

Barry D. McPherson

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# Aging as a Social Process



# **Aging as a Social Process**

*An Introduction to  
Individual and Population Aging*

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BUTTERWORTHS  
Toronto

**Aging as a Social Process**

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Printed and bound in Canada  
543 898

**Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data**

McPherson, Barry D.  
Aging as a Social Process

Includes index.  
ISBN 0-409-84830-1

1. Gerontology. 2. Aging. 3. Aged. I. Title.  
HQ1061.M36 305.2'6 C82-094792-X

**The Butterworth Group of Companies**

*Canada*

Butterworth & Co. (Canada) Ltd., Toronto and Vancouver

*United Kingdom*

Butterworth & Co. (Publishers) Ltd., London

*Australia*

Butterworth Pty. Ltd., Sydney

*New Zealand*

Butterworth of New Zealand Ltd., Wellington

*South Africa*

Butterworth & Co. (South Africa) Ltd., Durban

*United States*

Butterworth (Publishers) Inc., Boston  
Butterworth (Legal Publishers) Inc., Seattle  
Mason Publishing Company, St. Paul

## Foreword

For most of the years of its history, a history well described in this book, the quality of research and theory in social gerontology has been strained. Paradoxically, as if driven by the external demographic forces of population aging, the field has nonetheless expanded rapidly as an area of inquiry and, especially in North America, as an area of academic study. During the past five years a number of textbooks have sought to codify existing knowledge and to present it in a form suitable for teaching purposes; but until very recently the material available for codification has been highly unreliable, and many of the textbooks have been uncritical and far too skimpy in their coverage.

Methodologically, social gerontology has lagged behind general sociology in analytical and statistical sophistication. This may reflect the isolating influences of multidisciplinary programs, which have played an important part in gerontological research and training and which have tended to pull social scientists from their 'home' departments to work in multidisciplinary settings. Or it may reflect the compromises that result from attempts to work with other disciplines — compromises that seem to blend the worst aspects of each participating discipline.

Theoretically, the field of social gerontology has been dominated by one school of thought, structural functionalism; and the major debates, such as those centering on activity and disengagement theory in the social psychology of aging, or on modernization and its effects on the social status of the aged in the broader, more structural sociology of aging, have all been cast within the framework of society as an equilibrium system of linked status positions and role behavior, with social change viewed as incremental and social process seen as inherently self-regulating. Throughout the period of the rapid growth of social gerontology, its theory became increasingly archaic when contrasted with the critiques of structural functionalism and the growth of theoretical diversity in sociology.

The field, fortunately, has now caught up and has attained methodological rigor and theoretical sophistication comparable to other areas of sociology. The latest knowledge can be presented in a more technical way, and the received wisdom from the earlier period of social gerontology must now be critically evaluated against high standards. For these reasons, this book is called for, and for these reasons, it is a success.

Barry McPherson has brought together the most comprehensive review of the state of our knowledge in social gerontology that I have seen. But he has gone beyond that in calling the student's attention to the methodological problems of so much of this knowledge. The various chapters cover a wide ground. While concentrating on the North American situation, the book is, nonetheless, comparative across societies and in time. Students and instructors will find the explicit discussion of methodological concerns in social gerontology to be valuable and easy to digest. The discussion of the theory is prefaced by a helpful review of general theoretical perspectives. The eclectic approach to theory may displease some scholars who have strong preferences for one theoretical approach, but it is admirably suited to the student who must be

exposed to the broad range of theories while simultaneously being encouraged to address each critically.

The book is, then, as comprehensive and contemporary as it can be, and it is reliable and constructively critical in its codification of knowledge. This also implies that it is not an easy book, and it will find its greatest appeal with students who are more challenged than entertained by social gerontology. There are other, lesser textbooks in the area which will 'entertain' more but which cover the field in a skimpy and often misleading fashion. From my own perspective, and that of many colleagues in the field, I think the book will also be much used for basic reference purposes, simply because of its comprehensiveness. I trust that the book will be valuable to students in serious courses in social gerontology, and serious students will appreciate its virtues. This is an important book and a welcome addition to the published resources in the field.

*Victor W. Marshall*  
*University of Toronto*  
February 1983

## Preface

Because of the increasing proportion of adults who are in the middle and later stages of the life cycle, and because of social, economic, and political changes that have had an impact on the aging process, a number of occupations now consider the special needs of adults when planning and delivering services. Among those who need to acquire an understanding of the social processes of aging and the associated problems are health care personnel, psychiatrists, occupational therapists, immigration personnel, psychologists, architects, dietitians, recreation and media workers, social workers and agency administrators, kinesiologists, religious leaders, lawyers, economists, politicians, journalists, educators, policy planners, urban and regional planners, and engineers.

Before social policies and programs for the elderly are initiated, the existence of a potential problem must first be verified, why and how the problem arose must be understood, and solutions must be derived. Guesswork or hunches are not sufficient; rather, valid information on which to base decisions and plan programs must be available. The need to provide the professions listed above with valid information has led to an increasing concern with the problems of aging and the aged, and a concomitant interest in describing and explaining the process and product of aging from a social science perspective.

At first, studies were mainly descriptive. They sought to draw attention to a specific situation (such as the near-poverty status of many elderly citizens) or to provide a policy or a solution for some perceived social problem affecting the elderly. However, this approach often led to an exaggeration of the problem or to the creation and perpetuation of myths. Thus, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, sociologists, psychologists, economists, demographers, political scientists, anthropologists, and social gerontologists initiated research to explain, not just describe, phenomena associated with both the aging process and the status of being old. As a result, more reliable and valid information became available to assist in developing policies and in implementing social services. Moreover, this research refuted some myths about the elderly, thereby reducing to some degree prejudiced perceptions of the elderly.

This book is a synthesis of social science research concerning individual and population aging. The structure and content is based on an undergraduate course on the sociology and social psychology of aging that I have taught since 1971. Throughout, the emphasis is on identifying, describing, and explaining patterns, processes, and problems concerning individual and population aging, rather than on describing programs or providing prescriptions to assist the elderly. This approach permits students in a variety of programs to acquire basic knowledge essential to careers in fields related to gerontology, and to develop a better understanding of the aging process as it will influence them and their parents in the future.

Throughout the book, a variety of theoretical and methodological orientations are used to describe and explain the aging process. Although desirable, it is difficult to write a text from a single theoretical perspective since the literature on gerontology is highly eclectic and is based on a number of theoretical perspectives from various disciplines. The quality of the research also varies

greatly. Therefore, the reader is exposed to a variety of research methods and theoretical frameworks that represent the state of the art in social gerontology.

This book does not contain the standard (and usually token) chapter on the biology of aging. Rather, recognizing that biological factors do influence social behavior, the reader is introduced to the effect of degenerative changes in the physical and sensory systems as these changes relate to social processes and interpersonal interaction. Similarly, there are no sections or chapters on death and dying, social policy, psychopathology, or social services for the elderly, since many of these topics are the focal points of separate courses and texts. Moreover, much of the material on social policy and social services is unique to a particular social system (city, state, or nation) and becomes dated very quickly. It is left to the instructor to introduce relevant local and regional information on legislation, social policies, and social services for the elderly.

In organizing the book, an attempt was made to avoid the social-problems orientation found in many other textbooks. In fact, the issue of whether aging constitutes a social problem for more than a minority of adults is questionable. Therefore, the material in this book is based on the premise that aging is a social process involving interaction between the personal system (the individual), various social systems that influence the behavior of the aging individual, and changing social, economic, and physical environments. Thus, although individual experiences vary, there are common patterns to the aging process. Individuals born at about the same time (an age cohort) are influenced by similar historical or social events (economic depressions, world wars, or changes in cultural value systems). Moreover, individuals with similar ascribed (race, sex) or achieved (educational level, social class, occupation) attributes also tend to exhibit common patterns of behavior throughout the life cycle. In short, how persons age as individuals is greatly influenced by the social structure and by social processes within particular social systems.

The objectives of this text are threefold:

1. To enable the student to understand the process of aging from a sociological and social-psychological perspective. Where possible, alternative explanations for specific aspects of the aging process are emphasized more than descriptions of the process or specific problems.
2. To provide the student with basic concepts, theories, and methodologies that can be used to understand social phenomena related to processes of individual and population aging.
3. To sensitize the student to the fact that aging is not just a biological process, but an equally complex social process. In fact, the reader may well be left with the impression that relatively little is known about aging as a social process. Herein lies a challenge to the curious, innovative student who may wish to pursue a career in the field of social gerontology.

The book is structured in four parts. Part One provides background information about aging as a social phenomenon, sensitizes the reader to some critical parameters that influence the aging process and the status of being old, describes aging and the status of being old in a number of cultural contexts, and introduces theory and methods that may be used to understand the aging process from a social science perspective.

Part Two presents a micro-level analysis of the aging process. The focus is on aging individuals who must adapt to changes in their physical and psychological systems. In Part Three, a macro-level analysis focuses on the social structure, related social processes, and the physical environment. All of these



factors interact to influence the process of aging. Part Four is concerned with aging and social participation patterns, particularly within the family and the labor force, and at leisure.

## To the Student

Each chapter begins with a general overview and concludes with a summary of major research findings. Within each chapter a large number of references are cited in the text. These serve a twofold purpose. First, they indicate that there is some theoretical or research support for the statement. Second, they serve as a teaching aid to help you find and use primary sources in the basic literature. These references will be particularly useful if you are required to write a term paper on a specific topic, or if you wish to acquire additional information about a particular area.

Attempts were made to include material from most of the social sciences, although sociology (the study of normative patterns of behavior in various social systems) and social psychology (the study of the interaction of individual differences and the social milieu) are the major disciplines represented. The material includes an analysis of the process of aging, as well as an analysis of the end product of that process — the status of being old in a particular society and in a particular physical environment. Throughout, information on the aging process is presented from both a micro (individual) and a macro (societal) perspective.

There has been a virtual information explosion in this field in recent years, and most of the material presented here is based on articles published within the past six years. Where possible, information is based on theoretical and research evidence from a number of societies, although much of the work in social gerontology has been done in North America.

As in any dynamic and rapidly growing discipline, information quickly becomes dated. Therefore, the reader who wishes to acquire the most recent information should regularly consult general reference sources, such as *Current Contents*, *Sociological Abstracts*, and *Psychological Abstracts*; and specific gerontology journals such as *Gerontological Abstracts*, *Aging*, *Black Aging*, *Journal of Gerontology*, *The Gerontologist*, *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, *Research on Aging*, *Perspectives on Aging*, *Experimental Aging Research*, *Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, *Educational Gerontology*, *Ageing and Society*, *Aging and Work*, *The Canadian Journal on Aging*, and *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*. In addition, there are a number of non-English-language journals such as *Acta Gerontologica Japonica* (Japan), *Acta Gerontologica* (Italy), *Gerontologie* (France), and *Zeitschrift fur Gerontologie* (Federal Republic of Germany).

The paucity of research in this field relative to other disciplines should lead you to question carefully and discuss with others the research findings presented in any single study. You will only acquire a true understanding of the aging process when you become a critical reader, able to decide whether conclusions are logical and valid. One published article on a particular subject does not represent the 'absolute' truth. This is especially true in the field of social gerontology since race, sex, ethnicity, education, place and type of residence, health, income, occupation, and personality can have a profound impact on the process and status of aging. Many studies in social gerontology reflect only one 'slice' of a particular social system (usually focusing on white, middle-class males) and other social, personal, or structural factors are seldom considered in



the analysis of the results. In short, be skeptical, thorough, and knowledgeable in what you accept as fact. Finally, the test of how well a text serves as a learning resource is whether students find the material useful, interesting, clearly written, and comprehensive. Please provide feedback concerning this text to your instructor and to the author.

## **To the Instructor**

The chronological order of the chapters in this book represents only one conceptual approach to introducing the student to knowledge in the field. For upper-level students who have had a course in research methods, a chronological approach from chapter 1 to chapter 11 is probably best. For lower-level students just being introduced to social gerontology and perhaps to the social sciences, one of the following sequences might be more appropriate: chapters 1, 3, 5 to 11, 2, and 4; or chapters 1, 5 to 11, and 2 to 4. For courses with a sociological orientation, the sequence might be chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9 to 11, 5, and 6; courses with a social psychological orientation could use a sequence consisting of chapters 1, 5, 6, 3, 4, 7 to 11, and 2.

Regardless of the sequence, local and regional demographic facts should be introduced where possible and information should be provided in class discussions about current public- and private-sector policies on health care, social and recreational services, retirement policies, public and private pension plans, and subsidized housing. These have not been included in the text because policies in these areas rapidly become dated (for example, monthly government pension rates), and because they are often unique to specific regions or communities. It is also important for the student to become familiar with and to be a critical reader of the basic literature in a given field. Textbooks seldom provide opportunities for this experience. Therefore, you may wish to supplement the information in each chapter by having students read and discuss one or two recent articles on individual or population aging from gerontology or social science journals. The list of references at the end of each chapter and the most recent issues of the journals mentioned above can provide a starting point for this educational experience.

*Barry D. McPherson*  
*Waterloo, Ontario, Canada*  
February, 1983

# Acknowledgements

Behind every author there are a number of friends, colleagues, and relatives who provide invaluable support and assistance. So that those who provided direct or indirect assistance in the writing of this book will not remain anonymous, I wish to express my sincere thanks: to Gerald S. Kenyon and John W. Loy, friends and co-authors of earlier works, for encouragement and indirect conceptual input — may you 'age' with greater understanding; to Victor Marshall, for encouragement and feedback at all stages, for a thorough review of the completed manuscript, and for writing a thoughtful foreword; to Stan Eitzen and Dan Kubat for critical and constructive reviews of specific chapters; to Brenda Harvey, Betty Maes, Mark Tyndall, and Lorna Wenger who, when given the opportunity to 'turn the tables' and critique a professor's work, provided valuable feedback from the perspective of undergraduate students; to Barbara Brown, Jacqueline Frank, and Yasuo Yamaguchi for bibliographic assistance; to Kathy Johnson for her interest, efficiency, and professional editorial input; to Rick and Beth Beach of Waterloo Computer Typography for their patience, advice, and efficient typesetting; and to my worthy opponents at the Kitchener-Waterloo Racquet Club for keeping me mentally and physically fit after long days of writing (beware; now that I have put down the pen I will have more time for the racquet).

Deserving a special paragraph of recognition is Ms. Karri Deckert. Although classified as a secretary by the University of Waterloo, she has competently fulfilled a variety of other roles, including that of administrative assistant, slave driver, and cheerleader. She deciphered and translated my aging penmanship into an error-free manuscript; she frequently challenged me to write faster so that she would not be idle; she efficiently performed many administrative responsibilities on my behalf so that I could schedule blocks of time to read and write; and she remained dedicated and loyal to the project despite internal changes that placed extreme pressure on her time. I will never forget the look on her face when I informed her that she had entered over two million characters into the computer while typing this manuscript. Karri, a million thanks, times two.

Finally, to Liz, Jennifer, and David — 'the book' is finally finished. Thank you for your patience, time, and interest.

Grateful acknowledgement is also made to the following for permission to reprint or adapt excerpts from copyrighted material:

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Brooks/Cole Publishing Company for *Role Transitions in Later Life* by L. George © 1980 Wadsworth, Inc.

The Gerontological Society of America for 'Facts on Aging: A Short Quiz' by E. Palmore (in *The Gerontologist* 17(4/1977) © 1977 Gerontological Society of America; and for 'Facts on Aging Quiz: Part Two' by E. Palmore (in *The Gerontologist* 21(4/1981) © 1981 Gerontological Society of America.

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Social Security Administration, Office of Research and Statistics, for *Income of the Population 55 and Older, 1976* © 1979 U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

Travel, Tourism, and Recreation Section, Education, Science and Culture Division, Statistics Canada, for *Culture Statistics, Recreational Activities, 1976* © 1976 Statistics Canada.

United Nations Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs for 'Population Projection' © 1981 CSDHA.

Van Nostrand Reinhold Company for *Handbook of the Psychology of Aging*, edited by James E. Birren and K. Warner Schaie © 1977 Van Nostrand Reinhold Company.

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## **PART ONE**

# **An Introduction to Individual and Population Aging**

Although aging has traditionally been considered a biological process, increasing research attention is being directed to the impact of sociocultural, historical, and environmental factors on the processes of individual and population aging. This increased interest has led to the development of a large body of research within the field of social gerontology.

Part I comprises four chapters that will equip the student to read, understand, and critique pertinent literature on individual or population aging. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of aging as a social phenomenon, outlines historical and contemporary developments in the field of social gerontology, alerts the student to some conceptual and methodological concerns, and introduces environmental and sociocultural variables essential to the study of individual or population aging.

Chapter 2 describes the process and product of aging in selected societies throughout history, analyzes the changing status of the elderly in preindustrial and industrial societies, especially following the onset of modernization, and examines, primarily within the North American context, the process and product of aging within indigenous, racial, ethnic, rural, and religious subcultures.

Chapter 3 provides the reader with information about demographic processes and indicators that describe the size, composition, and distribution of the population by age, and focuses on the social and environmental characteristics of older cohorts within a society, from both a historical and a contemporary perspective.

Chapter 4 introduces the goals and methods of scientific inquiry, as well as some specific methodological concerns that must be considered when studying the aging process. Most of the chapter discusses the major conceptual perspectives and social theories that have been used to stimulate, guide, and explain aging phenomena from a social science perspective. The section on social science perspectives and theories introduces the two general levels of analysis used throughout the book: the micro (or personal) level that pertains to individual aging, and the macro (or societal) level that pertains to cohort or population aging. These are not separate entities; there is constant interaction throughout adulthood between individual and population aging, and between the individual and the social structure.





# 1

## Aging as a Social Phenomenon

### Introduction

During the past twenty to thirty years, birthrates have declined and life expectancy has increased in most modern industrial societies. As a result, approximately 8 percent of the population in North America now is made up of people over 65. This proportion is expected to increase to about 12 percent by the year 2000, and to between 15 and 17 percent between 2010 and 2020 when the 'baby-boom' age cohort passes 65. This phenomenon, where an increasing percentage of the population is made up of older people, is known as 'population aging'.

In contrast, 'individual aging' refers to the structural, sensory, motor, behavioral, and cognitive changes in a given organism over time, especially with respect to how these factors influence life chances and lifestyle at various stages of the life cycle. An individual's reactions to these biological, physiological, and psychological changes and his or her behavior at different periods in the life cycle are closely related to the individual's past and present social context. The social processes and structure of a particular society can greatly influence the aging process for an individual or for a specific age cohort. In short, individual and population aging are social processes that may differ within various contexts.

Much of the early research in social gerontology sought to describe and improve the situation of the elderly (from a social problems perspective); more recently, the emphasis has been on explaining the process of aging during the middle and later years of the life cycle. This book reflects the latter focus.

This chapter provides an overview of the social process of aging, briefly outlines the development of the field of social gerontology, and alerts the reader to some of the methodological concerns and social and environmental factors that influence the aging process. Throughout, the universal biological and psychological processes, although somewhat independent of the social milieu, are seen to interact with social processes. These social processes are unique to a given culture or subculture in that they are influenced by social change and historical events. Moreover, they may vary owing to social and environmental factors such as sex, social class, income, education, race, ethnic background, nationality, and place of residence (urban or rural).

It will be apparent throughout this book that the study of aging and the aged is complex and involves many levels of analysis. These include physical, sensory, and motor changes within the individual; the impact of population aging on the individual and on society; the impact of social change on the status of the elderly; the patterns of aging unique to age cohorts or generations; the interaction among different age cohorts within a society; the culture-based