In first encounters, age is one of the earliest characteristics we notice about other people (Fiske 1998; Kite, Deaux, and Miele 1991). Conscious or not, noticing age drives our interactions with others. Age seems to answer: How should I address them? What are their political views? What do they know about popular culture? Will they be competent? Socially aware? How slowly should I talk? How loudly? From an individual’s perceived age, we infer social and cognitive competencies, political and religious beliefs, and physical abilities. These inferences guide how we behave and what information we seek, heed, and remember.

Age is far from the only social marker that shapes our attitudes toward other people. We form opinions based on sex, race, and religion, among other social categories. But unlike these other categories, old age is one that most of us eventually join. For the most part, people do not move from one gender, racial, ethnic, or religious category to another. Moreover, stereotyping people based on their age, unlike these other groupings, goes largely unchallenged and even unnoticed in the United States. We disparage elderly people without fear of censure. Indeed, noticing a person’s age early in a social encounter is not surprising or inherently offensive. It is what we do with that information that can be destructive. As Butler (1980) notes in an edition of the *Journal of Social Issues* devoted to the topic, ageism, like racism and sexism, becomes institutionalized, affecting hiring decisions, medical care, and social policy.

Many people approach old age with dread. What was once viewed as a natural process is now seen as a social problem. Television portrays only 1.5 percent of its characters as elderly, and most of them in minor roles (Zebrowitz and Montepare 2000). Older adults are also more likely than any other age group to appear in television and film as conduits for comic relief, exploiting stereotypes of physical, cognitive, and sexual ineffectiveness (Zebrowitz and Montepare 2000). Today in America, we no
longer see our elders as sources of wisdom but as feeble yet lovable, doddering but dear.

Our goal in writing this chapter is to shed light on the social-psychological underpinnings of stereotyping processes, contents, and functions and to use this as a scaffold to discuss stereotyping of elderly people. We begin by elucidating the systematic nature of the processes of stereotyping, including those of older people. After process, we discuss the less examined area of stereotype content. We suggest that content, including the content of stereotypes about elderly people, is systematic. Finally, the chapter examines the functions served by stereotyping and discusses the conditions most likely to elicit the use of stereotypic information in impression formation. Overall, the processes, contents, and functions of elderly stereotypes fit well with the general principles of stereotyping.

Social-Psychological Processes of Stereotyping

Processes of stereotyping primarily address cognition. One context for this comes from the traditional tripartite view that three mechanisms constitute attitudes: affect, behavior, and cognition (Breckler 1984; Eagly and Chaiken 1998). In category-based attitudes, these are represented as prejudice (affective), discrimination (behavioral), and stereotyping (cognitive). Ageism contains the same three mechanisms. This chapter focuses primarily on stereotypes, which are cognitive structures that store our beliefs and expectations about the characteristics of members of social groups, and stereotyping, the process of applying stereotypic information.

Stereotypes develop over time as people perceive their changing environments, interpret the perceived information, and encode it in memory. Biased by various cognitive processes, these collections of beliefs are later retrieved for use in interpreting social cues, and consequently directing how we behave in social interactions (Stangor and Schaller 1996). Accurate or not, stereotypes guide our social behavior and often govern what information we seek, heed, and remember (for a review, see Fiske 1998). At the root of stereotyping is our impulse to assign objects, events, and people to meaningful classes, about which we have established beliefs and expectations.

Categorization and Stereotype Formation

Human functioning requires cognitive categorization. To make sense of the world, we group objects and events based on their similar features.