

PREFACE

On New Person-Environment Dynamics in Old Age: Opportunities and Constraints

Not only does gerontology come in many disciplinary stripes, it comes in multiple nationalities as well. Each has a unique contribution to make, and each helps the field move ever closer to adequately grasping what it means to grow old. The study of aging is itself dynamic, continually on the move—addressing enduring questions and mounting a search for elusive solutions.

As this volume makes clear, the big picture sometimes gets lost in the quest for day-to-day answers. As Immanuel Kant put it, there is nothing quite so useful as good theory, and the reader will be convinced of that assertion after reading the material included in *New Dynamics in Old Age: Individual, Environmental, and Societal Perspectives*. Wahl, Tesch-Romer, and Hoff have assembled a world-class cadre of insightful scholars from both sides of the Atlantic, and they represent some of the best thinking available on the interlocking and overlapping levels of analysis of the aging experience.

Trajectories of individual aging cannot help but reflect societal transformations: demographic, economic, and in terms of policies and practices. In fact, global changes are felt at the local level and by individuals growing old, whether they are cognizant of that fact or not. As worldwide economic integration occurs, local policies are not insulated from what is going on halfway around the world. A single example should suffice: local retirement policies may affect a corporation's decision to stay put or to move off-shore, and that decision will in turn affect how individuals in a given locale experience their own aging. The same is true of medical discoveries that know no international boundaries and are able to reach out and affect the meaning of one condition or another, which is likely to be part of the lives of individuals who may not even be aware of where the discoveries are made.

Given the dynamic nature of aging, the past may not be prologue to the future insofar as the aged of tomorrow are not likely to replicate the patterns demonstrated by past cohorts. That fact is liberating and serves to complicate the task facing gerontologists who attempt to gaze into crystal balls and prognosticate what the future holds. Within the discussions by Fry, Manton, and Gu, and the editors themselves in the opening section of this volume are clues as to why that will be the case and options for making sense of what is about to happen or what will be the case as members of the baby boom generation arrive at the doorstep of old age. What their presentations establish is that consideration of structure along with people is crucial to interpreting

the daily activities through which old age is created. By examining those activities, the processual nature of age-related experiences can be placed in context as part of a broader ranging current of change. Individuals bring to their lives a panoply of personal resources composed of individual characteristics and opportunities organized by their structural surround. As one or another dimension of those personal resources undergoes transformation, a rebalancing is necessary to maintain personal well being.

Running throughout this volume is a recognition that the first order of theorizing occurs in the constructs individuals develop to explain their own lives. What we as gerontologists do is weave those first-order constructions into inclusive conceptualizations that we label as theories of social gerontology. The editors and authors of this volume contribute to the latter by reviewing the former and the ways in which one or another type of environmental conditions become a context for aging.

Surely part of the gerontological imagination referred to in subsequent chapters is an appreciation that the meaning of aging is being recast in a global light. Yet, these influences play out in the daily lives of aging individuals and can be seen as an influence there given thoughtful scrutiny. As the contributors to this volume make readily apparent, the social, immediate home, and extended larger environments are in constant flux, and that fact alone is enough to ensure that aging will also demonstrate dynamic changes. Factor in the rapidity of technological innovations as contextual elements impinging on every aspect of the process of aging, and the concatenated nature of the experience grows awesomely complicated. Indeed, the name of the aging game can be none other than continuous change.

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