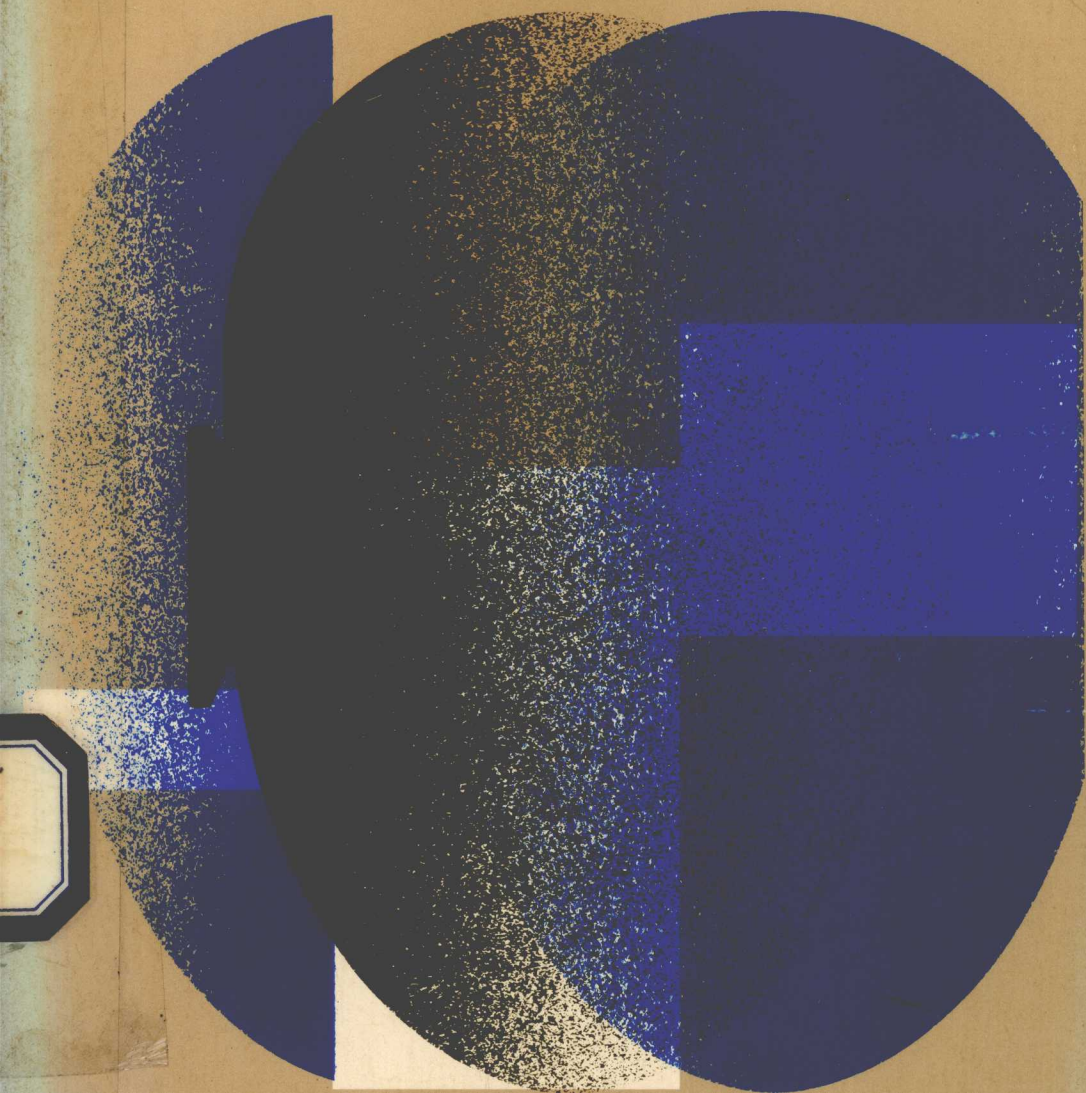


Jennie Keith

# Old People As People

Social and Cultural  
Influences on Aging  
and Old Age

Little, Brown  
Series  
On Gerontology



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Social and Cultural  
Influences on Aging  
and Old Age

Jennie Keith  
Swarthmore College



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# Old People As People

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# Foreword

## to

## Series

Where is it? In each of the billions of cells in our bodies? Or in our minds? Then, again, perhaps it is something that happens *between* people. Ought we not also take a look at the marketplace as well? And at the values expressed through our cultural institutions? Undoubtedly, the answer lies in all these factors—and more. The phenomenon of aging takes place within our bodies, in our minds, between ourselves and others, and in culturally defined patterns.

The study and analysis of aging—a burgeoning field—is deserving of an integrated spectrum approach. Now, Little, Brown and Company offers such a perspective, one designed to respond to the diversity and complexity of the subject matter and to individualized instructional needs. The Little, Brown Series on Gerontology provides a series of succinct and readable books that encompass a wide variety of topics and concerns. Each volume, written by a highly qualified gerontologist, will provide a degree of precision and specificity not available in a general text whose coverage, expertise and interest level cannot help but be uneven. While the scope of the gerontology series is indeed broad, individual volumes provide accurate, up-to-date presentations unmatched in the literature of gerontology.

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With the Little, Brown Series on Gerontology now becoming available, instructors can select the texts most desirable for their individual courses. Practitioners and other professionals will also find the foundations necessary to remain abreast of their own particular areas. No doubt, students too will respond to the knowledge and enthusiasm of gerontologists writing about only those topics they know and care most about.

Little, Brown and Company and the editors are pleased to provide a series that not only looks at conceptual and theoretical questions but squarely addresses the most critical and applied concerns of the 1980s. Knowledge without action is unacceptable. The reverse is no better.

As the list of volumes makes clear, some books focus primarily on research and theoretical concerns, others on the applied; by this two-sided approach they draw upon the most significant and dependable thinking available. It is hoped that they will serve as a wellspring for developments in years to come.



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## Preface

This book is written in response to a question that I am asked whenever I talk about my research with older people. Forms and tones of voice vary, but the essential query is always the same: Aren't you saying that old people are just like everybody else? The question is asked sometimes with surprise, sometimes with disappointment, sometimes with obvious annoyance. My answer is as persistent as the question: Yes, old people are people just like everybody else. Since what was a starting premise to me turns out to be a startling conclusion to others, I think it's time to develop the dialogue into a book. *Old People As People* therefore has as both origin and goal an exploration of the ways in which older people are human, i.e., both constrained and liberated by the social and cultural contexts in which they age and are old. It also tries to discover why the humanity of old people should surprise, disappoint, or annoy members of our own particular social and cultural context.

I am very grateful to Joe Hendricks for editorial critique and encouragement far beyond the call of duty, to my students and audiences for pressing me to make more orderly and explicit my thinking about old age, and to my entire expanded family for support of all kinds during the writing.

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# Chapter 1

## Old Age in Cross-Cultural Perspective

“Is that really anthropology?” is the question I’m most often asked about my research with older people. Don’t anthropologists go to study exotic societies and bring back reports about unknown customs and views of the world? My answer to both questions is yes—but there’s no contradiction. Old people are an exotic group in most industrial societies because we make them outsiders, keep them at a distance, and so know very little about them. This is in one way understandable, and in another way a rather remarkable psychological feat.

Our lack of knowledge about old people is understandable from the point of view that the situation of the elderly in modern societies is unknown in a profound sense: they occupy a space in the life course that is new territory in human experience. Extended life, better health, and retirement laws have created a new interval between work and death; and the people who occupy it now are pioneers who must explore and define the potential of a new territory for human habitation. Old age itself is in evolutionary terms characteristically human: old individuals are rare among other primate groups such as apes or monkeys (Dolhinow forthcoming). Like other human specialties, presence of numerous old people in human communities is, however, foreshadowed in the behavior of other primates. Old female macaque and langur monkeys defend and care for their young relatives to the extent that a grandmother may be a survival asset. Old monkeys also ease crises through their knowledge of the environment, e.g., by leading others to a formerly used water hole during a drought (Hrdy 1981). The great proportion of human culture that must be learned may have intensified the value of old

people both as caretakers during our extended human childhood, and as living archives of experience (Katz 1978).

The remarkable psychological feat is that so many of us are able to *maintain* a sense of distance from old people. Yes, they are exploring new biological and social space; but we will follow them. They are the one minority group to which all of us, with a little luck, will belong. But instead of observing their explorations with self-interested curiosity, we transfer the exotic nature of the new social territory to the individuals exploring it, and keep our distance.

This psychological feat of making foreign or even taboo something as inevitable as our own aging suggests that old age is the kind of painful topic that most needs the telephoto-focusing of cross-cultural examination. Traditionally, cross-cultural researchers have used enforced distance from the exotic to see some aspect of human life more clearly, then brought that distance back home for a better understanding of the familiar. There is a slight reversal in this process when applied to old age, in itself revealing of our habitual ways of thinking about the elderly. The typical anthropological investigation often began with interest in some apparently bizarre behavior in a distant culture. The gradual understanding of that behavior as reasonable in its context revealed previously invisible links between our own actions and their cultural setting. The reversal in old-age research is that it is certain behaviors of our own old people—age-homogeneous communities, for example—which seem strange but become understandable in the light of cross-cultural examination.

The title of the book comes from the major finding of cross-cultural research so far: old people are people. I am often asked the following rather querulous question: But isn't everything you're saying about old people just like students in dorms, or soldiers in camps, or anyone who's suffered a loss, and so on? Of course it is—which pleases me, but seems to annoy the audience. Our expectation that old people are different is so strong that it is annoying to be told, and difficult to believe, that they behave very much as other human beings under similar conditions and in similar cultural contexts. We don't need special "old-people theory" to understand what old people do and feel. We apparently do need a great deal of evidence to persuade ourselves that old people are people, and to understand how the same cultural compensations or constraints that affect all humans shape what it means to be an old person in various social settings. The goal of this book is a cross-cultural examination of age, which will bring us closer, both theoretically and personally, to understanding old people and old age.

Anthropologists have often worked with the old, but age itself is a new focus for cross-cultural study. Ethnographers visiting traditional societies around the world have spent many hours with old

people, who know the customs, remember what the society was like before outside contacts, and perhaps most important, have the time to spend hours talking with a curious anthropologist. Although old people have been important informants, however, the topic of conversation was seldom old age itself. Cross-cultural study of old people, or of age as a factor in social organization, is a recent form of the long-standing alliance between anthropologists and the aged (Keith 1980a).

Understanding old people as people, as human actors in culturally defined settings, requires several perspectives central to anthropological research: cross-cultural comparison, holistic analysis of context, and subjective data. First, a *cross-cultural comparative* approach is necessary to distinguish universal aspects of aging from the diversity of social responses to it. Second, old age must be considered in *context*. The effect of social and cultural context on what it means to be old emerges from the comparisons mentioned above. Another context from which old age must not be isolated is that of the life course. To understand the significance of age as a social identity late in life, it is essential to know what was its importance at other points, such as adolescence. Finally, the meaning of age and its uses in society must be considered from the point of view of the *actors*—that is, of the old people themselves.

These anthropological perspectives provide the central themes of this book. The rest of this chapter outlines the development of cross-cultural research on old age. The following chapters explore the various ways that age assumes social significance—in cognitive categorizations, norms and ideologies, informal interactions, formal groups. Every dimension of age as a social border is examined for its effect on older people. Also, as the boundary image indicates, age as a social phenomenon must be seen from various vantages: that of the individuals in a particular age category as well as of those in whatever other age divisions are recognized in a particular context. Emphasis is on the subjective situation of old people, but that influences, and is influenced by, the perceptions and expectations of others.

## The Status and Treatment of Old People

The first and major continuing focus in cross-cultural study of old age is status. Perhaps because early Western researchers were surprised to see old people in positions of power and prestige, they reported those cases prominently and developed theories to explain this exotic behavior. I found, for instance, in a study of sixty traditional (small-scale, non-industrial) societies that explicit statements



by ethnographers about age as an important principle in the society were correlated with status differences based on age, but not with other reported uses of age, such as division of labor, differences in dress, or access to food.

The ancestral model for cross-cultural studies of old age is Simmons's 1945 work on *The Role of the Aged in Primitive Society*. Comparing seventy-one societies, Simmons discovered that higher status for old people was derived from traditional skills and knowledge; greater security came from property rights; food from communal sharing and exemptions from taboos; and their general welfare was guaranteed by their families in exchange for routine services such as babysitting, cooking, or mending. A more recent study identified information control as a key factor. Old people around the world have higher status when they control important information. When they consult, make decisions, arbitrate, teach, they get special food privileges, seating arrangements, and verbal deference (Maxwell and Silverman 1970). It has also been speculated that the reason it made evolutionary sense for early human societies to take care of old people was that when the memory was the only available storehouse for information, living a long time made old people precious archives. Societies with such stores of information might therefore have been more successful than those with less longevity (Katz 1978).

"So what else is new?" might be the reaction to this list. Old people are respected when they control information or resources, and when they can offer useful services. My answer to the question is "not much is new." In most parts of the world, and for a long time, the same things have provided prestige for old people as for anyone else. The question is whether old people are excluded from or have special access to those possibilities.

Social change and modernization have been blamed by several scholars as conditions detrimental to the status of old people. The role of old people as living storehouses of information, for example, is less valuable when changes make their knowledge obsolete, or when books and computers can keep more information more efficiently (Maxwell and Silverman 1970). Prestige is often also more available to the young in situations of change, since they then have a chance to acquire skills and resources independently of their elders (Press and McKool 1972). One comparison of fifteen societies showed that, in general, higher levels of modernization are detrimental to the position of the aged (Cowgill and Holmes 1972).

However, this general relationship is now being reconsidered. Fortunately—because otherwise there might be an invidious tendency to believe that a good position for the old is part of a primitive, traditional way of life, and no longer possible in modern society. The