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Growing Pains in the Sociology of Aging and the Life Course: A Review Essay on Recent Textbooks

Harold G. Cox. *Later Life: The Realities of Aging*. 6th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. 2006. 423 pp.

Diana K. Harris. *The Sociology of Aging*. 3rd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield. 2007. 292 pp.

Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, Editors. *Aging and Everyday Life*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. 2000. 483 pp.

Susan M. Hillier and Georgia M. Barrow. *Aging, the Individual and Society*. 8th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. 2007. 465 pp.

Nancy R. Hooyman and H. Asuman Kiyak. *Social Gerontology: A Multidisciplinary Perspective*. 8th ed. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon. 2008. 776 pp.

Leslie A. Morgan and Suzanne R. Kunkel. *Aging, Society, and the Life Course*. 3rd ed. New York: Springer. 2007. 388 pp.

Harry R. Moody. *Aging: Concepts and Controversies*. 6th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge. 2010. 503 pp.

Jill Quadagno. *Aging and the Life Course*. 4th ed. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill. 2008. 521 pp.

Robert S. Weiss and Scott Bass. *Challenges of the Third Age: Meaning and Purpose in Later Life*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2002. 206 pp.

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In this review I attempt, in rather few pages, to do justice to a collection of textbooks in a dynamic subfield of sociology, that of aging and the life course. The challenge is all the greater because of the multidisciplinary nature of this subfield and its history of development through a close dialogue between scholarly and applied/policy concerns. There has long been a productive tension between the integrative and theoretical ambitions of the field—which one of the founders, Matilda White Riley (1988), elegantly described as promising to "provide an analytical framework for understanding the interplay between human lives and changing social structures" (p. 24)—and a more problem-centered orientation toward decline, disability, and dependence among people in later life. Certainly since Carroll Estes's (1979) critique, *The Aging Enterprise*, the point of departure for many sociologists, particularly those focusing on inequality and health, has been Estes's argument that "politics, economics, and social structure have far more to do with the role and status of the aged than does the aging process and its effects on the individual" (p. 221).

Though important, this tension captures only a segment of a broader spectrum of issues sociologists of aging seek to explain, which, as Bengston, Rice, and Johnson (1999:9-10) note, encompasses (1) *the aged* and issues specific to this subpopulation, (2) *aging as a developmental and normative process* across the life course, and (3) *the study of age as a structural basis of social organization and distribution*, for example, in social policies

addressing education, health care, and public pensions. Distinguishing between these themes is helpful in understanding the interdisciplinary linkages that teachers of aging-related courses often find it essential to develop. Teachers focusing on the first (the aged as a subgroup) tend to include specialized material on the physiology and psychology of aging and to draw more from clinical fields such as social work and nursing. The second theme calls for explicit integration of life span, human developmental theory, and research, which tends to emphasize micro-level and ahistorical models. Third, those stressing age as a structural basis for collective action and distribution benefit significantly from political science and comparative anthropology, in addition to relevant sociological materials. This varied and ambitious agenda offers teachers great flexibility in organizing courses, all of which can be said to reflect and advance the development of sociological understandings of aging and the life course. Much of the excitement in teaching about aging lies in conveying to students the breadth and innovation that characterize this subfield.

Alas, among students and in public discourse the salience of a narrower, problem-centered view of aging has only increased: Tens of millions of "baby boomers" are approaching traditional retirement age, even as the adequacy of federal welfare programs and health policy is being scrutinized as never before.[1] This sense of alarm has fueled the proliferation of academic degrees centered on aging in the United States, which, according to the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (personal communication, 2010), now includes nearly 150 bachelor's programs, 130 master's programs, and more than a dozen doctoral programs. (Were we to include programs with aging specialties in psychology, social work, and human development, the numbers would leap considerably.) Thus, while Streib (1981), in an earlier review essay, claimed that aging had "come of age," today we see "growing pains" as teachers seek to convey distinctively sociological perspectives on age-related phenomena, while funders and students alike are driven to respond to compelling implications (and, yes, challenges) of societal aging with the full array of available research.

SOCIAL GERONTOLOGY VERSUS THE SOCIOLOGY OF AGING?

An important, related, distinction is that between the *sociology of aging* and *social gerontology*. Despite substantial overlap between the two, the former emphasizes the study of aging through established theoretical and topical lenses within sociology—for example, social inequality and mobility, dynamics and implications of familial/kin ties, sociology of illness and medicine, and the character and outcomes of political and policy conflict, centering on the aged and disabled as interest groups.[2] By contrast, *social gerontology* implies a truly multidisciplinary enterprise, in which equal attention is paid to contributions not only from other social sciences, but also from the humanities, health sciences, and clinical fields. Readers can turn elsewhere (e.g., Alkema and Alley 2006; Sterns and Ferarro 2009) for discussions of what have been, or should be, the disciplinary status and boundaries of gerontology vis-à-vis other fields. In this review, I seek to balance (as teachers must) the goals of reinforcing what are distinctively sociological bases of understanding processes and implications of aging while selectively integrating contributions of multidisciplinary perspectives and research.

Where readers place themselves in this spectrum will be shaped both by topical interests and by tendencies and traditions regarding what role particular courses play in the curriculum. Typically, introductory courses offer a broad, multidisciplinary treatment, while sociology of aging courses serve more advanced and sociologically literate students. Readers will navigate this review in light of their own agenda, and I'll address in the following which texts best serve which need.

In my decade of experience teaching both introductory and advanced courses, I've found that a majority of the most committed students are drawn to the field either through family caregiving, volunteer roles in hospitals or nursing homes, or in preparation for entry into medicine, allied health, or social service occupations. The pressing need for gerontological knowledge among entrants into these fields, coupled with projected job growth in health and human services, will continue to drive

enrollments in aging-related courses for years to come.

This reality, reflecting both labor market demand and student interests, filters my reading of the texts under review and leads me to reexamine the framing of the debate previously sketched: Perhaps the challenge teachers face is not whether to embrace either an applied, problem-centered or more theoretically broad approach to aging but rather, how to integrate the diverse literatures in the field such that they speak both to sociology majors and to students with liberal arts or clinical interests. Regardless of the particular audience, two virtues of aging, as a specialty in sociology, are its power to foster Mills's *sociological imagination* (linking biography and history), which McKinney (2005), a scholar of teaching and learning, has shown to be an elusive goal for teachers in the field; and its utility in helping students to grasp and apply arguments—regarding identity change, social class, stratification, demography, and political economy—which they may otherwise find too abstract or overdetermined.

CHOICE OF TEXTBOOKS AND RUBRICS FOR COMPARISON

The editors of *Teaching Sociology* suggested I review approximately 10 textbooks, representing both those with high circulation and visibility as well as others with more specialized or modest niches. Nearly all of the books reviewed have been revised several times, reflecting their success in sustaining sizable and distinctive readerships over time. I also sought out suggestions from colleagues and perused online booksellers to yield a broadly representative group of textbooks. Finally, my sense of the importance of offering qualitative portraits of late life (largely absent in all the conventional texts) led me to include two edited volumes to the list.

Having chosen books for review, I took extensive notes on each regarding their breadth and depth of topical coverage; discussion and integration, both of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches; clarity and sophistication of presentation; and success in sustaining conceptual linkages across topics and chapters. After this inductive reading, I compared the texts on these salient (for me) dimensions in a more explicit and systematic way. Guided by these criteria and the need to be concise, I focused my review on assessing authors' success in addressing and integrating: (a) sociological theory and research throughout topics and chapters; (b) the multidisciplinary challenge of life course analyses; (c) the diversity of aging experiences as they are shaped by race/ethnicity, class, and gender; and (d) conceptual and methodological considerations that are distinctive to aging research, be it quantitative or qualitative.

COMPARING TEXTBOOKS ON AGING

Among the texts that I find to be most successful in achieving these disparate goals are those by Quadagno and Moody, respectively. The first one hundred pages or so of Quadagno's book lucidly present the scope and nature of social gerontology, key distinctions such as how age is defined (e.g., inferring age differences based on age, period, or cohort), theoretical arguments and critique—including feminist and critical approaches missing from most competing books—and demographic perspectives and data. The author refers early—though too briefly—to the theory of cumulative advantage/disadvantage (CAD). Dannefer (2003) has shown this model to be essential in linking knowledge of aging (seen as passage through multiple institutional and personal careers throughout life), patterns and outcomes of inequality, and dynamics of historical, economic, and policy change. Because Quadagno presents it early, the CAD model is able to inform later topical discussions. A strong chapter on "Historical Perspectives" makes good on the promise of interdisciplinarity: Public images of the aged, family structure, the impact of industrialization, and the rise of institutional elder care—all are treated through an historical lens, a discussion that deepens and animates what in other texts tends to be overly schematic treatments, for example, of modernization theory. Chapters on family relations, living arrangements, work and retirement, and poverty/inequality are similarly detailed, clear, and sophisticated. One topic that I find to be less comprehensively handled is the psychology of aging, in which key developmental models, such as Erikson's, are presented with little sociological

interrogation or elaboration. Indeed, a shortcoming common to *all* the books under review (excepting the edited readers) is scanty coverage of the burgeoning literature in qualitative and narrative gerontology. The voices and perspectives of older people and ethnographic accounts of their activities, routines, and community involvements are all but absent in conventional texts.[3]

Moody's *Aging: Concepts and Controversies* is exceptional by virtue of its innovative organization of and approach to the material: The author's background in philosophy and his position as director of academic affairs at AARP (engaging with varied publics as well as the academic community) inform a unique gestalt on gerontology. Rather than a succession of "stand-alone" chapters—most texts have between 12 and 15—Moody develops 11 substantive "controversies" under three "Basic Concepts": (1) a life course perspective on aging; (2) aging, health care, and society; and (3) social and economic outlook for an aging society.

This more synthetic, parsimonious plan sometimes produces odd juxtapositions. For example, in the first section, Moody's elegant and detailed review of life course concepts and implications is followed by two controversies that will strike many readers as incongruous: "Does Old Age Have Meaning?" (in which the author's expansive, philosophical, and transcultural outlook is evident) is followed by "Why Do Our Bodies Grow Old?" (in which theories of biological aging appear alongside lucid discussions of environmental impacts on health and the potential impact of genetic engineering on longevity). Moody's departure from the typical inventory of chronic conditions that tend to accompany advanced age is both welcome and provocative—offering readers insights into mechanisms, both biological and socio-environmental, which influence health and longevity across the life course.

Also welcome are the nearly 50 brief supplementary readings, several of which follow each "controversy." Authors represented are diverse and distinguished; having a virtual dialogue between Erik Erikson and Simone de Beauvoir on the meaning of age is sure to enrich class discussion, particular in bridging the social sciences and humanities. However, one easily imagines undergraduates struggling to follow the sequence of topics, and not a few instructors having to fundamentally revise syllabi and course plans accordingly. In sum, features of Moody's book (e.g., the supplementary readings) make it more suitable than most to be the sole text in a course. But, adopting it would seem to require teachers conscientiously to commit and adapt to the author's broad, eclectic logic of presentation. In terms of comparative rubrics noted previously, I find Moody to be deeply conversant in sociological theory and research. However, his superficial (at best) treatment of race/class/gender dynamics makes the book a weaker choice for teachers seeking to integrate aging with analyses of inequality. Finally, unlike many of the books reviewed, his provides no discussion of research methods or approaches to knowledge construction. Given the exceptionally interdisciplinary nature of the book, this is a regrettable omission; for example, Moody would seem to be especially well positioned to compare positivist and interpretive inquiry and how particular approaches to research are viewed and accepted in policy domains.

Another good text for sociology of aging courses is Morgan and Kunkel's *Aging, Society, and the Life Course*. Along with Quadagno's book, this one is supported by a strong scaffolding of sociological insight. Early chapters delineate and illustrate a critical, social construction of aging stance,[4] which the authors go on to apply to such pervasive phenomena as the reification of chronological age (driven partly by its utility in administering large welfare state programs), the emergence of generational consciousness (following Mannheim's classic essay), and the relevance of gerontology to fulfill C. W. Mills's promise of a sociology committed to revealing the dialectic of biography and history. There is both elegance and economy of language in the presentation and avoidance of the kind of encyclopedic coverage that, for me, detracts from some widely used competitors.

A comparative advantage of Morgan and Kunkel's text is an early chapter on "Studying Aging," which is a coherent and comprehensive treatment of this broad topic. I have taught this book, in courses in which a majority of students—including sociology majors—arrive without prior formal exposure to research methods. Students' performance on exams (both objective and essay) and

original research projects suggest that the book effectively equips them to grasp distinctive challenges in studying aging and the life course. In addition to offering detailed discussion of age, period, and cohort as competing bases for making inferences about observed age differences, the nearly 30-page chapter surveys a range of practical strategies (cross-sectional vs. longitudinal studies, measures of central tendency and their limits, life-history and reminiscence, etc.) in accessible, conceptual terms. There is also reference—consistent with a constructionist stance—to the sociology of knowledge as key to understanding how and why focal questions and topics in the field have changed over time.

Other strengths of Morgan and Kunkel's text include a core set of chapters on work and the life course, economics of aging, retirement, health (treated in separate chapters on individual and systemic levels of analysis), and welfare state politics and programs. Singly and together, these chapters are especially conducive to conveying—in line with Dannefer's (2003) CAD model—how significant social patterns and outcomes in late life reflect cumulative access to resources and are contingent on role demands and social policies in multiple domains. These strengths must be weighed, however, against serious shortcomings in the treatment of racial/ethnic diversity—which is represented mostly by inclusion as a category, for example, in tables reporting census data rather than integrated or theorized more fully in the narrative—and of the social psychology of aging. The latter is barely an afterthought; readers must divine what they will about aging and identity from a terse discussion of age norms. For teachers wanting to develop fuller treatment of the personal and contextual meanings of aging, the relatively streamlined presentation in Morgan and Kunkel can, however, successfully be paired with edited volumes such as those by Weiss and Bass, Gubrium and Holstein, or Stoller and Gibson, discussed in what follows.

Social Gerontology by Hooyman and Kiyak must be among the most comprehensive texts available. Over nearly 800 pages, the authors offer a skillful, scholarly, and encyclopedic treatment of the field. Among the standout chapters—for which few other texts have counterparts—are those on "Opportunities and Challenges of Informal Caregiving"; "The Importance of Social Supports: Family, Friends, Neighbors, and Communities"; and "Productive Aging: Paid and Nonpaid Roles and Activities." The latter includes a thoughtful exploration of religiosity and spirituality, a topic of renewed importance both in theoretical and clinical circles. Chapters on "Social Theories of Aging," "Resilience" among elders of color and older women, and on "Living Arrangements and Social Interactions" are also superb. For courses in the psychology of aging, as well as those catering to students in the health sciences, Hooyman and Kiyak offer depth of coverage regarding cognitive changes with aging and biological aging and chronic illness (the latter two topics alone claim nearly 100 pages) that are unmatched in competing books. Thus, this is a strong choice for courses with a *geriatric* emphasis.

But, for those seeking to integrate the study of aging with social inequality, identity, and life course careers in major institutional realms, teachers and students alike may feel lost in a book that, for all its breadth and detail, struggles to sustain a coherent *sociological* perspective across the 17 chapters. Here we bump into subdisciplinary assumptions and tastes. For example, in extensive chapters on biological aging and chronic illness, scant attention is paid to the social epidemiology of health: of how risk factors that set the stage for growing class and racial/ethnic disparities in morbidity and mortality as people age—in line with the CAD model—are mediated by structural factors such as work-based health insurance and the distribution of health care providers and resources. Similarly, of roughly 60 pages devoted to "Personality and Mental Health," nearly half address individual forms of psychopathology. Conversely, landmark studies such as Kaufman's (1986) *The Ageless Self* and McAdams's (1993) *Stories We Live By*, which engage fundamental processes of continuity, adaptation, and identity through the life course, are neglected. Perhaps this gulf has less to do with *disciplinary* boundaries—McAdams's field is psychology and human development—than with different paradigms of inquiry: Both Kaufman and McAdams employ narrative theory and data, rather than positivist or quasi-experimental approaches. Still, the absence of such contributions seems to be at odds with Hooyman and Kiyak's

goal (and subtitle) of offering a robustly multidisciplinary perspective on aging.

Next I turn briefly to a few textbook options in social gerontology that combine overall quality and breadth of coverage with affordability—all are available in paperback and have features that make them ideal for particular courses or audiences. Hillier and Barrow's *Aging, the Individual, and Society* has much to recommend, including strong chapters discussing and comparing theories in social gerontology and adult development (respectively) and another on "Special Problems" that are timely and compelling for many students, such as crimes/fraud involving elders, aging criminals, drug abuse, and suicide. Few books better combine sophistication and ambition with economy and clarity of presentation. Cox's *Later Life* is a lucid and concise book, which makes good use of constructionist, social problems perspectives on key topics such as ageism, theoretical and developmental perspectives, and the political and generational conflict surrounding societal aging. It is less cluttered with tables, photographs, and other graphic blandishments than is true of more expensive books and more comprehensive and broad in representing a slightly older (yet vital and stimulating) body of sociological literature that predated the specialization of the field in recent years. The same virtues are present in Harris's book, *The Sociology of Aging*, which is written in a simpler style, especially appropriate for advanced placement courses in high school, community college courses, or those catering to entering college students. Both the Cox and Harris texts bear the stamp of a time when the sociology of aging was less specialized and more deeply embedded in classic topics such as role theory, transitions, and adult socialization, for example, the reciprocal influences of work and identity.[5]

SUGGESTIONS FOR SUPPLEMENTING TEXTBOOKS

Many teachers choose to supplement textbooks with edited volumes that offer qualitative, contextual portraits of aging as it unfolds in diverse community and historical settings. Two that can well serve this need are *Challenges of the Third Age* and *Aging and Everyday Life*. Both are eloquent correctives to the problem-centered, detached stance toward aging and older people that unfortunately clings to academic gerontology. The point of departure for the first, edited by Weiss and Bass, is that the combination of increased longevity and improved health status for many people means that a *third age* of life, postretirement, is now a significant and expected part of the life course in the United States and other affluent nations. Though in the past, later life has often been framed, by academics no less than by laypeople, in terms of leisure, the desire among many older people for *generativity*—Erik Erikson's term for the impulse to leave behind a legacy for individual or collective enhancement—compels attention to the meaning and purpose of this third age. In their graceful and concise collection, Weiss and Bass present essays that both elucidate this new horizon in aging research and policy and situate meanings and ways of aging in discrete cultural and community contexts. Some chapters, such as one on the Druse Elders (a Middle-Eastern religious sect), reflect the grandeur of an anthropological view of aging. Another chapter, on aging experiences among two older gay men, reveals and helps explain the heterogeneity within this community, even within a single historical cohort that faced the closeted life imposed by legal and cultural exclusion. The latter chapter vividly conveys the more holistic scholarship, centered on understanding *lives*, that is emerging within the fields of life course and narrative gerontology. This book can profitably be paired with a conventional textbook to stimulate classroom discussion and understanding of the richness, diversity, and agency of later life.

Teachers wanting a more comprehensive edited volume, offering superb critical, qualitative readings that correspond with many of the rubrics central to textbook chapters, will warmly welcome Gubrium and Holstein's *Aging and Everyday Life*. The volume's 30 chapters—some classic, but most published since 1990—range across such key topics as aging and identity, work and retirement, the aging body, interpersonal ties, living arrangements, and bereavement. Taken together, the chapters represent and celebrate the flowering of qualitative gerontology. Another superb supplementary source is Stoller and Gibson's (2000) edited volume,

Worlds of Difference. Drawing on sources from the social sciences, humanities, and journalism, the book reveals how history, culture, ethnicity, and gender shape aging experiences; the authors also offer an excellent introductory chapter explicating the life course perspective and its relevance to the eclectic collection of readings to follow.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In closing, I can only stress that my attempt has been to discuss the sources in connection with diverse pedagogical goals and audiences, rather than to make invidious distinctions among texts or authors. Indeed, leaving aside the edited volumes, the texts reviewed represent nearly *40* revisions, undertaken better to serve particular markets and intellectual ambitions. Alluding to growing pains in the review's title is not at all to deny the current vibrancy of social gerontology, either as an intellectual stream in sociology or as an ascendant field in its own right.

I conclude with a set of challenges, questions that strike me as important both in making use of this review and also for teachers and scholars contemplating future needs and contributions of teaching resources in this dynamic subfield of sociology: (1) how to fulfill the promise and scope of the life course perspective, (2) how to stimulate active learning and research strategies for students, and (3) how and why to advance a critical sociology of aging.

The promise of life course perspectives. By definition, the life course perspective seeks to theorize and interpret aging as an unfolding, dynamic process "from birth to death." Though virtually all of the texts reviewed here invoke this catechism, all are vulnerable to the critique that earlier life stages are either treated superficially or neglected altogether. The imprint of the life course perspective is most clear and valuable, as stated, in the cumulative advantage/disadvantage model, in which later life outcomes and identities are interpreted in the context of earlier life conditions and trajectories. Yet the CAD model is an invitation to—rather than a substitute for—direct inquiry into earlier life transitions and experiences.

Part of the problem, ironically, is that the scholarship on earlier life stages has itself blossomed, such that it becomes more daunting for a textbook writer or teacher on aging to do it justice. The burgeoning literatures on childhood (e.g., Corsaro 1997) and adolescence (e.g., Settersten et al. 2005) are increasingly informing stand-alone courses on those topics. And the torrent of published material on later life (in what are well over a dozen specialist journals on aging in the social sciences alone) can easily overwhelm. Thus, it may not be feasible for any single textbook, seeking to approach comprehensive topical coverage, also to fulfill the ideal of the life course model. Teachers wanting to integrate material on earlier life stages are best advised to adopt such superb sources as Fine's (1987) or Eder's (1993) ethnographies of gender development and culture creation among children or Lareau's (2003) or MacLeod's ([1987] 1995) work on the early contexts and bases of social inequality.

Active and/or experiential learning strategies. Active and/or experiential learning strategies would seem to be especially relevant to teaching about aging, given that students are themselves immersed in age-graded institutions and aware (as they negotiate authority with parents) of clashing generational and cohort perspectives. However, authors of the textbooks reviewed here are typical of the genre: Where they discuss and develop student learning strategies, these tend to involve Internet or census research (to illuminate connections to social problems or demographic principles, respectively) or internships and service learning. These are clearly valuable, but limited, options. Internet and census research clearly enhance students' knowledge of advocacy organizations (and their agendas) and demographic change and its implications. However, these approaches are limited in revealing the contextual and subjective contours of aging. More, they tend to reinforce the very segregation of elders from other age groups that many textbooks and teachers purport to lament. Another concern is that where service learning or internships are practiced, they tend to be concentrated in health and social service settings. This is a pattern that reinforces the problem-centered, institutionalized, dependent images of older people to which Estes (1979) and others have drawn attention, to the exclusion of the community arrangements and programs on which the vast majority of older or disabled people rely.

Among the most powerful and flexible active learning strategies for students of aging is to conduct "life review" or other kinds of interviews, which can vary a great deal in terms of focus, depth, and pedagogic goals (see Wellin 2007). In such interviews, students come to appreciate the Millsian call to link biography and history not only as an intellectual goal, but as a compelling human need.

Discussions and select examples of other active learning options are usefully compiled in two collections of syllabi and assignments published by the American Sociological Association (Fettes et al. 2002; Harris 2000). Among the most promising are students' reflective studies of changing norms (and generational conflicts) surrounding the transition to adolescence; community-level studies of networks—spanning religious, social service, and even artistic institutions—that shape the quality of life for older people; and exercises that invite students to confront the barriers, in our "ableist" society, which continue to plague those with physical or sensory disabilities. As suggested previously, much of the fear and avoidance, among younger people, about aging centers not on aging per se, but rather on disability, dependence, and mortality, which accounts for the strong appeal (and impact) for students of discussions of death and dying within courses on aging.

Advancing a critical sociology of aging. Finally, the need for and relevance of a *critical* stance on aging is partly a matter of intellectual and political sensibilities. Public portraits of elders as affluent or even "greedy geezers" conceal dramatic inequalities within the older population. My own identification with this approach has clearly informed the review. However, it is also required, to my mind, because of the pervasive (if subtle) ageism that persists in popular culture, and because of the evident challenge that the "baby boomers" pose to much of the accumulated theory and knowledge that fills the pages of current textbooks. A wrenching and timely example of the obsolescence of scholarship concerns long-established models of retirement. Most textbooks on aging continue to present retirement models and research that reflect the more orderly transition typical of middle-class people in the mid to late twentieth century—decades in which pension policies and funding were more stable and the political status of Social Security and health care policy was far less contested than is true today. In the current economic recession, estimates are that some 40 percent of elders have been forced to revise long-held retirement plans, and a comparably high percentage of those approaching retirement age are being forced to consider new training or career paths. Heinz (2003) has analyzed this pattern, equally true in the U.K., Europe and elsewhere, as a shift from relatively stable work trajectories, to a *contingent life course,* in which individuals assume far greater responsibility and risk. The implications of these convulsive changes, for the material and subjective quality of late life, are only now being glimpsed in the literature.

Persistent ageism takes various forms and is activated by ongoing policy debates (e.g., that surrounding health care reform, in which older people tended, paradoxically, to oppose the extension to younger people of coverage that, in the past, was provided only to the aged and poor). Those who would write future textbooks on aging must grapple with the fact—be it blessing or curse—that much of what we thought we knew about such key topics as family and generational relations, work careers and retirement, age norms and identity change, political participation, and death and dying has been called into question, revealed to be ephemeral patterns established during the decades, and by the cohorts, following the Second World War. The challenge of organizing and representing knowledge, for students, in such a dynamic period only enhances one's admiration of textbook authors.

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NOTES

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1. The dominance of the problem-centered perspective in academic research on aging was

confirmed by a recent content analysis of major publishing outlets by Carr, Wellin, and Reece (2009).

2. Inasmuch as large-scale federal welfare programs targeted at elders (Medicare and Social Security) are anomalous historically in the political economy of the United States, aging is a useful vehicle for teaching about related issues.
3. Another absence, noted by Taub and Fanflik (2000) in connection with sociology textbooks, concerns attention to disability and the disability perspective. This is equally true, and particularly troublesome, in gerontology texts given the tendency to conflate old age and disability. For a life course approach to disability, see Priestley (2003).
4. As in the teaching of social problems, constructionist approaches to aging question the conventional emphasis on particular problems associated with advanced age (chronic illness, social isolation, poverty), in favor of analyzing how such problems arise and change in discrete historical, political, and academic contexts. In addition to Estes's (1979) book noted previously, an essential discussion of the constructionist viewpoint can be found in Spector and Kitsuse (1987).
5. It is suggestive, in this connection that the index to Cox, whose first edition appeared in 1984, contains multiple references to the work of founding figures such as Matilda Riley, Bernice Neugarten, and Richard Kalish, whose imprint is less visible in later developed texts.

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BIO

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