seems to urge us--unsuccessfully until now--not to postpone childbirth but to have children earlier and earlier. But the psychological implications of increased life expectancy induce us, if one thus interprets Carstensen's theory to further and further postpone reproduction because we have even more time. Biology does not play along.