



# Talking about My Generation, But Not Necessarily about Me: Working with Older Adults in a Community Setting

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## *Abstract*

The author is a newly graduated student of the Simmons School of Social work. In this article, she touches upon the lessons she has learned from working in the field with older adults and discusses the greater cultural and societal factors that she has observed that have impacted the older adult population.

If you had asked me what population I wanted to work with after graduate school when I first started, I wouldn't have been able to tell you. If you had pressed me for potential populations, I certainly wouldn't have said older adults.

As a recent graduate of Simmons School of Social Work, I routinely find myself working with older adults. Before my first exposure to older adult clients in graduate school, I didn't have a working knowledge of the population. My point of reference consisted of media images and commercials, which painted all older adults as nursing-home bound. I was worried that I would find the work draining and unfulfilling.

This sentiment evaporated when I started my first field placement working with older adults in a community setting, a placement that would lead me to my current job. The older adults I work with are nothing like the images we are used to seeing on television. My clients are vibrant, passionate, and engaging. And they have much to offer to their communities.

I work at a senior center, and the majority of my work revolves around connecting clients to resources, helping them understand benefits and apply for social welfare programs, such as Mass-health and Social Security. My agency's mission is to help older adults continue to remain active, both in their community and in general.

### **“I Am an Older Adult, but I Don’t Feel Like It”: Thoughts on Labeling**

While working with older adults, I have come across an interesting sentiment among this population. In conversations with clients, I often see them try to disassociate themselves from other older people. This is a problem within my agency, because our sole purpose is to serve older adults. The displeasure of being associated with “the elderly” is at least partially responsible for older adults deciding not to use our programming, stating that they don’t believe it will suit them. The stigma of being older dissuades them from even being in the same program as other older adults.

My agency has tried to combat this stigma by modifying our programming to suit older adults who want more. We have yoga and fitness programs that emphasize healthy eating and nutrition as well as overall wellness. We provide trips and other excursions at an affordable rate. Despite these efforts, I still encounter older adults who would rather not receive services than be around “old people.”

### **Retirement: A Double Edge Sword**

Whether you are newly employed or have been in the workforce for decades, retirement is an end goal that workers both look forward to and fear. Often, this fear revolves around having enough money to retire successfully and support oneself. This fear is bolstered by increases in the cost of living and other expenses that accompany becoming an older adult.

Even though older adults receive social security checks every month, many still struggle with finances. Older adults often rely on food stamps and other programs just to get by. Health care costs also put a strain on the finances of older adults, and these costs frequently force older adults to make tough decisions and sacrifices in order to survive.

Besides the financial aspect of retirement, there is also the social aspect. What happens after we retire? Who are we, now that we are no longer in the workforce? While people currently in the workforce fantasize about not having to go back after a long weekend, what we do is an important part of who we are. My work with older adults has certainly demonstrated that. Many still identify with their previous employment, explaining what they did before they retired with pride. While this narrative is important, asking older adults who they are now challenges them to focus on the present, instead of only identifying themselves with their past careers.

### **Why Is a Community Setting Important?**

Something that my current agency has taught me is the importance of community, as exemplified in the behavior of our clients. Clients tend to socialize with one another and establish interpersonal bonds. Often, clients will advocate for one another and make sure that their friends are taken care of fully. Clients are our best source of advertisement, as they live in the community and publicize what we have to offer to their friends and neighbors. This sense of community is better than the alternative of having seniors left alone at home, where they will be reminded through the television that people

of a certain age are seen as no longer relevant, important, or worth anyone's time. This is a sentiment that I wish to combat, both in and out of my agency.

### **Final Thoughts**

As a new social worker in the field, I feel that I have learned much about the older adult population. The concept of being an older adult is highly stigmatized, even among older adults. This stigma prevents older adults from exploring services from agencies that solely cater to older adults. This can negatively impact their quality of life and hinder them from enjoying their later years.

Older adults are an underserved population that needs more care. While older adults are a wonderful population, they are often overlooked. As the costs of healthcare and living expenses rises, older adults need to be better supported in their communities. Agencies like mine can only do so much with the budgets that we have; there needs to be more funding for these programs. Policy change is also crucial, as the older adult population is projected to increase within the next few decades.