

Abstracts

Social Psychology

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J. J. F. Schroots. 1995. Psychological models of aging. *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 14 (1), 44–66.

L. L. Carstensen and S. Turk-Charles. 1994. The salience of emotion across the adult life span. *Psychology and Aging*, 9 (2), 259–264.

F. R. Lang and L. L. Carstensen. 1994. Close emotional relationships in late life: further support for proactive aging in the social domain. *Psychology and Aging*, 9 (2), 315–324.

Psychology as a discipline is not noted for theoretical strength, and psychogerontology is no exception. Johannes Schroots's paper is an invigorating assessment of the models and metaphors that do exist, albeit often implicitly. He clusters psychological approaches into three groups. The 'Psychology of the aged', despite being based on a stages-of-life perspective, is still characterised by a confusing multiplicity of themes. The 'Psychology of age' focusses on age differences, taking age as the independent variable, and measures such as competence, autonomy or quality of life as the dependent variable. Schroots argues that the cross-sectional data usually obtained within this approach are fallaciously interpreted as age changes, based on the 'hill' metaphor of life which sees development as a single-peaked function paralleling biological growth and decline. Schroots's third group, the 'Psychology of ageing', focusses on typicality rather than differences, depicting changes in average functioning over time. It requires longitudinal studies, and is based on a two stages-of-life perspective: development to maturity, followed by ageing, and again employs the 'hill' metaphor. Schroots challenges these generalised models from the standpoint that *psychological* processes of change need not parallel biological changes, taking wisdom as his example. Schroots ends his paper with an exciting new approach, *gerodynamics*, using chaos theory to explain psychological ageing as a process of increasing entropy from which both disorder and order emerge. The metaphor here is life as a road or river. Branches are selected by choice or chance. This is readily assimilated to lay views of the life course, so data for the model can be obtained from the 'Life-line interview', and quantified as 'fractals' (summaries of irregular

structures such as branching patterns). With this model and method, Schroots anticipates a typology of patterns of ageing.

Laura Carstensen's 'Socioemotional selectivity theory' (SST) is another exception in the 'data rich, theory poor' psychology bemoaned by Schroots. The theory takes a two-stage view of development, and a cost-benefit analysis of social interaction. In early life, social interaction brings the benefits of information, self-definition, support and emotional regulation; these outweigh their costs of energy, negative experiences and threats to self-concept. In later life, the weighting is reversed except that the benefits of support and emotional regulation remain, now with greater salience. This cost-benefit reversal allows Carstensen to explain the reduction of social contacts in later life as an active selection strategy, while challenging the evidence that emotions are diminished in later life. Carstensen's empirical study with Turk-Charles supported the challenge to decreased emotional sensitivity by showing that older people recalled proportionately more incidents about inner feelings than neutral incidents after reading an extract from a novel, while younger people showed the reverse pattern. (Although absolute comparison showed that emotional recall was at the same level for both groups: the older group recalled fewer neutral incidents). The second study, with Lang, was with respondents from the multi-disciplinary Berlin Ageing Study. It showed that while social networks of very old people are less than half the size of those of old people, these two groups were not different in their numbers of very close emotional relationships.

These theory-guided approaches by Schroots and Carstensen are refreshing glades in the forest of unsynthesised empirical studies which characterise much of psychogerontology. Further, they allow their respondents' personal agency, choice and subjective understanding to feature in the models, while incorporating important supra-individual factors such as chance, and intertwined biological and social processes. The potential of Schroots' gerodynamics remains to be empirically developed. Carstensen's most recent studies rescue her work from her earlier confounding of socio-emotional selectivity with other demands on the young adult: her earlier work claimed to show that selectivity begins from early adulthood onward, without convincingly controlling for the demands of marriage and child-rearing. However her recent work also confounds, by including kin as 'close emotional others'. This tends to undermine the very aspect of her theory, selectivity, which makes it most appealing since, in the words of the adage, we can choose our friends but not our family. Similarly, we are less free to choose our disciplines than our theories, and given that I find myself in psychology,

I would select Schroots and Carstensen for the support they offer toward developing a theoretically incisive, and humane, psychology of ageing.

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Social Work and Older People

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C. J. Fahey. 1996. Social work education and the field of aging, *The Gerontologist*, **36** (1), 36–41.

B. Silverstone. 1996. Older people of tomorrow: a psychosocial profile, *The Gerontologist*, **36** (1), 27–32.

C. V. Browne. 1995. Empowerment in social work practice with older women, *Social Work*, **40** (3), 358–365.

The three articles considered address the role of social work with older people and contemplate how this is likely to develop in the future. The first two originated from a symposium on ‘The many faces of aging: challenges for the future’, which brought together leaders in the field of social work to consider the challenges of ageing and the role of social work in meeting those challenges. Both articles from *The Gerontologist* emphasise that this is a time of crisis, a potential turning point in society’s response to an ageing population. Silverman compares profiles of today’s and tomorrow’s older people in terms of economic security and productivity, social supports, health and disability. Her picture is one where older people who are better educated and skilled will be more confident about ageing and prepared to tackle the predictable challenges to later life in a world of potentially diminishing resources. In contrast, those in poverty will have little to help them overcome or delay mental and physical disabilities. Both groups will however be vulnerable in their years of frailty, with less reliable primary caregivers able and willing to assist them.

If one accepts her scenario, then social work practice will require significant adaptation and it is this task she addresses in the later half of the article. Practice today, she outlines, is largely age-segmented and concentrates on the isolated, frail and disabled population in need of long-term care case management. ‘Work with the very old in nursing homes has become the hallmark of gerontological social work practice’ (p. 31). As far as the future is concerned, demands for case management and counselling will increase. Alongside this she expects social workers