

Critical Gerontology Comes of Age

*Advances in Research and Theory
for a New Century*

©
2018

Edited by
Chris Wellin

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2018
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2018 Taylor & Francis

The right of Chris Wellin to be identified as the author of the editorial material, and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wellin, Christopher, editor.

Title: Critical gerontology comes of age : advances in research and theory for a new century / edited by Chris Wellin.

Description: First Edition. | New York : Routledge, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017057708 | ISBN 9781138630277 (hardcover : alk. paper) |

ISBN 9781138630284 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781315209371 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Gerontology. | Social gerontology. | Aging—Social aspects. |

Older people—Care. | Older transsexuals—Care.

Classification: LCC HQ1061 .C694 2018 | DDC 305.26—dc23LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017057708>

ISBN: 978-1-138-63027-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-63028-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-20937-1 (ebk)

Typeset in Minion

by Florence Production Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon, UK

Introductory Chapter: The Need for, and Fruits of, a Current Critical Gerontology

Chris Wellin

Introduction

The academic study of aging has flourished in recent decades, along with the growth in the older population of the United States and other developed nations. This demographic process, dramatic in itself, is accompanied by equally far-reaching changes in the meanings, timing, and sequence of social roles and transitions that have organized the life course for decades, certainly since the mid-twentieth century.

Among the key issues that have arisen in the United States and other aging societies are: impacts of greater longevity and disability on family ties and living arrangements; new residential forms and policies that depart from the institutional bias of the past (e.g., assisted living and home- and community-based services, as an alternative to nursing home placement); strains in public policies that historically assumed caregiving to be a family responsibility, primarily borne by women; new forms of community—both place-based and virtual—that are distinctive to the baby boomer cohorts; and whether/how these patterns differ by race, social class, gender, and ethnicity in an increasingly diverse society. There is clearly a need for attention to how these forces are remaking intergenerational ties, and for careful observation and description of how people, in diverse contexts and with varying resources, are adapting.

Rather than isolate later life, or older adults, as focal concerns—which was often true of earlier generations of scholarship (e.g., see Hendricks, 1992)—we now see how longer life trajectories, family formation, intergenerational ties, political agendas, and personal identity and role expectations are all being called urgently into question. In response to these dynamics, academic programs, research, professional practice, advocacy, and commercial interests within social gerontology have all proliferated (Wellin, 2010).

As a theoretical framework, more than a theory, *per se*, the *life course perspective* is the most encompassing and interdisciplinary explanatory map for understanding the interplay between social structures, history, and human lives. In a concise summary, Quadagno (2018) defines the framework as “an approach to aging

2 Chris Wellin

that emphasizes the interaction of historical events, individual decisions and opportunities, and the effect of early life experiences in determining later life outcomes" (pp. 26–27). Foundational concepts in the social-behavioral sciences—social roles and role transitions, kinship and social support, stratification, health status, occupational and other careers, welfare state policy—are placed in dynamic motion in ways that reveal their interrelationships and historical particularity, in light of the life course perspective. In addition, the framework enables one to resolve apparent dilemmas that have persistently inhibited understanding within social inquiry, specifically: how to reconcile agency and structure in exploring social life, a tension that, in other terms, frames a reductive debate between micro- and macroscopic levels of analysis (e.g., Alexander, 1988, pp. 87–88). Life course perspectives help transcend these constraints and (to quote a book title from a prominent scholar) advance the understanding of *Lives in Time and Place* (Settersten, 1999). In all, there has been enormous and varied growth in the scholarship on aging, propelled by life course thinking, especially over the past four decades.

However, there are several reasons why a contemporary collection of writings on aging and the life course is especially useful now. First, most of the published research now available was conceived and conducted before the implications of the large "baby boomer" cohorts of the post-World War II period could be visible, much less analyzed or understood. This diverse group, numbering some eighty million, has transformed the demographic structure of the United States, in which the older population, defined as those older than 60 years, will soon constitute 20% of the total. Within a period of one human life span, from the early twentieth to the early twenty-first centuries, the percentage of elders in the United States has at least quadrupled. This has presented both bracing challenges and opportunities to which cultural norms, social policies, and established institutions are struggling to adapt.

It is important to note that earlier perspectives in gerontology rightly decried ageism—the negative stereotyping of older people, abetted by the increasingly age-segregated nature of modern society—but tended to exaggerate differences or variation *between* older and younger cohorts. However, as Dannefer (1987) and others have shown both theoretically and empirically, older cohorts are the *most* diverse and heterogeneous in the population. This pattern, rooted in social class, historical change, and people's biographical choices and priorities, is evident across the topical areas that have characterized the study of aging for decades: family life, employment and retirement, economic fortunes, religiosity, health, and even death and dying. Moreover, the maturation of a global economic and political order, which is now the focus of intense political debate in the United States, United Kingdom, and elsewhere, is implicated, along with a turn toward neoliberal social policy (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012), with levels of social inequality not seen in nearly a century. *How are such conditions reverberating in the lives and aging experiences of people today?*

We believe that such dynamic change calls for inductive, contextualized, and historically sensitive accounts, rather than attempts to discern what is typical,

normative, or in keeping with older, quasi-causal models. Our approach found support in an earlier, lucid review of theory in gerontology:

... we call for future theoretical directions which concretely analyze the social contexts of aging. By social context we do not mean the kind of analysis commonly done by age-stratification and life course researchers, which merely examines statistical comparisons of select cohort demographics. Our concern, rather, is with social *experience*, the fluid and dynamic features of social context.

(Passuth & Bengtson, 1996, p. 25 [emphasis in original])

The authors go on to advocate for a marriage, so to speak, between macro-oriented, structural awareness and fine-grained study of language and action, social phenomenology. This methodological emphasis, on qualitative/interpretive approaches, is evident in these pages.

A second feature of this volume is the explicit influence of *critical gerontology* perspectives. Never static, this stance invites ongoing scrutiny of the assumptions, concepts, topics, stakeholders, and consequences of what might be termed "established" gerontology. In the next section, I sketch the major thrust of a political economy perspective on aging and the aged, which is perhaps the most visible strain in critical gerontology, certainly in the academic presentation of the field. The emphasis on political economy, however, is but one part of the broader spectrum of critical gerontology. Moody (quoted in Bengtson, Burgess, & Parrott, 1997, p. S83) identified four goals that have characterized this approach, which are: (1) *to theorize subjective and interpretive dimensions of aging*; (2) *to focus not on technical advancement but on praxis, defined as action or involvement in practical change (such as public policy)*; (3) *to link academics and practitioners through praxis*; and (4) *to produce emancipatory knowledge*. These goals, even when implicit, animate contributing authors, and buttress this book. The same goals underlie the diversity of writing strategies and voices authors use and, at times, justify longer or less conventional presentations than are typical of academic journals or conference presentations. A shared commitment among authors is to aim for the widest accessibility, both within and beyond academic circles, in an effort to fulfill Mills' (1959, p. 3) promise that social inquiry might shed light on the connections between biography and history and reveal the forces impelling "seemingly impersonal changes in the very structure of continent-side societies."

Internal Debates and Policy Analysis in Critical Gerontology

As editor, I never conceived this book in terms of pre-determined or proposed sections or topical foci within critical gerontology. Such a strategy would not be in keeping with the spirit of innovation we seek to embody and, in any case, would only have led to insoluble disputes about which topics to include or how to justify the choice of sections. Instead, through experience in teaching and reading, along with networks forged through professional associations, I sought out contributors

who are breaking new ground and who have sustained their engagement with areas of interest throughout their careers, or in multiple roles in their careers. As the collection took shape, topical connections and complementary arguments emerged.

After briefly elaborating on the diversity of critical gerontology, I will point to ways in which the current collection represents innovation and synthesis in critical aging studies. Though internally diverse and even contested (Bengston et al., 1997), critical gerontology places aging and related issues in historical and cultural contexts. For some scholars in this tradition (e.g., Estes, 1979), the status of older people, collectively and across sub-groups, is most powerfully explained in reference to the *political economy* at particular historical periods, and the resultant power relations, cultural/media imagery, and macro-level policies that shape access to roles (such as in employment or retirement) and economic resources.

In the United States, a nation whose history has reflected exceptional resistance toward welfare state expansion as compared with those of other advanced countries, federal policy regarding older adults has been anomalous: the two obvious and contrary cases—Social Security in 1935 and Medicare three decades later—define older people, in part, as a *deserving* constituency. These policies, eligibility for which is based on chronological age, might instead have been based on *need* (Neugarten, 1982), and this idea fuels an ongoing controversy. That said, critical gerontologists have shared an enduring tension regarding whether to view such policies as benevolent entitlements for a “good” old age or, alternatively, as mechanisms that ultimately consign older people to a status of *structured dependence* and vulnerability in late- or post-capitalist societies.

In this volume, contributors Estes, Moody and Sasser, Diamond, and Cabin engage and elaborate on this strand of critical aging studies, from diverse philosophical, political, and methodological stances. Specifically, Estes and Moody, in dialogic fashion, aim to define and celebrate critical gerontology, though they differ on such issues as how to square the approach with current political alignments in the United States, which differ by age, and whether there is a benign or even constructive role for private, market-based responses to challenges that aging poses, both individually and collectively.

Estes’ chapter sets the tone for the book, both in terms of substance and voice. She pairs a richly candid and personal account of her career, as a pioneering gerontologist and builder of a research center, with a declaration of the kinds of knowledge and praxis she has aspired to enhance through the decades. Her career reveals the trade-offs, for example, between constructing policy-relevant scholarship and advocacy (shaped by specialized discourse and by the range of possible policy options at given political moments) and her desire to engage in a more broadly engaged *public sociology* (see Burawoy, 2004).

Diamond, drawing on the distinctive tradition of institutional ethnography (see DeVault, 1999), examines the text of a public manual on Medicare, as well as narrative material from various public settings, in order to challenge widely held premises regarding the nature and quality of coverage. This is a novel if not heretical project, given the strong public support for Medicare and current threats

by the newly installed Trump administration radically to alter major welfare state policies (especially Social Security Disability and Medicaid expansion, under the Affordable Care Act) in the proposed (FY) 2018 budget. Cabin, drawing on extensive experience in health care administration and related research, examines the expansion of home health care, questioning how and to what extent non-profit and proprietary ownership shape the quality of care. Cabin’s contribution reflects the rather specialized language and analysis of formal policy that, even among critical scholars, has shaped the field.

Engaging the “Aging Network” and the Domains of Occupational/Professional Practice

Indeed, from its origins, gerontology has had a strong focus on application and policy, which in earlier decades strongly reflected a *problem-centered* orientation—one that assumed and emphasized losses and decline in later life (Katz, 1996). In her book, *The Aging Enterprise*, Estes (1979, pp. 16–30) was among the first to advance an explicit critique of the “services strategy,” that expanded sharply, especially after the passage in 1965 of the *Older Americans Act* (OAA). While the spirit and text of the OAA strike readers as quasi-utopian in these austere times for federal funding, Estes and others argue that the “aging network,” and the “helping professionals” that provide such services, tends to *individualize and pathologize* the persistent problems facing substantial groups of older people (and, equally, people with disabilities). As such, this approach, which Morgan and Kunkel (2007, pp. 298–299) discuss as “compassionate ageism,” tends to obscure and diffuse attention from what many critical scholars see as the political, economic, and professional exploitation that reproduces such inequalities—poverty, inadequate or unaffordable housing, social and geographic isolation—over the decades, even during periods when service provision has expanded. For Biggs, Hendricks, and Lowenstein (2003, p. 2), “*Aging Enterprise* is an apt example of critique building to a novel and antithetical understanding of the growth in services for older adults. It is suggested, from Estes’ view, that the ostensive development of services to meet a growing need, in reality disguises the exploitation of new markets and the consolidation of new forms of professional power.” This paradox, I can attest, complicates the teaching of gerontology from a critical angle, since a great many motivated and professionally oriented students, drawn to courses on aging, are committed to the very fields, such as social work and allied health, which are targets of the critique. How, then, can we reconcile the quasi-cynical indictment of the services strategy while allowing for more inductive and affirmative arguments regarding the motives and achievements of those in the helping and policy professions?

Indeed, even those who subscribe to macro-level, critical approaches might acknowledge and investigate how, in practice, intermediate/meso-level institutions and interactions contribute to shaping experiences and identities, linked to age. More recent scholars and advocates are more likely to document the humane or even potentially empowering impacts of clinical and human services, rejecting

what some regard as nihilistic tendencies, for example, in warnings about the *biomedicalization* of aging (Estes & Binney, 1989). Though vital and provocative, arguments framed at this level of analysis limit, in effect if not by intent, inquiry into the motives and contradictions of those within the “aging network” and related fields, as well as their contributions to the quality of life for people facing the burdens of advanced age or disability.

Perhaps another reason why there has been relatively scant qualitative or experiential research on the helping professions is that, as Pithouse (1987) asserted, fields such as social casework are “invisible,” by virtue of the ethical and organizational constraints surrounding detailed inquiry into what are, after all, encounters involving vulnerable people facing fateful circumstances. Still, in what I regard as an exciting and pertinent development, scholars such as the medical anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly (1998) have brought narrative analysis into our understanding of clinical encounters and, in turn, into processes of healing and rehabilitation that are ever more important in our age of chronic illness and increased longevity.

“Narrative,” she argues, “not only functions as a form of talk; it also serves as an aesthetic and moral form underlying clinical action. That is, therapists and patients not only tell stories; sometimes they create story-like structures through their interactions. Furthermore, this effort at story-making, which I will refer to as *therapeutic emplacement*, is integral to the healing power of this practice.” (emphasis in original, p. 2)

In principle, the open-ended quality of human service interactions has long been acknowledged, even by those, such as Estes (1979), who have called the efficacy of the aging network into question. She writes that the symbolic interactionist perspective, “argues that it is possible for the interactional context and process (the environment, the persons, and encounters in it) to significantly affect the kind of aging process a person will experience” (1979, p. 9). We hold a somewhat fluid, constructionist view, seeking to mesh macro-level and interactionist theory in tracing how social views of age or disability are typified and routinized within policies and institutions and, often, internalized by those who are reliant on programs and services. Nonetheless, more inductive and detailed investigations of human service and medical encounters have been slow to appear or more fully to inform critical gerontology—a gap that we seek to address in this book.

In this connection, Miller and Crampton address the broad domain of ethnography in/of human service institutions, offering a meta-analysis of themes and implications, rooted in their respective and lengthy experiences of immersion in programs that serve clients across the age spectrum. They document how “seemingly personal life experiences are socially organized and given meaning in diverse institutional contexts.” The value of fine-grained, ethnographic attention to the local practices and staff discretion that mediate the impact and, potentially, justice of human service interventions was articulated decades ago by Lipsky (1980) and others. Miller and Crampton revisit and expand on this vital theme.

In turn, Gabrielson, a nurse-scholar, addresses how her field—defined by its distinctive commitment to patient advocacy and community support—is seeking to enhance outreach to LGBTQ elders, a community that, in the past, was neglected, if not stigmatized, within the health care system. My own chapter on direct care workers (such as certified nursing assistants [CNAs] and home health aides) draws on first-hand experience and research, as well as on a thematic review of earlier literature, to define and document the skillful quality of direct care work. This account is a counterpoint to conventional economic and policy discourse, which tends to equate skill with formal training and credentials, and which has accepted and reproduced culturally embedded assumptions about gender, race/ethnicity, and caring which continue to undermine the public appreciation of or compensation for the work (see Cancian & Olicker, 2000). Inasmuch as direct care work (including that for children, as well as for those who are aged or disabled) represents the largest and fastest-growing sector of the service economy in the United States, the stakes for all concerned could not be higher. This chapter also exemplifies the fact that while much policy analysis and evaluation research have been dominated by positivist approaches and quantitative strategies, narrative approaches and meta-analysis can also have an impact, especially if/when conventional framings and data sources show diminishing returns (Wellin, 2007).

“Places” as Contexts for the Study of Aging

Earlier I alluded to the value of anchoring the study of aging in discrete contexts, *places*, which one can define in myriad ways—cultural, institutional, historical, communitarian. The study of aging and places—environmental gerontology—is in itself a rich subfield (e.g., Rowles & Bernard, 2013). Several authors frame their contributions in connection with places, ranging from the metaphorical (an idealized sense of “home” and safety) to the brutally material (aging behind bars).

An implied backdrop to these studies is the often unexamined concept of *aging in place*, which Quadagno (2018, pp. 198–199) and others discuss as containing the ideal of continuity and independence, tied to remaining in one’s own home. This ideal is often untenable, either because a reduction in mobility can render the home restrictive (unless modifications are possible) or because residents lack the energy or resources to maintain or sell their homes. In any case, rates of homeownership are highest among older people, in the United States, and many equate this, for good or ill, with middle-class status: “home” and “place” are deeply symbolic, entwined with history, social status, and identity.

Drawing from the constructionist approach to social problems, Petonito and Muschert trace the policy phenomenon of “Silver Alerts,” centered on missing elders which, they argue, emerged “on the coattails,” so to speak, of the earlier “Amber Alerts” which focused on the location of missing children. *Silver Alerts* reflect and seek to address looming concerns about missing elders, disoriented to place and rendered vulnerable and less than fully adult, by virtue of dementia. After reviewing the constructionist approach to social problems (see Best, 1995), the authors argue that despite the compassionate framing of the issue, this policy

“solution” denies older people a voice or sense of agency, in essence infantilizing them in the process, ostensibly, of bestowing a kind of protection—a paradox of “care and control.”

Torres extends the theme of aging “in places,” in two ways: first, by reviewing and integrating insights from earlier ethnographic studies, and second, by pointing to the innovations and adaptations elders make, when compelled to find new places. Her ethnographic project explored the impact of gentrification in greater New York City and, she discovered, the significance of a local bakery in providing a “gathering spot,” “. . . a bubbling hub of neighborhood life, the center of an invisible world of older people hiding in plain sight.” Complementing recent research (e.g., Klinenberg, 2012) documenting the rise of solitary living among more affluent elders in the United States and abroad, Torres exposes and extends meanings of place in aging studies, as a fulcrum for understanding identity, community, and adaptation.

Janssen offers a penetrating view into the meanings of age and aging among incarcerated women. Moving beyond the harrowing and pervasive accounts of mass incarceration in the United States over recent decades (e.g., Carson, 2014), her in-depth interview project provides subjective and narrative texture that is rare in the literature. Informants’ accounts give shape to the meanings of time, biographical themes, and strategies of survival behind bars, and insights into how programming with prisons could be reformed and redesigned, better to meet the needs of aging or disabled women inmates. This population has been triply silenced—by virtue of their criminal sanction, and by their age and gender. Though the targeting of young African-American men within the criminal justice system has been vividly documented, Janssen offers a different and vital window into what is a fast-aging prison population. Though not expressly framed as a narrative study, she finds the power and resources of narrative, as a source of both personal resilience and directions for policy reform, much as Gubrium (1993) did in his illuminating study of residents’ perceptions of and adaptations to life in nursing homes.

The Expanding Scope, Challenges, and Intergenerational Nature of Life Course Transitions

Earlier in the Introduction section, I touched on the nature and promise of life course perspectives and inquiry. The ascendancy of the life course perspective in recent decades, despite its internal diversity, has encouraged and allowed us to understand *lives* in a more holistic way. The promise of what a leading scholar calls “developmental science” is to reject the fragmentation of inquiry, rooted in the multiple methods and theoretical orientations that have informed social research on aging, and move toward more contextualized, person-centered understanding. Specifically, we seek “a synthesis of the central concepts, propositions, and methods related to human development, one that bridges scholarship in different disciplines and on different life periods” (Settersten, 1999, p. 2). Certainly, one of the most powerful influences on how lives unfold is history,

which, through the flow of birth cohorts (Mannheim, 1952; Ryder, 1965), connects individual biographies to the welter of larger events and conditions—economic, political, and cultural—that shape but do not determine, life trajectories. Like swimmers in the ocean, we ride the waves that propel some toward social opportunity and mobility, even as they break upon others. In the study of aging, this dynamic brings the productive tension between structure and agency, endemic in the human sciences, into vivid relief. In turning to topics and projects that have absorbed their careers, the contributors to this book orient their discussions to particular historical conditions that have been consequential, for good or ill, for how we navigate the aging process.

The life course framework is essentially ahistorical—neither assuming nor celebrating particular historical conditions or trajectories. Nonetheless, given our commitment to contemporary dynamics, it is important to spell out significant ways in which the twenty-first century life course is shaping life choices and trajectories. These changes, widely acknowledged and documented across kindred fields concerned with aging and adaptation, frame the inductive arguments that authors develop. The post-World War II period saw the institutionalization, for most, of what Riley and Riley (1994) termed the “age differentiated life course,” characterized by a sequential and normative focus on roles in education, work, and then “leisure” or retirement, in advanced industrial societies. This pattern, which seemed natural and robust for those coming of age between the late 1940s and the 1970s, was firmly rooted in the state and federal policies. The G.I. Bill vastly increased access to higher education; federal home loans and rising productivity and real wages expanded the American middle class; and the same “social contract” (Rubin, 1996), enforced by strong labor union density, helped to provide supplementary pensions that made secure retirement possible, even for many with limited formal education.

This mid-twentieth century phenomenon—and its impact on the trajectory of so many lives and the expansion of the middle class in the United States—has left vivid traces in my own life. My father, Edward, is a first-generation American, born to Russian-Jewish parents who had fled the Ukraine in 1910 or so. Passing through Ellis Island, they embarked on a difficult life in Worcester, Massachusetts: my grandfather, a blacksmith and tool maker, struggled with employment through much of the 1930s, and my father, born in 1917, was compelled to work to help support the family. His plan, if not ambition, in his early twenties, was to complete training as a machinist in a local textile factory and secure a stable job as a skilled tradesman. World War II, for all its devastation, proved to be a catalyst in his life when, having survived the conflict, he was encouraged to attend college on the G.I. Bill. In that era, the benefit extended to private, as well as public, universities, and he ultimately completed a doctorate in anthropology and sustained a career in the then-nascent field of medical anthropology (e.g., Wellin, 1998, 1955). This historical roller-coaster—defined by harsh adversity, followed by a tide of upward and sustained mobility—is central to the narrative concerning what some journalists have celebrated as the *greatest* generation (Brokaw, 1998). In the decades following World War II, this historical/cultural narrative has shaped—even if not

always consciously—the ways in which many in the United States came to perceive and assess their own biographies. After all, there was evidence of widespread mobility and expanded opportunity, despite the glaring inequalities that remain.

Despite these gains, there were always inherent gaps and problems with the age-differentiated model/ideal, which have only become more sharply apparent in the global, post-industrial economic order in which we live today. Among the problems are the increased premium on formal and extended educational careers, to achieve middle-class status (despite yawning inequalities that persist in educational access and attainment); less stable employment arrangements and careers, which were visible even before the Great Recession of a decade ago; and the assumption that later life is non-productive (centered on “leisure”), which fueled ageism and undercut the sense of civic engagement among older people, and played into debates about generational equity.

Riley and Riley, in their discussion in 1994, argued for a need to move toward a more *age-integrated* life course model, allowing greater flexibility for people to move between educational, work, and other roles throughout their lives. Family, gender, and caregiving roles were largely absent from this analysis, an omission that has since been addressed in a vibrant stream of scholarship that integrates feminist and political economy/policy perspectives (Meyer, 2000.) In short, more by necessity than choice, we now see convulsions in life plans that reveal the obsolescence of the earlier, more “orderly” model. As Heinz (2003) demonstrated, ours is now a far more *contingent* life course, in which the risks and uncertainties of entering “full adulthood” and building family and community careers fall much more heavily on individuals at every stage. These changes have injected tension and instability into the meta-narratives of culture and identity that, for many, had come to seem natural in prior decades. As McAdams (1993, pp. 11–12) argued, a powerful strand of identity is coming to know oneself by

... creating a heroic story of the self . . . What is a personal myth? First and foremost, it is a special kind of story that each of us naturally constructs to bring together the different parts of ourselves and our lives into a purposeful and convincing whole . . . A personal myth is an act of imagination that is a patterned integration of our remembered past, perceived present, and anticipated future.

The convulsive changes in the twenty-first century life course in many advanced nations, intensified in the United States by the results of the 2016 election, constitute a jarring breach in the assumptions and expectations by which—even if implicitly—many have navigated their lives. Becker (1997), in her book, *Disrupted Lives*, wrote that

People’s efforts to create linkages with the past during times of disruptive changes—whether societal, such as those caused by a revolution, or individual, such as the onset of illness—have been readily observed. People maintain

continuity with the past amid the facts of change by interpreting current events so they are understood as part of a tradition.

(p. 4)

This ongoing process of reconciliation is, in good part, a *narrative* process, in which we place events and choices in time, seeking to discern the potential and limits of human *agency* to heal the breach; in this sense, there is substantial overlap between the power and efficacy of historical/cultural narratives, and individual ones, such as clinical counselors, seek to excavate via therapy (Polkinghorne, 1988). The promise is that one can *re-story* events, such that they become more coherent and morally acceptable. Social researchers on aging are certainly implicated in this process, and the concluding chapters in this volume reflect and expand on this theme. Like our informants, those who investigate aging are continuously *constructing the life course* (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

Schmeeckle offers both an intellectual memoir, recounting the development of her interests, training, and agenda as a sociologist, and a detailed appeal for gerontology to expand the study of the life course—to earlier life stages including childhood, and to global patterns and connections. Her initial interest, in the diverse and contested nature of family ties, drew her to examine children more directly, including their rights (or lack thereof); comparative status and well-being, internationally; and the extant state of law and policy which, at least potentially, advances social justice for children. In an especially poignant question, she asks us to consider the untold numbers of *missing elders*, those in so many stressed nations for whom reaching adulthood itself is fraught with risk.

Song, in her ethnographic study of life perspectives and strategies of Korean university students in the United States, draws from and expands on the timely theme of *prolonged adolescence*, or alternatively, *delayed adulthood*. This has become an enormously troubling and visible issue (e.g., Settersten & Ray, 2010), and not only in the United States. Other nations in Western Europe are also facing very high rates of unemployment (even for the most educated youth), stalled progress for young people seeking to establish independent homes or families, and high levels of student debt. These stresses combine and compound their sense that adulthood, as their parents or grandparents perceived it, is, not to strain our earlier oceanic metaphor, a receding horizon that they may not be able to reach until their thirties, if then. The informants in Song’s account are highly motivated, worldly and, to be sure, sophisticated and accomplished. Multilingual, they reveal a new kind of subjectivity, quite different from that which we assumed to be the case in earlier iterations of research on immigration, based on models of *assimilation*. Rather than being anchored in national, cultural, or temporal matrices, their identities seem to be as fluid and contextual as is their use of language (code-switching) in their hectic routines. Dutiful toward parents and compliant with a rather vague obligation to prepare for life in “the big world,” their lives on campus and in their communities are, by contrast, rather limited and ascetic, certainly lacking the kind of exploration, autonomy, or rebellion that one assumes from stereotypes of American college students. In their social gatherings, nested

within a larger church community in central New Jersey, Song's informants make visible a kind of liminal young adulthood and community that one assumes must be present in virtually any large college or university. In the spirit of praxis and sensitivity to policy, Song concludes with some thoughts on how colleges, as institutions, might better support and integrate such students.

In the final chapter, Toro-Morn draws on the approach of auto-ethnography, to recount a saga of transnational caregiving—spanning boundaries of nation, culture, gender, and social class—involving her mother's final years. A native of Puerto Rico, the author frames the account in the context of a modernization project within her home country; of traditional gendered expectations regarding care within the family; and, finally, of hard-won experience that she filters through a sophisticated gender lens. For example, she argues that while accounts of immigration, based on men, reveal ways in which the transition may enable them more effectively to “do gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and masculinity (despite the obvious tribulations immigration imposes), the same odyssey may conflict with women's ability to integrate their traditional and newly acquired roles and aspirations. Moreover, this analysis complements others, which have documented transnational care chains involving women from the developing world, providing care for more affluent “first world” women (Hochschild & Ehrenreich, 2002). Toro-Morn's account is equally revealing about the hidden dilemmas and costs—typically seen as private troubles—that roil the lives of those who have achieved our shared hope of “upward mobility” (see Roberts & Rosenwald, 2001). Given the inevitable and existential nature of mortality, it is fitting to conclude the book with a meditation on how, despite the breadth and velocity of social change, we labor to honor intergenerational commitments.

Final Thoughts on Narrative and Personal Biographies in Critical Gerontology

Thus, contributors to the book present topics, questions, and findings in ways that speak to current social conditions and debates. Critical gerontology resists codification or consensus, in terms of theoretical or methodological approaches, but insists upon ongoing reflection and critique of how, by whom, and with what moral or political stances age and aging are rendered problematic.

Introducing readers to a contemporary group of chapters on critical gerontology leads one to reflect on the range of voices and stances that are increasingly animating this area of inquiry. An especially welcome turn, in my view, is, as noted, toward *narrative* gerontology, which is equally relevant for scholars, recounting their careers, as for understanding others' lives (e.g., Kenyon, Ruth, & Mader, 1999). Estes' early chapter exemplifies this commitment. After all, it would be difficult to refute Hendricks' (1992) point that, “As social scientists, we study the structure and process of our ‘subjects’ behavior. Is it not legitimate to study our own behavior as well?” (p. 31). This insight echoes earlier critiques, such as that by Gouldner (1970, pp. 46–49), who argued for the need to reject “theory” or theorizing as disembodied practices, carried out by detached social scientists.

Instead, he called attention to the *infrastructure* of social theory—made up of the sentiments, experiences, and quasi-political stances of those involved, who carry out their work against the backdrop of powerful, though implicit, perceptions of the nature and justice of their society, at particular historical moments.

Taken too far, this call to “personalize” inquiry could be inhibiting or somehow seen as self-indulgent, whether from positivist or post-positivist quarters. But today, one sees more co-existence, between such personal awareness and candor (what many term *reflexivity*) and diverse kinds of scholarship, teaching, and advocacy (see Glassner & Hertz, 2003). I concur with Krieger (1985), who argued that we need to honor our experience but, also, move *beyond subjectivity*, using the self and biography as vehicles for understanding social processes that are distinctive, in our lives, but not unique to us.

The narrative stance (rooted in the larger tradition of social constructionism) calls for particularity over broad generalization, for attention to context and agency over deterministic schemes of analysis. Narratives engage and reflect *time*, in its historical, organizational, and biographical dimensions, and they allow for, if not insist on, greater subjective and emotional candor than has been typical in positivistic studies. Myerhoff (1978), an exceptionally insightful figure in this tradition, did much to exemplify and promote narrative approaches in her book, *Number our Days*. Centering on a community of older, Eastern European Jews in Venice, California, Myerhoff's work displays the transcultural need for people to tell, to witness, to ritualize the fateful events and achievements of their lives—especially dramatic given that her informants, born early in the twentieth century, were survivors of the Holocaust. Though the events and accounts in this book are far less dramatic, Myerhoff's ethos has informed the project from the outset.

Such a stance is not narrowly subjective but, rather, mines experience for insight into social life and social change, anchored by an explicitly comparative turn of mind. Though characteristically interpretive (often ethnographic), this approach is open to diverse sources and methods of inquiry. As stated by Gubrium and Holstein (1999), in a précis of constructionist and narrative approaches in aging studies: “conceptualization on the part of the researcher is less a matter of theorizing than it is an effort to formulate analytic or sensitizing vocabularies that make the social world visible on its own terms” (p. 291). This goal does not at all reject theoretical development but leads to a more inductive, nuanced, comparative, historically specific exploration and understanding of aging (see also Hendricks, 1996). Ultimately, the contributions speak to new realities and possibilities in the early twenty-first century, without any presumption that they are either representative or comprehensive in this regard.

One topical connection that I was not successful in including in the book is to the burgeoning area of disability studies (Albrecht, Seelman, & Bury, 2001). Many of the fears and challenges ascribed to later life are, on reflection, revealed to be rooted in disability and chronic illness, rather than to aging, per se. The trans-disciplinary field of disability studies offers some of the most exciting and important insights for critical gerontology, and many scholars (e.g., Priestley, 2003) have

turned to explicit investigation of how the experience of, and management of, disability intersects with particular life course periods and, also, with gender (Gerschick, 2000).

Of course, this dialectical approach to linking *social structures* and *human lives* is venerable, even if the specific trends, questions, and implications are newer. Nearly three decades ago, Riley (1988a) edited a collection (to which we owe a great debt) bearing that title; it was paired with a second volume (Riley 1988b) containing what Robert K. Merton termed “sociological biographies” by celebrated scholars. These rich essays traced the emergence of social gerontology as a sub-discipline in the decades following World War II. Through the eyes of such influential scholars as Bernice Neugarten, we learn how the Committee on Human Development at the University of Chicago flourished even during the pre-war years. By the mid-1970s, with the establishment of the National Institute of Aging and several independent academic programs nationwide, there was a critical mass of activity, across kindred fields. Neugarten (1988b) writes, “During that 20-year period, some 80 Ph.D.s graduated from our special program, almost all of whom are now in university faculties around the country, teaching and carrying out research, with some . . . administering multidisciplinary gerontology centers” (p. 94). More recently, research centers that foster multidisciplinary research and dense professional and policy networks were established, such as the *Institute for Health & Aging*, at the University of California, San Francisco, founded by Carroll Estes. These teachers and scholars, in a resonant and apt cliché, are the mothers and fathers of our contributors, the giants on whose shoulders we stand; many of their names will appear in the acknowledgments as well as prominently in the citations.

In my own case, life experience certainly shaped the interests and agenda that have unfolded over the past 30 years. As a non-traditional student, starting college in my late twenties, I was avidly interested in the nature and trade-offs of age-role transitions, including those that, as in my case, were “disorderly” or “off-time” (George, 1993). Seeking to make sense of employment in an elder care setting, I was drawn to the Chicago School of Sociology—in particular to the comparative and detailed case studies of occupations and careers that Everett Hughes and others fostered in that program (see Barley, 1989). The intellectual appeal of this approach, for me, combined with a more pressing, practical set of questions that grew out of my role as a paid caregiver in a group home setting (among the first in the nascent “group home” movement) for older women diagnosed with dementia (e.g., Jaffe & Wellin, 2008; Wellin & Jaffe, 2004). I puzzled over the social/interactional nature of identity and memory, and how both were mediated by mundane, quasi-medical institutional categories and interactions. Such questions seemed to me equally relevant to understanding work roles and occupational careers, as to the study of aging, more narrowly.

Parallel assumptions and questions were equally prominent in the work of sociologists who shaped my thinking, but who are not generally associated with gerontology, such as Erving Goffman and Howard S. Becker. Becker (1970a, 1970b), who would have known Neugarten and others at the Committee on

Human Development at Chicago and, later, at Northwestern, where I studied, published papers such as “Personal Change and Adult Life” and “The Self and Adult Socialization,” which are as illuminating and relevant as ever and helped (through reference to his empirical studies of school teachers, medical students, jazz musicians, and others) to sustain a rich tradition of field research into occupational socialization and careers. This strand, or lineage, in the earlier development of research on aging, identity, and institutional timetables and contingencies has not always been linked to the development of gerontology, *per se*. However, this strand emerges as important in this collection and reinforces my message that critical gerontology has strong and deep roots in approaches that have long shaped the study of lives. That connection is certainly strong regarding the Chicago School of Sociology, informed as it was by symbolic interactionism, the study of careers (to which Goffman [1961] imbued a sharper subjective and moral dimension), and attention to how institutions and role-transitions shape one’s sense of identity over time (see Barley, 1989; Hughes, 1984). Pointing out this continuity in my own concerns and aspirations is certainly not to imply any rigid or consensual agreement among those who would claim to be critical gerontologists, including the contributors to this book. What we offer, then, is a contemporary and (we believe) conceptually coherent cross-section of scholarship, reflecting the range of current topics and questions that we see as important for a broad readership.

A final word to the audiences of the book, including students—whether doing advanced undergraduate work or graduate study—as well as practitioners. It is true that readers will find little direct reference to pedagogy in these pages. However, virtually all of the contributors to the book are long-time and devoted teachers, and our ideas and modes of presentation have been honed through and informed by years of classroom experience and collaboration with community partners, involved in internships, advocacy, and action research. We hope the volume will be a touchstone for students, teachers, advocates, policymakers, and interested readers who share our desire to make sense of and engage both challenges and prospects regarding age and aging in a new century.

References

- Albrecht, G.L., Seelman, K.D., & Bury, M. (Eds.). (2001). *Handbook of disability studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Alexander, J.C. (1988). The new theoretical movement. In N.J. Smelser (Ed.), *Handbook of sociology* (pp. 77–101). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Barley, S.R. (1989). Careers, identities, and institutions: The legacy of the Chicago School of Sociology. In M.B. Arthur, D.T. Hall, & B.S. Lawrence (Eds.), *Handbook of career theory* (pp. 41–65). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Becker, G. (1997). *Disrupted lives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Becker, H.S. (1970a). Personal change in adult life. In H.S. Becker (Ed.), *Sociological work: Method and substance* (pp. 275–288). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.
- Becker, H.S. (1970b). The self and adult socialization. In H.S. Becker (Ed.), *Sociological work: Method and substance* (pp. 289–303). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

- Bengston, V.L., Burgess, E.O., & Parrott, T.M. (1997). Theory, explanation, and a third generation of theoretical development in social gerontology. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 52B(2), S72–S88.
- Best, J. (1995). Constructionism in context. In J. Best (Ed.), *Images of issues* (2nd ed., pp. 337–354). Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Biggs, S., Hendricks, J., & Lowenstein, A. (2003). The need for theory in gerontology. In S. Biggs, A. Lowenstein, & J. Hendricks (Eds.), *The need for theory; Critical approaches to gerontology* (pp. 1–12). Amityville, NY: Baywood.
- Brokaw, T. (1998). *The greatest generation*. New York: Random House.
- Burawoy, M. (2004). ASA Presidential address: For public sociology. *American Sociological Review*, 70(1), 4–28.
- Cancian, F.M., & Oliker, S.J. (2000). *Caring and gender*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Carson, E.A. (2014). Prisoners in 2013. *U.S. Department of Justice: Bureau of Justice Statistics*. 32 pages. Washington, DC.
- Dannefer, D. (1987). Aging as intracohort differentiation: Accentuation, the Matthew effect, and the life course. *Sociological Forum*, 2, 211–236.
- DeVault, M.L. (1999). Institutional ethnography: A strategy for feminist inquiry. In M.L. DeVault (Ed.), *Liberating method: Feminism and social research* (pp. 46–54). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Estes, C.L. (1979). *The aging enterprise*. San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass.
- Estes, C.L., & Binney, E.A. (1989). The bio-medicalization of aging: Dangers and dilemmas. *The Gerontologist*, 29(5), 587–596.
- George, L.K. (1993). Sociological perspectives on life transitions. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 19, 353–373.
- Gerschick, T.J. (2000). Toward a theory of disability and gender. *Signs*, 14(4), 1263–1268.
- Glassner, B., & Hertz, R. (Eds.). (2003). *Our studies, ourselves*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums*. New York: Doubleday.
- Gouldner, A. W. (1970). *The coming crisis of western sociology*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gubrium, J.F. (1993). *Speaking of life: Horizons of meaning for nursing home residents*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Gubrium, J.F., & Holstein, J.A. (1999). Constructionist perspectives on aging. In V.L. Bengston & K.W. Schaie (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of aging* (pp. 287–305). New York: Springer.
- Hasenfeld, Y., & Garrow, E.E. (2012). Nonprofit human services organizations and advocacy in a neoliberal welfare state. *Social Service Review*, 86(2), 295–322.
- Heinz, W.R. (2003). From work trajectories to negotiated careers. In J.T. Mortimer & M.J. Shanahan (Eds.), *Handbook of the life course* (pp. 185–204). New York: Springer.
- Hendricks, J. (1992). Generations and the generation of theory in social gerontology. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 35(1), 31–47.
- Hendricks, J. (1996). Qualitative research: Contributions and advances. In R. Binstock & L. George (Eds.), *Handbook of aging and the social sciences* (4th ed., pp. 52–72). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Hochschild, A.R., & Ehrenreich, B. (2002). Introduction. In A.R. Hochschild & B. Ehrenreich (Eds.), *Global woman: Nannies, maids, and sex workers in the new economy* (pp. 1–13). New York: Henry Holt.
- Holstein, J.A., & Gubrium, J.F. (2000). *Constructing the life course* (2nd ed.). Lanham, MD: General Hall.
- Hughes, E.C. (1984). *The sociological eye*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.
- Jaffe, D., & C. Wellin. (2008). June's troubled transition: Adjustment to residential care for older adults with dementia. *Care Management Journals*, 9(3), 128–137.
- Katz, S. (1996). *Disciplining old age*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia.
- Kenyon, G.M., Ruth, J.E., & Mader, W. (1999). Elements of a narrative gerontology. In V.L. Bengston & K.W. Schaie (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of aging* (pp. 40–58). New York: Springer.
- Klinenberg, E. (2012). *Going solo*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Krieger, S. (1985). Beyond "subjectivity": The use of the self in social science. *Qualitative Sociology*, 8, 309–324.
- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- McAdams, D. (1993). *Stories we live by*. New York: William Morrow.
- Mannheim, K. (1952). The problem of generations. In K. Mannheim (Ed.), *Essays on the sociology of knowledge*, (276–322). London: Oxford University Press.
- Mattingly, C. (1998). *Healing dramas and clinical plots: The narrative structure of experience*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Meyer, M.H. (Ed.). (2000). *Carework: Gender, labor, and the welfare state*. New York: Routledge.
- Mills, C.W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Morgan, L.A., & Kunkel, S.R. (2007). *Aging, society, and the life course* (3rd ed.). New York: Springer.
- Myerhoff, B. (1978). *Number our days*. New York: Touchstone.
- Neugarten, B.L. (Ed.). (1982). *Age or need: Public policies for older people*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Neugarten, B.L. (1988). The aging society and my academic life. In M.W. Riley (Ed.), *Sociological lives* (pp. 91–106). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Passuth, P.M., & Bengston, V.L. (1996). Sociological theories of aging: Current perspectives and future directions. In J. Quadagno & D. Street (Eds.), *Aging for the twenty-first century* (pp. 12–30). New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Pithouse, A. (1987). *Social work: The social organisation of an invisible trade*. Aldershot, UK: Gower.
- Polkinghorne, D.E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Priestley, M. (2003). *Disability: A life course approach*. Malden, MA: Polity.
- Quadagno, J. (2018). *Aging and the life course* (7th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Riley, M.W. (Ed.). (1988a). *Social structure & human lives: Social change and the life course* (Vol. 1). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Riley, M.W. (Ed.). (1988b). *Sociological lives: Social change and the life course* (Vol. 2). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Riley, M.W., & Riley, J.W. (1994). Age integration and the lives of older people. *The Gerontologist*, 34, 110–115.
- Roberts, J.S., & Rosenwald, G.C. (2001). Ever upward and no turning back: Social mobility and identity formation among first-generation college students. In D.P. McAdams, R. Josselson, & A. Lieblich (Eds.), *Turns in the road: Narrative studies of lives in transition* (pp. 91–120). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Rowles, G.D., & Bernard, M. (Eds.). (2013). *Environmental gerontology: Making meaningful places in old age*. New York: Springer.
- Rubin, B.A. (1996). *Shifts in the social contract*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

- Ryder, N.B. (1965). The cohort as a concept in the study of social change. *American Sociological Review*, 30(6), 843–861.
- Settersten, R.A. (1999). *Lives in time and place*. Amityville, NY: Baywood.
- Settersten, R.A., & Ray, B.A. (2010). *Not quite adults*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Wellin, C. (2007). Narrative interviewing: Process and benefits in teaching about aging and the life course. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 28(1), 79–99.
- Wellin, C. (2010). Growing pains in the sociology of aging and the life course: A review of recent textbooks. *Teaching Sociology*, 38(4), 373–382.
- Wellin, C., & Jaffe, D.J. (2004, August). In search of personal care: Challenges to identity support in residential care for elders with cognitive illness. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 18(3), 275–295.
- Wellin, E. (1955). Water boiling in a Peruvian town. In B.D. Paul (Ed.), *Health, culture, and community* (pp. 71–103). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Wellin, E. (1998). Theoretical orientations in medical anthropology: Continuity and change over the past half-century. In S.V. Sjaak & A. Rienks (Eds.), *The art of medical anthropology: Readings* (pp. 10–22). The Netherlands: Het Spinhuis.
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D.H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender and Society*, 1(2), 125–151.