

Communication and Aging

**Jon F. Nussbaum
Teresa Thompson
James D. Robinson**

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JON F. NUSSBAUM

University of Oklahoma

TERESA THOMPSON

University of Dayton

JAMES D. ROBINSON

University of Dayton



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*This book is dedicated to our parents:
Richard and Mary Nussbaum,
Jean and Jerry Thompson,
and
Karl and Jo Ann Robinson.*

Preface

One major change that is occurring during the final decades of the twentieth century is the ever increasing life span of the population. For whatever reasons—advances in medicine, technology, evolution, and so forth—we are all living longer. As a result, policymakers, scholars, and students are becoming increasingly aware of the serious implications of this aging society and its possible effects on each one of us. This book examines the aging process and the ability of individuals to adapt successfully to aging from a communicative perspective.

We view aging not only as a physiological or psychological process but also as a social process. Communication is the vehicle through which aging as a social process occurs. We bring an expertise in relational communication to the ever increasing knowledge base of gerontology. This is not to suggest that every chapter or topic in this book is consistent with the relational perspective, nor are we suggesting that other, nonrelational considerations are of no consequence. Far from it. Hearing loss, for example, is not a relational concept, but such a loss directly impacts our relationships with others and the life quality of the elderly.

The authors of this book also emphasize a life-span approach toward understanding the social interaction that occurs during old age. One cannot truly explain or understand the communicative behavior of the elderly without first realizing that the social behavior of the elderly is well couched within a long history of previous relationships. We believe that the communicative relationships of the elderly are of vital importance and that those relationships should be maintained throughout life.

The book is organized into thirteen chapters. Each chapter is written so that the reader is presented with an exhaustive review of the pertinent and recent literature from the social sciences. When the literature is empirically based, the communicative ramifications are then discussed.

Chapter 1 is intended to be an introduction to the study of communication and aging with special emphasis given to those theories of successful aging that stress

the importance of social interaction. Each of the remaining chapters concentrates on one major area within the communicative lives of the aged.

Chapter 2 concentrates on attitudes and ageism. The stereotyping of the aged and the ageist beliefs of this society are discussed. Those ageist beliefs are known to affect the social lives of the elderly, and the chapter outlines those effects. In addition, the possible communicative effects of these ageist attitudes are discussed.

Chapter 3 highlights the theoretical and practical implications of relational communication. Within the chapter, the importance for the elderly of reminiscence, sexual activity, communicative competence, interactional control, and loneliness is discussed. The purpose of the chapter is to identify significant concepts within the relational perspective and discuss issues that significantly influence the relationships of the elderly.

Chapter 4 discusses the mass media and aging. The chapter describes media usage patterns of the elderly, the reasons the elderly use the media, and how the elderly are portrayed in the various media. In addition, contemporary theories of media influence are also discussed. The relationships between media use and the interpersonal relationships of the elderly are discussed. The use of mediated characters as parasocial "friends" is also explored.

Chapter 5 discusses work, retirement, and leisure. Both our leisure world and our work world are inherently social. With the advent of retirement and the changing norms of leisure for the elderly, the social interactions within the context of leisure and work must also change. This chapter discusses the communicative implications of the leisure and work environments of the elderly and the transition to a social world of retirement.

Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 concentrate upon the relationships between the aging individual and family and friends. The unique communicative functions of marriage, the adult child-elderly parent relationship, the sibling relationship, the grandparent-grandchild relationship, and the friend relationship are discussed in these chapters.

Chapters 10, 11, and 12 concentrate upon the communicative ramifications of health and death for the aged. These chapters cover such important areas as the changing cognitive abilities of the elderly, physician-patient interaction, relocation, coping with death, and communication with the dying. Again, these three chapters have great relational significance and represent three contexts where communication and communicative relationships are particularly important and difficult.

Chapter 13 of the book is entitled "Successful Aging." Within this chapter, the authors highlight the many social correlates of successful adaptation to the aging process that have been demonstrated empirically. This research clearly demonstrates the importance that communicative relationships have throughout the life span. Those relationships are of particular importance to the elderly.

In understanding the process of aging, we must understand the social relationships of the elderly and how they develop across the life span. For a host of social, cultural, economic, psychological, and physiological reasons, the elderly are forced to adapt to what can be a cruel and unforgiving environment. By understanding how the elderly adapt to significant changes in their environment, one can gain great insight into the process of communication. On a more pragmatic level, an improved understanding of the communicative behavior of the elderly can result in significant improvements in life satisfaction and life quality of the elderly.

Our purpose for writing this text was to help people understand how important their communicative relationships are and how important they remain across the life span. It seems doubtful that the significance of our relationships diminishes across

the life span. It is apparent, however, that the difficulties surrounding the creation and maintenance of such relationships increase with age. These difficulties, for the most part, are not insurmountable and can often be remedied with some understanding of the process of communication and aging and with modification of the environmental contingencies. We hope this book helps raise people's awareness of the barriers facing the elderly in conversation and the importance such conversations play in the lives of the elderly.

An instructor's manual is available for this text. It includes chapter outlines, activities for the classroom and student research, and objective and short-answer questions.

There are several people we would like to thank for their help with this book. First, we would like to thank Louise Waller and Gerry Phillips for initiating this project. In addition, we would like to thank Brenda Cooper and Sally Nemeth for their help in composing the instructor's manual. Shirley Byrum and Jeanne Hargis helped type several chapters of the manuscript and their efforts are appreciated. We would also like to thank Barbara Cinquegrani, Donna DeBenedictis, Stephen Hopkins, Marianne Russell, and all the people at Harper & Row for their efforts on our behalf. Finally, we would like to thank Lou Cusella, Lorraine Bettini, and Jerry Robinson for their significant contributions to the content and style of this text.

Jon F. Nussbaum
Teresa Thompson
James D. Robinson

Contents

PREFACE xiii

1 Introduction 1

Communication Within an Aging Society 1

Life-Span Developmental Communication 3

Theories of Successful Aging 5

Summary 9

References 9

2 Attitudes and Ageism 13

Attitudes Toward the Aging Process 14

Ageism 16

Relational Implications of Attitudes and Ageism 17

Summary 21

References 21

3 Relational Considerations 24

Reminiscence 24

Communication of Intimacy 27

Communicative Competence 32

Interactional Control 33

Confirmation Versus Disconfirmation 35

Helping and Loneliness 37

- Summary 38
References 38
- 4 The Mass Media and Aging 43**
Mass Communication Theory: An Overview 44
Media Usage of the Elderly 53
How Are the Elderly Portrayed in the Mass Media? 58
Summary 63
References 66
- 5 Work, Leisure, and Retirement 72**
Adjusting to Retirement 73
What Is Leisure? 74
Leisure Activities for the Elderly 75
Variables that Affect Leisure 76
Functions of Leisure Activity 77
The Marital Relationship and Retirement 79
Satisfaction with Retirement 79
Effects of Retirement 80
Gender Differences 82
Preretirement Activities 85
Summary 85
References 86
- 6 Aging and the Family: The Marital Relationship 93**
Functions of the Family 93
Marriage and the Quality of Life 95
Characteristics of Older Marriages 97
Summary 104
References 104
- 7 Aging and the Family: Changes in Relational Life-Style 110**
Divorce 110
Remarriage 112
Singlehood 114
Dating and Courtship 115
Widowhood 117
Summary 124
References 125
- 8 The Aging Family: Elderly Parents, Grandparents, and Siblings 131**
The Elderly Parent-Adult Child Relationship 131
The Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship 136

	The Sibling Relationship	139
	Other Family Relationships	141
	Summary	141
	References	142
9	Friendship and Aging	146
	The Friend Relationship	146
	Friendship and Aging	148
	Function of Friendships for the Aging	151
	Sex Differences in Elderly Friendships	152
	Alternative Friendships	153
	Summary	154
	References	155
10	Barriers Facing the Elderly in Conversation	158
	Age-Related Barriers to Conversation	159
	Aging and Communicator Style	168
	Aging and Language	169
	Summary	172
	References	172
11	Health, Communication, and Aging	185
	Social Support and Aging	187
	Formal Support Agencies	189
	Patient-Physician Interaction	190
	Patient-Nurse Interaction	192
	Relocation and the Elderly	193
	Summary	197
	References	198
12	Death and Dying	214
	Social Distance and Social Death	214
	Death Anxiety or Fear	216
	Awareness of Impending Death	216
	Communication of the Dying	218
	Communication to the Dying	222
	Patient-Physician Interaction	224
	Patient-Nurse Interaction	226
	Communication Between Patients and Other Health-Care Providers	227
	Institutional Settings and Death	229
	Death Announcements	230
	Death in the Institution	231
	Summary	233
	References	234

13	Successful Aging	239
	What Is Successful Aging?	240
	Theories of Successful Aging	243
	Predictors of Successful Aging	244
	Social Interaction and Successful Aging	246
	Relational Considerations and Successful Aging	247
	Summary	249
	References	249
	AUTHOR INDEX	253
	SUBJECT INDEX	267

chapter 1

Introduction

The aging process has both fascinated and frightened human beings since the beginning of time. Only within the last several decades, however, have social scientists, including a small number of communication scholars, systematically attempted to document, understand, and explain the dynamic changes in behavior that occur as an individual ages. This book approaches the aging process from a communication perspective. The purpose of the book is to shed new light on the ever-increasing amount of information concerning individuals aged 65 and over that constantly flows from the social sciences.

In this introductory chapter, we will briefly explain what is meant by a communication perspective and how this perspective is a particularly interesting way of viewing the behavior of elderly individuals. In addition, we will highlight the importance of a *life-span view* as a means to organize and to understand human communication. Finally, we will conclude with a brief discussion of the most popular theories of successful aging, which have at their core the successful maintenance of an individual's communicative world.

COMMUNICATION WITHIN AN AGING SOCIETY

Each and every author who writes for the field of communication must at some point attempt to define communication. Hundreds of authors have offered definitions using concepts such as intentionality, shared meanings, feedback loops, and symbol systems. The problem with the great majority of these definitions is the state of confusion they create. Somehow we knew more about communication before we attempted to articulate a definition of communication.

For the purpose of this book, therefore, we will simply state that *communication* entails an individual emitting cues in the presence of another individual and the meaning that those cues produce (Wilmot, 1980). This view equates communication with behavior and stresses the pragmatic, functional nature of that behavior. The communication (behavior) that takes place between two or more individuals defines their *relationship*. It is at this level, the *relational* level, that this book is written. Gregory Bateson, a noted anthropologist, and his followers (many of whom, like William Wilmot, Edna Rogers, and B. Aubrey Fisher, are communication scholars) have written extensively on the relational nature of communication and the benefits of describing human behavior from this perspective. For us, the elderly individual is not seen as a personality inventory or an entity fulfilling a prescribed role, but as an *active participant in a system of relationships, who is constantly adapting and attempting to maintain relational equilibrium*. We believe the ability to lead a long, satisfying life is dependent to a great extent upon each individual's relational system and how that system is maintained.

Before a more complete analysis of the factors that impact upon the communicative world of the elderly individual can be accomplished, a short discussion follows concerning the necessity of studying communication and aging. This discussion begins with the demography of aging.

The United States is becoming an increasingly mature country. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in concert with the Program Resources Department, the American Association of Retired Persons, and the Administration on Aging, published information in 1985 based on data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census stating that in 1984 persons 65 years or older numbered 28 million or 11.9 percent of the U.S. population. Since 1900 the percentage of Americans over the age of 65 has tripled. By the time the baby boom generation reaches 65 (in the year 2030), 60 million Americans, representing 22 percent of the total population, will be over 65. The present older population is, of course, also getting older. The fastest growing segment of the population in the 1980 census included those individuals aged 85 years and older. For whatever reason, be it advances in medical technology, improved social programs for the elderly, or some evolutionary advance in the adaptational mechanism of the human species, we are all living longer. This longevity affects every facet of our lives, from marital relationships to marketing strategies to architectural design. For no other reason than pure numbers, the elderly in this society are drawing attention.

Coupled with the increasing population of elderly individuals are the special needs, based in part on physiological imperatives, that make this subsegment of the population qualitatively different from other subsegments of American society. As individuals pass the age of 65, they must constantly adapt to changes in their lives that are often beyond their control. Elderly individuals experience physical decline in capabilities, ranging from slowed reaction time (Stern, Oster, & Newport, 1980) to reduced problem solving ability (Giambra & Arenberg, 1980). At this same time, elderly individuals must cope with their feelings of being near death (Kubler-Ross 1975) or the notion that they are entering the final stage of life (Erikson, 1963). The ability

to cope and to successfully adapt to these life changes may be dependent upon the communicative skills of the elderly individual that are used to produce a stable relational network. These relational networks help determine the satisfactory or unsatisfactory nature of later life.

A final impelling reason to study communication and aging is the unique pragmatic function that communication plays within the aged population. Troll (1980) argues that the communicative behavior of the aged serves several critical helping functions. First, ~~communication defines the changing power relationships between the elderly person and both family and friends that occur as an individual ages.~~ As an elderly individual retires or in some way becomes more dependent upon family members and friends, this loss of independence is accompanied by a loss of power in these relationships. This power loss is reflected and created within the relationships by communication. Neugarten and Gutmann (1968) have demonstrated that elderly men become less competitive and less dominant, whereas elderly women tend to become more dominant and more competitive with increasing age. These behavioral changes have profound effects not only on the marital relationship but also on relationships with children, grandchildren, and friends. The fuel for these relational changes is the communication that transpires within the relationships.

~~Communication serves a second important function as the one mechanism that can aid the replacement of lost mobility necessary to ensure~~ active participation in family affairs, religious activities, and community events. It is through the relational network of family and friends that information sharing takes place. If an elderly individual cannot physically place himself or herself at a community function, the individual will lose touch—unless friends or family members serve as messengers or information sources.

~~A third important function of communication within the aging society relates to simple awareness of needs.~~ Cicirelli (1981) discovered that adult children who interact more frequently with their elderly parents were not only more informed about the needs and desires of their parents but also were regarded as being more likely to help their parents. Cicirelli (1981) suggests that adult children be encouraged to communicate frequently with their parents so as to be better able to understand and to fulfill the special needs of their elderly parents.

In addition, the elderly are of interest to communication scholars because they have participated in more relationships and in longer lasting relationships. They have had to adapt to more communicative situations than any other group of individuals. The elderly have a wealth of communicative information to impart, and we simply have to listen!

LIFE-SPAN DEVELOPMENTAL COMMUNICATION

The field of communication has all but ignored the developmental nature of the communicative act. This is not true of other social sciences that have placed a major emphasis upon human development. One trend within the fields of psychology and sociology is to focus on development throughout

the entire life span (Santrock, 1983), and a major goal of this book is to suggest that *communication* is a developmental phenomenon with important implications throughout life.

The major theme of a developmental approach toward the study of human behavior is *change*. "The life-span developmental approach emphasizes the lifelong nature of development and asserts that our understanding of any point in the life-span is enhanced by taking into account the individual's past history and perhaps his or her future expectations" (Huyck & Hoyer, 1982, p. 2). Life-span developmentalists do not postulate any specific theory of change. Instead, they tend to be pluralistic, accepting several worldviews as useful explanations of human development. A central concept within life-span development is *process*. Just discovering change is not enough. One must strive to understand and explain the process of that change.

A popular misconception about the *process of change* revolves around the necessity of stages of development. It has been believed since Piaget and Erikson first posited stages in their theories of development that stages, therefore, must be a necessity. Actually, stages only serve as a tool to aid our understanding of human development. It would be wrong to think that human communicative behavior must pass through predetermined stages.

Since life-span development is a relatively new way of viewing human behavior, many interesting debates can be found in recent social scientific literature. Readers interested in a more exhaustive discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of life-span development may see Baltes, Reese, and Lipsett's (1980) thorough overview.

The study of human behavior across the life span has led to new research methods consistent with an emphasis upon the process of change. The most common research methods within life-span development are the *cross-sectional method*, the *longitudinal method*, and various *sequential methods*. Of these, the most utilized method is the cross-sectional method, which involves gathering information from individuals of different ages at one point in time. The researcher can then compare, for example, how individuals behave in a marital relationship at age 25 with the behavior of married individuals 65 years of age. The major disadvantage of this method is the confounding of *cohort* influences within the design. This is to say that individuals born in 1922 may have had different life experiences than individuals born in 1962, and these different experiences may have nothing to do with age variation. Their marital relationships, for example, may be different because of their varying life experiences rather than their different ages.

A researcher utilizing the *longitudinal method* gathers information from the same individuals at different time intervals. This is the ideal method for studying developmental change. The researcher can compare each individual at 25 years, 30 years, 35 years, and so forth, noting trends as the individual ages. This method, however, does have several nagging problems, such as the selective attrition of both subjects and researchers, repeated testing with the same test, and enormous cost problems. A book by Schaie (1983) summarizes the major longitudinal studies from across the world and offers the