CRAFTING THE STUDY OF LIVES: THE LEGACY OF BERNICE NEUGARTEN AND THE FUTURE OF GERONTOLOGY


The Meanings of Age: Selected Papers of Bernice L. Neugarten, edited by Dail A. Neugarten. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1996, 433 pp., $64.00 (cloth), $24.95 (paper).

Also:


What I find most intriguing about these books is their more peripheral commentary on the state of gerontology: About what attracts us to this field; whether we can do better by our subject matter; whether we can put meaning back into gerontological research, and whether gerontology has reached its "end" or can be "saved." I will close the essay with some final thoughts on these topics. Because each book relates in some way to the life and legacy of Bernice Neugarten, I will begin my essay with a review of the Neugarten collection, and then turn to the Gutmann and Bengtson volumes.

Neugarten's Many Contributions to the Field of Gerontology

Neugarten has always had a knack for finding catchy expressions for important ideas, so many of which now stand at the very core of gerontological scholarship. One of her most central distinctions, that between the "young-old" and "old-old," is somewhat misused in contemporary gerontological scholarship. It is now commonplace for gerontological researchers to split older adults into a "young-old" and an "old-old" group, and to define them in purely chronological terms, with the young-old defined as those between 65 and 74, or between 65 and 84; and with the old-old defined as either those aged 75 or older, or aged 85 or older. Neugarten, however, started her influential work. Many of Neugarten's ideas have never changed, and will continue to change, how we understand aging. Neugarten brought us those terms in a 1974 essay on "Age Groups in American Society and the Rise of the Young-Old," and continued to struggle with them in a 1979 essay on "The Young-Old and the Age-Irrelevant Society." Here we see, however, that her original formulation was not exclusively bound to age. Neugarten does say that "at the risk of oversimplification, the young-old come from the group composed of those who are approximately 55 to 75 — as distinguished from the old-old, who are 75 and over" (p. 37). However, her intention was to separate elders who are relatively healthy, affluent, and active from those who are not, independent of age. "Indeed," she says, "the terms young-old and old-old were originally suggested as a gross way of acknowledging some of the enormous diversity among older persons" (p. 48).

In these papers, and in "New Perspectives on Aging and Social Policy" (1982), Neugarten also warns us that the potential for politics based on "age divisiveness" may be exacerbated in an aging society, as younger groups may lash out against unprecedented numbers of elderly people. As for whether anything came of Neugarten's early warnings, we need only remind ourselves of the controversial intergenerational equity debate that later surfaced during the 1980s (for reviews, see Cook, Marshall, Marshall, & Kaufman, 1994; Marshall, Cook, & Marshall, 1993).

Recent gerontological research has emphasized the need to better explicate the heterogeneity that exists among older adults (Calasanti, 1996; Light, Grigsby, & Bligh, 1996; Nelson & Dannefer, 1992), although Neugarten has for decades been pushing researchers and policy makers to take into account the diversity among older people. In part, this diversity is a function of the fact that "as people live longer, the more different they become... Lives fan out with time as people develop their own patterns of interests and commitments, their own sequences of life choices, their own psychological turning points, and their own patterns of relations with the few
significant other people whose development impinges most directly on their own ("The Young-Old and the Age-Irrelevant Society," p. 48). Sociologists now use a similar concept — the "Matthew Effect" — to explain the great degree of variability that exists among people in later life: This principle, based on a passage from the Gospel of Matthew, posits that advantages earlier in life promote later advantages, just as disadvantages earlier in life promote later disadvantages (Dannefer, 1987). The last portion of Neugarten's statement also stands as an early articulation of what life-course scholars now describe as the "interdependence of lives": that an individual's development is crucially linked to, and shaped by, the lives of other people (Elder, 1995).

In "Age Distinctions and their Social Functions" (1981) and several other essays, Neugarten encourages researchers to be cautious about the degree to which they rely on age as an index of development: While age is surely a convenient variable, it is often a poor predictor of psychological, biological, and social statuses. And in "The Changing Meanings of Age" (with D. Neugarten), Neugarten speculates that an aging society brings with it the potential for a more fluid life cycle with "blurred boundaries between the periods of life ... new patterns in the timing of major life events, and new inconsistencies in what is considered age-appropriate behavior" (p. 72). Several of these papers express hope that our society has become (or has the potential to become) "age irrelevant."

"Age Norms, Age Constraints, and Adult Socialization" (with Moore and Lowe, 1965) is one of the most frequently cited articles of our time. This paper introduced the concepts of "social clock" and "age time tables," and the individual's subjective awareness of being "early," "on-time," or "late" with respect to them. It is in this essay that Neugarten describes age norms and expectations as "prods and breaks on behavior, in some cases hastening an event, in others delaying it" (p. 25). And in "Sociological Perspectives on the Life Cycle" (with Danat, 1973), Neugarten pushes us to better conceptualize time along three separate dimensions: life time, social time, and historical time.

Neugarten begins "Continuities and Discontinuities of Psychological Issues in Adult Life" (1969) by noting that she is "more impressed by the discontinuities than by the continuities of psychological issues into adult life." We cannot take adult life for granted, Neugarten argues, and must be "proactively oriented toward the issues that are salient in childhood" (p. 88). Neugarten urges us to consider the many new psychological issues that emerge during adulthood, particularly in middle age and beyond. Among other things, Neugarten notes the "changing time perspective, as time is restructured in terms of time-left-to-live rather than time-since-birth," and the "personalization of death, bringing with it, for women, rehearsal for widowhood, and for men, the rehearsal of illness" (pp. 88–89). Similarly, in "The Middle Years" (with Danat, 1974), "Mid-life Women in the 1980s" (with Brown-Rezanka, 1978), "Women's Attitudes toward the Menopause" (with Wood, Kainkees, and Loomis, 1963), and "The Middle Generations" (1979), Neugarten pushes us to think more about the unique changes that accompany mid-life — changes in family, work, body, mind, and personality.

Neugarten's work on "The Measurement of Life Satisfaction" (with Havighurst and Tobin, 1961), and the corresponding rating scales and indexes that were developed as part of the seminal Kansas City Studies of Adult Life, set the stage for research on life satisfaction in the decades that followed. In fact, those scales, in whole or in part, underlie many of the measures of life satisfaction and subjective well-being used in contemporary research. "Successful Aging in 1970 and 1990" (written in 1974) is also interesting from a measurement standpoint: This little-known essay is an interesting conceptual exposition on what constitutes "successful aging" and how it might be measured. The reintroduction of this essay is also timely given the surge of recent interest in this question.

In Neugarten's later years, her attention has turned toward social policy, medicine, and medical ethics, and the implications of an aging society for society and its institutions. With Age or Need? Public Policies for Older People (1982), Neugarten began to advocate a need-based rather than age-based approach to public policies, including those related to later life. Two papers in this collection, "Policy for the 1980s: Age or Need Entitlement" (1979) and "New Perspectives on Aging and Social Policy" (1982), reflect Neugarten's thinking about age and social policy just before she brought together experts to address that topic in the 1982 volume noted above. "The Social Implications of Life Extension" (1978) and "The Goals of Medicine in an Aging Society" (with Cassel, 1995) explore some of the ethical issues associated with increased longevity, including how medical care for adults in advanced old age might be handled "most rationally, most effectively, and most humanely" (p. 377). Neugarten's later work has also pushed scholars to think about what it means to live in an aging society — to consider the ways in which individuals and social institutions are affected by the presence of so many older people.

Finally, in rereading these classic papers, I am reminded of Neugarten's emphasis on the role of agency in human development. While acknowledging that social structures may certainly impinge upon and limit an individual's development, Neugarten nonetheless takes the developing person to be active, even proactive, in constructing his or her life, and interactive with his or her environment, in much the same way as the tradition of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979; see also the recent volume in honor of Bronfenbrenner, Examining Lives in Context, edited by Moen, Elder, & Luescher, 1995). In this sense, Neugarten has always tried to bridge psychology and sociology, and the micro and macro. Whereas sociologists often lose sight of the person, and psychologists often overlook the power of social and historical contexts, Neugarten has always struggled to link these levels in her work.

**A Stronger Face of Aging**

The Human Elder in Nature, Culture, and Society is an interesting collection of 12 previously published papers representing 25 years of research by psychologist David Gutmann. This volume stands as the most complete statement of Gutmann's central thesis: That "later life is the stage for a significant evolution towards a sexually bi-polar or androgynous condition. Men [take] on some of the nurturing, pacific qualities they had once relegated to women, and women [take] over some of the combative properties that they had once sent out of the 'demilitarized' house with their husbands" (p. 78).

This personality shift, Gutmann argues, is a universal developmental process in the human species. If so, how might it then be explained? As a universal process, it should have an "equally universal stimulus," brought about by factors common to the species. His answer? Parenthood: "The universal requirements of human parenthood determine the degree of gender differentiation between the sexes ... [The sexes are most differentiated along conventional lines when the sense of parental emergency is at its peak, but as children mature and take
over responsibility for their own physical and emotional nurture, both parents can relax and reclaim those strands of their sexual nature, yang or yin, that they had temporarily conceded to the spouse during the emergency period."  

The data that Gutmann uses to support his assertions about these universal age-related personality changes come from naturalistic interviews and especially from the administration of the TAT (Thematic Apperception Test). The first project Gutmann conducted along these lines was actually done with Neugarten as part of the Kansas City Studies of Adult Life. In fact, their paper "Age-Sex Roles and Personality in Middle Age: A Thematic Apperception Study" (1958) is included in the Meanings of Age volume discussed above. An elaboration of that thesis, and the replication of those findings, would become Gutmann's life work. After all, the personality shifts observed in the cross-sectional Kansas City data, if they were to be claimed as a universal developmental process, would not only need to be paralleled in diverse settings the world over, but they would need to be anchored in longitudinal data. Over the course of his career, Gutmann expanded his work by pursuing the Navajo (in the southwestern United States), the Druze (of Galilean Israel and the Golan Heights), and Mayan peoples (in Mexico, including both the Lowland and Highland Maya). The TAT is a projective test, originally developed by psychologist Henry Murray, in which the subject is asked to tell a story about a picture on a card. Gutmann has consistently used several of what seem to be cultural-neutral cards in the standard Murray TAT battery, including the two cards that are probably most well known: the Rope Climber card, and the Heterosexual Conflict card. Other cards were tailored to meet standards of the culture in which they were administered (e.g., apparel, housing, furnishings). Gutmann used the same basic deck of cards across the sites to convey a standard set of meanings. Anticipating the remarks of critics of his data, and of projective testing in general, Gutmann makes a strong case in his work by pursuing the Navajo (in the southwestern United States), the Druze (of Galilean Israel and the Golan Heights), and Mayan peoples (in Mexico, including both the Lowland and Highland Maya). The TAT is a projective test, originally developed by psychologist Henry Murray, in which the subject is asked to tell a story about a picture on a card. Gutmann has consistently used several of what seem to be cultural-neutral cards in the standard Murray TAT battery, including the two cards that are probably most well known: the Rope Climber card, and the Heterosexual Conflict card. Other cards were tailored to meet standards of the culture in which they were administered (e.g., apparel, housing, furnishings). Gutmann used the same basic deck of cards across the sites to convey a standard set of meanings. Anticipating the remarks of critics of his data, and of projective testing in general, Gutmann makes a strong case in their view, the projective protocols, because they require "subjective" analytic approaches, are irredeemably unreliable. Worse yet, in their book, the projectives rarely predict to the presumably more reliable findings from the "objective" self-report personality inventories. However, reporting on recent longitudinal TAT data, Gutmann notes that ... tendencies picked up by the TAT will not surface in the subjects' concurrent self-report inventory; but five years later these tendencies are no longer covert; they will be openly acknowledged by the same respondents. Clearly, tendencies that will later emerge openly in behavior and attitude are first rehearsed and "detoxified" in fantasy; the mind obeys the rules of fantasy life and not those of bureaucratic methodologies. The TAT acts as a kind of early warning system or seismograph of the psyche, picking up the early stirrings at the tectonic bowels of the personality, while these same murmurs are still being ignored by the conscious mind (and unavailable for self-report). As Bernice Neugarten (1968) has pointed out, these tools are more likely to register change rather than stability of personality. They are then, without apology, ideal instruments for [the] study of personality ... in the later years (p. 3, emphases added).

What I find most liberating about Gutmann's work is that he has long emphasized the possibility that the second half of life may be filled with new potentials and capacities. This theme is especially salient in his earlier research, in which he focused on what he calls the "strong face of aging," its sources, its powers, and the significant contributions that elders make to other people's lives and to society at large. The aging self, in particular, actually has the chance to expand in later life, and does not necessarily become stagnant or fragmented.

Gutmann's later, more clinical, work shifted toward the weaker face of aging, to its psychological disorders, and to the movement from being an "elder" to being "aged." This is exemplified in his essays "Culture and Mental Health in Later Life, Revisited," "The Human Father and the Masculine Life Cycle," and "Psychological Development and Pathology in Later Adulthood," the last of which is a fascinating analysis of the life of Ernest Hemingway as an illustration of Gutmann's theory.

Gutmann introduces each paper in this collection on a personal note, situating each piece within the context of his evolving thought and career. Even readers already familiar with Gutmann's work will find these reflections interesting — and often very humorous. Consider, for example, his reflections on the younger versus the older Gutmann:

[Even] Sigmund Freud did not prepare me for this particular recognition — that an older man can be rivalrous with his younger self. Worse yet, I felt disadvantaged in this competition: Gutmann the younger seemed smarter than me, and — save for some pretentious language and psychobabble — a better writer. Thus, when that cocky striping deserted, he left me vulnerable to aging and he ripped me off by taking away my special myth and my youthful — if counterphobic — courage. Finally, it seemed, insult was added to injury: Gutmann the younger's work was done, but I had to put together a book to highlight that young punk's accomplishments (p. xviii).

Gutmann's theses and data have generated controversy and have been criticized on many grounds. I will not elaborate on these criticisms here. In fact, Gutmann acknowledges, and responds to, his critics in several of the opening narratives. Let me say only this: Regardless of whether one is inclined or disinclined to believe Gutmann's theses or data, there are many important messages in this compilation that should not be ignored. I will return to other of these messages at the close of the essay.

Neugarten's Legacy Continues

Adulthood and Aging: Research on Continuities and Discontinuities, edited by Vern L. Bengtson, contains 15 chapters written by 19 of Neugarten's former students or long-standing colleagues. These papers, initially presented at a 1995 Chicago conference in honor of Neugarten's 79th birthday, explore one of the great themes in Neugarten's work: That of continuity and discontinuity, and of stability and change, throughout adult life. The authors, who represent a range of disciplines — psychiatry, psychology, sociology, and social policy — were asked to discuss how this theme is represented in, and further developed by, their research. Each chapter is followed by a brief commentary on that chapter from another participant in the conference. The volume opens with a short foreword by James Birren and a very brief preface by Bengtson, and it ends with a biographical profile of Neugarten.

Like many conference volumes, this collection has a somewhat disjointed feel: It has no clear internal structure (the 15 chapters appear one after the other, separated by the commentary on the prior chapter), no substantive introductory chapter, and no integrative closing chapter. In addition, if one evaluates the success of this volume in terms of whether it achieves its stated mission — "to explore and apply models of continuity and discontinuity" — this collection comes up short. Few of these chapters offer either an explicit theoretical model for un-

Vol. 37, No. 5, 1997 695
understanding continuity or discontinuity, or a clear definition of these concepts and how they might be dealt with practically in our research. In this and other writing on human development, “continuity” is often used synonymously with “stability,” and “discontinuity” is often used synonymously with “change.” Are they the same? (Some scholars have actually argued that they are different concepts and should not be used interchangeably; e.g., Shanahan, 1991.) Are continuity and discontinuity mutually exclusive concepts? How do we know these phenomena when we see them? How might they be defined, measured, and validated? (Along these lines, there is an emphasis on how weighty questions, sophisticated, and more meaningful, measures of “change” in longitudinal research; for examples, see Collins, 1996; Collins & Horn, 1991; Engel & Reinecke, 1996; Gottman, 1995; Willett, 1989.)

However, a few chapters are exceptional in this regard. For example, Chiriboga notes the fact that “students of adult development and aging ... have long decried the lack of theoretical guidelines for investigating continuity and change over time” (p. 174), and offers Cogen’s (1977) three underlying models of adult development (the “developmental stability model,” the “orderly change model,” and the “random change model”) as a way to frame these questions.

Gutmann also criticizes what he calls the “camel’s back model of pathogenesis,” in which “the laden beast will endure until a critical mass of burden is reached, at which point any additional straw will cause a decisive rupture of its back.” This model does not specify the destructive agents; given a critical mass of fodder, any additional straw can bring about the sudden cracking of the dromedary’s back” (p. 2, emphasis added). That “objective” and quantitative model is flawed, Gutmann says, because burden is “subjectively rather than objectively weighted: One man’s meat is another man’s poison.” This being the case, no standard catalogue of later life losses and insults” can guide our work. Instead, Gutmann argues that “the last straw breaks the camel’s back not because of its added weight, but because the camel is already giving up the fight” (p. 3, emphasis added).

It is important to note that many of these chapters do advance our understanding of other concepts and themes that Neugarten emphasized in her work, many of which were noted in the first section of this essay. For example, several chapters offer important extensions of Neugarten’s ideas about time and timing. Hagestad’s “personal ethnography” examines how unexpected illnesses can become a struggle to not fall “out of time.” Life-threatening illnesses create uncertainty in life; push people out of the predictable rhythms of social schedules; cause “ripple effects” throughout familial and social networks; and interrupt projects that are important for the maintenance of the self. Cohler, too, describes the ways in which schizophrenic adults and their families live “outside of time” as their lives are disrupted by episodes of hospitalization, discharge, and rehospitalization. And Tobin offers an interesting look at elderly parents with mentally retarded adult children. These “perpetual parents” experience time and aging differently than most parents — these parents must actively care for their retarded children all their lives, or at least until they become too incapacitated to maintain responsibility for care.

The broad conceptual model of “successful aging” presented by the Kahanas expands Neugarten’s early paper on this topic, taking up many of the same questions: What is successful aging? Is “success” equated with the simple absence of problems, or is it something more? Because any model of successful aging is necessarily multidimensional, what are its essential elements, and are some more important than others? The process at the heart of the Kahanas’ model — “preventive-corrective proactivity” — also parallels Neugarten’s emphasis on human beings as active and adaptive organisms. Neugarten’s stress on the positive sides of aging is also well-represented in the Liebermans’ chapter on widowhood: While the loss of a partner may create a state of crisis and cause grieving, it may also create new potential for growth as these women revise their self-concepts, take on new interests, develop new relationships, and become self-sufficient. However, Huyck’s chapter on gender identity contains interesting commentary on Gutmann’s “parental imperative” thesis, which I discussed earlier. Huyck argues that an important challenge facing Gutmann’s thesis is that we have yet to develop an adequate measure of “parental responsibility.” Huyck also suggests that the use of terms like “androgyny” and “unisex” to describe a possible personality shift in later life should be eliminated from our discussions, for “gender-associated behavior will [always] be evaluated, and responded to, by others in terms of the sex and presumed gender of the actor” (p. 118). Gender, she says, is “more problematic for men than for women. Women, particularly mid-life women, seem better able to incorporate what they feel are masculine characteristics without feeling compromised in their femininity ... [Whereas] the consequences of psychological passivity for mid-life men depend on the wife’s response; if she is accepting, his passivity is not problematic, but if he feels she demeans it, he is likely to feel very stressed” (p. 119).

Two chapters provide important new evidence on the social policy issues with which Neugarten has become increasingly interested in her later years. First, Binstock takes up Neugarten’s concerns about “age versus need” and shows that there are a few hints that purely age-based policies may be eroding. These are mainly instances of age being combined with economic status to determine benefit levels (e.g., the Social Security Reform Act of 1983, the Tax Reform Act of 1986, the Medicare Catastrophic Coverage Act of 1988, the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993). In addition, several long-term care proposals have been introduced since the late 1980s (e.g., the Long-Term Care Act of 1989; a long-term program proposed by Clinton in 1993), and each of these initiatives has eliminated age as a criterion for coverage.

Then, Cook takes up Neugarten’s warning that a “politics of age” may emerge in an aging society, as younger groups may feel resentful of the potential strain that a large elderly population may place on public resources. As Cook charts support for programs for older Americans throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, she shows that Neugarten’s warnings were partially correct: While public support for entitlement programs that target older people has remained strong, views in the media and among policy elites have often been very negative.

How Might the Field of Gerontology Be Improved?

As I noted at the opening of this essay, what I find most intriguing about these volumes is their more peripheral commentary on the state of gerontology: about what attracts us to this field, whether we can do better by our subject matter; whether we can put meaning back into gerontological research; and whether gerontology has reached its “end” or can be “saved.” Let me now touch upon a few additional points related to these themes.

What Makes Us Interested in Gerontology Anyway? If we look around us and within ourselves, we will probably
find that we are not attracted to our subject-matter randomly. Something in our own biographies or personalities likely draws us to gerontology and to a specific area of inquiry within it. Putting into words what many of us have often felt, Gutmann comments on what he sees as two groups of gerontologists drawn to the field for quite different reasons: gerophiles and gerophobes. Most recruits to the field of gerontology, Gutmann says, are gerophiles. But they were once rescued by their grandparents and now they want to repay the favor; they want to do good by old people. However, a smaller "underground community of gerophobes" exists. (Gutmann says he is among them; I, too, am a likely member of this group.) Gerophobes are attracted to the field of gerontology, consciously or unconsciously, because they fear, and want to be protected from, growing old. Along these lines, Gutmann wittily notes that: 'Trained as a clinician, I had early on acquired the Doctor's delusion: that the role boundaries set between clinician and patient would form an immune barrier against the patient's disorder. But as I become geriatric myself, that fantasy is revealed for the delusion it really is. My older patients and research subjects are not my portrait of Dorian Gray — and they never were... I have become the gray Dorian" (p. xviii).

Perhaps we might all benefit from asking ourselves tough questions about what led us to pursue academic or applied careers in gerontology. Once we know these answers (and are aware of these biases), our work will not only be better for it, but will be a little more honest, too.

Can We Do Better By Our Subject Matter? Is the field of gerontology, like the younger self that the older Gutmann now describes, so "eager for scientific recognition and not yet aware that significance is more than statistics" (p. 2)? Are we too quick to simply "seek to holy grail of the .05 level," unable to distinguish meaningful findings from statistically significant ones, and running models with too many variables and not enough thought?

Perhaps we might also do well to follow Gutmann's lead and spend less time in library (and less time with our computers as well) and more time learning from our direct experiences — in the field, from our patients, and from ourselves. And perhaps we might all benefit if the more "scientific gerontologists" among us were open to approaches other than the more "bureaucratic methodologies," to use Gutmann's phrases.

Neugarten once said that her goal was to "return old people to the human race — to make clear that they are not a special species, not creatures from another planet" (quoted in "A Profile of Bernice L. Neugarten" in the Bengtson volume, p. 375). Perhaps the time has now come to return old people — with real lives, and real voices — to our research. The study of lives is a messy business, and we must begin to take a more careful look at lives as they are actually lived, not as we wish them to be in order to simplify our research, to paraphrase Rindfuss, Swicegood, and Rosenfeld (1987, p. 799).

In Nothing as Rich as Human Life, a 50-minute video in which historian W. Andrew Achenbaum interviews Neugarten about her life and work, Neugarten tells the story of a doctoral student who came to ask for her advice on the methods she was planning to use in a project on middle age. The student was going to follow up a sample of a now upper-class, highly placed men for whom she had data from adolescence. "You don't take that kind of man," she says, "and put him in an interview, hand him a batch of lines divided into spaces, and say 'Put on this line, how satisfied are you with your life, how satisfied was your ... ?' I said to the woman, 'you're talking to somebody. Let him talk. Ask him what it's like. Don't hand him lines and ask him, 'Is it a 2 or a 3?' This isn't what you should be up to here.... You have to deal with your subject matter in terms of its merit ... And I happen to think that adults in general merit more attention than children: They've got more to say. They've thought ... And if you've got highly placed, successful men, and you ask them to rate themselves on 5-point scales that you have thought up, then you're not doing right by that subject matter."

Can We Put Meaning Back Into Gerontological Research? Those of us who are students of Neugarten will recall waiting, with great anxiety, for her ultimate question of us: "So what? Is your research worth a damn? Does it mean anything?" These are the toughest and most important questions that we must ask ourselves.

Has Gerontology Reached Its End? In an essay from a 1994 newsletter issued by Northwestern University's Buehler Center on Aging (included in The Meanings of Age), Neugarten made what was to become a controversial statement: "When I am asked about the future of gerontology, I am greatly tempted to predict that the field of gerontology is going to disappear over the next couple of decades" ("The End of Gerontology," p. 402).

Why? From an intellectual or academic standpoint, she says, aging is a lifelong process that begins at birth, not at an arbitrary point in the latter third of life. From a policy standpoint, age-related entitlements are finally being called into question. And on the "front lines," service providers, too, are recognizing that it is hard to provide services to people based on age alone. As a result, "gerontology is not going to last. The trend is undeniable. In the last analyses, chopping up the life cycle was not a very good idea to begin with.... The study of aging as it is presently defined will become less and less viable as age becomes less and less a criterion of anything. For the word 'gerontology,' we will substitute something we now call 'the study of lives,' based on the concept of the life cycle as a whole and the processes of change from infancy through old age" (p. 403).

In the video Nothing as Rich as Human Life, Neugarten continues: "There's something wrong with making a field that's so tightly limited somehow [bracketed by age] that you forget that a person who is 65 is a product of what he's been before. And if you don't [understand] what he's been before, you're not going to understand him when he's 65 really.... It belittles the concept of change over the life cycle.... There is, of course, always something to be said for [studying] growing old. But don't set it up in this kind of bracket [because] it does intellectual harm."

Has gerontology reached its end? Can it — and should it — be saved?

Richard A. Settersten, Jr., PhD
Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology
Case Western Reserve University
Cleveland, Ohio 44106-7124

References


It could hardly be a more exciting time to live or die. A thousand years of suffering and sorrow, confusion and doubt, dashed hopes and casual disasters — all about to end. The whole ramshackle edifice of failed civilization about to end. The age of folly to end. And all of it to end in the biggest of bangs. O, rapture!

That is pretty much how things stood as Christiandom envisioned the first millennium: (Those who were exacer-bated in the apocalyptic drama were not anticipating a re-run in 2001: one cataclysm was enough.) The emphasis was on the destruction of the existing order of human life rather than the situation that would follow after the forces of the Anti-Christ completed their role in the cosmic drama. It was easy to imagine the forms of disaster. One had but to transpose and elaborate upon the horrors that had already been visited on this miserable race of sinners: storms, flood and fire, famine, drought, and disease, the convulsions of the earth, the spewings of the volcano, and, over and again, the bloody hands of mercenaries. Imaginations luxuriated as no terror was prohibited from expression. One of the most salient consequences of this mindset was the heightened sensitivity to possible manifestations of the Anti-Christ. What form would be taken by this “evil twin”? It could be anybody.

Clever minds were particularly suspicious of those presenting themselves as saintly and holy, just the sort of cover that the demon might choose. The political opponent, the rival, the person of remarkable talents, the stranger were also vulnerable to accusation. Few burdened themselves with the difficult task of furnishing the