

An impressionistic painting of a narrow, snow-covered street in a village. The street is flanked by old, stone buildings with snow-laden roofs. Bare trees with white blossoms line the street. A lone figure in a dark coat walks away in the distance. The overall mood is quiet and wintry.

An Introduction to
Social Gerontology

Aging and the Life Course

Jill Quadagno

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Social Gerontology

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Pepper Institute on Aging and Public Policy,
Florida State University



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AGING AND THE LIFE COURSE: AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL GERONTOLOGY

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In 1992 she received the University Teaching Award from Florida State University and became a Fellow of the Gerontological Society of America. She has also been the recipient of the Distinguished Scholar Award from the Section on Aging of the American Sociological Association and has been awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship and an American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship. In 1994 she served as Senior Policy Advisor on the President's Bipartisan Commission on Entitlement and Tax Reform. She is the author or co-author of ten books on aging and social policy issues, including *The Transformation of Old Age Security*, *Social Bonds in Later Life: Aging and Interdependence*, *States, Labor Markets and the Future of Old Age Policy*, *From*



Nursing Homes to Home Care, Ending a Career in the Auto Industry: 30 and Out, and *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*. In 1996 *The Color of Welfare* received the award for the Outstanding Book on the Subject of Human Rights from the Gustavos Meyers Center for the Study of Human Rights in North America. She served as President of the American Sociological Association during 1997–1998.

Preface

I taught my first course in Social Gerontology in 1978. Would anyone sign up, I wondered? Why would 18-year-old students be interested in aging? I marched into the classroom and laid out my notes that August day, perspiring from nervousness as much as from the heat. I couldn't help but notice the tall, broad-shouldered guy sitting in the front row. His name, I learned when I called the roll, was Kirby Criswell, an Iowa farm boy transplanted to Kansas to play football. Oh, great luck, I thought, echoing the prejudice college professors sometimes hold against football players. To my surprise, Kirby earned a gentlemanly C+ as well as my abiding affection and respect. I hope his life is going well. He not only laid to rest my stereotype of football players but also taught me why my Social Gerontology classes have filled every semester that I have taught them.

Kirby wrote his required paper on grandparenting, a topic that interested him because of his close relationship to his own grandmother. Much as he loved her, he also witnessed the tensions that arose when she moved in with his parents, into his brother's old bedroom. Aging interested Kirby, like it does most students, because it is so close to their own lives. Of course, most college students are not yet worried about growing old themselves. But all young people are members of families, and the dilemmas their parents and grandparents face affect them too. So, it's natural that they are drawn to the subject. Then too, an increasing number of students these days are returning to school after having worked full-time for many years and raised families. These older students have an immediate interest in the topic of aging. The challenge for the instructor is to demonstrate how these personal concerns are linked to larger structural issues, such as how, for example, familial care of the frail elderly is influenced by population aging and

by political decisions about the just distribution of societal resources. It was my interest in demonstrating to students how the subject matter of their lives is shaped by larger societal forces that led me to write this text.

Organization

This text is divided into five parts and seventeen chapters, plus an appendix. The chapters in Part 1 (Defining the Field) provide the student with a firm grounding in core methodological and theoretical issues and document key trends in population aging. Part 2 (Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Aging) reflects the fact that social gerontology is an inherently interdisciplinary field. It provides a detailed look at the contributions of history, biology and psychology to the study of aging.

Part 3 (Changes in Social Roles and Relationships) examines the changes in social roles and relationships that occur as people move through the life course. Although everyone experiences the biological and psychological changes that are inherent in the aging process, the nature of that experience varies enormously from person to person. The chapters in Part 4 (Social Aspects of Individual Aging) explore the social forces that influence the individual aging experience. Part 5 (Aging and Society) examines aspects of aging at the societal level. The three chapters in this section discuss the economic and political aspects of aging. Finally, the appendix introduces students to career opportunities in social gerontology.

Special Features

This book includes all the topics typically covered in a social gerontology text and contains three distinctive chapters. One of these is a separate chapter on the life course (Chapter 8, *Adult Development*

and Life Course Transitions). I include this topic because of the growing emphasis in the field of social gerontology on the relationship between the quality of life in old age and an individual's cumulative experiences, choices, constraints, and opportunities over the life course. Indeed, members of the Section on Aging of the American Sociological Association recently voted to change the section name to Aging and the Life Course.

Another distinctive chapter focuses on the long-term care of the frail elderly (Chapter 13, *Caring for the Frail Elderly*). There is now a substantial body of research on this subject, which examines the burdens and satisfactions family members experience in caring for their aging kin, the problems associated with nursing home care, and the advantages and disadvantages of various alternative living arrangements. This chapter provides a complete portrait of the range of long-term care options and of the policy choices facing an aging society. It also includes the fascinating qualitative research on daily life in nursing homes that students find so interesting.

Each semester that I have taught this course, I have found that students were confused by the vast array of social programs for income support, health care, social services, and long-term care in the United States. Most texts scatter explanations of these programs within various chapters. This book includes a separate chapter on the welfare state that explains the differences in how these programs are funded, who is eligible for benefits, what benefits are provided, and the relationship of the programs to each other (Chapter 4, *Old Age and the Welfare State*). It is intended to serve as a ready reference for students as they read about these programs at appropriate points elsewhere in the text.

In my own teaching, I have found it useful for students to have a chapter that summarizes the key theories on aging, and in this book, I frame these theories in a historical context. Students can thus see how each theory has not only been influenced by advances in scientific knowledge but also by changing world views and historical events.

Students should be aware of the diverse ways people grow old, and each chapter contains some material on aging in other cultures as well as material on race, ethnic, and gender differences in aging. In addition, Chapter 16, *Aging and Inequality*, explains the processes that create gender, racial, and ethnic inequality in old age. Finally, each chapter contains two theme boxes. Aging policy issues are continually front-page news. One box, entitled *An Issue for Public Policy*, examines the policy implications of the chapter's key issues. A second theme box, *In Their Own Words*, describes the various experiences of aging individuals through vivid first-person accounts.

Pedagogy

Each of the five parts of this book is preceded by a brief introduction that sets the stage for the issues to follow. Chapters begin with a lively introduction, highlighting aspects of the chapter that are of particular interest to students. Each chapter also contains an opening outline, key terms (highlighted in boldface where they are introduced and defined), a chapter summary, and a list of key terms. There is a comprehensive glossary at the end of the book.

The instructor's manual that accompanies this book provides exam questions for each chapter. I have used many of these exam questions in my own courses and have revised them based on students' responses. The instructor's manual also includes suggested readings and suggestions for films and videos to help stimulate class discussion.

The past few semesters that I have taught the undergraduate course in *Aging and Society*, I have found an increasing number of students using the World Wide Web to obtain references for their papers. Thus, I have included a Web Directory of sites at the end of the book that will provide a useful starting point for the student who is interested in learning more about the subjects covered in each chapter.

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In the process of writing this text, I have received help from many people. At McGraw-Hill, I am most indebted to senior developmental editor Rhona Robbin, whose detailed critiques of every chapter not only improved the book but provided a source of support and inspiration. Phil Butcher and Jill Gordon provided me with editorial guidance, Kimberly Schau shepherded the book through the production process, and Inge King selected excellent photos to complement the text. For the past three years I have tested the materials in each chapter on the undergraduate students who took my course in Social Gerontology for organization, clarity, and interest. Their comments and ideas have been incorporated into the final version. I am especially indebted to my husband, David, who wrote first drafts of Chapter 6, *Biology of Aging*, and Chapter 10, *Intimacy and Sexuality in Later Life*. He also read every chapter at least once and listened to my many concerns and ideas.

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Defining the Field

Part

I

Social gerontology is the study of the social aspects of aging. Among the topics of interest to social gerontologists are family relationships, health, economics, retirement, widowhood, and care of the frail elderly. The chapters in Part 1 provide a firm grounding in the core issues and key trends in the discipline.

Chapter 1 discusses age discrimination as a historical problem and describes contemporary patterns of ageism. It also describes the range of methodological approaches used in the study of aging.

Chapter 2 introduces the major theories of aging. The chapter illustrates how each theory is influenced by the social, economic, and political context of the particular historical era in which it was formulated.

Chapter 3 introduces the fundamental issues of the demography of aging, the study of the basic population processes of fertility, mortality, and migration. The chapter also describes the aged population in the United States in regard to marital status, income, education, race and ethnicity, and housing and living arrangements.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the basic social programs for the elderly, which in combination are defined as the welfare state. The chapter describes each program in terms of who pays, who receives benefits, and what benefits are provided. The chapter concludes with a discussion of a controversy over whether benefits should be provided on the basis of age or need.