

# upfront

RESEARCH NEWS



## Old Dogs, New Opinions

*Contrary to stereotypes, people grow more liberal and tolerant as they age*

A stroll through the greeting card aisle of many dime stores reveals Americans' beliefs about aging. The cards clearly convey the widely held belief that as the years tick by, people not only get weaker and slower, they also get crankier and more close-minded. In short, "[Americans] think that old people get as rigid as their arteries," says Nicholas L. Danigelis, a sociologist at the University of Vermont.

Yet in a recent study published in the October 2007 *American Sociological Review*, Danigelis shows the opposite to be true: As people age, their political attitudes grow more liberal and flexible. "We found no support for the bogeyman of gerontology, which is that the older you get, the more conservative and rigid you become," he says.

Using data from the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Surveys, the authors examined the political attitudes of 46,510 American adults from the years 1972 to 2004. They analyzed people's attitudes

toward women and blacks; their support of civil rights for such unpopular groups as communists, racists, and atheists; and their opinions about such personal issues as divorce, extramarital sex, and the right to die. They were particularly interested in how the attitudes of people age 60 and older compared to the attitudes of people under the age of 40.

Danigelis and his colleagues found that although American culture as a whole became more liberal over these 33 years, people age 60 and older became more liberal more quickly than did their younger counterparts on most measures. Indeed, on some issues, such as protecting free speech for unpopular groups, the 60-and-older set became more tolerant over time, while the 40-and-under crowd became less so.

"We never saw that the older cohort became more conservative while the younger group became more liberal or remained static," summarizes Danigelis. "And in no case did

we find that the 60-and-older group didn't change at all."

If people actually loosen up as they age, why do American stereotypes hold that they become more set in their ways? Danigelis points to two forces that turned Americans against their elders. First, "the American Revolution challenged the old systems of patriarchy with newfangled ideas of liberty and equality," he says, "which led to a systematic dismantling of the stature of older folks." Second, the industrial revolution shifted people's values away from the experience and knowledge that the agrarian life demanded and toward the mobility and youth that factories preferred. "It was a 180-degree turn," he says. "Old became bad and young became good."

Many other cultures view their older members as the keepers of tradition. Yet they are more likely to see their older members' resistance to change as "thinking two or three moves down the road, rather than evidence of rigid thinking," he says.

As baby boomers age and younger generations curb their birthrates, some stereotypes of the old are dissipating. "But I fear that we're creating new stereotypes that are just as scary," says Danigelis, including that of "old people as an interest group whom you don't want to cross because the AARP and Gray Panthers are going to come after you." Like their predecessors, these new views do not acknowledge that old people change their attitudes and behaviors in the same ways that young people do.

"Yet organizations should know that older workers are gems to be cherished," he says. "Older people have experience, they have knowledge, and they have the ability to adapt." —Alana Conner

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