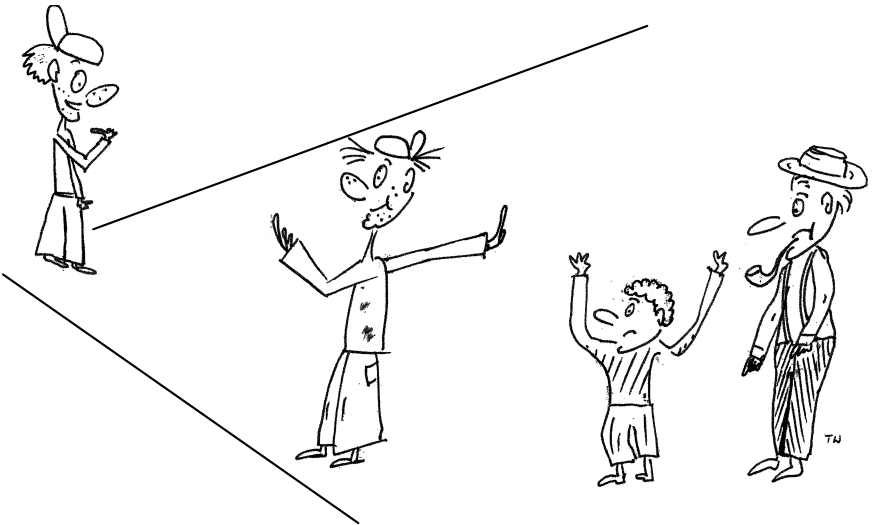


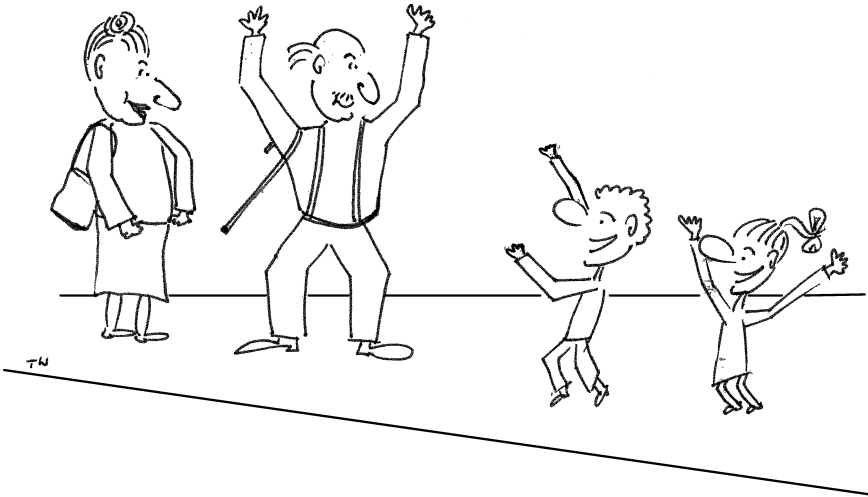
# Chapter One

## What's the Problem?



**Fig. 1.1.** “We choose friends who are roughly as old as we are”.

Throughout our lives, and particularly when we are young, we automatically choose friends who are roughly as old as we are (Fig. 1.1). The reasons are obvious. Youngsters younger than ourselves are likely to be smaller, and will play with mates who do not run any faster than they do, or climb higher than they can, or do not understand the words that we have picked up. Similarly, we are going to avoid grown-ups, who run faster than we can, climb higher than we do, and talk about things we haven't come across or understand (though we would probably be able to hold our own when it comes to discussing soccer or a particular celeb's



**Fig. 1.2.** “because they are part of our childhood”.

hairstyle). The reverse is also true: many a mature irate customer may have flown at a bland receptionist who connected him with a “whippersnapper” in his or her twenties when, in fact, he expected to meet a senior executive.

When, in our early years, we come across people who are “old”, all this becomes much more difficult. We all know someone old when we see one, but how would we describe him or her? It is possible that the first “old” people we come across would be granny and grandpa or, more likely, these days, great-granny and great-grandpa.

But because they are part of our childhood (Fig. 1.2) they do not specially stand out — they are part of our furniture, like mother or father. It is the other old people who are the strangers, the people whose names we don’t know (Fig. 1.3). It is they who are classified as being old. We may note the colour of their hair (if they have any), their slower walk, their faces probably marked by lines, maybe the odd missing tooth, and drooping shoulders. Their voices will be quieter than those of younger people. In addition they may be wearing glasses when reading, whereas in our young years the



**Fig. 1.3.** “The strangers... are classified as being old”.

need of them would never occur to us. Although it may be well hidden, a hearing aid may be nestling in one or the other ear or both. And sometimes the “oldsters” may be ambling along supported by a stick.

All this may be enough for us to look on them as strangers. The upshot is that we form opinions about them to make us feel comfortable, a process known as stereotyping. This word describes a way of thinking in which individuals are grouped together, not infrequently to be mocked. The grouping together serves to simplify our thinking: if we lump different people into one word-bin, we need to think only about the stereotype rather than about the differences which distinguish them.

Looking up the word “stereotype” on the Internet is a revelation: it offers quite a few surprises by what it has to say. A great deal of stereotyping occurs in connection with the elderly, which is as unjustified as when applied to other groups (or when the elderly apply stereotyping to young people). An interesting example was quoted by Sir Malcolm Rifkind, when he reviewed Menzies

Campbell's autobiography in a British Sunday paper — *The Observer* — early in 2008.

In the last few months of his leadership [of the parliamentary LibDem party], this 66-year-old ex-Olympic athlete was portrayed in the press as a doddering geriatric with constant references to Zimmer frames, bus passes and pensions. Such is the cult of youth today that this was seen as fair game and there was little Ming [Menzies] could do about it. It was absurd when judged against the national interest. Churchill and Harold Macmillan were both in their middle sixties when they first became Prime Minister and they didn't do too badly. The US may be about to elect a 71 year old as its next President.

Not as though there were anything new under the Sun. More than 400 years earlier, Shakespeare's Earl of Gloster (who appears in *King Lear*) reads the following letter:

This policy and reverence of age, makes the world bitter to the best of our times; keeps our fortunes from us, till our oldness cannot relish them. I begin to feel an idle and fond bondage in the oppression of aged Tyranny; who sways, not as it hath power, but as if it is suffer'd.

As implied earlier, the object of this slim book is to offer some explanation about how people become elderly, how youngsters in the long run are likely to become like them, how ageing can be delayed, and to show that, by stereotyping those with years of birth earlier than our own, we finish up by stereotyping only ourselves.