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The Hidden Age Revolution: Emergent Integration of All Ages

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Policy Brief

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The Hidden Age Revolution:
Emergent Integration of All Ages

Matilda White Riley

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Matilda White Riley is Scientist Emeritus at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). One of the world's leading scholars on age and aging, she has received numerous honorary degrees and awards. Her memberships include the National Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Institute of Medicine. She is best known for her three volumes on *Aging and Society* and for many age-related books and articles. This Policy Brief, adapted from a lecture at Syracuse University, is a component of Dr. Riley's Program on Age and Structural Change (PASC) at the National Institute on Aging (NIA).

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The Hidden Age Revolution: Emergent Integration of All Ages

Matilda White Riley

Introduction by Richard Burkhauser, February 25, 1998

Matilda White Riley's professional life is difficult to summarize because she has done just about everything one can do in the world of ideas, and she keeps doing more! She has had a distinguished career as a professional academic—as both a teacher and researcher at Rutgers University and Bowdoin College. She has made major contributions in the disciplines of sociology and gerontology with regard to research methodology and also substantively in the sociology of aging.

She is one of the pioneers of the use of structural theory to understand aging—that is, to understand the interaction of social structures with the dynamics of individual and demographic aging.

Over the last two decades she has importantly shaped the research agenda in aging as Associate Director of the National Institute of Aging for Behavioral and Social Research, later as Senior Social Scientist at NIA, and now as Scientist Emeritus at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). She is a member of the National Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Medicine, and past president of the American Sociological Association, among other things. The honors she has received are numerous, well deserved, and truly too long to list.

Distinguished Lecturer in Aging Series Policy Brief

Two scholars have importantly shaped my interest in gerontology. Both are pioneers in staking out aging as a multidisciplinary field and I hold each in the highest esteem. The first is Bernice Neugarten, with whom I worked early in my career at the University of Chicago and who first introduced me to aging issues. The second is Matilda White Riley.

I met Matilda almost a decade ago when she asked me to be part of a multidisciplinary group that was working on issues of structural lag. That is the concept developed by Matilda that structural developments—in the social environment (e.g., labor markets, business organizations) or in components of culture that are built into current norms (e.g., laws, language, public policies)—lag dynamic change in the population, especially demographic change. This causes an inherent pressure to alleviate the imbalances and improve the mesh between lives and structures.

At the time, I didn't realize that my work on pension policy in general and Social Security policy in particular, and my conclusion that these policies were decades out of touch with the current needs and desire of the population, could be considered in the broader context of structural lags as formulated by Matilda.

Over the last decade, together with several of my colleagues in the Center for Policy Research, we have been showing how Social Security policies that were developed in the 1930s in a world where the average life expectancy was around age 60, women primarily worked at home, divorce was rare, and little of value to society was expected from older people, no longer serves a society in which average life expectancy is now close to age 80, the roles of men and women inside and outside the household have radically

Matilda White Riley

changed, and family structures are now diverse and fluid over people's lives. And even more important, over the next three decades, as the baby boom generation ages, this generation will be capable of leading very productive lives well into their 70s and 80s and will be expected to do so if we are to have the good society.

Last year, when Doug Wolf, Tim Smeeding, and I began planning for this year's Distinguished Lecturer in Aging Series Public Lecture, we all agreed we wanted someone who would give us a view of what aging will be about in the next century. We quickly decided that no one is better suited to provide us with a glimpse of the future than Matilda White Riley, and it is a pleasure to have her here today.

When my old friend, Richard Burkhauser, invited me to lecture at Syracuse on the "future of aging," I felt both honored and challenged. The challenge comes from the stated goal of the Maxwell School's Center for Policy Research. The wording of that goal explains the rationale of my lecture: "to promote objective, informed, and well-balanced policies to meet the growing needs of our aging population today and into the next century." The policy challenge is not entirely unfamiliar to me. In fact my husband, John Riley, and I faced a similar challenge when we edited a chapter on aging and social policy exactly 30 years ago (Riley, Riley, and Johnson 1969). Our advisor was no other than Walter Beattie, then Dean of the School of Social Work at Syracuse University.

However, our aging studies over those 30 years have not focused primarily on policy. Instead, my colleagues and I have been focusing on conceptual and empirical work (the **aging and society paradigm**) that does not create policies, but can inform them. The most immediate phase of this long cumulative history (Riley 1994; Riley, Foner, and Riley forthcoming) is leading us now to hidden changes in people's lives and social institutions that herald a new

Distinguished Lecturer in Aging Series Policy Brief

phenomenon world-wide— a phenomenon that may have momentous implications for the policies of the future. We call it “age integration,” because it *integrates* older people with others of every age.

When I come to the end of my lecture, I hope you will see the potential for age integration to transform the basis for policy in the 21st century. But before considering policy, I want to share with you my excitement about the age integration that would greatly affect it.

Of course, we already know that lives have changed; they have become longer and healthier. But what many of us do not yet recognize is that two revolutionary changes, though still hidden, are beginning to emerge:

- , First, human lives are subtly extending so far that they create a new *age continuum*;
- , Second, a silent metamorphosis in social structures is opening unexpected *opportunities for people of every age*.

These hidden changes, and the pressures generated by the tensions between them, portend a virtual breakdown of the age barriers that once segregated the “three boxes”: retirement and leisure for the old, work and family for the middle aged, and education for the young. With the barriers removed, older people could participate together with younger people in work, life-long education, community, religion, and many other structures—that is, they could become “age integrated.”

Over the years we have made continuing attempts to understand this concept of age integration (Riley 1993; Riley and Riley 1992, 1994-a, 1994-b). Our current definition, still undergoing clarification and specification, is:

Matilda White Riley

Age integration means breaking down age barriers and thus bringing together people of all ages.

Synopsis

In this lecture I'll discuss five aspects of age integration:

1. I'll indicate how people's lives are becoming so extended and diverse that all ages are merging into an **age continuum of lives**, replacing the earlier "phases" of young, middle aged, and old.
2. I'll outline evidences of widening **structural opportunities for all ages** that enable people of differing ages to participate together.
3. I'll emphasize that age integration is not inevitable. There are built-in **resistances**, especially among those from earlier cohorts who have vested interests in the familiar ways.
4. At the same time, age integration, to the extent that it may, in fact, emerge in the future, can afford **potential benefits** for most people, both old and young.
5. I'll suggest, for further consideration, some **policy issues** relevant to a future age-integrated society.

1. Age Continuum of Lives

First, then, the revolution in lives—as unplumbed depths of longevity and diversity bid fair to integrate all ages within the life course as a whole.

Longevity

Anything but hidden are the previous increases in longevity. As Samuel Preston (1996) showed in his Syracuse lecture two years ago, the increases have been greater in this one century than in all previous human history. *Most* people now live to be old—compared with the 1900 statistical norm for dying at age 50. Yet, hints at hidden tendencies toward far greater future increases in longevity are now being disclosed. Recent studies of mortality rates in many countries now show that people who survive to age 85 may live to 100 or even longer (Vaupel and Jeune 1994). Centenarians are one of the fastest growing age categories in the United States. As if this were not enough, gene biologists are now reporting test tube experiments that might reset the cellular aging clock. The implications of these experiments, while hotly debated, hint at a visionary first step toward genetic “immortality” (Bodnar et al. 1998).

Diversity

Moreover, increased years of age, however many there may be, will have significant consequences—as longevity will bring unimaginable diversity to the life course continuum. As my colleague, Dale Dannefer (1984) had previously shown, heterogeneity in every domain increases with aging. Now, as more years of life are added, the biological changes and impairments that accumulate with old age will multiply, while advances in medicine and in technology will predictably offset many of the deficits (cf. Manton, Corder, and Stallard 1997). With added years, too, the range of accumulated life course experiences will also add to the diversity, as illustrated by the mounting numbers of cohorts alive at the same time. Thus, cohorts of people now old have lived through the Great Depression, World War II, and the Roosevelt era; whereas cohorts now young are growing up with soccer moms, computer technology, and uncertain social norms. And the cohorts

Matilda White Riley

in between have each experienced unique eras of history—the “silent generation,” the “baby boom generation,” “generation X,” and many others for whom we have no names.

New findings are pointing to increasing diversity across age and cohort at the young end of the age continuum too. We now see, for example, how learning starts very early, even within the womb of the mother; how childhood experiences (life styles, health patterns, sense of responsibility) affect later life; or how behaviors once defined as deviant for adults are increasingly widespread among children: abuse of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs; illegitimate pregnancies; crimes so heinous as to receive adult punishment. The “adolescent society” is no longer closed, as it now diversifies its present “youth culture” activities with its future aspirations for occupation, education, and family.

Here is the payoff:

In any given year in the future, people of these many varied ages and experiences will all be alive simultaneously.

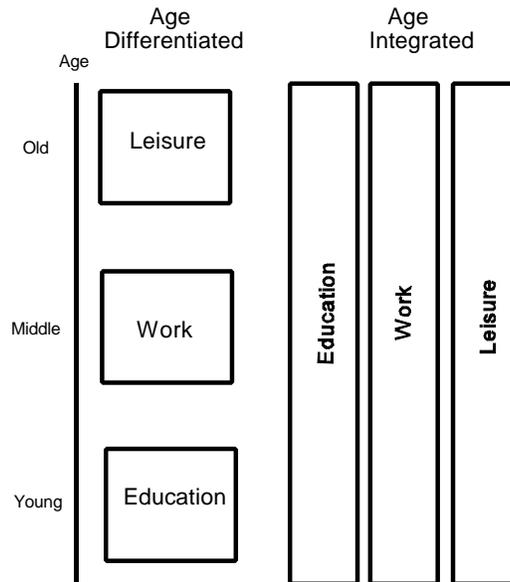
At the extreme, we may find cases of childbirth at age 60, retirement at age 30. We can no longer think of the life course as marked by clearcut phases. Rather, it is merging into a continuum, in which a common humanity “integrates” the age divisions. After all, everyone grows old.

2. Structural Opportunities for All Ages

Just as this extended and diverse age continuum is replacing the once sharply divided life course, hidden tendencies toward a revolution in social structures offer new opportunities for all ages.

Distinguished Lecturer in Aging Series Policy Brief

Ideal Types of Social Structures



Source: Riley and Riley (1992).

Types of Structural Change

As part of our accumulating explorations of structural change, Jack and I developed this chart several years ago. I keep using it (and many of you may have seen it) because it is useful for stereotyping the types of social structures that surround people's changing lives. (These are "ideal types," which do not exist in reality, though they may approximate it.)

At the left of the chart are the familiar three "boxes" that are sharply differentiated by age. Examples of age-differentiated structures are schools, where children in age-homogeneous grades have little opportunity for interaction with children even a few years older or younger than they; or nursing homes, where old people have little chance for interaction with younger people.

Matilda White Riley

By contrast, in the age-integrated structures at the right of the chart, age barriers are removed or reduced. Opportunities in all structures are open to people of every age (within the limits of biology). Thus, people of all ages are brought together. Ideally, in age-integrated structures, old people can interact with the middle aged and the young; and individuals can intersperse over their long lives periods of education or work with periods of leisure or time with family.

Tendencies toward Structural Integration

These are “ideal” types—but actually, in many structures *real* tendencies toward this ideal type of age integration are gradually emerging—though they are often hidden. I’ll sketch examples of these integrative tendencies in a range of structures.

Education

Nowhere are these integrative tendencies less hidden than in education, where the term “lifelong” is widely accepted.

Colleges and training institutions have already opened their doors to students of all ages, as have private industries; and in the United States half a million people over 50 have gone back to college. Thus, young and old are students together, with students often older than their teachers.

A wide array of age integrated internships involve children teaching children, college students teaching fifth graders or isolated old folks, people in nursing homes teaching kindergartners.

Often, senior educators serve as mentors for younger professional colleagues, encouraging reciprocal contributions of seasoned experiences in return for fresh ideas or cutting-edge technical skills.

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Through age-integrated education, each community and society as a whole can enhance the invaluable asset of an informed citizenry.

Work

Much like education, work—both paid and volunteer—is increasingly age-integrated, as many people over their long lives move through a succession of jobs. With age barriers breaking down, younger and older workers are intermixed in a range of occupations—from medical doctors and nurses to taxi drivers and plumbers—and in the training and retraining they require.

Firms increasingly integrate the workforce through programs for “unretirement,” re-hiring retired employees, or hiring retirees part-time or as consultants. These so-called “temps” are finding new routes to join the full-time workers.

Many older people are creating innovative new entrepreneurships for themselves, often making jobs for younger assistants. Younger workers learn from the experience of their elders, as in apprenticeships; but in high-tech firms it is often the young who teach the old.

Evidences that this age revolution in work is already emerging are documented in an earlier Policy Brief by Richard Burkhauser and Joseph Quinn (1997), which shows a striking reversal since the mid-1980s of the post-World War II trend toward earlier and earlier retirement by men. Whether or not this reversal will be sustained is being tracked through longitudinal analyses in the NIA-sponsored Health and Retirement Study.

Families

Unlike education or work, families have been undergoing a prolonged revolution in structure—but so gradually as to be utterly

unrecognized. The stereotype of “the family” as young parents (or single parents) with little children persists, despite the vastly widening scope of kin relationships of all ages into what we have called a “latent matrix” (Riley 1983; Riley and Riley 1993; and cf. Silverstein and Bengtson 1997). The unprecedented changes in longevity and patterns of marriage and divorce mean that many families now include at least four generations. And many include such diverse relationships as: step-kin, in-laws of many kinds, adopted children and foster children, older people adopted as foster parents, god-parents, “fictive” kin in the rising numbers of ethnic communities, and other surrogate kin outside the traditional family (e.g., lonely older patients often form kin-like ties to sympathetic nurses’ aides).

This change in the structure of kinship has just been documented in a microsimulation by Kenneth Wachter (1997), an NIA grantee. He demonstrates that the elderly of the 21st century will have impressive numbers of step-children and step-grandchildren—thus expanding the numbers of family members on whom the disabled may rely, and also increasing the caregiving responsibilities of the younger generation (though they will have more siblings to help them).

Thus, family boundaries extend far beyond the household—to transcend age and generation. Some kin and kin-like relationships remain latent, however, until called upon for instrumental or emotional support, companionship, or affection.

As these age-integrated kin networks expand, they are gradually subsuming functions once met by institutions outside the family. Thus, in health care, kin members of varied ages—always the major care takers—are already taking on added responsibilities as the numbers of older people mount. Much lifelong education goes on informally in the extended kin matrix, involving both old and young.

Distinguished Lecturer in Aging Series Policy Brief

With education programs now raising standards in the schools, it is the young who will often be educating the parents.

Housing

Architects, developers, and public agencies are pressed for housing plans suitable for age-integrated kin networks. Demands for age-segregated retirement communities will predictably give way to neighborhoods that provide access by all ages to community facilities and to other people. There are already scattered reports of accomplishments: private dwellings and apartment buildings for multiple generations; and fished-out farm communities where, among the elderly residents, “younger people” aged 70 stand by to help the older ones with snow blowing, driving, and other chores (*New York Times*, January 2, 1998). Most impressive are developments of age-integrated “co-housing,” where young and old live independently side by side. Following a pattern set in Denmark a quarter century ago, several dozen co-housing projects are already up and running in the United States. Most older people, though they prefer to stay in their own homes, prefer a mixed-age neighborhood over one restricted to people their own age (*New York Times*, February 18, 1997).

Health Care

For health care of the old, age-segregated nursing homes are already tending to give way to other arrangements that afford wide access to other people—(my colleague, Peter Uhlenberg, 1997, has just published an article on “Replacing the Nursing Home”).

For home care (families, as I have noted, are the caretakers of most frail older people), age-integrated support is provided through respite care, meals on wheels, or transportation services.

Matilda White Riley

Experiments with hospice care are allowing dying persons to be surrounded by family and friends.

In varied types of residential care, school children may be brought in to form “intergenerational partnerships,” to do crafts, sing, play games together and often just to hug each other (*Washington Post*, January 25, 1998).

Physicians, nurses, and other medical personnel—who are often younger than the patients—are gaining a broader perspective: they are coming to regard patients, not as individuals with isolated problems, but as members of a complex transgenerational kinship matrix with which health care must cope.

Welfare

Mentoring and other programs often help families or schools who are confronted with intergenerational problems over drugs or crime. Such programs attempt to reconcile competing demands for help and resources between disabled older people and younger people struggling with family abuse or AIDS. Some “community centers” are integrating “senior centers” with “child care centers,” thus facilitating cross-age interaction and at the same time conserving precious space and scarce resources.

Religion

As people of all ages are showing renewed interest in religion, many churches and synagogues are engaging old, young, and middle aged in common projects; and spiritual counselors are preparing to deal with the changing needs of parishioners of all ages.

These many examples illustrate the incipient tendencies toward structural changes that are now pointing toward increased age

integration—whether or not scientists, policy makers, or the public are aware of the tendencies.

3. Resistances

Looking toward the future, however, such tendencies toward structural changes are not inevitable. They may fail, in actuality, to yield all these opportunities for all ages. A moment's thought signals numerous resistances that may impede age integration, as many people remain comfortable with the familiar age-*differentiated* structures of the past.

Some older people will continue to hope for the earlier economic security of life-long jobs and guaranteed retirement income. They will abjure the uncertainty and limited benefits of “contingent employment.” Working part-time or starting over in new careers can require accepting periods of reduced income or loss of benefits—an untenable requirement for lower income workers in particular.

Whatever the resistances to economic changes, it is clear that many older people fear changes that might threaten their cherished independence from their adult children. On average, older parents are more likely to give financial assistance *to* their offspring, than to receive it *from* them. Very definitely, most older people wish to stay in their own households as long as possible; they want, in the classic words of Leopold Rosenmayr, “intimacy at a distance.”

Moreover, older people are likely to prefer friends of their own age, as Irving Rosow (1967) has shown. People of similar age can be drawn together by common beliefs and interests; sociologists call it “homophily” (see Hess 1972). Some older people find the presence of children annoying, and even avoid paying school taxes, though

the majority prefer a mixed-age neighborhood. In short, our age-differentiated society may be slow to change.

4. Potential Benefits

To be weighed against these resistances to age integration, there would also be potential benefits (as suggested previously in Riley 1997):

- , There would be increased **participation** by older people in the wider society. No longer isolated by age barriers, they could participate in varied structures, and with other people who differ in age and generation. And participation is known to be highly associated with health and effective functioning.
- , Old and young would both benefit by **socializing** each other, as older people teach the young, and young people, even babies, evoke responses from the old. Each would gain new knowledge by sharing experiences with the other, and come to understand each other's differences as they recognize their common humanity. Older people in particular gain renewed cognitive competence and sense of power when stimulated by the young.
- , As formerly age-segregated people become familiar with each other, **ageism** would be dissipated. Already, old people, even the very old, are demonstrating that most are *not*, after all, either unable to function or institutionalized: that false stereotype is crumbling. The bias against *children*, too, would be mitigated as grandparenting or great-grandparenting becomes the social norm: children would be less often fearful of older people, and more older people would rediscover children.
- , Age integration would evoke new forms of **institutional (or structural) integration**. As roles in work, education, or family

Distinguished Lecturer in Aging Series Policy Brief

intersect with roles in other social institutions (cf. Riley and Riley 1994-b), older people could exchange their experiences in one institution with younger people in a different institution. As expanding international data bases strengthen world-wide communication, institutional bridges would provide new channels for age integration.

- , Because of intergenerational **sharing of responsibilities**, older people could take over part of the middle-aged burdens of work and family, and the middle aged could in turn provide stronger social support to their elders (Riley and Loscocco 1994). They would even have time to pay much-needed attention to children.
- , Shared experiences would also benefit the future society by **preserving the heritage** of the past. Younger people starting out would inherit a core of wisdom from their elders that could stimulate future scientific innovations and practical interventions.
- , Through these many types of cross-age interaction, people of varied ages could form ties of group **solidarity**. To the extent that the outcome is mutual affection rather than conflict, older people's well-being would rest on a strengthened base of families, communities, states, and national and international organizations.

A heady vision of the future indeed!

5. Policy Issues

However visionary, these benefits of age integration are, of course, merely potential, and often still hidden from view. What policies might guide the potentials toward an optimum future reality? Many policy issues, already under debate in the Center for Policy

Research, would take on fresh urgency in an age-integrated world. I'll conclude with just a few issues—public and private, economic and social.

Economic Security

How will it be possible to ensure economic independence for older people of the future when, because of longevity, they are in danger of exhausting any savings intended as inheritance for their children; and when their increasing numbers may outrun the funds set aside by Social Security, Medicare, and other entitlements? These issues of savings and entitlements have been examined in previous Policy Briefs. Samuel Preston (1996) suggested saving Social Security by raising the age of entitlements, perhaps by as much as 2½ years; and James Smith (1997) suggested devices for enhancing wealth (and reducing its intergenerational disparities) by encouraging savings, private as well as public. Now, when such reforms are reconsidered under conditions of age integration, they are seen to involve collaboration across generations and ages. Revising Social Security may require sacrifices by the old, who will receive less, and by the young, who will contribute more. And incentives must encourage savings at every age. (In such ways, consideration of age integration contributes to the debate between state support and individual responsibility.)

However, plans for the next century must anticipate the fact that people in future cohorts will differ from those of today. Already, for example, those now old trust government more than market forces to provide retirement security; but for those now young, who will be the old of the future, it is the reverse: they place greater trust in the market (*Washington Post*, February 1, 1998).

Intergenerational Sharing

Since intergenerational collaboration may not come easily, special incentives may be needed to encourage old and young to share with one another. In an age-integrated society, changes made to bring older people into the mainstream could simultaneously enlarge their opportunities and relieve many in the middle years of their work-family “crunch” (Riley and Loscocco 1994). This modifies the earlier “generational contract,” in which the young were expected to contribute current work in exchange for the contributions to family support and societal infrastructure previously made by the old. With age integration, the role expectations for both old and young will be altered. Policies are now needed to ensure the effectiveness of these alterations. At the same time, as the transformation of gender roles is implicated (Riley and Riley 1994-b), public policies can no longer assume that “*the worker*” is a male who has a wife at home to take care of family, household, and all those other unpaid work activities.

Mechanisms of Structural Change

Quite a different set of policy issues concern mechanisms for benefitting from the structural opportunities entailed by the breakdown of age barriers. For example, new programs would be needed to support fully portable pensions or educational leaves that can prepare and re-prepare for the lifetime succession of jobs. Many jobs must be redesigned to fit the varied ages of immigrants, former welfare recipients, or the homeless. Special incentives would be required for those older people who need work but shrink from available jobs without adequate pay, benefits, or prestige.

Among programs being tested are age-targeted manipulations of wages, benefits, hours of work, or flex-place and flex-time arrangements. The G.I. Bill from the Roosevelt era is still the model mechanism for preparing people, society-wide, for a lifetime of

structural changes. With the rapid expansion of highly skilled office jobs, experimental programs are linking education with industry to provide on-the-job training and subsequent employment opportunities for older people, single parents, and other hard-to-employ students (*New York Times*, February 7, 1998). With the wrenching reports of serious crimes by juveniles, a number of states are experimenting with “blending” both adult and juvenile sentences; these allow the young offender the chance, before being jailed with adult criminals, to comply with highly supervised juvenile sanctions (*New York Times*, February 11, 1998).

Basic Values

Hidden behind all other issues, the most formidable *dilemma* of age integration remains unresolved: the choice between materialism and more time for family, friends, and self. Will people ever be willing and financially able to forego guaranteed economic security as a *summum bonum* for a basically new life style that emphasizes leisure and time free for social and cultural pursuits?

At this point, I depart from hard-headed conceptual and empirical thinking, to imagine possible implications of future experiences with age integration. Just suppose that older people do become accustomed to sharing paid jobs and material rewards with younger people, while younger people share some of their leisure with the elderly: Might the premium now placed on materialism and consumerism lose its allure? Is it possible that age integration might dissipate some of today’s cynicism, self-absorption, and concern with opulence and “success”? Might age integration lead to strengthened values of “connectedness”—through stronger kinship networks, communities that unify their diversity as Amitai Etzioni is suggesting, rising spirituality, a UN Charter for a world-wide “society for all ages” (Nusberg 1997)? The solutions to this fundamental dilemma of values are beyond the reach of current policies—but they are well worth thinking about.

Conclusion

I end this lecture with still baffling questions: How far will future changes actually approximate the idealized scenario of an age-integrated society? What current policies might ensure the potentials and cope with the resistances? How might age integration in the future shed entirely new light on policies that seem familiar today? My lecture has pointed to some often hidden directions for seeking answers. Now my hope is that others will join us in finding more prescient formulations of age integration that contribute to the Syracuse goal—I'll repeat it: to promote "objective, informed, and well-balanced policies to meet the growing needs of our aging population, today and into the next century."

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Matilda White Riley

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Matilda White Riley

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