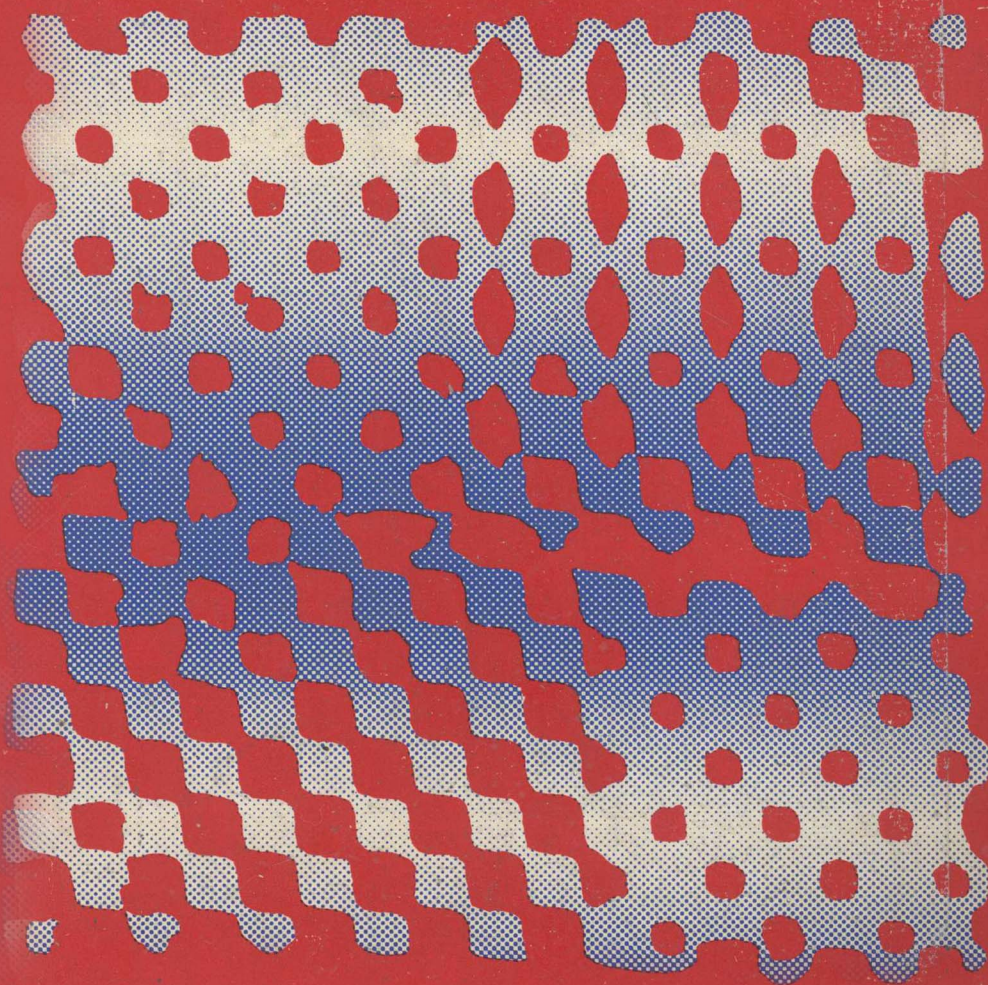


Jon Hendricks and  
C. Davis Hendricks

# Dimensions of Aging

Readings



# **DIMENSIONS OF AGING: Readings**

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# Preface

It is no exaggeration to say the scope of gerontology looms impossibly broad. In the process of researching the existing literature for our *Aging in Mass Society: Myths and Realities*, we came to appreciate the seemingly unending parade of materials confronting new and seasoned readers. While the critical reception granted our earlier work has been encouraging, we realize that even a well-honed text can never do justice to all that gerontologists have to offer. We are also quite aware of the spate of recent anthologies intended to provide an instant overview of the field. Having carefully considered a number of these we experience some trepidation over the prospect of adding still another. Yet the very frustration which arose from our attempt to integrate, to some degree, the diverse perspectives of gerontologists working in a variety of academic disciplines and applied programs serves as justification for the present volume.

This work is designed to be didactic in two senses. On the one hand, readers from traditional academic backgrounds coming to the study of aging and life-span development will find the going less than comfortable unless they have previous exposure to the holistic nature of human existence. Acknowledging that biological scientists have as much to learn from their social science brethren as the latter from the former is fairly easy; implementing the exchange is somewhat more problematic. With so much to learn in one's own area, what hope is there of mastering a truly interdisciplinary perspective? Gerontology is rapidly maturing, we hope, with the attendant cognizance of the myriad factors, and their interplay, which are the aging process. The

ground has been broken for interdisciplinary endeavors, now our work must proceed with building an initial and substantial foundation.

In a second sense our efforts and those of our colleagues depend on the titillation, capture and challenge of curious, questing minds. Your comments are not only welcome, but are essential to the dynamics of our future development in gerontology.

Readers will note the interdisciplinary focus, indeed the very organization of this work, parallels our text. We have not altered the view we expressed there for reasons which should be readily apparent. We remain convinced of the utility and the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach. The guiding light of our late night labors has been the creation of a workable combination of biological, psychological and sociological perspectives to be used in addressing the whys and hows of the aging process. Often the information provided by diverse research is not only complex, but appears contradictory. Nonetheless, it is an exciting task to make sense of what is itself a multifaceted, by no means singular, process.

Should Aging in Mass Society and this anthology be used together, their complementarity is intentional. This work was designed to offer a number of original readings which inform and shape the text's discussion. Should you explore one before the other, it is our hope that you will seek out the second to fill in the lean spaces of the first. In either case, we feel these selections stand as landmark contributions by their authors.

The more mature one becomes, the more nearly impossible it is to acknowledge all those who have shared in one's development. For their intellectual relentlessness, we owe our colleagues a debt of gratitude which can never be repaid. In particular, Alex Simirenko and Klaus Riegel have directly influenced or served as examples in ways only we four realize. First and foremost, however, has been their willingness to revise their own hard-won views when new, fertile perspectives become available. Isolating potential materials for inclusion is a never ending task, for which Cathy McAllister served as an able assistant. The person on whom we relied for the entirety of their project and to whom we also owe an incalculable debt is Carolyn Anderson. She has exhibited enviable strength and enthusiasm during the periods of intense work and frustration which come with every task. Paul O'Connell and the staff at Winthrop, especially Sharon Bryan, have been helpful, encouraging and reassuringly competent. We are most appreciative to all of you who have contributed to the gerontologists we are becoming.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Concerning Old Age: Interdisciplinary Dimensions

Old? What is old? Everything ages; the only alternative to old age is a “premature” death. Everyone reading these words will age in a number of highly predictable ways. From the most minute molecular process to the way we handle information, look at the world, and interact with one another, process and change are part of what it is to be alive. Interpretations of and attitudes toward the changes taking place vary widely. To respond to the question, “What is old?” gerontologists draw on studies and insights from the biological sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. None of these alone is sufficient to describe or understand the process of aging. While human aging has many parallels with the way other biological organisms age, only humans can analyze the process of their own aging. Accordingly, gerontology—the study of the entire aging process—is a multifaceted specialty drawing from traditional bodies of literature while building its own.

While it is usually the case that students of gerontology specialize in one particular area, it is also necessary for them to acquire some rudimentary grasp of the perspectives taken by others who also look at the aging process. The readings selected are intended to provide exactly this kind of overview. They have been included either as the most recent literature available or, in the case of some older articles, because they are seminal contributions to the conceptual development of gerontology. While textbooks can provide a summary view of the study of aging, these primary sources allow the reader to hear directly from those espousing one stance or another, and to participate in drawing whatever conclusions appear warranted.

Another point needs to be made clear at the outset. Oftentimes it is assumed, albeit mistakenly, that gerontology focuses exclusively on the elderly and has little to offer those who consider themselves a long way from old age. Nothing could be further from the truth; most gerontologists agree, not only would they be stinting their responsibility if they took such a position, but they would also be reducing their chances to affect responses to the process of aging. Gerontologists have so far concentrated their attention on the middle and later years but there is no reason they must continue to do so; as our knowledge expands, so will our focus. Among other things it is important to bear in mind that very little in life happens automatically, people do not simply find themselves biologically beyond the peak of their capabilities or socially well adjusted whenever their lives change in one direction or another. The problems encountered are not necessarily unique to the aging process; nevertheless, the possibility for addressing the plight of many offers justification for the investigations that are reported in this text. The opportunity for intervention enhances our appreciation of what it is to become old.

As a topic of interest gerontology is as old as our history; as a systematic inquiry it is considerably younger. In the thirteenth century Roger Bacon initiated the first lines of investigation into the physical components of the aging process but the ground he tilled remained fallow until the seventeenth century, and it was well into the nineteenth century before any appreciable body of information began to accumulate. Only early in the present century did the process of aging become an object of intensive research. Social gerontology, concentrating as it does on societal and cultural components of aging, is a young discipline. The psychologist G. Stanley Hall published his *Senescence, the Last Half of Life*, in 1922, but it was not until the end of World War II that some progress was first made toward an understanding of the social side of the aging process. What was a handful of publications in the 1940s is today a landslide. Journal entries on aging now number well over five thousand annually, with no peak in sight. Of course, not all of this literature furnishes generalizeable leads promoting better understanding, but the field is maturing and becoming more self-critical, paving the way for more insightful studies and research.

## STEREOTYPES AND ATTITUDES

Every culture provides a set of prescribed behaviors related to aging. These norms cover not only what rights and responsibilities accrue to people of a given age, but indicate, within certain broad limits, what are considered inappropriate modes of behaving. Throughout the early and middle years of life most people are presented with opportunities to try on various social roles in advance of the time these are fully

assumed. The various phases of courtship, for example, from the occasional date to going steady, becoming engaged, to getting married, are a progression which permits the individuals involved to see what each next step means in terms of interpersonal relations. If at any time the relationship begins to feel too confining, it may be terminated before the next step is taken. Old age represents an exception to this model, since little in life is preparatory to being defined as an "older person." Treating old age as a distinct phase of life, set off from all that has gone before, does little to smooth the transition into the later years. Old age is a subject blurred by stereotypes and anxieties perhaps more so than any other stage of life. In this country, for example, it is not at all uncommon to hear the elderly described in largely negative terms. Either they sit and ruminate over a bygone youth receding into the mist, or they are old fogies turned to pasture, no longer making any contribution to society. Bigotry of this type is sadly misinformed, yet it is so pervasive that it has been given a label—ageism—like many other common prejudices (Butler and Lewis, 1977). Assumptions that all old people are destined for an institution, are beset by serious health problems, are "senile," or are necessarily conservative are all examples of ageism. In point of fact, not one of these notions is true. Only about five percent of those over sixty-five years of age are in institutions; chronic health conditions do not limit their activities across the board; there is no such mental illness as senility; the elderly are not necessarily any more conservative than anyone else. According to any number of criteria, the elderly are quite robust, exhibiting positive coping mechanisms that younger people would do well to emulate.

While there is no denying that many people do experience very real problems as they age, far too often the most serious difficulties they have to contend with are the confining and unsympathetic attitudes towards older people. Asking old people what life is like for them and asking younger people what they expect life to be like for an older person is a revealing experience. In a study commissioned by the National Council on the Aging, carried out by the Harris polling organization, younger respondents consistently felt the problems encountered by the old were far worse than did the elderly themselves. Furthermore, for every older person who finds life to be more of a hardship than he or she expected, there are at least three who claim it is not nearly as onerous as they had anticipated (Harris, 1975).

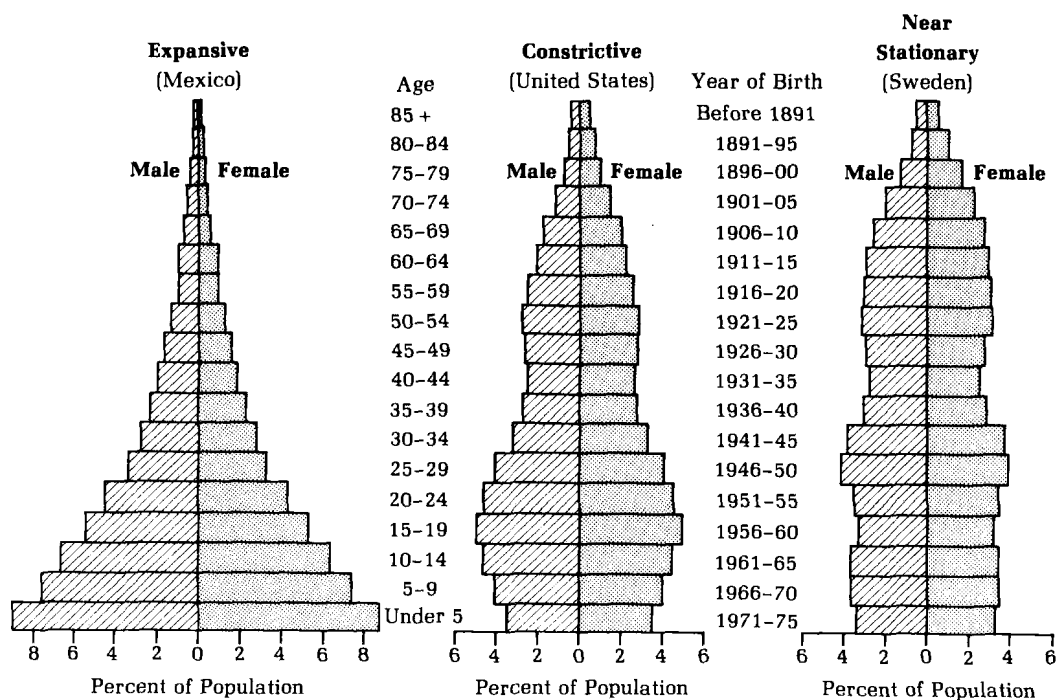
## THE OLDER POPULATION

As the ranks of those over sixty-five swell, and as the "graying of America" continues, many of the myths of aging are sure to be dispelled. Today the elderly, defined as those sixty-five and over, account for over 10 percent of the population in this country. In 1900 they

made up four percent of the population, and in 1790, when the first census was taken, they accounted for barely two percent of all Americans. With a net increase in their ranks of 1400–1600 every day, by the year 2000 there will be thirty-one million Americans over 65, eight million more than there are today; by the year 2030 there will be more than fifty-two million. Rapid changes, no matter how you count. One reason for the dramatic increase in percentage is the declining birth rate combined with lowered mortality rates for the early years of life. Both of these trends are concomitants of increasing industrialization and the medical advances which go along with modernization. As the age distribution of a country changes, other fundamental realignments are necessary; a country with a very low median age will have needs different from those of a country where the average age is appreciably higher. An example of three countries with differing age distributions is shown in Figure 1. In less industrialized but rapidly developing Mexico, marked by high birth rates but a declining death rate, the bulk of the population is in the lower age categories. The median age there is approximately seventeen years. Prior to its recent economic development Mexico, like all other non-industrialized countries, had a much

**Figure 1**

Age-sex composition for three types of population structures.



Source: *Population Handbook*, A. Haupt and T. Kane (Washington, D.C.: Population Reference Bureau, Inc. 1978).

higher death rate than it does now. A very small percentage of the population survived into their sixties or beyond, shown by the relatively small size of the top of the population pyramid.

Sweden, also shown in Figure 1, has long been an industrial nation. In the years following its modernization, death rates began to decline, followed shortly thereafter by a falling birth rate, then the population as a whole began to age. The rate of economic growth slowed eventually, while the population structure became relatively stabilized. Today the median age is over thirty-five years, and a sizable contingent of its populace is in the sixth decade or beyond. With zero population growth long a reality, Sweden's population distribution is not likely to exhibit much more aging in the foreseeable future.

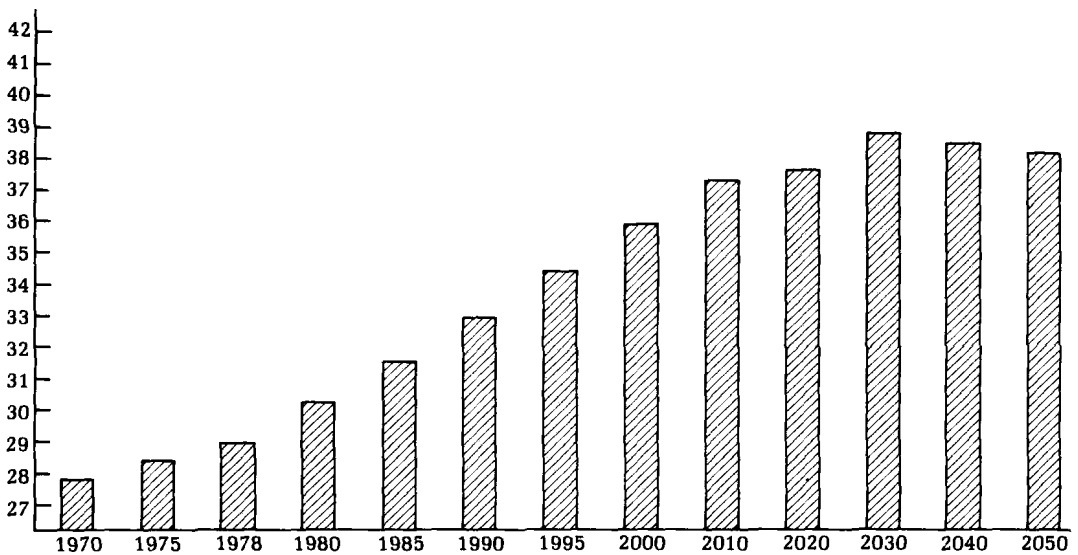
The United States, with an age distribution falling between those of the other two countries, has characteristically had a relatively young population. If the patterns established since the turn of the century continue, as most demographers assume they will, the trend will be toward a pyramid looking more or less like Sweden's. The only exception to what otherwise has been a consistent aging of the United States was produced by the post-war baby boom which temporarily shifted the birth rate higher. The median age in 1900 was approximately twenty-four years, with four percent of the people over sixty-five. The current median age is twenty-nine years, and as has already been noted, over one-tenth of all people in the United States are beyond their sixty-fifth birthday. Looking ahead to the next turn of the century, the median age will be between thirty-two and thirty-seven years, with the proportion over sixty-five years at least 11.5, and perhaps as high as 13 percent. In the first three or four decades of the twentieth century these figures are likely to climb even higher. Median age in the year 2030 will be between thirty-one and forty-two years, with the number and percentage of those over age sixty-five at least double what it is now (United States Census, 1977).

Since the Brotman selection in Section 6 explains how various projections are derived, it should be sufficient now to note that the inexactness of the figures cited is due to as yet unknown birth rates. If we merely replace ourselves, the population will become stabilized and our population pyramid will be nearly vertical. If population growth is more than zero, the picture will reflect a concentration in the younger ages, and if fewer births occur the median age will rise.

What is the point in presenting what are admittedly general estimates, figures which cannot be checked for nearly half a century? Why should we even bother with what may be the case fifty years down the road? Phrasing the answer in terms of another question might be the most expedient response. What will be the country's priorities, and how will these be established if as a nation we are significantly older than we are presently? During the 1950s a major investment was made in building public schools and training teachers

**Figure 2**

Median age of the population 1970–2050.



**Source:** *Current Population Reports*, Bureau of the Census, "Projections of the Population of the United States: 1977–2050" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977). (Converted from numerical data, estimates based on zero population growth.)

to staff them. Today schools are being closed nearly as rapidly as they were once built, teachers are looking for new careers, companies which experienced tremendous economic growth catering to the boom babies are searching out new markets, and zero population growth has become a popular credo among young adults. At the same time, the costs of providing for an expanding number of elderly are increasing daily, both for themselves and for workers who contribute to Social Security knowing full well their monies are being redistributed to pay current benefits as quickly as they are withheld from their incomes.

Profiles of the population, such as that presented here, are an essential ingredient of planned social change. In order to insure a maximally satisfying life for young and old, it is necessary to have some historical and analytic grasp of the dynamics of aging. Past, present, and future changes affecting people over the course of their lives are all interconnected, demanding of the gerontologist a kind of wide angle vision which is not easy to develop. The readings selected for inclusion here, and the organization of the material itself, are aimed at providing a holistic perspective on the process, one which cuts across usual academic boundaries. Somewhat greater emphasis is placed on the social and psychological dimensions than on other aspects, but for gerontologists working in these areas, as for the biologist who moves outside the laboratory, there is no excuse for not having at

least a rudimentary acquaintance with the overall character of the life process. We cannot afford, nor can we justify, an artificially delimited conceptualization of what it means to age.

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# SECTION 1

## In the Country of the Old: Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspectives

It has become relatively common these days to set the backdrop for a discussion of aging by painting a historical picture of the elderly, whether in one's own society or in those of other times and other places. Although tacit recognition has been given historical analyses of the aged and aging, how important are they, really, to our attempts to understand the processes of growing old? Not surprisingly, we find a range of responses, from an almost complete denial of the relevance of historical examination to those who would advocate the impossibility of understanding today without being thoroughly grounded in knowledge of yesterday.

It is not unusual to look to the past to clarify the present. We need reassurance about the present, we are curious about the uniqueness of our own positions, and we often hope that the past will reveal some information which may help us address immediate problems. One of the most important and interesting goals of the analysis of any aspect of life is the discovery of effective modes of intervention. Because we are so centrally involved in such a search, in this instance an appreciation of the role of aging in our lives, historical analyses can never be totally objective. The investigator is intimately involved not only with the subject matter of the investigation, but also with the methods employed. The way in which we phrase a question necessarily shapes