PART ONE

Social Sciences, Gerontology and Geriatrics
The State of Theory in Aging and the Social Sciences

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Science is built of facts the way a house is built of bricks: but an accumulation of facts is no more science than a pile of bricks is a house.

Jules Henri Poincare (1854–1912), French Mathematician

Introduction

Readers of this fourth edition of the Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences, of earlier editions, or of major social science journals in the field of aging, will have to work hard to identify explicit theoretical statements. Making theoretical presuppositions explicit can, arguably, enhance our understanding. Most social scientists consider theory to be a good thing, agreeing with Poincaré’s view that theory is needed to take us beyond the mere accumulation of facts. This chapter is predicated on that assumption. Other voices, however, decry the quest for theory as either fruitless or inimical to understanding. Some view theory as a key aspect of positivism, and some contemporary scholars have no sympathy for positivism.

My disciplinary origins in sociology, and the fact that sociology has been the predominant social science applied to aging, influence the nature of this overview of the state of theory. However, the issues addressed are, like social gerontology itself, transdisciplinary.

The chapter begins at a general level by establishing a typology of social theories of aging based on two dimensions: macro-versus microtheorizing, and normative versus interpretive theorizing. Inclusion of middle categories yields a nine-cell classification of social science theories of aging. This presupposes that the “state of theory” is actually more like a “United Nations of theories” – with all the squabbling and political rhetoric implied by that metaphor. The “state of theory” in aging and
the social sciences is made more complex by the fact that most work in the field (as can be seen from this Handbook) does not deal with aging at all, but rather with age-related issues. The level at which I describe theoretical perspectives is broad enough to encompass social science theories dealing with age in this broader sense (for a narrower review of theories of aging, see Marshall, 1995).

The nature of theory in the social sciences must be considered. What is theory and why do we have not one theory but a set of social science theories in aging? This will be considered in the next section prior to developing the typology. A third section deals with macrolevel theorizing from the normative and interpretive perspectives; the fourth section examines microlevel theorizing from these two perspectives; and the fifth section deals explicitly with attempts to link macro- and microperspectives. A concluding section identifies some continuing theoretical challenges.

**Classifying Social Theories of Aging**

Theory in the social sciences is discourse. As Alexander (1988, pp. 78–81) observed, theory is aimed at “rational knowledge,” but this is not necessarily knowledge that is verifiable empirically. Theoretical disputes are not just about the fit between theoretical statements and statements about data, and they are rarely resolved by recourse to data. Rather, the disputes are about the characterization of the theoretical statements. This, Alexander concluded, leads to the development of theoretical traditions and schools that are “not simply manifestations of scientific disagreement . . . but bases upon which such disagreements are promoted and sustained.” Theoretical discourse, therefore, goes well beyond formal theoretical statements to arguments about “logical coherence, expansiveness of scope, interpretive insight, value relevance, rhetorical force, beauty, and texture of argument” (1988, p. 80).

Not all social scientists agree, leading to their assignment to the normative side of the normative-interpretive continuum that will be described below. It follows from this view that a classification of theory itself is discursive; alternative classifications can be argued. My classification is found in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>level of analysis</th>
<th>NORMATIVE</th>
<th>BRIDGING</th>
<th>INTERPRETIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MACRO</td>
<td>structuralism, modernization and aging theory</td>
<td>interest group theory</td>
<td>political economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LINKING</td>
<td>disengagement and activity theory, &quot;birth and fortune&quot; thesis, age stratification perspective</td>
<td>life course perspective, feminist theories</td>
<td>critical theory, symbolic interactionism and phenomenology; cultural anthropology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MICRO</td>
<td>role theory, development theory, conventional economic and rational choice theory</td>
<td>exchange theory</td>
<td>self and identity theories (continuity theory; career/status passage; dramaturgical)</td>
</tr>
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*Figure 1. A classification of social science theories in the field of aging*
The major dimensions of the typology describe differences in theoretical perspective; the names within cells of the typology refer to more specific perspectives or to even more specific formal theoretical approaches (see also Marshall, 1987). The ideal-typical nature of this classification must be emphasized. Individual representatives may put their own emphasis on a theoretical approach, so that, for example, not all age-stratification theorists take a normative approach.

The micro-macro dimension reflects a long-standing tension in social gerontology between the social psychological and social structural levels of analysis. The microlevel is concerned with the individual alone or in social interaction. The macrolevel is concerned with social structure. The micro- and macrolevels of analysis, as well as the linkages between them, have been theorized in many ways in the social sciences (Alexander, 1988; Giddens, 1984, 1991; Huber, 1991; Ritzer, 1988, ch. 14; Turner, 1988) and in social gerontology (Bengtson, Dowd, Smith, & Inkeles, 1975; Buss, 1979; Marshall, 1993, 1994).

The distinction between normative and interpretive theorizing is a second major axis of social theory (Dawe, 1970; Wilson, 1970), and it too has been explicitly raised as a theoretical contrast by several scholars in social gerontology (e.g., Breytspraak, 1984; Dowd, 1980; Marshall, 1986, 1978–9, 1980; Neugarten, 1985). According to Wilson (1970), the normative perspective consists of two main ideas: that interaction is rule-governed (i.e., societal norms determine individual behavior), and that sociological explanation is essentially deductive in form, following the methodology of the natural sciences. The principal examples in the social sciences would be structural functionalist sociology and anthropology, notably in the traditions of Durkheim, Malinowski, and Parsons. In social gerontology, Rosow’s (1974, 1976) theorizing about self, socialization, and society, and Bengtson’s (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Bengtson & Roberts, 1991) theorizing about dimensions of intergenerational solidarity have Durkheimian theoretical underpinnings, and the disengagement theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961) has strong and explicit Parsonian underpinnings (Marshall, 1994). In contrast, the interpretive perspective argues that people construct and make use of norms, but do not automatically adhere to norms. It does not insist that explanation in the social sciences can only be deductive. The social scientist’s goal is to seek interpretive understanding of social behavior, and not usually or necessarily prediction.

Dawe (1970) distinguished between a normative “sociology of order” and an interpretive “sociology of control.” The former gives priority to the social system over the individual, arguing that widespread consensus over societal norms is achieved through highly efficient socialization processes. In contrast, the sociology of control views society as “the creation of its members; the product of their construction of meaning, and of the action and relationships through which they attempt to impose that meaning on their historical situations” (Dawe, 1970, p. 216). The normative-interpretive distinction is described by Estes in Ch. 18, this volume, as a distinction between consensus and conflict perspectives.

Examples of sociological work in the interpretive perspective at the micro-level are my work in aging and dying (Marshall, 1980, 1986b; Marshall & Levy, 1990); Breytspraak’s (1984) or Kaufman’s (1986) work on the aging self; and Matthews’s (1986) study of friendship. Anthropologists such as Fry and Myerhoff (1978a, b)
have employed the perspective. When scholars such as Estes (1979) or Guillemard (1976) describe the “social construction of reality” underlying policy formation for the elderly, they are working within the interpretive perspective at a macrolevel.

I now examine in more detail theorizing at the macro-, the micro-, and the linking levels of analysis. In each case, the discussion is structured to move from normative through bridging to interpretive examples of theory at these three levels (i.e., reading from left to right in each row of Figure 1).

**Macrolevel Theorizing**

Macrolevel theories of aging were initially developed within the normative perspective, with two theoretical approaches of interests to demographers, sociologists, and anthropologists being the theory of the demographic transition (considered here as an example of structural theories), and the theory of aging and modernization. Other macrolevel theories treat individuals or social groups as “actors,” moving toward the interpretive pole of this continuum.

**Structuralism**

Structuralism “excludes from consideration any idea of conscious and purposive individual or group action” (Dowd, 1987, p. 319). It seeks rather to identify universal (hence historical) structural characteristics of society. In the field of aging, this social science without meaningful social action is best represented by mainstream demography. The most important debates in these areas that impinge on aging issues are about the universality or specificity of the theory of the demographic transition (e.g., Stolnitz, 1992) and about the relationships among population growth, changing dependency ratios, and economic growth (e.g., Easterlin, 1991). Because analyses typically examine patterns and relationships among structural variables, such as rates of behavior, these structuralist theoretical approaches exemplify macrolevel, normative theorizing. The associations between changing rates are postulated or interpreted by “reading in” assumptions about how people behave in different circumstances, typically drawing on conventional microeconomic assumptions.

**Modernization and aging theory**

The theory of aging and modernization, as Achenbaum notes (Ch. 8, this volume), captured the imagination of historians as much as other social scientists. In 1960, Burgess suggested that a number of factors led to a decrease in the social status of the aged: urbanization, industrialization, bureaucratization, a move from the extended to the conjugal family, increased leisure time, and increased life expectancy itself. All these factors created what Burgess (1960) called, “role-less-roles,” in which the aged are left with little of any consequence to do in society. The argument is structural functionalist and hence normative, because it values a social
status in terms of its contribution to the survival of the society. The argument is also structuralist, because it is framed largely in terms of the effects of changes in some rates on changes in other rates – the meaningful action of individuals or social groups is not of interest. The most systematic formulation of the theory was by sociologist Donald Cowgill (1974; Cowgill & Holmes, 1972). As Achenbaum (Ch. 8, this volume) notes, historical evidence does not clearly support the theory. However, the historical and anthropological lenses have been finely focused by Cowgill's formalization of the theory, and continuing work in that tradition has shown the importance of specific social and cultural contexts in shaping the status of the aged (Climo, 1992). The theory thus stimulated work that is interpretive.

**Interest group theory**

Binstock and Day (Ch. 19, this volume) review work in the area of aging and politics, with an emphasis on interest-group politics. Recent monographs by Day (1990) and Pratt (1993) signal a renewed interest in the politics of age from an interest-group perspective. Day's goal is to trace the emergence and growth of mass membership organizations as policy actors in the politics of aging. Interest-group theory has evolved since its formulation by Bentley in the first decade of the twentieth century. The pluralist interest-group theory expounded by Dahl at midcentury saw American society as an arena of dispersed power at the elite and mass levels, with interest groups competing with one another and decision makers responsive to them and to the democratic process (Day, 1990, p. 6). The institutional approach treats interest groups in the context of institutions or legitimated structures of state authority that have at least partial autonomy from interest groups (Pratt, 1993, p. 11; Tuohy, 1992). Pratt's comparative analysis leads him to suggest that public policies have helped to create age-based interest groups that, in turn, shape subsequent policy developments. Day (1990; Binstock & Day, Ch. 19, this volume) argued that government grants enhance the survivability of age-based interest groups.

Cook and Barrett (1992) had considerable success in trying to predict support of the public at large and of political elites for public assistance to the elderly and to others. They go beyond the conventional interest-group approach by incorporating the notion of self-interest with that of political predispositions (stemming from political socialization) in a model that also includes perceptions of program effectiveness and recipient deservedness. The model is essentially individualist and normative, with the explanation entirely formulated in terms of attributes of individuals. Elsewhere, however, Cook has taken a processual and institutional approach to explain agenda-setting concerning intergenerational equity issues (Cook et al., 1994; Marshall, Cook, & Marshall, 1993).

**Political economy of aging**

The political economy perspective is distinguishable from interest-group approaches in that it gives greater importance to social structure and social forces
other than government as shaping the exercise of power. Estes and associates declared

The significance of the political economy literature is in its directing attention to how the treatment of older people in society and the experience of old age itself are related to an economy whose boundaries are no longer limited to the United States alone but include worldwide economic and political conditions. . . . The task of the political economy of aging as to locate society's treatment of the aged in the context of the economy (national and international), the role of the state, the conditions of the labor market, and the class, sex, race, and age divisions in society. This will require serious consideration of the relationship of capitalism to aging. (Estes, Gerard, Zones, & Swam, 1984, pp. 11–12; see also Ch. 18, this volume).

Major political economist theorists such as Estes (1979), Guillemard (1980), Phillipson (1982), and Walker (1983) have explicitly adopted a social construction of reality perspective to describe the role of ideology in systems of domination and social marginalization of the aged, or (as in Walker) in legitimizing care of the elderly as “women's work” (see Green, 1993, p. 185). The Marxian influence on this work has led the political economists to emphasize the relationship of age and aging to the means of production; hence, they typically argue that old age is defined by exit from work (Green, 1993; Kohli, Rein, Guillemard, & van Gusteren, 1991; Myles & Quadagno, 1991; Phillipson, 1982).

Myles (1984; Myles & Quadagno, 1991) made major contributions to the political economy of aging in relation to the relationship between the state, capital, and labor. He pointed out that labor values the right not to work and hence has frequently been supportive of pension systems that allow retirement, even if this means the loss of the right to work. In general, his analyses pointed to the structured interests of different groups in society. However, he recognized the importance of the moral economy as well as the political economy, and that the moral economy is socially constructed and politically manipulated. Thus, “the politics of old age tends to become structured in two domains: the public politics of poverty and the semiprivate politics of corporate welfare” (Myles & Teichroew, 1991, p. 99).

The term, moral economy has been linked to that of the political economy (Kohli, 1987, 1988; Minkler & Cole, 1991). Specific forms of political economy, such as a market economy, are seen as legitimated in specific systems of ideas about equity and allocation. Kohli (1987) noted that the approach shifts discussion from individual motivations to a system of reciprocal obligations, while going beyond narrow analyses restricted to political and economic considerations. Arguing that a key factor of the political economy is its marginalization of the old through the end of people's ability to work, Kohli (1988, p. 381) suggested that “the question for social theory then is: how does a society uphold its guiding moral orientation in the face of a group which by structural reasons is excluded from it.” This approach has also had important application in analyses of the potential for inter-generational conflict, where, for example, the “ideology of age/race wars” is viewed as a social construction detrimental to social integration (Minkler & Robertson, 1991).

Orloff (1993) offered an explanation of the nature and timing of the replacement of relief for the poor by modern social insurance and pensions for the elderly
in the United States, Britain, and Canada. Like the institutional interest-group theorists discussed above, she assumes the state to be a relatively autonomous actor (1993, p. 23). However, the dynamics of class relations are also important. She sees alliances between social classes that contributed to the development of social security to have been partly shaped by institutional factors of the state, but she sees the capacities and structures of social groups affecting the state in turn (Orloff, 1993, pp. 304–305). Moreover, actors’ conceptions of rights and equity are implicated in the explanation. The political economy is also a moral economy. The integration of considerations of the moral economy into the political economy perspective is closely related to the development of critical theory, discussed later in this chapter.

**Microlevel Theorizing**

Microlevel theorizing addresses individual-level behavior and small-scale social interaction. Normative micro approaches view the individual’s behavior as highly determined by prior socialization (as in role theory); by biopsychological imperatives (as in developmental theory); or by imperatives to behave in terms of instrumental rationality (as in conventional economic or rational choice theory). Moving away from highly deterministic assumptions and away from highly individualistic formulations of behavior, exchange theorists focus on interaction rather than on the individual, and self, identity, and continuity theories incorporate a dynamic voluntaristic model of the self.

**Role theory approaches**

*Role* is a basic concept in sociology and social psychology, yet the term has many definitions and connotations. In the early history of the field of aging, loss of functional roles was taken to be an inevitable concomitant of modernization, and integration in structured social roles was taken as a requirement for well-being in later life. The conception of role in these views is structural functionalist and views roles as structured sets of expectations for the behavior of incumbents of status positions in society. Statuses of interest to gerontologists include the state of being retired, widowed, or “old,” or any specific age in a system of age stratification.

The contemporary utility of this approach is evident in gender, age, and the life course, on social factors and illness. Moen, within the life-course perspective, sees aging as determining people’s social roles, “independent of their capacities and preferences;” and her chapter is structured to examine gender differences in the trajectories of transitions through successive roles. Uncertainty and change about age-related roles is compounded in its consequences by uncertainty and change about gender roles. Moen decries the lack of studies of social roles involving unpaid work such as volunteering or community activities. However, this disattention might result from the lack of clarity of expectations for such behavior. Such dimensions of life might, then, be at the outer edge of phenomena amenable to analysis in terms of roles.
George defines social integration as "the degree to which individuals have formal attachments to social structure. Operationally, social integration is usually defined as number of social roles or specific types of attachments (e.g., church attendance, participation in voluntary organizations)." She examines several hypotheses about the influence of social integration, defined in this way, on health, noting that "late life may be a strategic context for studying the links between social integration and health because old age is characterized by modest, but demonstrable losses of the roles upon which social integration rests."

The debate between disengagement theory and activity theory (see below) is also cast in role theory terms, and criticism of the approach from symbolic interactionist and phenomenological theorists generally sees structural-functional role theories as too deterministic. Alternative conceptions of role behavior are presented in our discussions of interpretive micro and linking theories.

**Developmental theory and life span approaches**

Developmental theories were important in early research in aging and the social sciences, with considerable influence continuing to this day. Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt (1980, p. 72) described a "strong model" of development, which sees human development as "qualitative, irreversible, end-state oriented, and universal"; however, they argued that a more useful "weak" model of development might envision many forms of time extension, directionality, and differentiation among individuals (Baltes et al., 1980, pp. 72–73). Gergen (1980) characterized developmental theories as unrealistic in their claims to historical universality and in their characterization of individuals as lacking intentionality. Dannefer repeated these criticisms (1992, p. 41), claiming that the individual as depicted by developmental theory is "a prisoner of age and stage."

As strong models of development are discredited, the term, *developmental*, is losing its meaning, and is frequently used in the literature (perhaps especially in aging and the family) as a synonym for "aging" or "age-related." So used, it connotes orderliness and ontogenetically based determinism, even if this is not the intention of the authors.

**Conventional economics and rational choice theory**

Conventional economic theorizing includes a conceptualization of meso- and macrolevel markets, but one of its fundamental tenets is methodological individualism, which argues that all social phenomena can be derived from individual behavior (Jackson, 1991). The second feature is an assumption of instrumental rationality, in which individuals are viewed as seeking to maximize utility (rewards minus costs) based on stable and clearly defined preferences. The third assumption is that individuals interact voluntarily in markets in ways that produce an equilibrium to the maximal benefit of all. Mainstream or neoclassical economics adds to this pure model consideration of imperfections and barriers leading to the failure to attain pure market behavior. As Jackson pointed out, these
additions create the opportunity for economists to discuss policy options. For example, if one applied the conventional view of economics to population aging, demographic changes would inexorably lead to economic changes in supply and demand through market mechanisms alone, without the need for any intentional intervention. Few economists would take this view. Jackson argued that non-neoclassical economics, supplemented with insights from sociology and social policy theorizing, is required to realistically deal with issues related to population aging. Social policy theorizing itself often incorporates rational choice theorizing, sometimes called “public choice” theory (Collins, 1994, p. 121).

As Dannefer pointed out, the concept of choice is central to economic and demographic analysis of life course patterns, in which we speak of the retirement “decision,” “occupational choice,” and “preferred timing of life-course events.” Moreover, “choice, unlike socialization or development, carries with it an implication of intentional human action” (Dannefer, 1992, p. 42). Dannefer argued that many “rational choices” are not voluntaristic. An example might be the choice to take early retirement, or the choice to provide care to an ill parent. A similar critique has been made by Giddens (1976, p. 16) about the structural-functionalist theoretical perspective in sociology. He noted that “there is no action in Parsons’ ‘action frame of reference,’ only behavior which is propelled by need-dispositions or role-expectations” (see Marshall, 1986a; Marshall, 1995).

**Exchange theory**

Exchange theory is an application of rational choice and utilitarian theory that has found its way into the field of aging principally through research on the family (Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993). Dowd (1975) explicitly applied exchange theory to aging, suggesting that decreased interaction between the old and the young was because the old had fewer resources to contribute to intergenerational exchanges. With the same underlying assumptions as in conventional economics or rational-choice theory, exchange theory is used extensively to understand the motivational bases for, and the development of structures of, exchange (Passuth & Bengtson, 1988). If nonutilitarian bases for continuing exchange cannot be discovered, then the investigator is led to search for other, nonrational motives (Bengtson, Parrott, & Burgess, 1994). Giarrusso, Stallings, and Bengtson (1995) suggested that individuals are motivated to reduce feelings of inequity and, if this cannot be done behaviorally, it is likely to be done psychologically.

**Self and identity theories**

Self and identity theories are distinguished here from role theories discussed above, in their emphasis on human intentionality and the active part played by the individual in developing self-hood. Theorists in the interpretive traditions of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology view the individual as actively participating in the creation of self and of society (Hendricks, 1992a; Marshall, 1986a). The self is not a state or object, but a process of constant appraisal of the
self-as-object (the “me”) by the “I,” with subsequent action of the “I” influenced by the “me” (Chappell & Orbach, 1986); it is not distinct from society but rather relational.

Continuity theory (Atchley, 1982, 1989) has gained great acceptance. Atchley argued that the self is a theory about one’s interactions in the world. Aging increases the number of tests of this theory, and this typically leads to greater stability of the self-as-object. Aging brings familiarity with many roles, but also continuity of roles. Past roles can be invoked, edited, or dramatized. The individual is actively engaged in attempts to maintain continuity of the self over time. This contrasts with the equilibrium assumptions of both activity and disengagement theory; in that continuity can be maintained with evolutionary change. Individuals seek supportive social contexts that enable continuity to be maintained.

Career and status passage perspectives were introduced into aging studies by symbolic interactionists (Marshall, 1980; Spence, 1986) and have more recently been incorporated into the life-course perspective. Hendricks (1992a, p. 1) described the approach: “Through negotiation with those around us, we realize who we are and launch ourselves toward who we want to become.” Corbin and Strauss (1988) used a form of the career-status passage concept in their analysis of the trajectories of chronically ill persons and those who give them care. The concept also influences Elder’s conceptualization of the life course, discussed in a later section.

**Linking theorizing**

As Alexander (1988, p. 77) has observed, despite profound disagreements, the “younger generation” of sociological theorists is united on one point: “Neither micro nor macro theory is satisfactory. Action and structure must now be intertwined.” Elsewhere, I (Marshall, 1993, 1994), have described several ways to address the linkage question. Here I describe options along the dimension from normative to interpretive social science.

**Disengagement and activity theory**

Disengagement theory was an explicit attempt to link the micro- and macrolevels of analysis within the normative perspective of structural functionalism. Activity theory was advanced as a theoretical alternative within the same overarching theoretical perspective of normative theory. Aspects of these theories have been discussed above under microlevel theorizing. The point should be made, however, that these theories, and especially disengagement theory, explicitly sought to incorporate both the macro- and microlevels of analysis. The attempts failed because of a lack of attention to social structure by activity theorists and the explicit rejection of any notion of social structure by disengagement theorists. According to disengagement theory, disengagement was functional for both the individual and society – societal equilibrium was facilitated by the scheduled, gradual withdrawal of its members from functionally important social roles; disengagement was functional for the individual because it allowed a person with diminishing
“ego energy” to adapt to impending death. The link between the social and individual levels, however, was restricted to this argument for parallel functions of disengagement at both levels, and to a view of the social environment as a resource for the individual. Cumming and Henry explicitly argued against the notion of constraint of the individual by social structure (1961, p. 12; Marshall, 1994).

**Easterlin’s “birth and fortune” thesis**

Richard Easterlin’s thesis relating the size of birth cohorts to their economic and social fortune (1968, 1987; and Ch. 5, this volume) is a linking normative theory. It links cohort size and socioeconomic fortune of these cohorts, but sees this link as mediated through social psychological processes of rational choice and social comparison processes acting at the micro-level. For example, it is not only that members of small birth cohorts have fewer competitors than larger cohorts that precede them, but also that members of the smaller cohorts compare their prospects with those of preceding cohorts and made economic and social choices in light of these comparisons.

**Age-stratification perspective**

The age-stratification perspective has had an even greater impact on scholarship in the area of aging than has the modernization theory of aging, such that Dowd (1987, p. 319) went so far as to comment on “the identification of the sociology of aging with one of its research paradigms.” Although Cain anticipated the approach in two important early works (1959, 1964), Riley and colleagues established the hegemony of the perspective for a number of years (a good overview is found in Riley, Foner, & Waring, 1988). Moreover, the age-stratification perspective brought forth a theoretical child, the life-course perspective (discussed below), which is the reigning approach in much contemporary social gerontology; and the basic assumptions of the perspective have recently been resurrected in Riley's new concept of “age and structural lag” (Riley, Kahn, & Foner, 1994). Riley directed attention away from the issue of individual adjustment to that of the age structure of society. This occurred despite the fact that the early book-length treatment of the perspective (Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972) gave considerable attention to the importance of socialization to age-stratified positions. The two key concepts are a stratified age structure and the cohort. Cohorts pass through an age structure viewed as an age-graded system of expectations and rewards. The abstract elegance of this formulation invites inquiry as to the nature of the age structure and the factors that shape progress of cohorts through this series of age-stratified positions. Moreover, the age-stratification system is itself seen as changing (Marshall, 1995). Dowd noted that this structural-functionalist approach is highly abstract. The notion of social role is critical to the perspective, because social structure is defined in terms of roles. Dowd criticized the failure of the age-stratification perspective to theorize about how cohort or strata membership affect attitudes or personality, its silence on the ways in which aging is influenced by power and class, and its failure to grant any autonomy to the individual.
The approach has been adopted by anthropologists and by sociologists. Foner (1984) applied the age-stratification perspective to examine cross-culturally inequalities between the old and young in preindustrial societies. She claimed that “the age stratification perspective takes as its starting point culturally defined life stages” (1984, p. xx); and although she argued that “the key actors are old people” (p. ix), she made only passing reference to individual lives, focusing rather on cohorts.

Sorensen (1986) applied this approach to the understanding of occupational mobility. The “interests and behavioral predispositions” of individuals are generated by social structure. In closed occupational systems, no individual can move until a vacancy occurs through retirement or death. Seniority often governs movement. In open systems, personal capacities and performance can more easily influence movement through the system. Sorenson (1986, p. 195) described his approach as “one of identifying properties of social structure that will shape the life course not through changes in structure, but by providing opportunities and constraints for individual achievement striving and by defining the mechanisms by which achievement goals are obtained.” Meyer (1988, p. 55) criticized Sorensen’s model as neglecting “human intentions, aspirations, and plans” while it focuses on characteristics of the social structure. However, Meyer’s own view of the individual grants little autonomy or voluntarism (Marshall, 1995).

Dowd argued that although it is a corrective to individualistic and historical research in aging, the age-stratification approach “has been unable to transcend the limits of its own nondialectical, functionalist metatheory. New models of age relations must therefore begin by reconceptualizing the crucial nexus that joins the individual and the societal structures that impinge upon human lives” (Dowd, 1987, p. 327).

The life-course perspective

The life-course perspective, which has become the new orthodoxy of aging and the social sciences (Marshall, 1995), is both linking and bridging. Research from this perspective runs through several chapters in this Handbook. One reason for its widespread adoption has been an openness of life-course analysts to different perspectives (George, 1993). Marshall (1995) and Passuth and Bengtson (1988) have emphasized the structural-functionalist origins of this perspective as an outgrowth of the age-stratification perspective, and certainly the overlap and continuity of well-known social scientists between these two approaches is considerable. However, Elder, a leading exemplary scholar in the area, cited as intellectual antecedents sources as diverse as the (structural functionalist) status-attainment and occupational mobility literature, the (symbolic interactionist) Chicago School of sociology, and the ecology of human development (Elder, 1992, in press; Elder & Caspi, 1990). The approach therefore has both normative and interpretive aspects. This openness or perhaps indifference, to normative or interpretive assumptions is a strength of the perspective in gaining it adherents, but it might also be its weakness. A perspective that is all things to all people might also be nothing to them.
The perspective explicitly attempts to link the micro- and macrolevels of analysis. For many life-course theorists, the linkage is seen as occurring through mesolevel social institutions such as the family or work (only rarely are work and family addressed simultaneously). Elder, more than others, has articulated specific interaction mechanisms that constitute micro-macro linkages over the life course (Elder, 1991; Marshall, 1993). These are, however, quite abstract. For example, the mechanism of “control cycle” refers to the principle that change sets in motion efforts to regain control and to adapt, which themselves construct and reconstruct the life course. Elder’s conception of social structure is as a structure of roles; and the life course is seen as a sequence of transitions, role entries and exits, constituting a trajectory or “pathway defined by the aging process or by movement across the age structure,” which is “charted by linking states across successive years . . . marked by a sequence of life events and transitions, changes in state that are more or less abrupt” (Elder, 1985, pp. 31–32).

The value of the life-course perspective is in its explicit attempt to view the individual biography within the context of society, and to take a historical perspective on both the individual and society (Mills, 1959). What the perspective does not do (and this might reflect the normative, structural-functionalist strain in its intellectual heritage) is focus on the dynamics of social structural change itself (something better accomplished within the political economy perspective). It is better suited as a theoretical model of aging than as a model of the social structure in which aging takes place. Moreover, like age-stratification theory, its focus on intercohort comparisons over the life course has at times deflected attention away from within-cohort contrasts or differentiation (Dannefer, 1987, 1988, 1993; Dannefer &Perlmutter, 1990; Maddox, 1987).

Feminist approaches

There are many approaches to feminist theorizing – some of which are highly structural or macro-oriented, and others highly micro-oriented; some are normative, whereas others are interpretive or critical. I would argue that feminist theory is not freestanding, but rather reflects a commitment to use theory in certain ways, and a critique of mainstream theories for their neglect of the gendered nature of work life, family life, and social stratification (Calasanti &Zajicek, 1993; McMullin, in press). Arber and Ginn (1991) applied the political economy approach to their book-length study, Gender and Later Life. They did so because that approach focuses on inequalities, and stated, “as feminists, we believe that gender is a major dimension of stratification, and that there are significant differences in the way ageing affects men and women; ageing is a gendered process” (p. 2).

McMullin (in press) made a distinction between many works that use gender as a variable in social analysis and work that assesses gender as fundamental to social organization. The options are to add gender and age considerations to mainstream social theories, to expand feminist theory to include age relations, or to rethink social theory, explicitly taking age and gender relations into account. She favors the latter approach. The need for feminist theory can be seen, for example,
when considering the failure to take domestic labor seriously in life-course analyses of work (e.g., Kohli, 1986).

**Critical theory**

Critical theory, which dates back in the social sciences as far as 1930 and the Frankfurt School, has recently risen to a place of some importance in social gerontology (Baars, 1991). Critical theorists devote much attention to a critique of positivism, yet at the same time they seek a multidisciplinary methodology drawing on such diverse sources as Marx and the phenomenologist Heidegger (Honneth, 1987, p. 350). Critical theory is reflexive, aware of the social conditions of its emergence and of its contemporary practical interests.

Critical theorists have attempted in many ways to bridge the micro and macro. Early critical theorists were preoccupied with the development of the class structure and its impact on individual psychology. Because classes were not acting “rationally” in a classical Marxist sense, early critical theorists turned to psychoanalysis for a theory of the irrational. The cultural sciences were incorporated into critical theorizing to further the understanding of the cultural conditions under which people accepted capitalism. Some critical theorists focused on the alienation of the individual which, they held, results from the “civilization process” of the application of “instrumental rationality,” whereas others came to see the importance of communication and negotiation, structured by class-based interests, to the shaping of social institutions. This conceptualization is more in line with the interpretive than the normative perspective. The leading contemporary critical theorist is Jurgen Habermas, who emphasized the importance of communication and a form of rationality of the life world that is distinct from the rationality of the social system (Ritzer, 1988, p. 490).

In the aging area, critical theory has taken different dimensions giving varying emphasis to culture or to the political economy. Walker (1990) sought a critical theory that links these two approaches. Noting that the political economy perspective took root in aging studies in response to ideological changes in policy during the late 1970s and early 1980s, he stressed the importance of the social construction of old-age policy. Dependency, for example, must be seen as partly a social construction, and not merely as the inevitable outcome of an aging process. Estes’s conception of the social construction of problems of age, as well as her invocation of Giddens’ (1984; see also Giddens, 1991, and Marshall, 1993) structuration theory brings in critical theory themes about what Estes calls the “recursive” relationships between micro- and macrolevel phenomena. Estes in fact argued that contemporary work in the political economy perspective continues earlier work in critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

**Symbolic interactionalism and phenomenology**

Together, symbolic interactionism and phenomenology, along with Weberian approaches in sociology and developments in symbolic anthropology, constitute interpretive social science. This approach, often associated with microlevel
theorizing, is also adopted by macrolevel theorists in the interpretive tradition, such as those in the political economy of aging. These approaches therefore are classified here as linking, interpretive approaches.

Gubrium has made major contributions from the phenomenological and ethnomethodological perspective, by emphasizing that social reality is constructed through on-going negotiative and definitional behavior. Not only do theorists construct versions of reality in this way, but people do so in their everyday lives, and in the everyday world people often use or critique the constructions of theorists (Gubrium & Wallace, 1990). Gubrium’s work on the descriptive organization of Alzheimer’s disease exemplifies his approach (Gubrium, 1986; Gubrium & Lynott, 1992). More recently, he has applied the approach to family behavior. In this view the symbolic interaction that describes reality also constitutes that reality. For example, “family as a social object may be construed as both a production and a by-product of family discourse” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1993, p. 66). The same processes apply to Alzheimer’s disease or to any social phenomena: the documentary process of describing reality is the same process that produces the reality. Reality construction does not occur arbitrarily or capriciously; rather, it is conditioned or constrained, “but not determined, by existing categories for assigning meaning to experience” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1993, p. 67). This is another way of indicating that culture, or subculture, counts as a resource for social action. This view of external constraint, linking the individual and society, is more delimited than that of the political economists, who grant the constraining or shaping influences of culture but also emphasize the constraints of objective social structural location in terms of systems of class, race, or gender stratification.

Matthews (1993) demonstrated a linking approach from the symbolic interactionist and the political economy of aging perspectives. She examined cultural constructions of old age and health, then compared these with constructions made by adult children about their aged parents and health status. Social policies may medicalize old age, but “social policies do not unilaterally dictate how people will behave. Instead, people make decisions about how to act in given situations to accomplish their ends. They interact with other people, not with social policies” (p. 111).

**Cultural anthropology approaches**

The introduction to *Age and Anthropological Theory* noted that

> Our starting point was the idea that both individual aging and the use of age as a principal in social organization must be taken into account in attempts to understand human behavior. The emphasis is not on the product of the aging process but on the process itself and its relationships to social, cultural, and historical context. (Keith & Kertzer, 1984, pp. 19–20)

Similarly, introducing a collection of papers in cultural anthropology and aging, Sokolovsky (1990, p. 2) emphasized that culture is at the same time socially created and a resource for creativity. These stances place cultural anthropology (to which these authors subscribe) as an interpretive, linking theoretical approach.
Continuing Theoretical Concerns

Social scientists have drawn on a rich and diversifying legacy of theories to understand aging. Although this review has been primarily classificatory, some trends in theorizing can be discerned (see also Hendricks, 1992b). One trend is that normative theorizing in the structural-functionalist tradition continues to thrive, despite trenchant criticisms from virtually all sides (but notably critical theorists, political economists, and interpretive theorists at the microlevel). The vitality of the interpretive approaches must be recognized, both in their critique of normative theorizing and also in their own right. However, developmental theory may well be disintegrating through its internal dynamics, in which research challenges the strong model of development.

As in the social sciences generally, the most exciting theoretical challenges are in attempts to link the micro- and macro-levels of analysis. The theoretical perspectives and approaches reviewed make this attempt in a variety of ways, employing different assumptions about human nature, the nature of society, and how people are integrated into society. The relationship between general theory in the social sciences and theory in aging was, in the early decades of the field, predominantly one-way, in which general theory was adopted for application in social gerontology. This was so for the modernization and aging theory, the age-stratification perspective, and a number of role theory approaches, such as disengagement theory. However, the emphasis of the life-course perspective on the whole biography in sociohistorical time is generating theoretical currents flowing in the opposite direction. For example, life-course theorizing about work is informing general theory in sociology and other social sciences about the nature of work. The same may be said of the family. Similarly, the political economy of aging has contributed to research on the welfare state and the social construction of public policy, simply because these domains have such a large impact on the aged. This new development testifies to the healthy state of theory in our field.

The single most important challenge to the value of theory comes from postmodernism, which has some adherents in the field of aging. Postmodernism does not appear on the typology of theoretical approaches because it is profoundly antitheoretical. Rosenau (1992, p. 3) warned, “Post-modernism haunts social science today ... it rejects epistemological assumptions, refutes methodological conventions, resists knowledge claims, obscures all versions of truth, and dismisses policy recommendations.” This is an extreme postmodernist position. A less extreme postmodernism is close to the interpretive perspective with its emphasis on knowledge as socially constructed and social life as highly improvisational. Culturally, postmodernism is a moralist critique of “modernist” society, not least its emphasis on instrumental rationality. It thus resonates with critical theory. Theoretically, postmodernism challenges positivistic science: “The most extreme postmodernists urge us to be comfortable in the absence of certainty, learn to live without explanation, accept the new philosophical relativism” (Bauman, 1987, pp. 3–4, as quoted in Rosenau, 1992, p. 6).

Certainly postmodernism draws on some of the theoretical approaches discussed earlier in the chapter, such as critical theory and phenomenology. It can
help us to be less imperialistic about our theories. By giving more attention to the reading than to the text itself or to the author of the text, postmodernism can have a liberating effect on our use of theory. Extreme postmodernism (for an example in aging, see Hazan, 1994), however, discredits and devalues any attempt to develop and share common understandings of the social world. Yet, in their everyday live, people strive for and, indeed, require such understandings. Why then should the social sciences not contribute to the satisfaction of these strivings and needs?

References


