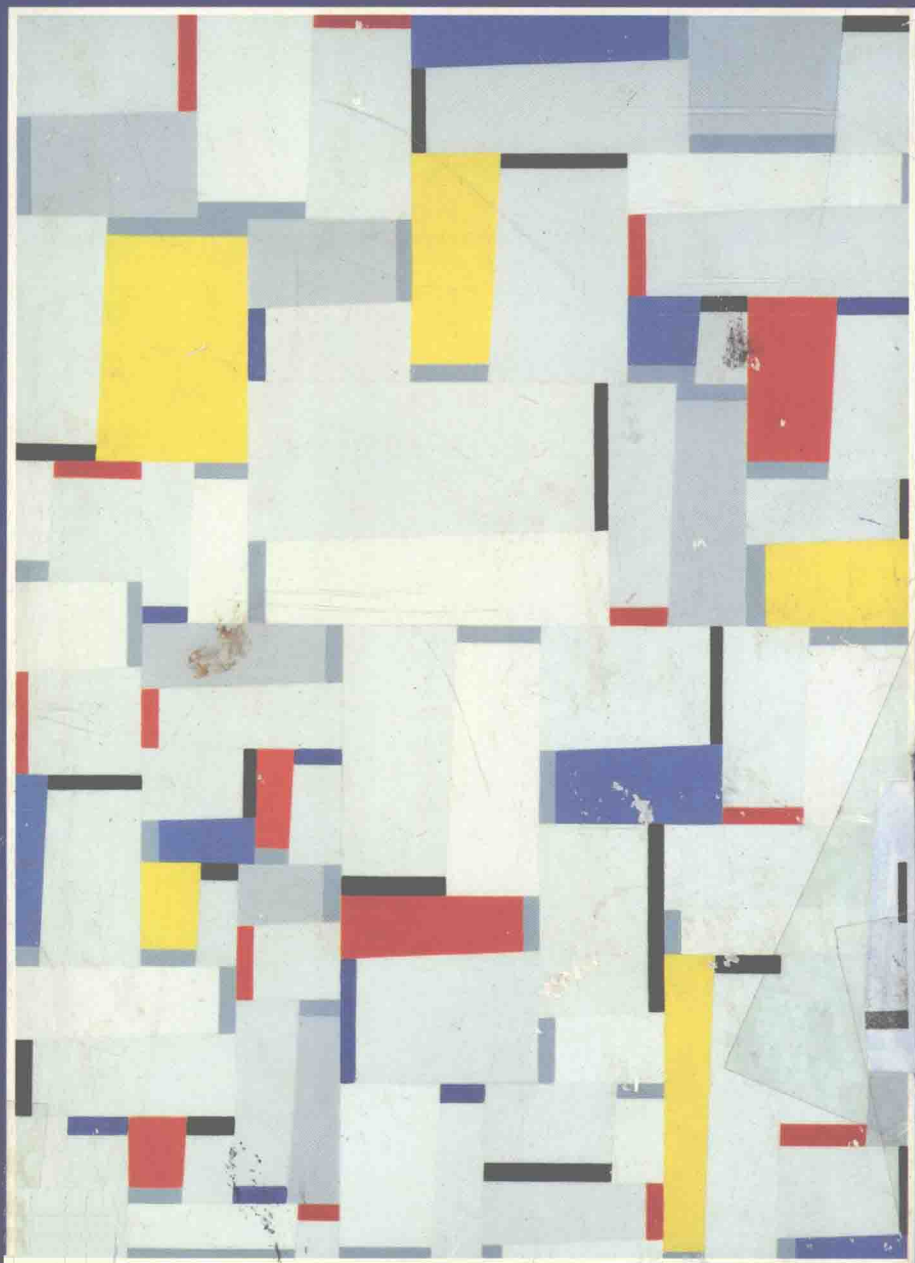


JAMES A. THORSON

AGING

IN A CHANGING

SOCIETY



# **Aging in a Changing Society**

**JAMES A. THORSON**

University of Nebraska at Omaha



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**T**he demographic revolution of the twentieth century is this: for the first time in human history most people born now live to see old age. Infant mortality and diseases that formerly carried off young people now affect only a minority of the population, and this is true in most of the parts of the world, not just in Western countries. Consequently, a population with a significant number of older members is a new thing in the history of the world. At the beginning of this century in the United States and Canada fewer than one person in twenty was an older person; now it is more like one in seven or eight. This demographic revolution is world-wide: in less than 25 years China will have the same percentage of older people that the United States has now.

As more people survive into later life, there is a corresponding increase among those who are very old. We are starting to see parent care as an important issue among retirees: there are many people in their 60s who provide care for one or more parents in their 80s or 90s.

Social changes related to this demographic revolution have emerged as important issues on the national agenda. Generational equity, for example, is an emergent political theme concerned with a supposed inequality of benefits received by the elderly at the expense of children and young adults. Services to help keep people independent and out of institutional care are now a national priority. Financing medical care continues to be in the headlines. Early retirement and corporate down-sizing at the expense of older workers is a vital concern in the world of business. At the basic science level, the possibility of extension of life itself raises important practical and ethical issues.

Thus the field of gerontology, the study of aging, has emerged in recent years as area of inquiry of increasing importance. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Gerontological Society of America, the association for scholars and researchers in the field of aging. For many years, gerontology was such a small field that virtually all important publications relating to aging could be included in a running bibliography published in *The Journal of Gerontology*. This effort, first begun in April, 1950, was abandoned 30 years later; the job had become overwhelming (Shock, 1980).

Similarly, the study of gerontology in higher education has mushroomed. A generation ago there were only a handful of academic gerontology programs at universities in the United States and Canada. A recent survey now numbers gerontology programs at colleges and universities at 493, with over a thousand campuses offering some type of credit instruction in aging-related courses (Peterson, Wendt & Douglass, 1994).

So, gerontology as a field of study has started to reach a certain level of maturity. At the campus where I teach, students are now taking a course or two in gerontology because they recognize it as an important area of inquiry. Gerontology is no longer a just sub-specialty for sociology or psychology students; gerontology coursework is now taken among general education electives by people majoring in all sorts of departments. Outside of our own majors, the largest group taking at least one course in gerontology on our campus comes from the College of Business. Out of approximately 650 student registrants each semester, about 300 are taking the introductory course. For most of them, this will be their first and only exposure to study in the field of aging. This is not a unique situation on just our campus—it is the trend nationally.

This represents a dramatic shift in gerontology instruction at colleges and universities. Academic units in gerontology were at one time focused mainly on providing specialized instruction only for a comparatively few students who were planning to go to work with the elderly. This mission continues, but the change we are seeing in recent years is that gerontology is increasingly seen as a legitimate area of study for the nonspecialist. The majority of our students in Introduction to Gerontology in fact do not go on to specialize or major in the field; they take the course as a part of their liberal education, just as they take coursework in English, math, history, and the sciences.

Given this situation—not all gerontology students come with a ready social science background, and not all introductory gerontology students will go on to major in the field—a unique problem has developed. One wants the introductory course in the field to serve as a foundation and prepare those who specialize in it for further study; and, one also wants a course that is comprehensive enough to expose those who will only be taking one course in gerontology

to the important issues in the field. That is the challenge I realized when I began work on this book. When I was first approached by the people at Wadsworth, the focus identified to me was the need for a basic text that was first and foremost *readable*. It had to be written with a clarity and style that would capture the attention of undergraduates at the freshman or sophomore level. The publisher already had Robert Atchley's fine gerontology text, going into its Seventh Edition (1994); mainly it has been used at the graduate level or at the advanced undergraduate level. This book was to be for the Introduction to Gerontology course for entry-level undergraduates. Thus it had to be in nontechnical language while still being an intellectually honest overview of the field. Further, barriers to its use were to be minimized: it had to be both comprehensive but comparatively brief; it would be in paperback to keep its cost as low as possible; it had to be written in an approachable and understandable style. In short, the book had to have some pizzazz.

Hopefully, I've achieved these goals. In a way I've not seen in many other texts, this book is self-revelatory: the first boxed-off commentary is a memory of my own grandparents. I've put a lot of my own observations and experiences in this book; the reader of it will get to know me in a certain way. I've been teaching gerontology at the university level for 25 years, and this book includes many of the personal illustrations I've found to be useful in communicating with my own students. I hope the writing style is more engaging than that found in many textbooks. I've also included a *lot* of my own research, so much that I might be rightly be criticized for it. *Mea culpa*; it's stuff I'm most familiar with.

In addition to the goals set out for me by the people at Wadsworth, I had a few of my own. First and foremost, the writing of a text that was to provide a comprehensive foundation in the field had to be well-documented. The reader will note that this book has over 650 references, which is about twice what one would expect to find in comparably-sized book. In order that the documentation not be a barrier to the reader, though, the references have been placed at the back of the text. They're there if one wants to track down a particular source.

Another goal was that this book had to be consistent with a solid theoretical background in the field of gerontology, yet it had to have practical value as well. I've attempted to describe theory in the disciplines of sociology, psychology, biology, economics, and political science as it applies to gerontology in terms that are understandable to the lay reader. Especially in the boxed-off sections, I've made a serious attempt to give the reader practical implications of research findings in the field.

And I've tried to make this text consistent with the curriculum goals set out in the *Core Principles and Outcomes* document issued by the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education

(Wendt, Peterson & Douglass, 1993). Also, in the Instructor's Manual, I point out how this text is consistent with material developed by the Annenberg/CPB video project, *Growing Old in a New Age*.

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He and his wife, Judy, live in Omaha. They have two adult sons.

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