It Is Not Getting Old: The Rejuvenation of Social Gerontology

Upon hearing that I accepted the position of editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Gerontology Social Sciences* (*JG:SS*), a friend of mine, who happens to be a journalist, responded with the quip, “I guess it is not getting old.” As I parsed the multiple meanings of this statement, it occurred to me that the field of gerontology has never been healthier and has in some sense been rejuvenated by recent advances in the science of human development and aging that include innovations in the theories and methods applied by gerontologists, investments in data collection enterprises that allow true tests of developmental hypotheses, and integration of scholars across traditional disciplines that produces knowledge greater than the sum of its parts.

Promoting a better understanding of the meanings, implications, and opportunities presented by the relentless march of population aging—perhaps the single most relevant fact across the constituent disciplines that make up the field of gerontology—has become a priority around the world. Concurrently, the increased availability of long-term longitudinal data has fulfilled the promise of dynamic theories of the life course as they relate to social, mental, and physiological well-being throughout the life span. As “models” of aging and “data” about aging have increasingly come into synchrony, the research community has before it the tools to answer questions related to cumulative advantage and disadvantage, cohort succession, and the process of human development going from neonatal conditions to the end of life. The collection of biomarker data and genetics—even in large nationally representative social surveys—has opened pathways for integrating the social sciences with the biological sciences in ways that were unimaginable even a decade ago. Qualitative and mixed methods studies that focus on the meanings attributed to successful and unsuccessful aging are flourishing in gerontology and have brought to light the socially constructed nature of aging and old age. Indeed, it is the overabundance, rather than the shortage, of data that is currently producing challenges for researchers in the social science of aging, increasing the importance of theory to guide the way.

Social gerontology has also internationalized to a great degree. Cross-national and cross-continental collaborations and comparisons have flourished, shedding light on significant policy issues, as well as adding to basic social science knowledge about aging and older adults. Although we need to be cognizant of important differences among countries, the boundaries that in the past may have balkanized research have to some degree blurred with international migration and economic integration of the world economy. Knowledge about aging in countries with various welfare regimes—whether from the rapidly developing nations of Asia and Latin America or the more stable but increasingly diverse nations of Europe—is ever more important in a globalized world. I encourage the submission of high-quality articles from around the globe.

With this issue, we begin to celebrate a notoriously important birthday of the Gerontological Society of America: its 65th! To commemorate this milestone, each issue of *JG:SS* in 2010 includes a “frontier-review article” designed to describe cutting-edge scholarship on a particular topic in social gerontology. In science, frontiers are transient boundaries that are continually extended by new discoveries and the emergence of new perspectives. However, it is at our peril that we ignore the rich soil from which these discoveries and perspectives have sprouted. Thus, each article will look back on early formulations of the topic, track its developmental pathway to the present, and prognosticate into the future based on the most novel scholarship of today. The results will be fascinating to read.

As a graduate student in 1985, I submitted my first scholarly article to an academic journal. When I received the reviews, I scanned them quickly and then turned my attention to the letter from the editor. It was a litany of criticisms, citing the article’s many deficiencies (who knew about polychoric correlations?), so that by the middle of the second page, I stopped reading, too depressed to go on. I put the letter away, absorbing the sting of my first rejection. Then, in 1993, in my first year as an Assistant Professor at University of Southern California (USC), I stumbled across the letter while moving into my new office. The sting of that earlier rejection had softened with time and some minor publishing success, so I read the full letter to discover that the last paragraph included an invitation to revise and resubmit the manuscript! It was a generous decision but one for which I will always be grateful despite my youthful mistake. Perhaps you already guess that this journal was *JG:SS*. This experience taught me that it is no contradiction for an editor to uphold the highest standards of empirical rigor while granting a few degrees of freedom to an author whose research may contain the seeds of a significant innovation. But those seeds need to be planted before they can germinate. Thus, one of my goals will be to widen the base of submissions by welcoming articles from junior scholars as well as from scholars who are based outside the United States, who use less common methodological approaches,
and who are from disciplines traditionally underrepresented in *JG:SS*.

In entering the role of editor, I acknowledge several mentors and advisors whose guidance equipped me with the skills necessary for the formidable task ahead. First, I want to thank Ken Ferraro, my immediate predecessor, for his skillful stewardship of *JG:SS*. I am inheriting a journal in excellent health thanks to his diligent pursuit of high-quality research that we see in the articles that fill these pages. His gracious provision of advice and support during the transition period has been of inordinate value to me. The late Chuck Longino, a former editor of this journal, was a “shadow” advisor who provided me a role model for how a demographer can also be a critical theorist. We both acknowledged to each other that our paths had intersected so many times (some of it around *JG:SS*) that it seemed that we had professionally collaborated with each other, when in fact we had not. Vern Bengtson was instrumental in my professional development, providing me an intellectual architecture from which my own research sprung. He left me an important legacy in the Longitudinal Study of Generations for which I am greatly indebted. Finally, Eugene Litwak, my dissertation supervisor, was instrumental in forging my sociological imagination through his emphasis on the importance of formal theory and his infectious enthusiasm for sociological ideas. The generosity of these scholars was a gift that I hope I have passed to my own students. In addition, I thank my two deans at USC, Jerry Davison and Michael Quick, without whose institutional support I would not have been able to accept the position of editor, and Mat Thorslund, who, in a true act of international collegiality, has agreed to let me make the Aging Research Center of the Karolinska Institute the (partial) summer editorial home of *JG:SS*.

The length of an editor’s term at *JG:SS* is 4 years, and I anticipate significant changes in the journal publishing world during this time. The print version of this journal will likely fade away, a victim of the digital revolution and changing work habits. However, the impact of other digital innovations is difficult to predict. Social networking sites, podcasts, and communication strategies not yet invented may strengthen communities of scholars, as well as potentially link their work to the general public in ways that directly fulfill the mandate to make scientific research translational and widely accessible. Internal to these pages, I intend to reinforce and strengthen the reputation of *JG:SS* as the premier journal in aging and the social sciences by reaffirming its mission to publish gerontological research that is firmly grounded in theory, that applies the most rigorous empirical methods, and that extends knowledge on issues of great societal and personal relevance. I am honored and excited to be at the helm of a journal that is improving with age and at 65 is nowhere near retirement.

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