

# Elderly and Senior Citizen: Contested Terms

*Kate de Medeiros*

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 7<sup>th</sup> 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

- “Age.” *APA Style*. American Psychological Association, July 2021, [apastyle.apa.org/stylegrammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/age](http://apastyle.apa.org/stylegrammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/age).
- Avers, Dale et al. “Use of the Term Elderly.” *Journal of Geriatric Physical Therapy*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2011, pp. 153–54, <https://doi.org/10.1519/JPT.0b013e31823ab7ec>.
- Covey, Herbert. “The Definitions of the Beginning of Old Age in History.” *The International Journal of Aging & Human Development*, vol. 34, no. 4, 1992, pp. 325–37, <https://doi.org/10.2190/GBXB-BE1F-1BU1-7FKK>.
- Dr. Bree. “Letter on Stramonium.” *The New-England Journal of Medicine and Surgery, and Collateral Branches of Science*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1812, p. 411.
- “Eld, n.2.” *OED Online*, Oxford UP, 2022, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/60177](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/60177).
- “Elder, n.” *Merriam-Webster*, 2022, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/elder](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/elder).
- “Elderling, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford UP, 2022, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/60190](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/60190).
- “Elderly, adj.” *Merriam-Webster*, 2022, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/elderly#h1](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/elderly#h1).
- Graham, Judith. “‘Elderly’ No More.” *The New York Times*. 19 April 2012, [newoldage.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/19/elderly-no-more/](http://newoldage.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/19/elderly-no-more/).
- “Legal Counsel for the Elderly.” *AARP*. American Association of Retired Persons, [www.aarp.org/legal-counsel-for-elderly/](http://www.aarp.org/legal-counsel-for-elderly/).
- “Manual of Style. 11th Edition” American Medical Association, 2021, [www.amamanualofstyle.com/browse?btog=chap&t=AMAMOS\\_SECTIONS%3Amed-9780190246556-chapter-11-div1-33](http://www.amamanualofstyle.com/browse?btog=chap&t=AMAMOS_SECTIONS%3Amed-9780190246556-chapter-11-div1-33).
- Ng, Sik Hung. “Language-Based Discrimination: Blatant and Subtle Forms.” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2007, pp. 106–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X07300074>.
- “NPR Survey Reveals Despised and Acceptable Terms for Aging.” *NPR*, 8 July 2014, [www.npr.org/transcripts/329731428](http://www.npr.org/transcripts/329731428).
- Nuessel Jr, Frank H. “The Language of Ageism.” *The Gerontologist*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1982, pp. 273–76, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/22.3.273>.
- “Preferred Terms for Select Population Groups & Communities.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 6 October 2021, [www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/Preferred\\_Terms.html](http://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/Preferred_Terms.html).
- Quinlan, Nicky and Desmond O’Neill. “‘Older’ or ‘Elderly’ – Are Medical Journals Sensitive to the Wishes of Older People?” *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, vol. 56, no. 10, 2008, pp. 1983–84.
- “Senior citizen, n.” *Merriam-Webster*, 2022, [www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/senior%20citizen](http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/senior%20citizen).
- “Social Security: Men Under the Moon.” *Time Magazine*, vol. XXXII, no. 1724, October 1938, [content.time.com/time/subscriber/printout/0,8816,883769,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/printout/0,8816,883769,00.html).

Weeks, Linton. "An Age-Old Problem: Who Is 'Elderly'?" *NPR*, 14 March 2013,  
[www.npr.org/2013/03/12/174124992/an-age-old-problem-who-is-elderly](http://www.npr.org/2013/03/12/174124992/an-age-old-problem-who-is-elderly).

---

**Kate de Medeiros**, PhD, is the O'Toole Professor of Gerontology in the Department of Sociology and Gerontology at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, and the current chair of the North American Network of Aging Studies (NANAS) governing council. Her topics of research include ageism, gerontology as a discipline, narrative approaches to understanding later life, the meaning of place, and friendships among people living with dementia. Her work has been funded by the Brookdale Foundation, the Alzheimer's Association, and the National Institutes of Health. She can be reached at [demedekb@MiamiOH.edu](mailto:demedekb@MiamiOH.edu).