Linking the Two Ends of Life: What Gerontology Can Learn From Childhood Studies

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This paper extends provocative ideas from the emerging interdisciplinary field of childhood studies to the field of gerontology. These ideas constitute a framework for building new kinds of theories and research on old people and old age—gathered around rights and responsibilities of and for old people; focused on their agency and social participation; concerned with the social problems of old people, as well as how old people are constructed to be social problems; anchored in their perspectives and voices; dedicated to describing and explaining both commonness and difference in their experiences and statuses; devoted to understanding old people as beings and becoming; and attentive to the interdependence of generations within families and societies. These commitments will require gerontology to strengthen its treatment of sociocultural phenomena, prompt more genuinely interdisciplinary scholarship, and advocate a wider range of research methods and data. A “new social studies of old people and old age,” nurtured around these ideas, will also raise the visibility of old people and old age in science, public policy, and social life.

One of the central propositions of developmental science is that experiences and statuses in one period of life cannot be understood in isolation from those in other periods. This proposition is most often evoked in taking—or expressing the need to take—a long view of individual lives, though it is also relevant in understanding the collective lives of cohorts and other groups. Yet, this proposition can also be understood at a higher level as a call to integrate scientific inquiry across what have long been studied as distinct life periods (e.g., childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle age, old age). Two tasks are central to responding to this call: one, to build views of human development that move beyond age-based divisions; and the other, to build stronger partnerships across disciplines (for illustrations related to life-course sociology and life-span psychology, see Settersten, 2005).

My hope in this article is to make a small attempt to build bridges between scholarship on childhood and old age and to ask how scholarship on the first few decades of life might yield insights for scholarship on the last few decades. I especially draw on some of the ideas that underlie what Prout (2005) calls the “new social studies of children and childhood”—in short, the field of “childhood studies.” This interdisciplinary, and to date largely European, field is transforming the ways in which the social experiences of children, which are dramatically different from what they were a century or even a half century ago. These differences are not simply due to changes in the physical or psychological functioning of children, but are also the result of significant changes in cultural practices and legal definitions surrounding what children and childhood are or should be.

Distinguishing Between the Old Person, Old People, Old Age, and Aging

At the center of the field of childhood studies lies a distinction between childhood as a position in social structure, children as the group of individuals who occupy that position, and the child as a whole person, rights-bearing citizen, and idealized entity. Childhood is understood as both a permanent and temporary space. It is permanent in that it is a constant part of the structure of a society. But it is temporary in that its form and content continuously change, particularly as a result of the actions of new generations of children who move through it and of parents, professionals, and other adults who raise or advocate for children in new ways. One of the central missions of childhood studies has been to reveal the social meanings of childhood and the social experiences of children, which are dramatically different from what they were a century or even a half century ago. These differences are not simply due to changes in the physical or psychological functioning of children, but are also the result of significant changes in cultural practices and legal definitions surrounding what children and childhood are or should be.

A related task is to reveal how childhood, as a social category, intersects with other categories, and how children, as members of that group, interact with and have experiences with members of other groups. Here, the category “adulthood” is particularly important because childhood is often defined in direct contrast to adulthood (that is, being a child—legally, socially, psychologically, or physically—is at least partially about not yet being an adult). Similarly, “adults,” as members of that category, are particularly important because children’s lives are significantly defined by and in relation to adults (e.g., parents, educators, legislators, child advocates).
What are the implications of these distinctions for gerontologists? First, they suggest that gerontologists more clearly differentiate between the old person (as an individual), old people (as a group), old age (as a life period), and aging (as a lifelong process). Second, they suggest that we strengthen our commitment to describing and explaining the social meanings of old age and the social experiences of old people, the social forces that produce them, and the social consequences with which they come. Before these advances can occur, however, gerontologists must be willing to claim labels such as “old person,” “old people,” and “old age” as legitimate and use them confidently. At present these terms leave us feeling unsettled or uneasy. Yet therein lies their power. Gerontologists now eschew these terms for fear that they seem disrespectful or promote a negative and homogenized view of this period of life and the people in it. Instead, we opt for more age-(in)sensitive language such as “older adults” or “later life.” Many people who might be classified as “old” using traditional age criteria (such as 65 years old) do not consider themselves as such and refuse to do so (Cutler, Whitelaw, & Beattie, 2002). These dynamics result in an ideology of “agelessness,” itself a kind of ageism, in which old age is viewed as something that can be transcended and which ultimately denies old people “one of their most hard-earned resources: their age” (Andrews, 1999, p. 301). In taking steps to confront and even embrace these taboo terms, the visibility and value of old people and old age in science and society might be promoted and raised rather than avoided and lowered. There are inherent differences between children and childhood, on the one hand, and old people and old age, on the other, because they are located at opposite ends of life. Children leave childhood and become adults. They have relatively little history behind them and look forward with certainty to many decades of life ahead. Old people do not leave old age and enter another period, but instead face a dwindling time horizon and, ultimately, death. This basic fact is something that many gerontologists seem to want to deny or forget, whether out of fear of growing old or out of desires to care for and be sensitive to the circumstances of old people. These reactions, of course, are also heavily conditioned by cultural ideologies around dependence, dying, and death (e.g., Sokolovsky, 1997).

There is great need to examine contemporary social and legal definitions of old age and old people: When does old age begin? What markers signify entry into and calibrate movement through it? There is a similar need for renewed attention to “subjective age identity” in gerontology: how old a person feels, into which age group she places herself, or how old she would like to be (e.g., Kaufman & Elder, 2002; Settersten, 1999). In most Western nations, legal definitions of adulthood are bound to the ages of 18 or 21, at which point some of the legal rights and responsibilities of adulthood are granted. But even these are given gradually or in inconsistent and arbitrary ways. For example, in most American states, young people are allowed to marry before they are allowed to vote or serve in the military but cannot consume alcohol until even later. Young people are quick to point out these contradictions, but they also cling tightly to these ages in negotiating increased privileges with parents and other adults.

The boundary between childhood and adulthood is, in reality, far more complicated than these simple legal ages. Indeed, recent research in North America and Western Europe shows that in most countries many of the traditional markers of adulthood—leaving home, finishing school, starting work, getting married, and having children—have changed dramatically in the last few decades (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). This set of markers is now generally more protracted and variable, with sizable proportions of individuals not completing many of these transitions until well into their 30s. These markers have also changed dramatically in the minds of young people and the public. Many young people who have completed some and even all of these transitions do not yet feel like adults (though most do by the time they become parents), and public opinion suggests that both marriage and parenting are now disassociated from definitions of adulthood (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004).

At the other end of life, traditional markers of old age, at least in many Western nations and in the last half century, have largely been tied to chronological age and eligibility for old age programs and entitlements, or to retirement from work (e.g., Philipson, 1998). These markers, embedded in laws and policies, are important forces in the social construction of old age. Yet these, too, have changed dramatically in recent years, as eligibility criteria have shifted upward, as retirement patterns have become highly variable (with simultaneous trends toward early, late, and partial retirement), and as old age has grown longer and, at least for the early part, healthier. What is it, then, that signifies entry into old age and calibrates movement through the “young–old,” “old–old,” and “oldest–old” periods so commonly cited in the aging literature? The transition into old age, like the transition into adulthood, seems equally, if not more, protracted and blurred. Indeed, the very structure and content of “prolonged old age” in “long-lived societies” (Binstock, 2004, p. 362) seems likely to become only more blurry in the future.

A final issue that is potentially threatening to gerontology concerns the distinction between old age (as a period) and aging (as a lifelong process). Gerontologists are often ultimately interested in aging, but generally study old age. Can we justify studying old age in ways that knife it off from the past? Here again lies an important difference between childhood and old age: Old people have long pasts that must be taken into account; children do not. This is not to say, however, that temporal matters are unimportant in studying children. Indeed, concerns about the long-ranging effects of early experiences underlie much scholarship on child development and many child policies and programs, especially those based on the premise that early interventions will bring long-term cumulative payoffs.

The necessity of understanding aging in life-long terms is reflected in the widespread surge of references to the “life span” and especially “life course,” driven by the advances in the respective disciplines of psychology (e.g., Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998) and sociology (e.g., Elder & Johnson, 2003; Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003). Will greater attention to the whole of life bring the end of gerontology? This provocative question was posed a decade ago by Neugarten (1996), and her answer at that time leaned toward yes. My own response, like Hendricks and Cutler’s (2002) recent reflections on the same question, leans toward no. While there is a natural and mutual attraction between the life course and aging, greater attention to life-course concepts, principles, and data will not likely bring the end of gerontology—but it may revolutionize the field as we...
now know it. There is already good evidence that such transformations are well underway (for aging-related applications in the domains of health, work, retirement, leisure, and family, see Settersten, 2003a). These potentials have long been reflected in the American Psychological Association’s Division on Adult Development and Aging and are now reflected in the recent renaming of the American Sociological Association’s Section on Aging to the Section on Aging and the Life Course. These potentials are also captured in the unusual theme of a recent (2003) annual meeting of The Gerontological Society of America (GSA): “Our Future Selves: Research, Education, and Services for Early Development and Childhood in an Aging Society.”

Greater attention to the whole of life requires scientists to monitor advances in knowledge on all life periods, sift through mounting evidence, and make connections and build theories that cut across age- and disciplinary-based divisions. It also requires the development of new theories, concepts, and methods and further commitments to gathering and analyzing longitudinal and archival data. Highly skilled but broadly trained gerontologists seem particularly well-suited for this task because, as noted earlier, gerontologists must more naturally account for a long past in understanding present experiences of old people and anticipating future ones. Too exclusive a focus on any one period and the people in it loses what is best in life-course research: a dynamic and process-based approach to understanding trajectories and transitions for individuals and cohorts as they grow up and older. Still, age-based specializations will probably always exist, as the needs and circumstances of people in specific periods seem at least somewhat distinct from others, which leads us next to questions about commonness and difference.

Old Age(s): The Tension Between Commonness and Difference

A primary assumption in childhood studies is that there is no single version of childhood within a given nation or culture, let alone one that is global. Indeed, the field assumes that differences within nations or cultures may be as wide as those between them, and one of its central missions is to describe and explain multiple childhoods. As noted above, however, there are surely things that all children have in common because they share this position in life. Together, these two propositions bring an active tension, with one proposition granting some amount of permanency and commonness in children’s experiences, and the other taking for granted sizable variability and difference.

Gerontology would similarly benefit from renewed attention to commonness and to these tensions between commonness and difference. Variability now seems to be our mantra, as articles are opened and closed noting the fact that old people are generally more different from one another than they are similar and that there is greater variability in this period of life relative to earlier ones. Dannefer’s (e.g., 2003) recent theoretical discussions of cumulative advantage and disadvantage—freshly packaged extensions of classic ideas in sociology and economics—have been helpful in drawing attention to matters of heterogeneity and inequality over the life course. As already noted, a central—and special—challenge in studying old people and old age is that we must take account of a long past, and the emphasis on cumulative embodies time. Yet the many sudden references to the notion of cumulative advantage and disadvantage in research on aging remain rather empty, and these ideas may be more easily applied to some phenomena, such as income and health disparities, than others, such as personality traits and characteristics.

The pendulum seems to have swung so far in the direction of variability that only rarely are there mentions of things that old people have in common. What is that makes old people and old age different from other adults and the rest of adulthood? Even popular textbooks in gerontology (e.g., Atchley & Barusch, 2004; Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2002; Morgan & Kunkel, 2001; Quadagno, 2002) do not directly address this basic question, though some possibilities can be extracted, such as:

- normative declines in physical and cognitive capacities and increased prospects of failing health or chronic health conditions;
- greater salience of health concerns in individuals’ selfdefinitions;
- diminishing time left to live and the need to come to terms with one’s mortality;
- bereavement associated with the death of parents, spouses, and friends;
- more restricted but intense social relationships and networks;
- being perceived or treated by others in ageist ways;
- increasing interiority, desire for integrity, and search for meaning in life;
- greater acceptance of things that cannot be controlled in life, coupled with greater fear of losing control over one’s life.

This is not to say that our thinking should be universalistic or that we should return to outdated and problematic “stage” theories of human development (for a critique, see Settersten, 1999). It is to instead say that we must be as open to things that are shared within and between groups of old people as we are to the things that fracture the coherence of “old age” or “old people” as categories. When things that old people have in common—and that potentially unite them—are neglected, the activities and agendas (especially political ones) that serve the interests and needs of old people are also risked. The tension between commonness and difference is healthy, and it need not be resolved or reconciled as much as actively capitalized upon in order to creatively generate theories and conduct research.

Old People as Social Actors and Participants

Another central emphasis of childhood studies is that even very young children are competent social actors who can—and should be granted opportunities to—participate in decisions that affect them and define the directions and processes of their own development. Of course, there are always questions about how far this proposition can be extended in practice, given the status of children as dependents. This can also be said of many old people, at least those who are experiencing significant declines. The topic of agency has in recent years also become prevalent in child psychology, especially in light of the growing popularity of constructivist paradigms in developmental psychology. The same is true in gerontology, as reflected in the popularity of the successful aging rubric, to which I will later return.

A related principle that sets childhood studies far apart from traditional child psychology is the priority it assigns to listening to children’s voices and understanding their perspectives. Methodologically, this translates into a serious commitment to study children in ways that reveal their lived experiences from
their viewpoints and in their own words. Childhood studies has been especially critical of child psychology for objectifying children by quickly testing and labeling children with respect to statistical norms and by reducing their complexity to a handful of variables derived from questionnaires filled out by adults (e.g., parents, teachers) who somehow “represent” the child (see especially Woodhead, 1999). It has also encouraged research with (rather than on) children, and has adopted methodological strategies that significantly include children in the research process. The participation of children in research can take many forms: the weakest forms are to directly address children in obtaining informed consent, educate children in terms they can understand about research and their role in it, and avoid deception of any kind; the strongest forms are to have children participate as junior coinvestigators (Kirby & Woodhead, 2003).

Childhood scholars have experimented with these latter, more revolutionary, practices. Imagine how different research in gerontology would be if we were to consult with old people as research questions are defined and framed, instruments are developed, results are interpreted, and implications for policy and practice are considered. Like researchers who work with children, researchers who work with old people must often confront complicated challenges related to human subjects and other ethical matters, particularly if they recruit subjects who are experiencing or at risk for serious physical and cognitive declines (especially dementia). These conditions create legitimate worries that data obtained from these participants will be inaccurate or fraught with reliability problems. Yet there must be ways to more actively and directly involve old people in the research process, regardless of abilities and other statuses.

The emphasis on children’s voices and perspectives, pervasive in the field of childhood studies, naturally leads us to the question: Where is the old person in research on aging? Rather than rely so exclusively on the numeric input that study participants provide as they are tested or administered a scale already in widespread use, new insights might result if we more often gave old people a chance to talk about the problems and possibilities of old age—and if we more often took the chance to listen and find a place for their voices in our publications. This is not to say that understanding people as variables does not yield important findings. It is to instead say that we might more often acknowledge if they are to be dealt with effectively.

So much about childhood, then, seems to be about ensuring a positive future and maximizing gain, and so much about old age seems to be about coming to terms with an expansive past and minimizing losses. Of course, gerontology has in the last few decades seriously challenged the stereotype that old age is a dark period of irreversible physical and cognitive declines. This is especially reflected in discussions of “successful,” “productive,” or “robust” aging (e.g., Kahana & Kahana, 2003; Rowe & Kahn, 1998). While it is important to promote positive images of old people and combat negative stereotypes about old people and old age, we must also ask whether we do ourselves and old people a disservice when we downplay the very real difficulties that come with aging, difficulties that must be acknowledged if they are to be dealt with effectively.

The Social Spaces of Old Age

In understanding the development of children, it is impossible to ignore context: The ecology of human development is central to how we think and what we do. Unlike movement through adulthood, movement through childhood is calibrated by a more standard, circumscribed, and interwoven set of environments (though this is not to say that children’s experiences in these environments, nor the quality of these settings and their connections, are uniform). For example, schools are dominant in the daily lives of children, relatively structured and predictable, and formally linked to other contexts. They are the primary place in which friendships and peer groups are built. They are intimately tied to neighborhood environments and community life. They are often architected so that they build on or compensate for family or neighborhood environments. For these and other reasons, research on children and youth has explicitly explored person–context interactions more than research on other life periods.

In contrast, it is not uncommon in gerontology to ask questions that pay little or no attention to context. Or, at least when contexts are referenced, they are rarely treated in ways as specific and comprehensive as in scholarship on children and childhood—in which the composition of, and processes operating in, schools, families, peer groups, and neighborhoods are well-measured and jointly or differentially traced to child outcomes (e.g., Cook, Herman, Phillips, & Settersten, 2003).
Where contexts are well treated in gerontology, they are most often handled singly, such as the vast and informative literatures on residential environments (especially long-term care settings; e.g., Kahana, 2001; Maddox, 2001) or on personal relationships (especially family and dyadic caregiving relationships; e.g., Lang & Fingerman, 2004).

More often than not, gerontologists use individual statuses—such as race and ethnicity, social class, sex and gender, age and cohort, and health—as proxies for context and then compare groups based on configurations of these characteristics. In reality, these variables provide little or no direct information about the social worlds that individuals inhabit nor the experiences of individuals in those worlds. The differences that result when groups are compared are often assumed to index the differential effects of distal historical conditions, institutional settings, social opportunities, and the like—but they are inferred and not directly measured.

Specifying and measuring the effects of social contexts on individuals—as opposed to the standard practice of assessing individual statuses or activities in social domains—remain “elusive” in social gerontology (Maddox, 2004, p. 566). There is a great need to advance knowledge about the contexts that matter in facilitating or constraining the development of old people, how they matter, and for whom they matter, as well as how old people inhabit, navigate, and negotiate their social worlds. Settings beyond residence and personal relationships are particularly important to understand, including neighborhoods, educational institutions, work organizations, leisure, technology, the media, military, historical events and changes, and the state and its policies (for illustrations, see contributions to Settersten & Owens, 2002; Wahl, Scheidt, & Windley, 2004). Attention to these matters is necessary if gerontologists are to overcome what Hagestad and Dannefer (2001, p. 3) describe as the predominant problem of “microfication” of gerontology: a relatively exclusive emphasis on the individual to the neglect of groups and structures, both big and small, and a relatively exclusive emphasis on physical and psychological factors to the neglect of social ones.

The differential emphasis on sociocultural contexts at the two ends of life can also be connected to what life-span psychologists call the “plasticity” (or malleability) of human development and its limits (e.g., Baltes et al., 1998). For example, biogenetic factors may matter more in childhood and old age than during the bulk of adult life. Development during childhood, however, may be particularly open to the influences of environmental factors, whereas in old age, social and cultural forces may offset biological weakening in the sixth and seventh decades in life but have little power in the eighth decade and beyond (Baltes, 1998). That is, once the “incomplete architecture of human ontogeny” has expressed itself in advanced old age, the effects of environmental interventions in promoting gains or preventing losses may be limited (Baltes, 1997, p. 366).

Rights and Responsibilities of and for Old People

One of the hallmark features of childhood studies is its explicit concern with children’s rights and statuses in nations and the world. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) has been especially important in advancing the field because the convention requires ratifying countries to ensure the (1) provision of necessary resources for children, (2) protection of children from harm, and (3) participation of children in decisions that affect their personal lives and well-being. The Convention has been ratified by 191 countries and has tremendous symbolic import. (The United States, Somalia, and Timor-Leste are the only U.N. countries that have not ratified the Convention.) Though the Convention intends to allow some leeway for culturally and politically specific constructions of childhood, it has, in adopting the language of rights, assumed that the needs and circumstances of children are—or must be made—somewhat universal, which brings us back to the issue of commonness discussed earlier. Some have criticized the Convention for being too Western in its assumptions, for creating a “gold standard” against which to judge other childhoods, and for espousing a set of principles that cannot be met in countries that lack the required infrastructure.

Gerontology would similarly benefit from greater debate around the rights and statuses of old people, the ways in which old people contribute to the well-being of others and society, and how they build or have collective agency as a group. Attention to these matters can reinforce the need to watch and advocate for the welfare of elders and link their concerns to those of other social groups (Morgan & David, 2002). There is no document parallel to the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child that enforces special rights for old people, for they should be ensured rights extended to all adults in the countries in which they reside. Many of these existing rights stem from the basic foundation provided by the three documents that comprise the International Bill of Rights (the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [1948], the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights [1966], and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights [1966]).

Like children, though, many old people around the world do have special concerns related to independence, participation, care, self-fulfillment, and dignity, all of which were recently expressed in the United Nations Principles for Older Persons (1999). Unlike the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is ratified by countries whose conditions are then monitored, the Principles for Older Persons more simply encourage governments to give priority attention to the situations of old people. Still, the Principles carry significant potential in getting aging—and research on aging—onto political agendas in participating countries (for an analysis, see Andrews & Clark, 1999).

Children and old people have long been viewed as legitimately dependent populations, and there is more public and government support for interventions in childhood and old age than for other age groups, though there seems to be growing apprehension about the value and costs of government programs serving older adults and the poor (Silverstein, Parrott, Angelelli, & Cook, 2000). In some ways, old people are treated more similarly to adolescents and young adults than to children or other adults; they are assumed to be neither completely dependent nor completely independent, regarded as “choice-making beings,” to use Coles’ (2002) phrase, but also as heavily reliant on others for care, guidance, and support.

For early life, discussions about legal ages often focus on how soon individuals should be granted the full set of adult rights and obligations. For old age, these discussions focus on how late adult rights and obligations should be maintained, or the conditions under which they should be taken away (see Cain, 2003). The circumstances of young and old people are therefore
critically different: Youth are gradually acquiring a set of rights and responsibilities for which they long, while old people are often forced to relinquish rights and responsibilities that they have long had.

The field of childhood studies also makes the problematization of children and childhood important objects of study. For example, a primary tension here concerns the distinctions between understanding children as social problems, understanding the social problems of children, and (often mistakenly) viewing children as a proxy for social problems (that is, identified as the source of problems that are not exclusively about or created by them). These three ways of problematizing children as a group or childhood as a period can be extended to old people and old age. These tensions naturally lead to debates about the responsibilities of these groups and responsibilities for these groups—as well as who is responsible and how.

Of course, the stakes for children are especially great because children generally have little or no political voice. Old people have the right to vote, do so heavily, and are aided by a proliferation of strong and stable political organizations to advocate their interests (Binstock & Quadagno, 2001). Yet voices of and for old people may also increasingly be at risk, at least in Western nations, because old people are perceived as draining the economy, straining the health care system, and threatening the future of the welfare state, especially where there is significant pressure to reduce and deregulate the welfare state (Myles, 2002). These risks are evidenced in popular discussions of the doom and gloom caused by the Baby Boom as it approaches old age and strains the viability of the old-age policies and programs. In this sense, a focus on the social problems of old people and old age may overlook the very significant social contributions of this group and potentials of this life period (see also Thomas, 2004). New attention to these matters is reflected in the 5-year Initiative on Civic Engagement in Older America just announced by GSA in an effort to understand and promote civic engagement in late life. Similar initiatives on civic engagement have recently been launched by professional societies and foundations devoted to children and youth.

Investments in children are often justified on the grounds that the long-term payoffs, and the costs of not intervening, are great. Investments in old people, in contrast, are often contested because the anticipated payoffs are assumed to be low because of the reality of limited time left to live and the perception that interventions have limited effectiveness. This logic is exacerbated by zero-sum logic in the political arena in which expenditures toward one age group are construed as competing with or withdrawing support from other groups (an approach illustrated in the intergenerational equity debate between the young and old, described below). This situation demands that gerontologists build a much stronger case that the social and financial costs of not investing in old age remain great for individuals, families, and societies.

The points above draw attention to the fact that childhood and old age are not just social constructions but political ones, defined and structured by laws and policies that create and reify their boundaries and content (see Leisering, 2003; Settersten, 2003c). This fact should prompt discussion among developmental scientists, including gerontologists, about any moral or political imperatives we have, or should have, to advocate for or intervene on behalf of the populations we study. Most scholars of childhood studies have taken the stance that scientists have a minimal obligation to translate and interpret science for the public, policy makers, and practitioners; but many also argue that advocacy and intervention ought to be part of our charge. These stances are at odds with most basic research on human development as it is currently practiced, with the skills of basic researchers as they are currently trained, and with incentives within academia as it is currently structured. Indeed, the three separate "cultures" of research, policy, and practice have long proven difficult to bridge (Shonkoff, 2000). These debates are healthy because they demand that we clarify our roles as scientific observers and interpreters, on the one hand, and as citizens committed to building civil society and social inclusion for people of all ages, on the other.

Old Age and the Interdependence of Generations

The field of childhood studies, even in emphasizing children's agency, has been careful not to endorse what Prout (2005, p. 66) calls the "myth of the autonomous and independent person." That is, individual development does not happen in isolation but takes place within and is conditioned by complex webs of social relationships. This is obviously the case for the development of children, but it is also true of adults of any age. Our own lives are intimately bound up in the lives of others, especially upward and downward relations across generations in both the family and society. These interdependencies also change over time as individuals move upward through the structure of their families and the population. For example, in adolescence and early adulthood there is an inherent tension between the growing autonomy of children and the declining authority of parents over children's lives. In old age, there is often an inherent tension between the declining autonomy of parents and the growing authority of children over parents' lives, especially in the face of declining capacities.

Children grow up to become adults, and the things that distinguish adults from children are referenced in cultural expectations and reinforced in the law. Of course, as Prout (2005) notes, it is adults who create these expectations, conduct research, make policies, and engage in practices related to children and childhood—and their own experiences as and with children shape the things they do (or do not do) with and for children (see also Alanen & Mayall, 2001). The same thing cannot be said of old age because it is something toward which most people are moving, not from which they are leaving or already left, as is the case with childhood. Parallel activities related to old people and old age are largely conducted by adults who are not yet old and who can only assume what it is like to be old, though most adults have had direct experiences with old people in their families and society. These assumptions and experiences affect what we do (or do not do) with and for old people. In fact, positive experiences with old people often lead individuals to careers in gerontology; so, too, does a fear of aging (Gutmann, 1997).

The interdependence of generations is an area of inquiry to which gerontologists have devoted significant attention, though much remains to be learned about how generational phenomena are played out at family and societal levels (e.g., Silverstein, 2005). Trends across these levels also need not be complementary and may actually be contradictory. For example, sizable proportions of young people now receive significant material assistance from their parents well into their 30s (e.g., Schoeni &
Ross, 2005), but on a societal level there has been a debate, spurred by Preston (1984), about a purported struggle between the young and old over resources and whether too big a share of government resources is allocated to old people at the expense of the young. Similarly, taking care of children was forcefully raised in the 1960s and 1970s and remains a serious public issue in most countries (Qvortrup, 2000), just as taking care of old people will in the future become both an increasingly public issue (e.g., Calasanti & Slevin, 2001) and private “developmental task” for individuals in the early part of adulthood (Dellmann, Blankemeyer, & Pinkard, 2001).

The pressing needs to provide and receive care at both ends of life will not only be played out in politics, policies, and institutions but will also be directly experienced within the family and shaped by a mix of public and private solutions. The parties interested in or responsible for children will always be parents, and these obligations and duties are reinforced in law. But the parallel answer for old people may not be (or guaranteed to be) children. Concerns about both intergenerational equity (safeguarding the welfare of the weakest within generations) and intragenerational justice (safeguarding the welfare of the weakest within generations) in families and societies are certain to become increasingly significant for social life and the welfare state, despite the recognition that all generations have, or should have, a common stake in one another (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Myles, 2002).

Conclusion

Like the “new social studies of children and childhood,” a new social studies of old people and old age seems vital for advancing gerontology—anchored in the perspectives, voices, and everyday experiences of old people, built around their agency and participation in social settings, gathered around rights and social problems, committed to exploring both commonness and diversity, and sensitive to relationships between researchers and the people we study, among other things. Drawing greater attention to sociocultural forces is necessary to compensate for the still heavy emphasis on biological and psychological factors in gerontology and to make more apparent the social complexities and ambiguities of old age in the contemporary world.

Some of these ideas are not completely new to gerontology but were more present in earlier years and now seem part of a world we have lost. Perhaps as gerontology itself has grown older it, like the field of child development (see Prout, 2005), has lost track of some of the more basic preoccupations of its youth and is now experiencing something similar to the uneasiness often said to be typical of midlife—that there must be something more to our field than we have achieved thus far. The surge of interest in the life course may reflect new hopes that the field of gerontology is on the verge of something greater than we have known. Others of these ideas already linger in gerontology in subtle or isolated ways but deserve greater prominence and more complete application as a set. Still other ideas are brand new to the field and can be infused to yield fresh insights. This cluster of ideas, old and new, will bring opportunities to reflect on what the field of gerontology now is, reclaim some of what it once was, and dream about what it might one day become.

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