Examining the History and Current Status of Aging Theory

Introduction

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Symposium

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In 1985 the Institute for Advanced Study in Gerontology and Geriatrics at the Andrus Gerontology Center, University of Southern California, sponsored a year-long seminar on theories of aging. The purpose of the seminar was to assess the state of theory development in the field of gerontology. It included biologists, demographers, humanists, sociologists, and psychologists, among others, from the United States and other countries. Gerontologists from varied backgrounds were encouraged to debate the status of theorizing about aging in their particular field, challenge each other concerning the implicit assumptions of their discipline, and attempt to discover some common ground.

One outcome of the seminar was the book, Emergent Theories of Aging (Birren & Bengtson, 1988). It was one of the first attempts to assess theories of aging in book-length form. The focus was on the state of theorizing in anthropology, biology, demography, humanities, sociology, and psychology, as well as other disciplinary areas. The symposium presented here originally was organized for the 50th Anniversary Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, which was held in Los Angeles, in November 1995. It also served as a kind of “ten year reunion” for some of the participants in the original group. Our goal was to reexamine the state of theory development in aging in four fields: (1) biology, (2) psychology, (3) sociology, and (4) demography.

The articles that follow examine, to varying degrees, previous efforts in aging theory as well as the most recent developments in their respective fields.

The first article’s major focus is on current advances in the biology of aging (Cristofalo); the next two articles analyze the general history of gerontological theorizing as well as the most recent developments in the psychology (Schroots) and sociology (Lynott & Lynott) of aging; the final article seeks to develop a theoretical framework for understanding cohort differences in care giving/receiving (Uhlenberg). All of them, in one form or another, describe and assess the advances made in theoretical development over the last ten years in their particular disciplines.

Vincent Cristofalo, in his article entitled, “Ten Years Later: What Have We Learned about Human Aging from Studies of Cell Cultures?” finds substantial growth in our understanding of human aging at the cellular level. Advances in theorizing, however, have been more difficult. As he comments, “The fact that there is no defining theory of biological aging has done nothing to discourage the proliferation of theories.” Cristofalo reviews the major theories of biological aging, organized into stochastic and developmental-genetic theories. He emphasizes that there is overlap between many of the theories, and that “Modern gerontologists emphasize that the failures of aging tissues probably result from both genetic changes and environmental insults.” He concludes that although there have been several exciting developments in our understanding of cellular aging, we are far from a unified biological theory of aging.

Johannes Schroots, in his article titled, “Theoretical Developments in the Psychology of Aging,” gives a “summary overview” of the major psychological theories of aging since World War II. He categorizes geropsychological theories into three eras: (a) the Classical period (1940s–1970s), (b) the Modern period

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(1970s–1990s) and (c) the New period (1980s–1990s). Schroots argues for the elaboration of two new psychological theories, Tornstam’s theory of Gerotranscendence and his own branching theory of aging.

Robert J. Lynott and Patricia Passuth Lynott, in their article entitled, “Tracing the Course of Theoretical Development in the Sociology of Aging,” examine the history of sociological theorizing in the field of aging from the early practitioners of the 1940s and ’50s up to the most recent developments. The authors describe this process as involving two transformations in social gerontological theorizing. The first transformation began in 1961 with the advent of disengagement theory, the first theory of aging in scientific form. The second transformation began in the late 1970s and early ’80s with the emergence of social phenomenological and Marxist approaches. The transformation, in this case, involved commentary on theory, raising questions concerning the socially constructive and ideological features of age conceptualizations, issues that more recently (the past decade) also have been addressed by critical theory and feminist perspectives.

Peter Uhlenberg, in his article entitled, “The Burden of Aging: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Shifting Balance of Caregiving and Care Receiving as Cohorts Age,” develops a theoretical perspective on the changing balance of care for cohorts as they age through later life. He conceptualizes the balance of care at a particular age as the difference between volume of care given and volume of care received by cohort members. Uhlenberg begins with the question, “Why does the productive contribution of individuals to society so frequently decline as they age through the later stages of life?” His theoretical framework examines factors that affect a cohort’s volume of caregiving: (a) physical and mental health, (b) skills and knowledge, (c) opportunities, and (d) motivation, as contrasted with those factors associated with volume of care received: (a) physical and mental health, (b) self-care, and (c) access. The net result is the balance of care. He argues that the volume of care received by elders is much greater than care given.

Bengtson, Parrot, and Burgess, in their article entitled, “Progress and Pitfalls in Gerontological Theorizing,” provide an assessment of the four articles in the symposium. Their overall theme is that the authors of the respective articles are arguing, to one degree or another, that there have been paradigm shifts (Kuhn, 1962) in biogerontology, psychogerontology, and social gerontology during the past decade. Bengtson and associates conclude the evidence shows that no paradigm shift in any of the fields has indeed occurred. They note that while there has been much progress made in any of the area of gerontological theorizing during this period, at the same time, insufficient attention has been given to linking theory to empirical findings as well as interdisciplinary concerns.

As the four articles in this symposium make clear, there certainly has been no scientific revolution (Kuhn, 1962) in gerontological theorizing in the last ten years. It is puzzling then that Bengtson and associates would attempt to build a case refuting that there has been, as they put it, “a definable paradigmatic shift in research concerning biogerontological, psychogerontological, and social gerontological theories of aging during the past decade” given that none of the authors have suggested such a shift in the first place. The articles also make clear that, while research on aging is expanding (Binstock & George, 1996; Birren & Schae, 1996; Schneider & Rowe, 1996), our efforts to integrate knowledge have proved to be more elusive. Human aging, and our attempt to understand it, is indeed a very complex enterprise. As Linda George (1995), in her recent piece commemorating fifty years of social science research in gerontology suggests, gerontologists need to step back, think about, and explore critical theoretical issues. This symposium is one effort to do that. We hope there will be many more.

References

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