

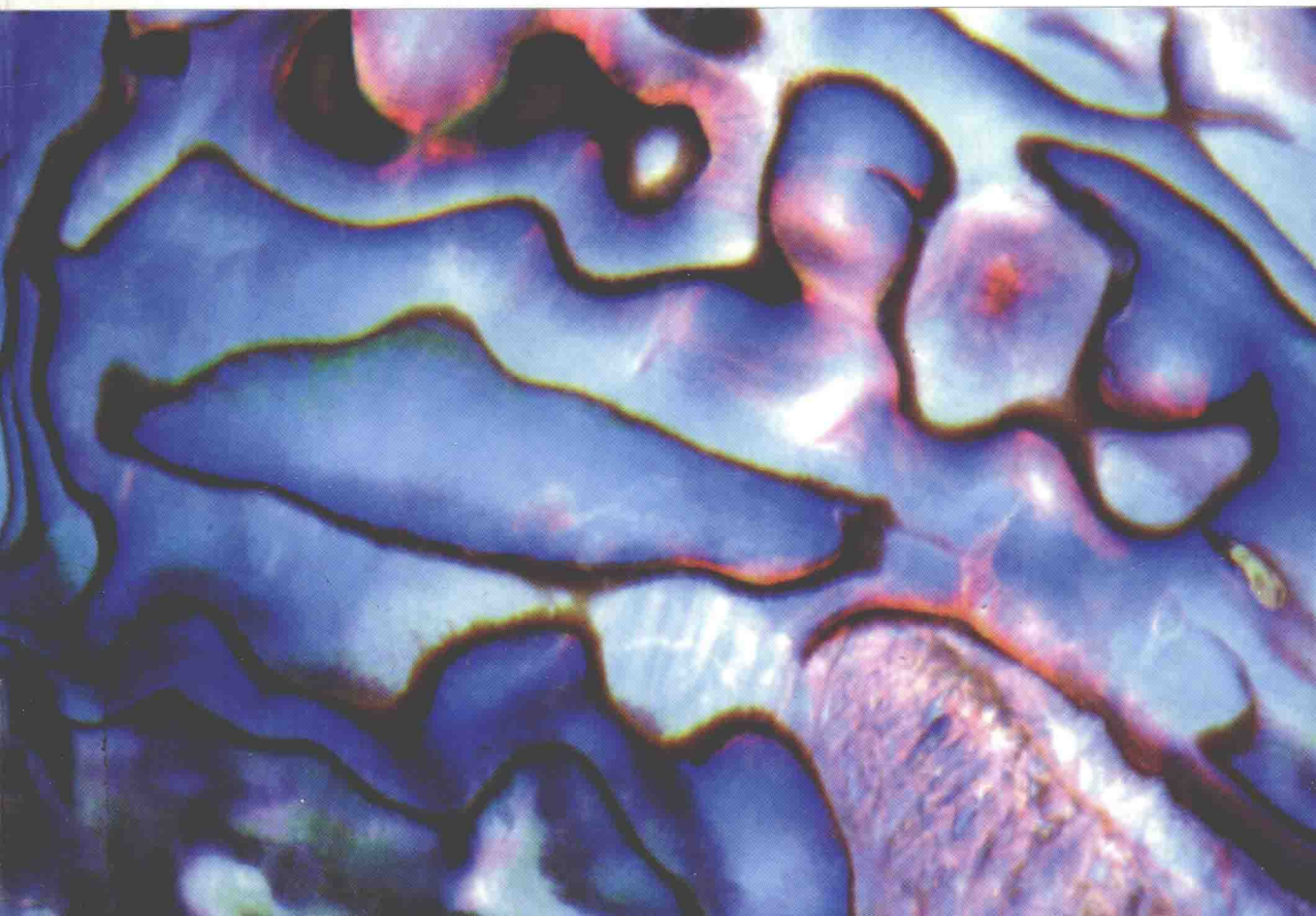
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SUZANNE KUNKEL

AGING

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT



Aging

The Social Context

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Pine Forge Press

Thousand Oaks, California ■ London ■ New Delhi

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For information:



Pine Forge Press
A Sage Publications Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: sales@pfp.sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
M-32 Market
Greater Kailash I
New Delhi 110 048 India

Production Coordinator: Windy Just
Typesetter: Su Wilson
Cover Designer: Graham Metcalfe and Paula Shuhert
Print Buyer: Anna Chin

Printed in the United States of America
97 98 99 00 01 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Morgan, Leslie and Suzanne Kunkel.

Aging: The Social Context / by Leslie Morgan and Suzanne Kunkel. p.cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8039-9087-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Aged — United States. 2. Aging—United States. 3. Gerontology—United States. I.

Morgan, Leslie A. II. Aging: the social context.

HQ1064.U5K85 1996

305.26—dc21

97-38527

CIP



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Leslie Morgan is Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Maryland Baltimore County and Associate Dean in the College of Arts and Sciences. She has authored or co-authored three previous books and has also published over 30 articles and book chapters. Her research has focused on a variety of issues related to the aging of the population and issues confronting older persons, including widowhood, economic well-being, family relationships, and housing alternatives.

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P R E F A C E

Existing texts in social gerontology generally focus on summaries of current and classic research and theories in the field of aging. Most give limited, if any, attention to the uniqueness and value of a social construction/social context approach to the study of age and aging. This book seeks to unfold the depths, richness, and breadth of such a perspective. The text emphasizes the social structural influences on individual decisions, values, behaviors, and experiences as we age. Throughout the book we examine the extent to which an individual's opportunities, choices, and experiences are a product of two forces: the unique characteristics of the individual and her/his position in a social structure. We also analyze the differing circumstances under which the weight of those influences varies. The strategy of acknowledging individualism and contrasting it with a sociological view, then encouraging a "step back" from the individualistic point of view, is designed to enhance students' ability to see the play of social forces in any given issue or individual experience of aging. The process of stepping back makes possible a greater understanding of the extent, nature, and implications of the social meanings and experience of age and aging. Explicit reference to social construction processes are made throughout the text, as we review the "two major topics in the sociology of age: aging over the life course as a social process, and age as a structural feature of changing societies and groups, as both people and roles are differentiated by age" (Riley, Foner, and Waring 1988, p. 243).

In our teaching experience, most students can relate easily to aging through their personal experiences and those of their social networks. Seldom, however, do they easily grasp the implications of the aging of societies or the way that the dynamics of aging work to reshape the major institutions of society in critical ways. It is this larger perspective on aging that we wish to add to our readers' intuitive understanding of aging—and to correct some misunderstandings that they may bring from their personal experience about what it means to grow older. Since human aging does not occur in isolation, it is critical to examine its interactions with the surrounding society, showing how we shape and are shaped by the social contexts in which we grow older.

We use two major vehicles—discipline-based chapters and special "applying theory" inserts within chapters—to present major theoretical and analytical frameworks from social gerontology and the core disciplines which inform the field. Theoretical perspectives throughout the text are connected to age-related

issues and problems such as retirement, health care, and economic inequality. These analyses explicitly look at the varying questions, assumptions, and conclusions that accompany different theoretical viewpoints. We take a broad look at societal institutions (such as the family, the economy, employment and retirement, politics and public policy, and social services and health care) that affect older adults and are affected by the aging of our society. Students will acquire tools for analyzing social issues and societal institutions from different theoretical points of view and different ideological frameworks from reading these chapters.

The emphasis on theoretical perspectives and the underlying theme of social context are two important features of the approach taken in this book. A third guiding focus is on the crosscutting of age with gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. One manifestation of this focus is the consistent discussion of heterogeneity and diversity among the older population. These discussions of diversity in later life allow a reformulation of the basic questions in the field—away from the question “What changes does aging bring about for the typical older person?” to questions such as “What are the variables on which older people differ from one another? What are the patterns of difference on those variables, and why do those differences exist?” Consistent discussion of diversity among older people, and of how it is patterned, helps to further illustrate the fact that the experiences and meanings of age and aging are socially constructed, and are not predictable results of a set of fixed physiological processes.

Teaching with This Book

This book is directed to undergraduate students in social gerontology and sociology of aging courses. Because we have included chapters on physical and psychological aging in Part II, the book will be appropriate for multidisciplinary survey courses in gerontology, especially those taught from a sociological point of view. The inclusion of these chapters broadens the usefulness of the text, and allows a discussion of how the important influences of both psychology and physiology interact with social forces to shape the meanings and experiences of aging. The biology and psychology chapters were written by experts from those disciplines; the third chapter in Part II is designed to place biological and psychological processes of aging in a social context.

We have also included some special pedagogical features that we think will help students to absorb critical theories and concepts. First, we have interspersed among the chapters six “speculative essays.” Each one is on a lively topic that takes the basic ideas from one or more chapters and moves beyond the usual questions about human aging. These essays are written to encourage students to apply ideas, concepts, and theoretical frameworks on aging to substantive issues in creative ways. By moving beyond the traditional aging literature and topics, we hope to challenge students to think about aging (not just old age) as relevant to many aspects of their current and future lives and careers.

A second teaching feature is a series of within-chapter inserts focusing on theories in the chapters of Part III, Social Institutions and Aging. Each of these “Applying Theory” inserts augments theoretical presentations in the discipline-based chapters from Part II, and is applied either to an individual’s own aging or to policy or practice. Thus, theory is presented to students in a far more practical, insightful, and interesting way than is usually presented in other texts. Placement of these theoretical inserts is coordinated with the material being presented in the chapters; for example, modernization theory is discussed in the chapter on demography, exchange theory in the chapter on families, and disengagement theory in the chapter on retirement. The “insert” format gives instructors greater flexibility as to how, when, and how fully to utilize these applications in their teaching.

Third, we have highlighted key terms in each chapter by using bold type when they are introduced and defined. These key terms are listed at the end of each chapter and are also defined in a glossary at the back of the book for review and study purposes.

Our purpose in writing has been to provide a new type of textbook on social gerontology/sociology of aging, one that is neither encyclopedic in its coverage nor overly weighted down with jargon. We hope that we have conveyed the excitement we share about the dynamics of aging within a changing social world. From our point of view, it is and should be much broader than just the study of old age and older adults.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As with any project of this size, a large number of people have made important contributions to its completion. We would first like to acknowledge the support, encouragement, and good humor of Steve Rutter of Pine Forge Press and his outstanding staff. Keeping us on track and on task was sometimes challenging. Second, we must acknowledge our coauthors, who contributed the chapters on Psychological Perspectives on Aging and Physical/Physiological Aging. Michael Marsiske, Melissa M. Franks, and Benjamin T. Mast, all from the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University, did a masterful job of pulling together considerable detail on the current “state of the art” regarding psychology’s approach to the study of aging. Helaine Alessio, from Miami University’s Department of Physical Education, Health, and Sports Studies, took on the difficult task of describing the sometimes challenging research conducted on cellular, biological, and physiological aging. Both of these chapters make a major contribution to this book that is well beyond the skills and knowledge of the primary authors. Robert C. Atchley, from Miami University’s Scripps Gerontology Center, contributed to Chapter 1. We appreciate these authors’ willingness to work within our concept to try to broaden our contributions as social scientists in presenting aging in social context.

We need also to thank our support systems on our individual campuses for their contributions to the completion of this project. Leslie Morgan is especially grateful to the staff at the Maryland Institute for Policy Analysis and Research (Linda Brown, Debbie Meehan, and especially Research Assistant Ronni Haertig); the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, especially Derek Gill (Chair), J. Kevin Eckert, Stephanie Lyon, and numerous graduate students who read chapters or parts of chapters; and the staff of the Dean of Arts and Sciences office, where I worked while concluding the writing.

For Suzanne Kunkel, sincere appreciation is extended to a long list of colleagues and friends at Miami University’s Scripps Gerontology Center. Special thanks go to Cheryl Johnson, Thelma Carmack, and Betty Williamson who provided careful and cheerful office support. Graduate assistant Jodi Israel located and wrote descriptions of many of the web sites. Pam Mayberry provided all kinds of intangible and essential moral support.

We would also like to acknowledge our mentors and colleagues (both proximate and remote) who have shaped our professional lives and perspectives. These

include Robert Atchley, Vern Bengston, William Feinburg, Norris Johnson, David T. Lewis, Matilda White Riley, Neal Ritchey, Pauline Robinson, Mildred Seltzer, and Judith Treas, among others we have inadvertently overlooked.

A set of insightful reviewers provided us with constructive feedback at several stages during the development of this project:

Merrill Silverstein, *University of Southern California*

Lynne Hodgson, *Quinnipiac College*

Toni Calasanti, *Virginia Polytechnical Institute*

Arlen Carey, *University of Central Florida*

Timothy Owens, *Indiana University—Purdue University, Indianapolis*

Michael Baker, *Arizona State University*

Linda Breytspraak, *University of Missouri—Kansas City*

Tonya Parrott, *Quinnipiac College*

Elaine Weeks, *University of Georgia*

Gretchen Stiers, *West Virginia University*

Nancy Buffenbarger, *Central Michigan University*

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the support and affirmation provided by our respective spouses and families during our work on this project. As our partners and companions in aging, they have been unstintingly supportive and understanding of the effort required to focus on and complete a major task such as this book.



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