

Shrink Rap Radio #23, January 28, 2006. Ageism: A Call for Tolerance and Compassion

Frank Smolle interviews Carol Mortenson

(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Dale Hoff)

Introduction: Welcome back to Shrink Rap Radio, the planet's premiere psychology podcast. This is Dr. Dave coming to you from the San Francisco Bay area. Our show revolves around interesting personalities in and around the world of psychology. Shrink Rap Radio is the show that speaks from the psychologist in me to the psychologist within you whether you be amateur, student or professional. Today's show features an interview conducted by Frank Smolle, our Australian correspondent. Frank conceived and produced this episode and it has the Dr. Dave Seal of Approval.

[Frank] Smolle: G'day and welcome to Shrink Rap Radio. Today I'm your host, Frank Smolle, talking to you from Australia, the land down under. I live in the city of Orange situated in the central west of New South Wales. Orange is about 300 kilometers west of Sydney. Well, earlier this week, I had the opportunity to talk with a Registered Nurse working with the aged so I invited her to speak to us about the effects of ageism and how stereotypes and attitudes are formed regarding the aged. Now, did you know that it has been projected that by the year 2010, forty million American people will be over the age of 65. This projection was published in the *British Journal of Social Psychology*. The authors of the article called *Stereotyping of the Elderly: A Functional Approach* also stated that "these negative beliefs emphasize the decline in daily function and the diminishing of physical ability (for example, the loss of hearing), mental capacities (for example, forgetfulness) and physical appearances (for example, wrinkly skin) associated with old age." So now I present to you our interview with Carol Mortenson, the Registered Nurse from Orange. Thank you very much. Today we're talking to Carol Mortenson about the effects of aging, ageism and its effects in the community. So, Carol, could you tell me about, at first, a bit about your career as a nurse?

[Carol] Mortenson: Alright. Well I am one of those more experienced, older people working in the nursing field. I've been a Registered Nurse for some 35

years—a life experience that would be very, very difficult to put down on paper in some respects.

Smolle: I'd imagine you'd have quite a lot of in-depth conversations with patients.

Mortenson: Yes. There are opportunities to have in-depth conversations with them but there's one thing that I have found in nursing that you are always so busy that you found it very difficult to sit down and have that time unless it was in your time. It was always a matter of "look I'll be back later" and you never got back which was very, very disappointing for those that were wanting to speak with somebody.

Smolle: Do you find that ageism creeps in?

Mortenson: Ageism starts in the community and creeps into all factors of life. It's a person's impression put upon another person's looks that group them in an ageism bracket. It can be—some of the signs are the blue rinse set. They're people who've got gray hair and have it rinsed in whatever color. Or the gray brigade or she's having a—they are having a DOB problem, that's a date of birth problem, which is an ageism statement or they're having a senior's moment. Things like that are ageism. No matter how old a person is, they can have a lapse of memory. They could put something down and not remember where it is but because a certain look goes with them, it's got to be Alzheimer's or dementia or something placed on them. So the community puts that on people and it goes with people from certain ages on. It's usually 40—you're over the hill and far away. At 50, you go off sliding down the other side. So all of this is putting a slow—or yet a fast—decline on a person's quality of life or quality in life according to other people.

Smolle: If you could put ageism in a nutshell, how could you sort of define it?

Mortenson: It's got to be where a certain look goes with a certain person. You start to lose a little bit of your capabilities. Naturally, as we all get a bit older, we start to look a little bit different. We lose our muscle tone. We get wrinkles. And, unless we work at it and have lots and lots of money to have the face lifts—they pull it up and tuck it up top, put the rubber band around it or whatever—your face falls in the soup, they say. So, ageism is a lack of acceptance of a person's stage in life. And, they'll go and have so many facials and so many face lifts and so many

other treatments to get rid of the wrinkles to try to avoid the ageism and lots of people can't handle what they see in the mirror so they opt for another way out.

Smolle: This is purely an attitude derived from the rest of the community. I could probably point out the media praises young and healthy bodies to be a stereotype of perfection and once you lose that—

Mortenson: Once you lose that, you've got that brand on you that you're aging and if you were to go and have your hair rinsed, you're in that ageism bracket; you know, you're of the blue rinse set.

Smolle: Do you see a difference in attitudes towards the aging between different members of the family or different members of the community? Is there a difference between attitudes?

Mortenson: There does appear to be. There's a lot of disrespect, younger people to older people. Maybe the older person might be a bit slower, a little more careful. And the younger people are in a rush to barge through, to push their way through. They get impatient. They just say they're old and decrepit. It's lack of tolerance even though mothers always say to their children, "You'll be there one day." I can remember when my dear mother couldn't thread a needle without glasses and she didn't have glasses because we came from [unintelligible]. We'd say, "Here, give it to us, mom. We'd thread it" and she'd say, "Don't worry dear. Your turn is coming." Well, it has. Thank you very much. But, you know, it's like intolerance from those who are not—they have not experienced it and don't think that they ever will have to experience it but it creeps up on them and they do have to face it then.

Smolle: What do you think is the most outstanding quality a nurse should possess?

Mortenson: Well, hopefully they possess it, but also hopefully they learn to expand on it with experience and that would be compassion, tolerance, understanding. There's a lot to deal with, right, just from being a nurse from a younger person nursing critically ill patients to a person who is working with the aged in the community. It's totally different, the aged in the community. And there's been a lot of work—a lot of different aspects of nursing now brought into the aged so they are placing a lot more importance on caring for the aged

comfortably to help them age with a little less—what shall we say?—pain and more dignity.

Smolle: So, in the industry, has the quality of care been drastically improved for the aged?

Mortenson: Yes. It certainly has. Over the years, I have seen it's been very, very much improved. From when I started nursing to what I see today and what they're working toward today and the facilities that are available, it is so vastly improved.

Smolle: For our overseas listeners, do you see the cultural differences between Australia and another country and how they deal with the aged?

Mortenson: There are certainly cultural differences with the aged from what I know of. Some countries still have their aged parents and grandparents living in the family home which is absolutely wonderful. We here in Australia don't have that as much now because we have facilities to put grandma and granddad in a facility so they get quality 24-hour care. Some people may argue if that's the best, some not, but it depends on the families and how they can cope.

Smolle: With aging here in Australia, do you see any people taking value of the aged in the community in respect to the knowledge that they've possessed over their life and the memories and experiences that they've encountered.

Mortenson: Sadly enough, I think a lot of knowledge and a lot of experience goes to the grave with the elderly here in this country. Nobody seems to have the time or even the value to sit down and interview them on a tape, get them to put their memoirs down, or to draw on their expertise. Once a person gets to look like an older person, they tend to disregard what they have to say. A lot of trades are disappearing, you know, the making of a banister with a curve in it or turning the corner without the supports from the ceiling and the floor is a dying trade. I've experienced somebody actually wanting it put in their house like that and they put a big support from the ceiling to hold the banister up and she brought them up to a heritage house and she said, "This is how I want it" and the house is over 100 years old. So it's a trade that's been lost. Roller carriages—it's a trade that's lost. There's nobody that is qualified now to restore or to build roller carriages in the way that they used to years ago. The beautiful etching of crystal glass—you've got to send

overseas to get somebody to do that or there might only be one tradesman around that does it and it costs about \$4000 or something for a little pane of glass. So we're losing a lot of our skills because it takes time. It's a throw away society and getting more that way. It's done faster and cheaper and we're losing our pride in what we're doing. A dad might say to the son, "We used to do it this way." "Oh, that was way back there then. You know, they talk about the old times. This is how we do it now." So it's lack of tolerance. It's impatience. They don't want to know how it used to be. So, you know, the aged are virtually—what shall we say?—cooped up in their own memories because nobody wants to know how it was done or are very interested in finding out how it was done. So they can't impart their knowledge.

Smolle: Do you see a difference between the attitudes towards males growing older and females growing older and how the community responds to their age?

Mortenson: I feel there is a difference, a noticeable difference. Men panic inwardly, I think. They don't show the general public that they're concerned about their age because they don't do the things that women do, like get their hair done regularly, have it dyed to cover the gray. I must admit some men do fight off their age that way or try to cover it to lessen the ageism, level the game. Women tend to have worked in the family home all their lives, left the workplace where men have been in the workplace. Their skills stay with them right up until an older age whereas women, all of a sudden, once the children have left home, they say, "Well, what are we going to do now?" And things seem to fall apart if they haven't got their grandchildren close handy that they can offer their expertise in that area, where men are a lot more independent when it comes to keeping up their skills and their social activities outside of the house. Once that happens and their nest is empty, they get caught up in women's groups, art and craft groups and life changes between the husband and the wife because, all of a sudden, she's finding outside interests that she has never had before whereas his life goes on the same—work, eat and sleep. There's a lot of changes that have to be accepted between male and female in partnerships when that age comes around. Retirement is another thing that men tend to find very difficult to accept in some cases and if they haven't prepared themselves for it, they can be depressed at that time—a "big black dog" as Winston Churchill named it.

Smolle: The society that we live in at the moment seems not really to have room for the aged to participate with the rest of the community.

Mortenson: That's right. I mean, if somebody is unfortunate enough to have to need a walking stick at any stage in their life, particularly when they're getting on into the older years or if you have a limp, they say, "Well, where's your walking stick? Well, you need a walking stick." Women tend to accept things like that a lot better than men. Men keep things hidden. They won't discuss it, they won't talk about it and that's where I feel it is a lot harder for a man to accept that age is creeping on because he hasn't got the use of his skills or his limbs or even his mind as he used to have and he battles against that all the time.

Smolle: Do you believe that those concepts of aging are truly valid when it comes to employment for the aged?

Mortenson: No. I don't believe so. I think it's quite invalid because there's a lot of experience goes with a person no matter what they look like. If they were to come into an employment—or to answer a job or seek employment, it should be evaluated on their merits, not on how they look. The other adage is "mutton dressed up as lamb." If you overdressed yourself to apply for a position, it could be looked on that there is a mental imbalance here—instability—because you haven't accepted your own life, how are you ever going to put anything valuable into the position that your going to take because you're battling your own personal problems. So, I believe you've got to take people at face value and look at their experience, not at their physical appearance. And yet, you know, an aged lecturer can have a lot more going for them with regards to control and respect from a class or a group. It just depends, I suppose, on the type of people that you're training or teaching and where they're at in life with regards to how they're going to sit and listen and glean a little bit of the experience from the person, what they're bringing out in them.

Smolle: I noticed when I was going to university, being a mature-aged student, you really felt ostracized by the school leaders at uni just being a mature-aged student.

Mortenson: So you're feeling a bit of ageism.

Smolle: I'm feeling ageism, the feelings of discrimination against the aged, yeah.

Mortenson: It's an attitude that comes out that you can feel that you can't really put your finger on but it's there.

Smolle: It's very, very subtle. It hurts too.

Mortenson: It does. It does because we don't feel any older. I mean, I still think I can do what I did when I was 21 but when I come to do it, of course, I can't. That's when you realize that you're not the same age physically but the mind says, yes, you can do it. The old saying is "the mind's willing but the body's weak."

[laughter]

Smolle: Thank you very, very much for coming along to speak with us today, Carol.

Mortenson: Thank you very much, Frank.

Smolle: It's been fantastic.

Dr. Dave: Frank and Carol, thanks for a great interview. Between the two of you, you really nailed many of the issues surrounding age discrimination of various sorts. Discrimination of any sort hurts and I think Carol Mortenson hits the nail on the head when she says what is needed is tolerance and compassion. In the U.S., the baby boomers represent the population bulge and they're now hitting their sixties. As a generation, they're still young and vigorous and defying some of the stereotypes that have been associated with age. This group will continue to be influential in the voting booth and in the ways they vote with their dollars. As a consequence, we may see somewhat more services and consideration and maybe even tolerance and compassion for our aging population over here. Okay. That's our show for today. I want to remind you that I love hearing from listeners. And we now have a phone in the U. S. where you can leave voice mail and we're still waiting for our first piece of audio feedback. You can be the first. Go ahead and pick up the phone. That number is 206-888-2746. You can also contact me at Shrink@ShrinkRapRadio.com. Our show notes are at www.ShrinkRapRadio.com. You can leave voice mail for Shrinkpod on Skype or Gizmo Project. And, if you feel so moved, please leave a review for Shrink Rap Radio on the iTunes website. Okay, that's our show for today. Please stay tuned. At the end of our outro music, we'll have a piece of Podsafe music selected by Frank.