Editorial

Foreword (and Farewell)

This special issue covers the topic of social networks and aging and marks the end of my editorship of this journal. The confluence of these features provides me the opportunity to dwell on the meaning of this capstone issue and reflect on my five years of stewarding JGSS.

From when I started as editor, JGSS experienced a more than 50% growth in submissions, saw the publication of three supplemental issues, as well as an integrated special issue on widowhood with JGPS and now this special issue on social networks. A large reason for the increase in submissions is that the field of social gerontology geographically diversified with more manuscripts originating from a source outside the United States, sometimes using multinational data. Aging has come to be increasingly recognized as a global phenomenon. Parochial perspectives do not well serve an area of gerontology in which cultural milieu and policy contexts are key protagonists in how aging is construed and how aging populations are treated around the world.

We now have an embarrassment of riches in data availability as evidenced by the proliferation of large, nationally representative often harmonized datasets from many countries and several continents. We have already learned much from these comparative data about the importance of context for how later life is experienced. In addition, longitudinal studies are stretching over increasing lengths of time, some now spanning more than several decades, to examine aging as it was meant to be studied—as a process. These studies have benefited from the ready application of specialized methods that are capable of tracing long-term trends in the physical, social, and economic health of aging individuals and identify their early origins. Our capacity to study aging in “real time” allows us to answer previously unanswerable research questions about human development across large spans of the life course. Additional innovations are coming with the emergence of a new generation of bright junior scholars, many of whom have graced these pages and whose representation in JGSS will continue to increase.

Lest we become too self-congratulatory, I want to emphasize several directions along which I hope we as a field will persevere and improve. First, I urge researchers in social gerontology to continue to privilege social science theory when developing hypotheses and building empirical models. The potential of the wonderfully rich and complex data at our disposal can best be maximized through theory testing. Without the assistance of theory to help understand the meaning of empirical facts, explanations of age and aging related phenomena remain ad hoc and are difficult to generalize (Bengtson, Silverstein, Putney, & Gans, 2008).

Second, it is common, almost mandatory, to treat gerontology as a multidisciplinary field of study and to call for more inter- and multi-disciplinary research, a valid and important goal. But I want to use my last word in this editorial to go in another direction. And that is a call to preserve the uniquely social science profile of JGSS in a changing empirical landscape characterized by enhanced assessments of biomarkers and genotypes. As editors previous to me have suggested, it is important that the health sciences inform the social science of aging but not subsume it. In carving out the intellectual space for social gerontology, it has become increasingly important to identify the added value that the social sciences contribute to better understand the aging process.

That this issue is devoted to the topic of social networks and aging provides the opportunity to nudge the field of social gerontology toward the productive use of social theory and incremental model building. Robert Merton in his treatise Social Theory and Social Structure (Merton, 1968) charged social scientists to turn their attention to theories of the middle range. Social networks, the topic to which this issue is dedicated, provides a good example of a middle-range mechanism that can mediate the influence of various social processes and forces—such as retirement, family support, neighborhood quality, cumulative advantage/disadvantage, caregiving, and health transitions—on well-being in later life. When considered as a system of structural relationships within which resources flow, social networks are a conceptual bridge between society and every day interactions, and serve as an exemplar of how middle-range social science theory can illuminate explanations in social gerontological inquiry.

In closing, I want to thank the Gerontological Society of America for giving me the opportunity to serve as editor of the premier journal for gerontological research in the social sciences. I am very grateful to members of my Editorial Board who often went beyond the call of duty to insure that the review process worked fairly and (for me) efficiently, the legion of peer reviewers without whose seriously considered reviews the journal would not have its strong reputation, and Oxford University Press for providing its publishing expertise to help improve the journal’s scholarly position. Finally, profound appreciation goes out to my two Managing Editors, Norella Putney and Kathleen Jackson, who creatively engaged with me in the processing of manuscripts, supportively worked with authors, reviewers, and
editorial board members, and helped to make my time as editor an edifying and rewarding experience.

References


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