

# Book Reviews

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## YOU'VE COME A LONG WAY, SOCIOLOGY

Richard A. Settersten, Jr., and Jacqueline L. Angel (Eds). (2012). *Handbook of Sociology of Aging*. New York: Springer Publishing Co., 689 pp., \$109.00 (paper).

When I was an undergraduate at Duke University (Class of '52), there was no gerontology, much less any sociology of aging. When I got my doctorate at Columbia University in 1959, there were the beginnings of some gerontology, but still no sociology of aging. It was not until 1979 that there was enough sociology of aging to establish a Section on Aging and the Life Course at the American Sociological Association. This handbook celebrates the 30th anniversary of that establishment by publishing 45 chapters on a wide range of topics in the field by 80 authors.

Each author was asked to review the past 30 years and consider questions such as:

- Where has the field been and where is it now?
- What new frontiers should be pursued?
- What are the central sources and consequences of the topic under study?
- What are the implications for social policy?

Most authors did pretty well at trying to answer these questions.

At the end of the book is a most interesting section on “Sociological Lives” that contains intimate essays written by a group of senior social gerontologists who share their personal experiences in the field and their hopes for the future. This section helps to make the preceding facts and theories more human and alive.

This handbook is the first of its kind and one of a dozen published by Springer in their series on *Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research*. Such handbooks have their advantages and

disadvantages. The main advantage is that they are large, so they can accommodate many topics and authors. The corresponding disadvantages are that they are expensive (\$109) and bulky.

This handbook is organized into nine sections: Historical Trends, Theories and Methods, Social Diversity and Inequalities, Social Relationships, Social Institutions, Economics and Government, Social Vulnerabilities, Public Health, and Care Arrangements. Despite these wide sweep of topics, it is disappointing to find that the following get little or no attention: ageism, older Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgendered (LGBT) persons, cross-cultural aging, death and dying. There are a few paragraphs here and there on some of these topics, but they do not show up in the index. Part of the problem is the index that does not adequately list many topics that actually are in the book.

It is difficult to choose which chapters to comment on, but the following are some of my favorites.

### Theories and Methods

The first chapter, “Trends in the Sociology of Aging” written by the editors, does a good job of pointing out the extraordinary growth in the field since 1979, such as the availability of several longitudinal data sets, the advances in methods of statistical analysis, the development of theory (from modernization theory to disengagement to activity to continuity theory), the progress in methods (from description to explanation and causality, from qualitative to quantitative, from cross sectional to panel and longitudinal, from crude measures to refined, reliable, and valid ones, from age as a causal variable to aging as a process and its mechanisms). Another significant change is the semantic change from referring to “the aged” or “the elderly” to

“older persons” or “senior citizens.” Similarly, there has been a change from studying older people as a group separate from other age groups, to studying older people as part of the life course.

I am reminded of Bernice Neugarten’s essay which suggested that we might eventually see the “End of Gerontology?” One of my colleagues once accused me of trying to eliminate age as an independent variable. That is not quite right, but I do believe that explanations of why age is related to other variables are more important than just demonstrating that it is related.

The second chapter, on theoretical perspectives by Marshall and Bengtson, demonstrates that social gerontology is no longer “data rich and theory poor.” These authors review the current theoretical developments including stress theory, cumulative advantages or inequality, standardized life course, risk society, chance events, structural versus individual agency, linked lives and caregiving, critical gerontology, and globalization. They conclude that we still need more explanatory theory, attention to previous theories, and more interdisciplinary theory, and we should not let life course theory obscure the effects of social structure. Bengtson supplements this with his personal review in Chapter 38 of the shift from activity to disengagement to continuity theories and his development of the generational stake, social breakdown, and multiple jeopardy theories.

The third chapter, by Silverstein and Giarrusso, “Aging Individuals, Families, and Societies: Micro-Meso-Macro Linkages in the Life Course,” proposes a dynamic biographical–institutional–societal model for analyzing the life course. This results in a highly complex model with three interacting levels that would be very difficult to carry out in real-life research but may be the ideal we should keep in mind.

### **Social Diversity**

The chapter by Kelley-Moore and Lin illustrates how much the great heterogeneity among older people is often lost due to the standard reliance on measures of central tendency and neglect of the variation around those measures, or due to study designs that truncate the age range of the samples used, or due to the use of single methodologies that could be enriched with multiple methods to triangulate the phenomenon being studied.

The two chapters on gender and on race are especially salient during these years celebrating the 50th anniversary of the civil rights movement and

legislation. The chapter on immigration and health by Markides and Gerst is also particularly salient in view of the current debate over changing our immigration laws. It points out the recent evidence that immigrants have a health advantage which challenges our previous and often stereotyped notions about immigrants from poorer countries; and discusses the several reasons why this is true.

The chapter on “Global Aging” by Higo and Williamson partially makes up for the general neglect of cross-cultural gerontology. However, it mostly deals with the well-known facts of population aging in the developed and developing nations and the problems it causes for family structure, epidemiological transitions, financial security, and long-term care.

“Diversity and Family Relations” by Treas and Marcum discusses how the diversity of family types is increasing in our aging society, so that the “ideal” type family of once-married heterosexual parents with two young children is becoming more and more rare. Part of this change is related to the increasing convergence of men’s and women’s roles with more women in the labor force and more men outside of it. The chapter also has a paragraph about nonheterosexual couples, but this does not make up for the general neglect of aging among LGBT persons.

### **Social Relationships**

Carr and Moorman point out in “Social Relations and Aging” that over the past three decades, researchers have discovered that “the protective effects of social ties vary based on the structure, nature, and quality of the relationship.” For example, it appears that marriage is more beneficial for men than for women and that widowhood is more negative for men than for women. There are several reasons for this, which make for an interesting discussion.

“The Midlife Financial Squeeze” by Corey Remie is especially relevant during this period of slow recovery from the recession. The chapter discusses several theories to account for the intergenerational transfers of financial resources within families: contingency theory (which includes the altruism and exchange hypothesis), solidarity theory, and ambivalence theory.

### **Social Institutions**

The chapter on “Rethinking Retirement” by Melissa Hardy describes the shift in research from a 1970s concern with building a financially secure

retirement to the 1980s shift toward democratization of retirement, to the accelerating process of individuation in retirement during the 1990s, and the uncertainty and changing expectations of the decade just past, which included proposals to privatize social security, delay retirement, and use more flexible retirement policies.

“Volunteering in Later Life” by O’Neill, Morrow-Howell, and Wilson describes the shift from disengagement theory to the virtues and benefits of civic engagement. It shows that volunteering has shown a continuous upward trend throughout the last three decades so that 24% of persons aged more than 65 reported volunteering in 2009. This is somewhat less than the rate for middle-aged persons, but the number of hours per volunteer rises linearly with age. The chapter also reviews the many social and personal benefits of volunteering.

### Crime and the Law

One of the most interesting chapters to me was the one on crime and the law by Matcha, which shows again how rarely older people are actually victims of violent crime, despite their high levels of fear of crime. The statistics clearly show that already low rates of victimization have been slowly diminishing to the vanishing point (2.4 per 1,000 persons). On the other hand, the rates of elder abuse have been rising, and the number of cases not reported is even higher. As is generally known, elders are least likely to commit crimes. This is due to several reasons such as the fact that criminals tend to die young or to retire from crime early. In other words, “crime doesn’t pay,” or it pays so well that one can retire early.

### Public Health

Another particularly interesting chapter to me was the one on social factors in obesity. It is clear that obesity has been rising dramatically in all ages and that the increase has been greatest among those already overweight. In other words, the fat are getting fatter. However, there is considerable controversy about how to explain this. There seems to be some consensus that increased caloric intake has been more important than reduced exercise. Multiple theories are used to explain this increased intake, however, including increased advertisements for high caloric foods, increased stress, increased participation of women in the labor force (which increases eating out and eating convenience foods), declines in smoking, increase in consumption of high-fructose corn syrup, decreases in price of food,

and declining physical activity. Age–Period–Cohort analyses conclude that the “obesity epidemic” has affected all age groups and all cohorts and that the period effect is the principal cause.

Another chapter in the health section of particular interest is on “Religious Involvement, Health Status, and Mortality Risk” by Hill, Burdette, and Idler. They review the extensive evidence that religious involvement is associated with mental health, physical health, and lower mortality risk. Then they discuss the major theories about why this association exists. Religious involvement may counteract the risk of social isolation in old age; belief that one is cared for and supported by a loving God may contribute to mental health, may increase self-esteem, self-control, meaning and purpose, and may help maintain healthy behaviors.

### Personal Reflections on the Sociology of Aging

The book closes with personal essays on the development of sociology of aging by seven distinguished social gerontologists: Vern Bengtson, Steve Cutler, Dale Dannefer, Anne Foner, Linda George, Gunhild Hagestad, and Phyllis Moen. These essays put a human face on the sometimes dry research and theories in the rest of the book.

### Recommendations

The blurb on the cover of the book says “It is an indispensable resource for scholars, policy-makers, and aging professionals.” I doubt that it is “indispensable,” but it certainly is a *useful* resource for such persons—as well as for anyone interested in sociology or aging. I would not recommend it as the main text for a class; it is not designed to be a textbook. There are several good textbooks that would be better, such as those by [Diana Harris \(2007\)](#) and [Duane Matcha \(2007\)](#). However, it would be a good supplemental readings book.

It also is highly gratifying to us in the field to see how we have come such “a long way.”

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