The older segment of the population is growing faster than any other age group. In the United States, those over 65 are projected to account for 20% of the nation, reflecting a worldwide pattern (McDonald, 1997; Perlmutter, 1990). Average life expectancy has not only increased but has led to two new categories of old age, the very-old and the old-old. There are more than 664 million people over 80 in the world, 1 for every 100 on earth, a number predicted to grow by another 370 million in 2050. The 135,000 centenarians in the United States in 1998, say forecasters, will reach 2.2 million in the next 50 years. The upsurge of the aged is reflected in more than 1,000 college programs in gerontology, with several hundred at the graduate level, a 36-fold increase in funding from the National Institute on Aging in the last 25 years, to $685.6 million in a recent accounting, and more than a 10-times growth in the number of grants in the same period, valued at $722 million.

These changing demographics are bound to affect attitudes toward the old, including the elderly's views of themselves, and alter the meaning of growing old from what it was in the past. More people live longer, to over seventy, and many continue to work or go to school. The nature of retirement differs; senior citizen groups, many with militant agendas, are well organized, and laws are legislated against age discrimination (Chudacoff, 1992; Fischer 1977; Murray, Sleek, & DeAngeles, 1997; Qualls & Abeles, 2000). In response to the graying of the population, a large number of reports, essays, articles, and books on growing old have been written by psychologists, gerontologists, social scientists, historians, health specialists, and journalists (Cole, 1992a, 1992b; Cole & Winkler, 1994; Craik & Salthouse, 1992), contributing to the new fields of “humanistic gerontology” and “geropsychology” (Birren & Schroots, 2000). The government’s interest in the aged was formally initiated in 1950 by the National Council on the Aging, followed by the National Center on the Arts and Aging in 1973 “to serve as an advocate and agent for linking the arts and the aging together...
ensure that older persons have an equal opportunity with other age
groups to participate in and have access to the arts” (Sunderland,

Supplementing professional and governmental efforts are popular
works on finances, retirement, housing, and recreation led by Simone de
Beavoir's influential 1950 book, *The Coming of Age* (titled *La Vieillesse*
in French, or *Old Age*), which drew upon literature, the arts, history,
psychology and biology in a personal and readable way (Woodward,
1994), although it presented a view of aging that Achenbaum (1989)
called grim (see pp. viii–xxv).

The many connotations of aging were formalized in McLerrran and
McKee's (1991) *Cultural Dictionary*, which annotates 350 references to
the elderly in the arts, literature, and culture. The number and diver­
sity of citations, the authors contended, indicated that old age is an
“archetype” that “resonates with richly ambiguous meanings” (p. ix).
The multiple and changing historical, philosophical, humanistic,
methodological, disciplinary, and substantive areas of aging are based
on continuing series of handbooks (Birren & Schaie, 1977, 1985, 1990;
see also Maddox, 1987).

**OLD AGE: A TIME OF WOE OR WORTH?**

Two opposing perspectives broadly characterize approaches to
aging. First and foremost is an emphasis on the anxieties of old age:
having enough money for food, housing, and medical care; coping with
increasing illnesses, physical deterioration, and sensory debilities; fac­
ing the deaths of spouse, relatives, and friends; and coming to terms
with one's mortality. To these worries add fears of mental decline and
stagnation, losses in intellect and intelligence, impaired ability in
learning and remembering, and the onset of senility or dementia,
including Alzheimer's disease. These foreboding preoccupations,
according to Cummings (1979), lead to the elderly’s “disengagement”
from life, a self-protective distancing from feelings, other people, and
activities that result in personal and social isolation. A brief poem
by W. H. Auden (1976), entitled *Old People's Home* (p. 645), captures
pessimistic sentiments about aging.

According to the negative view of old age, losses take precedence
over gains, bad things are more likely to happen than good ones, and
despair triumphs over hope. A litany of woes pervade societal attitudes
toward the old and the elderly's attitudes about themselves, and form
the basis for stereotypes about aging and the prejudice of ageism.