

# Anthropology & Aging

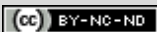
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## Book Review

Wilmoth, Janet & Ferraro, Kenneth, Eds. *Gerontology Perspectives and Issues*. (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) New York: Springer Publishing Company. 2013. ISBN 978-0-8261-0965-1. 331 pp. Price \$80.00 (Hard Copy)

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The contributors have advanced degrees in sociology, psychology, anthropology, law, economics, gerontology, public health, and other related content areas.

The central theme of the text is “Gerontological Imagination” (GI), a term that suggests a new paradigm for describing the way of thinking that identifies the key elements regarding the aging process as perceived by multidisciplinary gerontologists. The key elements include: aging as a multifaceted change; genetic influences on aging; heterogeneity in aging; aging as a lifelong process; accumulation of disadvantages over the life course; and aging in the social and intellectual climate. The 15 chapters are divided into three main classifications on these related gerontology issues: the physiological aspects, the social aspects of aging, and public policy and service provision in meeting the needs of elders and their families.

Research has indicated that biological, environmental factors and specific life events have great impact on the aging process. The patterns of cognitive decline are, often, due to biological changes that interfere with a person’s sense of independence. However, elders can learn to use alternative methods for processing decisions and performing daily functions. The decrease in social partners can result in a variety of emotional responses to life events, and can determine a person’s sense of well-being. Yet, elders retain the social relationships that mean the most to them, and most elders effectively adapt to the changing life phases and are satisfied with their lives. Studies have, also, revealed the heterogeneity in the aging population, and the differences in managing emotions and behaviors.

The text authors/researchers suggest using a life course perspective for studying healthy longevity. The core principles are:

- Life patterns are established during the early years, and human lives unfold over long periods of time.
- An individual life course is influenced within a social-world historical context.
- Humans are linked together within complex relationships of work, family, friends, and community.
- The life course is determined by the individual’s decisions in situations and/or conditions.

Some life course research has begun; however, many relevant topics have not been explored. Although, longitudinal studies can be very costly, much can be learned that could be valuable for the future. “The primary goal of life course research is to understand long-term patterns of stability and change as they unfold in social and historical contexts” (p. 168).

Age is usually the defining factor in the research literature related to functional abilities in daily life and a sense of well-being. The authors recommend using an integrated model when exploring the many aspects of socio-emotional aging. The Social Input Model includes three main foci: (1) Personal characteristics of age, gender, race, regulation of emotions, and a future time perspective; (2) the social network and the quality of the relationships with partners that are readily available; (3) and extrinsic factors that include stressors and partner responses.

The model would be an effective method for studying how older individuals transition to retirement; and how they maintain social relationships using telephone, social media, and other technologies. Anthropologists are particularly interested in understanding how the elderly respond to the technology challenges. The model could, also, be useful in examining the intergenerational family relationships within cultural groups. Of most importance would be learning how elders regulate their emotional responses and the strategies they use when coping with negative experiences associated with the aging processes.

A study of lifetime medical histories of centenarians revealed that 38% of the oldest old were survivors of at least one major disease prior to the age of 80. Delayers (43%) were individuals who were free from any major disease until after the age of 80. Escapers were identified as people who were free of any major disease until after they reached 100 years of age. Actually all of the centenarians had a strong disease resistance that declined in the tenth decade of life (p. 33). However, research with this age group can be difficult due to the loss of long-term recall of life events, actual age validation, or the presence of concurrent diseases.

Researchers considered innovative approaches for studying longevity in animals for comparison purposes that resulted in new ways of thinking about the human aging processes. Some important discoveries indicated that biomarkers, such as peak bone mass during the second and third decades of life have a great influence on the probability of bone fracture in later years. Researchers have, also, discovered that elevated blood cholesterol at age 50 may be an indicator of developing Alzheimer's disease at age 70. However, if the cholesterol level is higher in the seventh decade, it may serve as a protective mechanism against the disease. Obesity in the young and middle aged adults is commonly associated with diminished life expectancy; in contrast, studies have shown it does not have the same effect for people over 60 years of age (especially in men). These and other similar findings indicate that optimizing the timing of interventions may alter the course of health/disease management throughout the lifespan.

There is a world-wide concern regarding the unequal geographical distribution of aging populations and available resources. The demographics of aging have been of great interest to several disciplines related to world-wide economic issues, the transitioning of elderly to different geographic areas, availability of resources to meet the needs of the aging population, cross cultural issues and the changes in intergenerational relationships over time, as well as the aging leadership in countries, and scarcity of future leaders. Future research may help provide solutions to these issues including public policies and services to protect the interests and needs of the aging populations throughout the world. There is a great need to see aging as a dynamic changing system rather than a continued downward trajectory.

The text is an important resource for introducing research and innovative methods using interdisciplinary teams in providing care to these very special complex and diverse groups of people.