

The Social Psychology of Aging

**Shirlynn Spacapan
Stuart Oskamp**

Editors



**The Claremont Symposium on
Applied Social Psychology**

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The Social Psychology of Aging



The Claremont Symposium on Applied Social Psychology

This series of volumes highlights important new developments on the leading edge of applied social psychology. Each volume concentrates on one area where social psychological knowledge is being applied to the resolution of social problems. Within that area, a distinguished group of authorities present chapters summarizing recent theoretical views and empirical findings, including the results of their own research and applied activities. An introductory chapter integrates this material, pointing out common themes and varied areas of practical applications. Thus each volume brings together trenchant new social psychological ideas, research results, and fruitful applications bearing on an area of current social interest. The volumes will be of value not only to practitioners and researchers, but also to students and lay people interested in this vital and expanding area of psychology.

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Preface

The chapters in this volume are based on presentations given at the fifth Claremont Symposium on Applied Social Psychology on February 20, 1988. These symposia, held annually at the Claremont Graduate School, bring outstanding psychologists from various parts of North America to join in discussion and analysis of important topics and issues in the field of applied social psychology. We appreciate the generous financial support for this series of symposia from each of the Claremont Colleges (Claremont Graduate School, Claremont McKenna College, Harvey Mudd College, Pitzer College, Pomona College, and Scripps College). We are also indebted to the John Randolph and Dora Haynes Foundation of Southern California, for a founding grant for the conference as well as for a 1988 Faculty Fellowship, which enabled the first editor to work on this volume. This year, additional thanks are due to Karen Rook, of the Program in Social Ecology at the University of California at Irvine, and Jon Pynoos, of the Andrus Gerontology Center at the University of Southern California, for their help in serving as discussants of the presentations at the conference. We are also grateful to Fay Hicks, Craig Huhta, Lilian Klepa, Shawn Okuda, and Michael W. Scott for their help with proofreading and indexing, and to Mike Nichol and Catherine Cameron for their support.

In preparing the conference presentations for publication, we suggested that the contributors expand and elaborate on points that they did not have time to cover orally and incorporate material addressing some of the points raised by the audience discussion. We also encouraged the contributors to maintain some of the informal style that made the conference talks so interesting by using a personalized, narrative tone and including personal examples or anecdotal information to highlight their research findings and theoretical material. To reflect the symposium panel discussions led by Rook and Pynoos, and to provide a fuller integration of the several papers, we have written an introductory chapter summarizing some of the major themes in the social psychology of aging. Finally, we solicited

an additional, concluding chapter on aging and public policy to underscore the importance to current political policy of the “leading edge” research and thought of prior chapters.

We believe this volume will be interesting and valuable to researchers and practitioners in both social psychology and gerontology, as well as to professors, students, and lay people who want to know more about this exciting and increasingly important field.

Shirlynn Spacapan
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Claremont, CA

1

Introduction to the Social Psychology of Aging

SHIRLYNN SPACAPAN
STUART OSKAMP

There is perhaps no other developmental stage of life so full of contradictions and myths as that of old age. Common stereotypes of the elderly, for example, hold that they are in poor health, unhappy, lonely, and fearful of crime (see Butler, 1975). Less than one-fourth of the oldsters polled, however, reported experiencing these problems (National Council on the Aging, 1975), and many surveys have found that feelings of satisfaction are higher among the elderly than among young adults (Herzog, Rogers, & Woodworth, 1982). It is interesting that many older respondents did report that *other* elderly people (e.g., “the old biddy next door” or “the old fogey down the street”) experience these problems, suggesting that our older population believes in, and perpetuates, some of the ageist myths. One sad result of such social devaluation, according to Aiken (1982), is the development of negative self-concepts and earlier symptoms of biological aging.

How can some of the negative symptoms of aging be eased? A rapidly developing body of knowledge suggests that there are a number of cognitive and social factors that may ameliorate the negative

aspects of aging. Some of these factors—predictability, perceived control, prior expectations—are ones that environmental psychologists have studied in relation to lessening the negative impact of stressors like noise, crowding, and pollution. Other researchers have found that these same factors are effective in improving the health of elderly patients in institutional settings (Langer & Rodin, 1976). In addition, environmental psychologists have suggested ways in which the physical environment of the elderly can be altered to enhance functioning (see Simon, 1987). As Lawton, Altman, and Wohlwill (1984) have pointed out, these and other similar research areas—such as issues of age-segregated housing (Rosow, 1967)—provide information that is helpful to public policymakers.

All of the topics mentioned above—stereotypes, feelings of life satisfaction, perceived control, the physical environment, and research input to public policy—are among the dozen recurrent themes in this book. In this first chapter, after a brief outline of the volume, we will summarize these issues or themes common in the study of the social psychology of aging. Then the chapter concludes with a preview of each of the following chapters of the volume.

Outline of the Volume

The following seven chapters are framed, on either end, by chapters that present a set of challenges to researchers in the field. In the first of these, Chapter 2, Robert Hansson provides a broad overview of the challenges to basic social psychological assumptions inherent in studying old age and aging. In the closing chapter, Chapter 8, Thomas Puglisi and Larry Rickards outline roles psychologists can play and public policy changes that are needed to meet the challenges presented by our aging society.

In between these two sets of challenges, the chapters are presented in an order that roughly corresponds to some of the tasks of later life: caring for elderly parents, the retirement transition, post-retirement issues, creating one's environment and maintaining positive affect, and the adaptive role of possessions in late adulthood. In Chapter 3, Melvin Lerner and his colleagues point out that, in middle age to early old age, parents' needs for their children's care

and resources may result in a form of social dilemma for the siblings; and they present a theoretical framework and recent data that help in understanding the development of the dilemma. Next, Tora Bikson and Jacqueline Goodchilds report some results from a field experiment in which retirement planning and problems were analyzed in long-term task groups made up of individuals on both sides of "the great retirement divide"—individuals who were close to retirement and those who had retired within the preceding four years. In the fifth chapter, Philip Dreyer highlights the factors that may contribute to life satisfaction in later life and reports some results of two recent studies of retirees. Powell Lawton elaborates on some of the consequences of person-environment transactions, focusing on affect among aging individuals, in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 presents Laura Kamptner's discussion of the instrumental and symbolic functions of possessions and her findings on the possessions that were particularly valued by a sample of oldsters.

Themes in a Social Psychological Approach to Aging

Interdisciplinary Approach

At the outset, it is important to note that the study of aging is an interdisciplinary undertaking. This is reflected in the content of journals in the field and in the composition of major professional associations of researchers in aging. To take one example, the Gerontological Society of America brings together biological, behavioral, and social science researchers, as well as those whose backgrounds are in clinical medicine and social planning or practice. An interdisciplinary approach to the study of aging is not only appropriate but necessary, given the complex interactions between health, social competence, and cognitive functioning in the elderly. In Butler's (1975) classic book, several poignant illustrations—such as how a health problem may lead to impaired cognitive functioning, which in turn may drive away sources of social support—serve to remind us of the importance of examining these interactions. This idea is reinforced by the contributors to this volume, and constitutes a major theme throughout the chapters. In the following chapter, Hansson reviews some recent

findings on the interrelationships between psychological, social, and health issues for the elderly, and suggests that social psychologists should assume a greater role in the interdisciplinary effort to understand these interactions. In discussing roles that psychologists can take in affecting public policy for the aged, Puglisi and Rickards note that such activist roles require an ability to understand and apply multidisciplinary research findings.

In addition to suggesting more activities that cross disciplinary boundaries, several authors in this volume emphasize strengthening the interface between various subdisciplines within psychology in order to make headway in understanding the process of aging. Puglisi and Rickards focus on the potential of the two subfields of health psychology and the psychology of women, urging researchers in aging to begin to incorporate the insights of these areas. Hansson describes how cognitive, personality, industrial/organizational, and other areas of psychology have gained from the added perspective provided by studying older populations, and he encourages social psychologists to do the same. He stresses that not only will they learn something about aging, but they may find their favorite social psychological assumptions and theories challenged, revised, and (in the end) enriched. One good example of this is Lawton's contribution to this volume, where he explicitly states that the general study of person-environment transactions may be advanced through exploring the motivation of elderly individuals in interacting with their environment.

It seems, then, that if a "social psychology of aging" is to flourish and make important contributions to gerontology, it will need to be more than just a "social" psychology. The interdisciplinary approach that has marked the study of aging is evident in much of the exciting new social psychological work on aging, and we note developmental and clinical psychologists as well as social psychologists as contributors to this volume.

Life Satisfaction

While "life satisfaction" is the topic of Chapter 5, the related issues of "successful" aging and the psychological well-being of the elderly are at the core of several of the chapters. This topic has also been a

central concern in the field of gerontology, where "life satisfaction" is one of the oldest areas of research. As Dreyer's chapter relates, measures of life satisfaction vary, but generally include having a zest for life, resolution and fortitude, congruence between desired and achieved goals, a positive self-concept, and positive affect (see Neugarten, Havighurst, & Tobin, 1968). Theories of successful aging have ranged from prescribing *disengagement* from active social roles in order to attain higher levels of life satisfaction in old age (Cumming & Henry, 1961) to Neugarten's proposal that it is *continuity* of life-style across the life span that leads to happiness in later life (Neugarten et al., 1968). Recent work, including research by Dreyer and his colleagues (this volume), suggests that continuing one's preretirement life-style leads to more satisfaction with life after retirement.

While Lawton has developed a popular measure of life satisfaction (see Lawton, 1975), in Chapter 6 he turns his attention from global measures to the affective component of life satisfaction. Affect is also a topic addressed in Kamptner's chapter, where she delineates the function that personal possessions may play as moderators of their owner's affect. Possessions are not only sources of comfort and pleasure, she reports, but are also tied to one's self-identity and self-concept. This component of positive self-concept or self-esteem is one of the main issues that Bikson and Goodchilds investigated in their study of the retirement transition, reported in Chapter 4. In addition to highlighting this classic component of life satisfaction, their work points out that a variety of other factors—such as time spent with spouse—also contribute to one's happiness. Thus Bikson and Goodchilds, as well as Kamptner and other contributors, remind us that interpersonal ties are related to life satisfaction.

Interpersonal Processes

Interpersonal processes are the heart of social psychology. As psychologists turn their attention to the social psychology of aging, then, it is not surprising to find that interpersonal processes are discussed at every turn. This is reflected in each chapter that follows, to varying degrees. For instance, Lerner and his colleagues devote a chapter to

examining the processes that produce a social dilemma for children of dependent elderly parents, while Puglisi and Rickards mention the need for research on the interactions between elderly patients, professional caregivers, and families of patients.

The importance of interpersonal processes is evident in the theoretical bases of many of the following chapters. Sometimes it is implicit, as in Lawton's application of the opponent-process model to affectivity in aging, while at other times interpersonal processes are an explicit part of key hypotheses, as in Dreyer's summary of theoretical views of healthy adjustment, which involve an individual's social role activity. Even when interpersonal aspects are not the theoretical focal point of a chapter, they are included with other key processes in aging. For example, in discussing the symbolic functions of possessions, Kamptner notes that possessions may represent their owner's relationships with others in addition to being symbols of the self or sources of comfort.

The crucial nature of interpersonal processes is evident also throughout the research findings reported in this volume. For instance, Bikson and Goodchilds's chapter reports that, contrary to expectations, retirees have relatively full social lives in comparison with their slightly younger, still-employed counterparts. As other examples, Kamptner reports that her elderly population overwhelmingly attributed interpersonal-familial meanings to their most valued possessions, and Dreyer found that continuity in socializing with one's family was one of the few factors that distinguished his group of retirees who were most happily and successfully adjusting to the changes that come with aging. Hansson's chapter stresses interpersonal processes in its coverage of a variety of traditional social psychological topics like social support, social comparison, and stereotyping—which he urges us to consider in the context of their development over the life span.

Stereotyping

Of all the various interpersonal processes discussed throughout this volume, stereotyping of the elderly may be the one most deserving of further attention. Stereotypes of the elderly abound and include the idea that they are "unteachable, disabled, poor, sexless, power-

less" (Dreyer, this volume). Hansson reminds us that, unlike other groups that may be the objects of our stereotyped beliefs, we are each destined for membership in the group of "elderly." As mentioned earlier, even after joining this group, people continue to express ageist beliefs. Psychologists themselves have allowed ageism to creep into their research and theories, and the disengagement hypothesis of successful aging is one example (Rook, 1988): that is, the idea that happiness in old age accompanies withdrawal from active social lives and problem solving is based on the assumption that inactivity is synonymous with old age and that it is best to "give in and go along." Recently, various writers have pointed out that, as society is gradually leaving behind the disengagement-inactivity stereotype of the elderly, it may not be moving toward a less ageist stance, but instead may be substituting a new stereotype of the (hyper)active, athletic senior (see, for example, Anaya, 1988).

Both the causes and consequences of stereotypes have been studied by social psychologists for years. While none of the chapters in this volume focuses primarily on stereotyping, Lerner and his colleagues examine a form of biased perception, and the information in their chapter sheds light on the causes of some types of stereotyping and prejudice. The consequences of stereotyping are numerous and take varied forms: Kamptner writes that such social devaluation may damage one's self-esteem and interfere with one's competence and efficacy, while Lawton indicates that ageism results in a tendency to disempower the aged and rob them of access to a wide range of experiences that could enhance the quality of their lives. Even more chilling is the information from Puglisi and Rickards that important public policy on aging is often guided by stereotypical views of the elderly.

Heterogeneity

Stereotyping the aged, of course, involves the tendency to regard them and treat them as if they were one homogeneous group. On the contrary, in this volume the heterogeneity of the elderly population is a theme that cuts across all the chapters. Hansson sets the stage for this in Chapter 2 by listing some of the areas in which within-group variability increases with age: health, intellectual abilities,

interpersonal skills, and so on. To a great extent, this increasing heterogeneity is related to the complex interactions between aspects of individuals' health and their psychological functioning, and the complexity of this relationship reinforces the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to aging.

The theme of heterogeneity is apparent at several different levels in the contributions that follow. At the most micro level, it is reflected in specific findings of research projects, such as Bikson and Goodchilds's finding that their sample of retirees was more heterogeneous in their allocation of time across activities than were the still-employed subjects. At the demographic level, some authors note that aging has different implications for different subgroups of the population. Dreyer, for instance, reviews literature indicating that retirement entails different meanings and activities for different occupational groups and different racial or ethnic minority groups. Hansson points out that older Black and White groups differ in the frequency of contact with their children as well as in the amount and type of assistance they receive from their offspring. Women, as a subgroup, are especially likely to experience aging differently than men, and the particular case of aging women constitutes another theme in this volume.

Women

To discuss older women and their particular experiences as a separate theme in aging research can be considered misleading, for many writers have remarked that the psychology of aging *is* a psychology of women, and the problems of the very old are essentially women's problems (see, for example, Dreyer or Hansson, this volume; Rodeheaver & Datan, 1988). This is due, in large part, to the simple demographic facts that women, on average, tend to outlive men substantially and to marry men older than they are. One result of these facts is that studies of negative events in old age, such as bereavement or loss of social support, turn out to be mostly studies of women. Another result of the longer life expectancy for women is seen in recent surveys indicating that women constitute almost 80% of the elderly who live alone (Kasper, 1988). Further descriptions of the life of older women may be found in Chapters 2, 5, and 8, and