Is Gerontology Interdisciplinary?

Universities and colleges often espouse the value of interdisciplinary study, and gerontology is frequently cited as an exemplar of an interdisciplinary field of inquiry. It could be argued that this characterization has been good for gerontology in the academic milieu. Gerontology is viewed as intellectually vibrant and engaging, reaching across disciplinary boundaries. But is this characterization correct? Is gerontology interdisciplinary? What evidence exists to support such a claim?

Answering this question might begin by defining multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, terms that are often used interchangeably. Consider the distinction by Ferraro and Chan (1997, p. 374):

A multidisciplinary field of study refers to an inquiry involving a plurality of disciplines where disciplinary boundaries are maintained and the unique contributions of each are highlighted. We refer to interdisciplinary as an inquiry involving a plurality of disciplines where disciplinary boundaries are often muted and the joint contributions of the synergy are highlighted.

For the conduct of research, this distinction implies that multidisciplinary research will entail collaboration among investigators from more than one discipline. One would expect interdisciplinary research, however, to emphasize a more integrated approach—perhaps one that is not even apparent at the outset.

As one reviews the pages of this Journal, is there much evidence of these more interdisciplinary, integrated approaches? There may be more co-authored papers from colleagues from different disciplines, but that may simply be evidence for a multidisciplinary approach to research. I ask these questions for two reasons: (a) to stimulate reflection within our scientific community and (b) to invite colleagues who are engaged in interdisciplinary research to consider submitting their finest work to the Journal.

The title of this publication is the Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences, which clearly identifies the multiple social science disciplines engaged in research on aging. I want to continue the rich tradition of publishing discipline-based research from the wide range of social sciences listed on the masthead (from anthropology to sociology). At the same time, I want our “tent” to welcome interdisciplinary approaches, provided that significant social science content is manifest.

I anticipate more interdisciplinary research on aging in the future because of developments that are changing the way we think about what it means to grow older. First, the Journal is receiving (and publishing) more papers that systematically consider ecological context along with age changes. The interest in multi-level models for studying ecological effects on aging is bringing multiple social science fields together (e.g., sociology and geography). Second, the growing interest in biological specimens (hereafter, biomarkers) is dramatic. Many national and local surveys have begun adding biomarker data, especially since the release of the National Research Council’s report (2000). Although multi-level models are principally bringing social scientists together, I believe that linking cells and surveys will usher in a new wave of research integrating biological and social sciences.

To those engaged in such research, I ask you to consider this Journal as an outlet interested in interdisciplinary research. Parallel to what the Journal does for qualitative research, we can relax the 5,000-word limit somewhat to handle these types of papers (contact the editorial office for details). It is my expectation that gerontology can (and will) reach new heights as an exemplar of interdisciplinary research.

Visible and Behind the Scenes

Each article published in the Journal has a decision editor, and the articles over which I presided have begun to appear. There will be papers to review during my term that may represent a conflict of interest, and I have asked Jacqueline Angel and Neal Krause to serve as decision editors for those submissions. For this service beyond their membership on the editorial board, I consider them associate editors.

I am very grateful to the editorial board for their continued service to our scientific community. Each member has gone the extra mile in providing helpful reviews, and I express my public appreciation for their tireless service. Graham Rowles was on the board when I assumed the editorship and graciously agreed to stay on for another year. Although he will be rotating off the board, we are adding seven new members: Lisa Barnes, Kathleen Cagney, Melissa Hardy, Sarah Ladikta, Gary Lee, Naoko Muramatsu, and John Watkins. Given the increase in submissions to the Journal over the past six years, I think a larger Board is needed.

Finally, I thank the GSA for approving my request for additional pages allocated to the Journal.

Kenneth F. Ferraro, PhD
Editor

REFERENCES
