

INTRODUCTION

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In the spring of 2017, a Google search of the phrase “60 is the new 50” yielded around 17,700 hits in English. When written as “sixty is the new fifty,” there were around 9,880 hits; albeit with certainly many overlaps. People understand what “60 is the new 50” means, and some of them are even walking around wearing t-shirts and hoodies that reflect that idea. So far, however, an updated understanding of what it means to be “old” has yet to reach most scholars of population aging or public officials charged with making policies related to aging. If there were an aphorism that sums up the dominant academic and policy view of population aging, it would be something like: “The new 60 is the old 60.”

It almost seems as though the ways in which population aging is conceptualized and measured have been frozen in time. In a UN analysis of population aging in the *Vienna International Plan on Aging, 1982*, people in all countries of the world were categorized as “old” upon reaching their 60th birthday. In a subsequent analysis of aging in *World Population Ageing 2015*, the point in the life course at which people were classified as “old” had not changed. Thus, implicitly, none of the changes in life expectancy and health that occurred between 1982 and 2015 were considered relevant to the study of population aging. The total dependency ratio – i.e., the ratio of people in the “dependent” age groups to people not in the “dependent” age groups, as defined by fixed chronological age boundaries – first appeared in 1913. While the new 60 may have been the old 60 in 1913, it certainly is not now.

There are some advantages to the approach to population aging based on the assumption that “the new 60 is the old 60.” For example, it solves what could be called “the Segall problem.” Segall is supposed to have said the following: “A man with a watch knows what time it is. A man with two watches is never sure.” Thus, “the new 60 is the old 60” assumption is the equivalent of having only one watch. In the study of population aging, 60-year-olds are uniformly treated

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as identical, regardless of whether they lived in Swaziland in 1950 or in Sweden in 2020. But considering the possibility that 60 may indeed be the new 50 leads us to think about the question of whether aging has to do with more than just chronological age. We are invited to wonder whether the watch that counts down to the end of our lives runs faster in some circumstances than in others.

It is important to have measures of age that depend on people's characteristics, such as their remaining life expectancy and their physical and cognitive health, because many behaviors are influenced by these characteristics. Moreover, changes in the behavioral patterns of age groups can have important economic and social implications. For example, older people are far more likely to engage in certain activities today than they were in the past, such as taking university classes, buying a house, or climbing a mountain.

In the last decade or so, new approaches to thinking about and measuring population aging have been developed. These approaches share the view that aging should be defined more by how people are living than by how long they have been alive. At each age, there are many aspects of people's lives that are relevant to the study of population aging, including how long they expect to live, how healthy they are, what activity limitations they have, how well they function physically and cognitively, and whether they receive a state-funded pension. These dimensions of people's lives differ across generations, across countries, and across subgroups of the population. The new 60 is not the old 60 when aging is viewed from a more holistic perspective. In recognition of this insight, the Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (IIASA, VID, and WU) brought experts on aging together in November 2014 to discuss new ways of thinking about and measuring population aging. This volume is the result of that conference.

In our introductory essay, "A Unifying Framework for the Study of Population Aging," we provide a conceptual guide to the remaining papers in the volume, and show that the Segall problem need not arise in the multidimensional study of population aging. Three papers in this volume measure population aging using prospective age in addition to chronological age. Prospective age is based on remaining life expectancy. Emelyanova and Rautio examine aging in the Arctic region; while Gnajtovic and Devedzic analyze aging in Serbia; and Basten-Gietel, Sanderson, and Scherbov explore aging in emerging market economies. Two papers address the role of health in aging. Boissonnaeult and de Beer show that in 14 European countries, changes in measures of health and labor force participation among the elderly are only weakly related. Demuru and Egidi study aging in Italy by adjusting prospective ages for measures of health. Barslund et al. show how prospective ages can be used to make dependency ratios based on National Transfer Accounts data more dynamic. Novak and Palloni show that subjective survival expectations based on survey data are largely consistent with observed life expectancies. Riffe et al. add thanatological age to the mix. Thanatological age is defined as the exact number of years a person has left to live. Riffe et al. study the joint effects of prospective and thanatological age on markers of aging and

disability. Rehkopf et al. investigate the relationship between biomarkers and age in two populations of people aged 60+.

The papers in this volume exemplify the ongoing transformation of the study of population aging from having been a research area that was largely static, to becoming a field of inquiry that is exciting and dynamic.

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