Editorial

Exploring the Connections: Theory and Research

All studies and the papers that are written from them are driven by ideas. They motivate the research and give it context. Some papers are narrowly focused on the social technology that would help workers in the practice community (in organizational administration, social work or nursing, for example) to solve a problem that would make their work more efficient and effective. These applied research studies appear frequently in the specialized journals read in the practice community and in the premier applied research journal in our field, *The Gerontologist*. The audience for applied research is devoted and enthusiastic and primarily concerned with practical issues.

Basic research is driven by ideas, too. These ideas are more abstract—and not as problem-focused—than those in applied research. Some are based on theory, others on a strong conceptual framework that may someday be viewed as theory. Basic research has an audience that transcends disciplinary boundaries.

Most writers on the subject seem to agree that theory, and therefore basic research, has been slow to develop in social gerontology. For that reason the *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences* has hosted a series of theory papers during the past three years. Four contemporary theorists were asked to write essays addressing researchers in social gerontology. In these papers they were asked to explain themselves theoretically and to demonstrate some points where theory and research come together. The four papers were reviewed by four reviewers each and underwent an additional round of revisions before they were accepted. The result has been very gratifying. Essays on life course theory, feminist theory, and critical theory appear in earlier issues. Dale Dannefer wrote “Cumulative Advantage/Disadvantage and the Life Course: Cross-Fertilizing Age and Social Science Theory” (November 2003), followed by Toni Calasanti’s “Feminist Gerontology and Old Men” (November 2004) and Simon Biggs’ “Beyond Appearances: Perspectives on Identity in Later Life and Some Implications for Method” (May 2005). If you have not read these papers, I commend them to you.

The fourth and final theory paper in the series is included in the present issue. When there is not a body of relevant theory, researchers often do not know where to turn. Richard Settersten has one answer to this problem in his article entitled “Linking the two ends of life: What gerontology can learn from childhood studies.” It is amazing to consider the similarities and differences between the theoretical approaches used in the two areas of research. I think that it does not infantilize gerontology to compare some of its major concepts with those of researchers who study people at other times of life. See what you think. Then read Lisa Kelley’s article, “Minor children and adult care exchanges with community-dwelling frail elders in a St. Lucian Village” (March 2005).

Charles F. Longino, Jr., PhD
Editor, *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*