Chapter 1
Trends in the Sociology of Aging: Thirty Year Observations

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This chapter takes a broad view of scholarship on the sociology of aging, highlighting how the contours and content of the field have changed over the last 30 years. The chapters of the *Handbook of Sociology of Aging* provide fertile grounds for these observations. Each chapter traces the evolution of important ideas, synthesizes knowledge, and offers compelling new directions for future inquiry on specific topics. This handbook illustrates the fact that one of the greatest strengths of the sociology of aging is the wide range of topics and methods that characterizes the field. To generate additional observations on the field, we examined a wide range of books and articles on behavioral and social aspects of aging, including three decades of the *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, *The Gerontologist,* and *Research on Aging*.

In taking 30 years as the lens for our observations here and in the handbook – 1979–2009 – we became quickly aware of the extraordinary growth that has occurred in our field during this time. Our most senior colleagues will, of course, immediately recognize this. But many readers may not appreciate just how significant these advances have been. To begin, we therefore ask readers to simply imagine a field:

- Where scholarship on aging is relegated a marginal status in most disciplines, including sociology, and struggles for its legitimacy as an area of inquiry
- Without *Research on Aging, Journal of Aging Studies, Ageing and Society* and other aging-related journals that emerged at the start of this period or well into it
- Without all but the first of seven editions of the *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences* (e.g., Binstock and Shanas 1976), and without the two editions of the *Handbook of Theories of Aging* (Bengtson and Schaie 1999; Bengtson et al. 2009) and their predecessor, *Emergent Theories of Aging* (Birren and Bengtson 1988)
- Without major secondary datasets, including longitudinal ones, we now take for granted – the Health and Retirement Study, the National Survey of Families and Households, the Longitudinal Studies of Aging, Midlife in the United States, and many waves of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Current Population Surveys, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, and other data sets and supplements sponsored by federal agencies
- Without so many of the advanced research methods, statistical techniques, and widely used and well validated measures we know today, including multi-level modeling, structural equation modeling, event history analysis, and advanced methods for measuring and analyzing change

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- Without the infrastructure of the National Institute on Aging (NIA) and other public and private agencies and foundations, including initiatives of the MacArthur Foundation and the Retirement Research Foundation, which have provided extensive funding for behavioral and social research on aging
- Without many of the training programs and research centers that have educated generations of graduate students, both within sociology proper or with core contributions from sociologists – including NIA-sponsored predoctoral and postdoctoral training programs, Centers on the Demography and Economics of Aging, Centers on Minority Aging Research, and the Roybal Centers for Translation Research in the Behavioral and Social Sciences of Aging
- Without so many other ground-breaking articles, books and special issues of journals, especially edited projects or commissioned papers, too many to name, in which authors were playful with ideas that nourished the field. Indeed, many of the readings we consider to be "classic" today were written not long before the start of this period and even into it
- Without many textbooks for teaching undergraduate students about the sociology of aging – or, for that matter, undergraduate courses on the sociology of aging
- Without the later works of so many of the pioneers of our field, some of whom are still with us, and without the contributions of so many scholars since
- Without the controversy over the name change of the American Sociological Association's Section on the Sociology of Aging to the Sociology of Aging and the Life Course, which was ultimately resolved after seven years in 1997. One proposal, to add "and the life course" to the name, was adopted, while another proposal, to change "aging" to "age," ultimately was not

Space will not permit us to discuss the many important works that have punctuated these three very rich decades of scholarship. However, the chapters of this handbook will do so, as each takes an in-depth view into the history and future of sociological theories and research on particular topics. We begin by describing larger historical trends in theories, methods, and topics.

Historical Trends in Theories, Methods, and Topics

Broad Trends in Theories

As sociologists arrived at the study of aging, they naturally relied on their toolbox of classical and contemporary theories. Besides the classical writings of Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber, who were acknowledged as the "holy trinity" of founding fathers, sociologists of aging also drew upon theories of structural functionalism (e.g., Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton), social conflict (e.g., Gerhard Lenski, Ralph Dahrendorf), social interaction and exchange (e.g., Georg Simmel, George Homans, Peter Blau), symbolic interactionism (e.g., George Herbert Mead, Charles Cooley, Irving Goffman), and phenomenology and social constructivism (e.g., Alfred Schütz, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann).

Central starting points for developing theories were also found in social gerontology, especially disengagement and modernization theories of aging in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Cumming and Henry 1961, Cowgill and Holmes 1972, respectively). The former postulated that physical decline in old age, and the social withdrawal of old people, is inevitable and functional for both individuals and society. In generating spirited debates ever since, disengagement theory would become crucial in the evolution of alternative views (e.g., activity theory, Havighurst 1963; continuity theory, Atchley 1971; functional equilibrium theory, Rosow 1963). These theories focused on individual behavior, but with an eye to social expectations and the greater social good. In contrast, modernization theory

was crucial in taking a purer societal view on aging. It examined the status of the aged across cultures and identified how the social changes associated with modernization contribute to the disadvantaged position of older people (e.g., changes in the economy, medicine, technology, education, and urbanization).

Within sociology, the age stratification framework was also conceived not long thereafter and would become a dominant heuristic device for advancing inquiry into the social, and especially structural, aspects of aging. Although the age stratification framework is associated with Riley et al. (1972), the often overlooked work of Leonard Cain (1964) was an important precursor of both the age stratification framework and the life course perspective, as were much earlier works by sociologists and anthropologists of age status, including Shmuel Eisenstadt (1956), Ralph Linton (1942), Arnold van Gennep (1908/1960), and Anselm Strauss (1959).

Each in their own way, these theorists emphasized that aging and the life course are social processes and that age is a structural feature of societies, with both people and roles allocated on the basis of it. These theorists also pointed to the dynamic aspects of aging at both individual and societal levels. That is, new cohorts of people are born, grow up and older together, and move through the age structure of the population. These ideas also heightened the awareness of the need to not only understand the unique characteristics of particular cohorts as they aged, but also to understand the differential effects of social change on adjacent cohorts. This brought new thinking about how to better conceptualize cohorts and measure cohort effects (Rosow 1978; Riley 1973; Ryder 1965), building especially on Karl Mannheim's (1928/1952) classic essay on "The Problem of Generations." The emphasis on understanding the legacy of historical events and social change on individual and collective life histories would also become central to Glen Elder's *Children of the Great Depression* at about this time (1974) and, later, a hallmark of the life course perspective.

As the life course perspective evolved, it explicitly built on two paradigms – the *personological* and *institutional* paradigms (see Dannefer and Settersten 2010). The personological paradigm, of which Elder's body of work is a good example (and that of John Clausen too, e.g., 1972), attempts to use key features of early life experience to predict and account for outcomes later in life. Although this paradigm is often focused on individuals, it can address the life experiences of whole cohorts or populations (recent theories of cumulative advantage and disadvantage are good examples; Dannefer 2003). The *institutional* paradigm, in contrast, needs not focus on individuals at all, but instead analyzes the life course as a social and political construct, often consisting of more or less explicitly defined age-graded stages that are created or reinforced in institutions and social policy (e.g., Kohli and Meyer 1986; Mayer and Müller 1986). It therefore refers to a part of the social and cultural definition of reality that broadly organizes both people's lives and their "knowledge" about age and aging. In the field of aging, the institutional paradigm has strong roots in the writings on formal and informal age norms and the rise of age consciousness in modern societies (e.g., Neugarten et al. 1965; Kohli 1986).

Over these years, other major theoretical traditions in the sociology of aging would also emerge, especially theories informed by the political economy of aging (e.g., Kail et al. 2009), theories of cumulative advantage and disadvantage (e.g., Ferraro et al. 2009), feminist theories (e.g., Calasanti 2009), and critical theories of gerontology (e.g., Baars et al. 2006).

Social theories of aging can be characterized as having experienced a pendulum swing away from (1) at one extreme, "grand" theories in an early era of research that was "theory rich but data poor," to use James Birren and Vern Bengtson's (1988) phrase, to (2) a subsequent era that was, at the other extreme, "data rich but theory poor" – what C. Wright Mills (1959) might also have called "abstracted empiricism," in which too much attention is given to data over theory, to (3) the era of research today, which has perhaps swung back toward theories of the "middle range," to use Robert Merton's (1968) term, built around narrow topics and a good dose of data. The presence of

middle-range theories in the field is evident across the chapters of this handbook. A larger window into theories of aging, including *social* theories of aging, can be found in the recent *Handbook of Theories of Aging* (Bengtson et al. 2009).

Social theories of aging can also be characterized as having experienced a pendulum swing moved through eras with differential attention to micro issues, macro issues, or the connections between them (micro-macro linkages): from (1) an early era of theories that were focused on individual issues, especially activity and life satisfaction, to (2) a subsequent era that was focused on larger contextual issues, especially how structural conditions determine the parameters of aging and the life situations of older people, to (3) an era of theorizing today that has attempted to synthesize micro and macro perspectives, especially in explaining differences in aging experiences by larger social forces or through intermediate contexts (see also Bengtson et al. 1997).

Broad Trends in Methods

Over these decades, several important methodological shifts have occurred in the field:

- From studies that emphasize basic description, to explanation, and to causality
- From studies that emphasize qualitative methods or relatively simple quantitative ones, to advanced quantitative methods, and to multi-method studies (at least in principle, though this ideal, at least in doing right by *all* of the methods brought to bear in a single study, has proven to be difficult to accomplish in practice)
- From a reliance on cross-sectional studies to the eventual building of panel and longitudinal data sets
- From studies based on small, original data sets to a preponderance of publications based on the analyses of large secondary data sets\designed for the scientific community

The field has also shifted from a reliance on crude measures to the development of measures that are more refined, more reliable, and better validated – even though there is much distance to go in creating truly meaningful measures that capture the complexities and realities of social aspects of aging. In fact, the most frequently read and cited articles across these decades pertain to scales meant to measure aspects of health or quality of life – specifically, life satisfaction, psychological well being, caregiver strain, caregiver burden, and cognitive performance, self-reported physical health, the use of services, and loneliness (see also Ferraro and Schafer 2008).

The investments in gathering longitudinal data are particularly important to note, as these investments have been made alongside the growing interest in the life course and recognition of the need to understand aging as a long-term process. Although longitudinal data permit new kinds of analyses, they also demand new kinds of methods, and this time period has brought much attention to methods for doing so.

Consistent with shifts in theories, the field has also moved beyond the use of age as a causal variable and instead toward understanding age in ways that are mediating or contextual. With this, the field has also turned greater attention to the possible *processes* and *mechanisms* that drive change, rather than simply demonstrating the empirical connection across the variables that are arrayed in a model.

However, some of these shifts have also fractured whole people and phenomena in favor of a narrow "peephole" perspective on small sets of variables, though the growing recognition and respect for interpretive and qualitative approaches has helped to counter these limitations. Sociological research has become more specialized over these decades, which also results in what seem like small windows into narrow phenomena of interest – though it has simultaneously become more interdisciplinary, which has similarly helped to counter these limitations.

Trends in Topics and Associated Terms

In conducting our review, we were immediately struck by how much language structures and reflects our realities. The language of our field becomes powerful in signaling our intellectual preoccupations and some of the assumptions that we make about our subject matter. Some of the topics and terminology that were present in the earlier years have vanished, some have persisted, but most have emerged and taken shape in the last three decades.

First, we no longer use some of the terms that were a prevalent part of our lexicon in the beginning of this period – terms we immediately recognize as outdated today. Many of these terms shock the contemporary inclination in the academy to deny or defy age: terms such as "the aged," "the elderly," "old people," and "old age" were very present in early articles and have now faded away, though they continue to be used by policymakers and in the media. Their disappearance is also surely linked to the fact that statements about "*the* old" or "*the* elderly" homogenize large groups of people who may be more different from one another than they are similar – a theme that gerontologists have sounded strongly in recent years, along with the reminder that chronological age is itself a poor proxy for the biological, psychological, or social statuses of individuals. The increasingly taboo nature of these terms in scholarship today serves as a powerful reminder that the meanings of age, and in this case *old* age and the things associated with it, are *socially* constructed.

Some topics that were very salient at the start of our review period have now largely vanished as major points of inquiry – including "interstate migration," "snowbirds," "NORCs" (naturally occurring retirement communities), "SROs" (single room occupancy hotels), "elder abuse," "elderly drivers," "senior suicide," "homes for the aged," "senior centers," "institutionalized aged," "fear of victimization," and "aging group consciousness." Several of these terms reflect the strong early emphasis of sociologists on the social problems of aging, problems that now receive much less attention in the face of a strong countertrend toward positive aging.

Second, many topics have been persistent or grown in significance, especially those that relate to health, family, and retirement. The strongest specific example is the explosion of interest in successful aging over this time period. However, it will surprise some readers to know that the term "successful aging" was, to our knowledge, first used by Robert Havighurst in a 1963 article that preceded our period, and again at the start of our period by Erdman Palmore in a 1979 article. These articles appeared well before Jack Rowe and Robert Kahn's first landmark article (1987) and later works (1997, 1998). Since Havighurst's and Palmore's times, many other variants of successful aging have emerged, even before or around the same time that Rowe and Kahn came onto the scene with their oft-cited articles and book. These include references to "optimal," "productive," "vital," "proactive," "robust," and "healthful" aging, among others.

Third, there are terms that are very much a part of scholarship now, but were largely absent in the early years of our review period. This language signals significant trends in the intellectual preoccupations and commitments of our field in the past 30 years. These include the following:

Anti-aging speak: Terms such as "old people," "old age," and "elderly" have been replaced by neutral language intentionally meant to avoid the sense of "old." In the face of concerns about ageism, the field of gerontology has, ironically, become rather ageless. We now speak of "older people" and "later life." This reflects a growing sense that age is something that can be defied or transcended, and the accompanying emphasis among gerontologists and in our society on successful aging and positive images of aging. Yet in lauding the potentials of age and aging, the field has deemphasized the social problems of aging and old age that captured the attention of the field in the early years, problems that we, as sociologists, are uniquely positioned to help solve.

These trends also make apparent another striking fact: aging and anti-aging industries have become big business. Aging (and anxiety about aging) has demanded that new institutions be designed (e.g., residential settings to meet the full spectrum of needed care; educational settings to meet the

need for "lifelong learning") and that services and products be brought to market (e.g., aesthetic services, hormone treatments, vitamins and supplements, legal services). The marketing and consumption of these institutions, services, and products has also brought a wave of new legal and regulatory concerns.

Care speak: With the long era of caregiving research from the late 1980s through the 1990s, an extensive language of "social support" grew with it, especially to reflect the more negative aspects of giving care – including "caregiver strain" and "caregiver burden."

Generational relations speak: Longstanding interests in intergenerational relationships, especially between older people and middle aged children, and between older people and grandchildren, grew alongside the long era of caregiving research. With it grew attention to the dimensions to characterize family relationships – for example, many types of "solidarity" and "conflict" and, more recently, "ambivalence."

Health and disability speak: Health also becomes a dominant point of focus over these years. Here, we see the emergence of notions of "health span," "healthful aging," and "healthy life expectancy"; attention to "activities of daily living," "functional status," and the "disability cascade"; concern about a wide variety of specific disability or illness conditions, some of which also mark the times (including HIV/AIDS, Alzheimer's disease, cancer, osteoporosis, arthritis, and obesity); and language related to health care and institutions (including "independent living," "assisted living," "long-term care," "home health care," "rationing," and "person-environment fit"). Alongside major attention to health grew significant attention to the connections between health, religiosity, and spirituality (and their measurement).

Technology speak: With advances in technology came new hopes for the "built environment" and the use of new technologies to help people "age in place" and monitor their health, as well as terms associated with advances in computing, the internet, and digital social networking.

Life course speak: With the growing significance of the life course perspective came much attention to "pathways," "trajectories," "antecedents," "consequences," "event histories," "linked lives," "timing," "dynamics," and "human agency." Attention to human agency is also captured in a variety of related social-psychological concepts that also became salient over these decades – such as "self-efficacy," "self-determination," "locus of control," "effort," "mindfulness," "resourcefulness," "mastery," and "autonomy."

Methods speak: With major methodological advances came new language to reflect the strategies of the day that would become endorsed in journals: "multi-level modeling," "structural equation modeling," "longitudinal" methods, "growth curves," "latent classes," "life history" and "event history" analyses, and the like. The emergence of the life course perspective, apart from aging, also reinforced the need for advanced temporal and contextual methods, including strategies for better disentangling "age," "period," and "cohort" effects.

Diversity speak: As diversity became part of our scientific lenses in the late 1980s and through the 1990s, many new terms appeared to reflect those commitments – "aged heterogeneity," and regular references to Blacks, Hispanics, and other special populations (e.g., the "differently abled," "rural elderly," and "gays and lesbians"). With this came sensitivity as well to the combined risks of being in multiple vulnerable statuses or positions – for example, the "double jeopardy" or "triple jeopardy" hypotheses.

Gender speak: With greater attention to diversity also came a stronger focus on women – the "feminization" of later life, the "sandwich generation" of "women in the middle" who are caregivers to both parents and children, and women as "kin-keepers" of family relationships and traditions.

Inequality speak: Explanations of the differences among older people prompted a closer look at social inequalities. These were signaled especially by attention to the "Matthew effect" and theories of "cumulative advantage and disadvantage" over the life course, and to the "poor," "near poor," and "underserved" aged; widespread concern about "health disparities" across different groups of older people; and heated controversies about "generational equity" between the young and the old.

Taken together, the commitments to diversity, gender, and inequality in the intervening years have brought significant breakthroughs in understanding inter-individual variability in aging. In having made great strides to include women, minorities, and, to a lesser degree, children in our research, the field has gone far beyond the white, middle class, male perspective that was both the norm and the source of much complaint in our early science.

The Institutionalization of the Sociology of Aging

This handbook takes as its starting point the birth date of the Section on Aging and the Life Course (SALC) of the American Sociological Association (ASA) in 1979. The establishment of the Section marks the formal recognition and institutionalization of the sociology of aging in our discipline's primary professional organization. But the forces that led to its installation were underway before then, and its history since has been punctuated by some tensions that mirror waves of intellectual tension in the field. (For further information on the history of the Section, see Ferraro et al. 2005.)

The organization of sociologists with interests in aging grew out of activities of Harold (Hal) Orbach and Leonard Breen in the fall of 1961. They both explored the idea of launching a section on aging in the ASA. But it was not until nearly 20 years later that a petition, signed by eighty charter members, many of whom are past and present luminaries, to create a Section on the Sociology of Aging was officially approved by the ASA.

Yet as George Maddox, one of the field's pioneers, observed: "In the early days of the Section, [sociologists of aging] sometimes had concerns about their identity. Were they mainly sociologists and incidentally gerontologists? Could one be both? How one answered the identity query was usually based on who was asking. An accommodation was achieved in which sociologists and gerontologists largely ignored each other. In "Sociology of Later Life," Maddox (1979) documented that articles on aging rarely appeared in the principal journals of sociology and, when they did, citations to gerontological journals were rare. Unfortunately, gerontological journals and authors largely returned the disregard" (as cited in Ferraro et al. 2005:13–14).

Today, of course, sociologists of aging can find homes in vibrant sections of professional organizations that allow us to nurture both the "sociology" and the "aging" facets of our identity – in the SALC of the ASA, and in the Behavioral and Social Sciences Section of the Gerontological Society of America. Relative to the time of Maddox's observations, citations to gerontology journals today have also seen extraordinary leaps as the significance of gerontology and the quality and range of journals has expanded. But it is still the case that sociologists of aging do not have a journal to formally institutionalize the intersection between sociology and aging. Instead, we have the option of publishing either in sociology journals, with our papers emphasizing aging and life course issues, or in gerontology journals, with our papers emphasizing social issues. Two of a handful of gerontology journals have traditionally had strong sociological content – the *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences,* which in 1995 officially became its own section in "Series B" (though the *Journal of Gerontology* was launched five decades earlier in 1946), and *Research on Aging,* which began in 1979, and even for a while carried the subtitle "A Quarterly Journal of Aging and the Life Course."

As the field grew and diversified, many scholars felt that aging, and especially the term "gerontology," signaled interests that were too cohort-centric. That is, "aging" is a long-term process and

need not – and, indeed, should not – be restricted to the study of the population of older people at any given time. The emergence of the life course perspective, as we will later discuss, both heightened that concern and strengthened that intellectual thread in the sociology of age and aging. Thus, Matilda White Riley (who had fashioned the "age stratification" framework and founded the Behavioral and Social Research Program at the National Institute on Aging), along with other leaders and members of the Section, began in 1990 to advocate a name change to what was then the Section on Aging.

Their proposal was to change "Aging" to "Age" and add "and the Life Course." The reason for the change from "aging" to "age" was at least twofold. One reason was that the inclusion of the "life course" would repeat the attention to processes already captured by the term "aging." But a second and more important reason was that "age" would keep attention focused on age as a property of social life and social systems – and therefore topics of inquiry that had been central to the field and its evolution (e.g., how social roles and activities are allocated on the basis of age, how age underlies the organization of social institutions, how age determines legal rights and responsibilities or eligibility for social programs, how age is used to determine expectations eligibility for social programs of the self and others).

Seven years later, after much controversy, the "life course" part was eventually adopted, but the "age" part ultimately rejected. However, the emphases on the sociology of age were nonetheless very present in the revised mission of the Section, which holds to this day:

> Sociology of Aging and the Life Course provides an analytical framework for understanding the interplay between human lives and changing social structures. Its mission is to examine the interdependence between (a) aging over the life course as a social process and (b) societies and groups as stratified by age, with succession of cohorts as the link connecting the two. This special field of age draws on sociology as a whole and contributes to it through reformulation of traditional emphases on process and change, on the multiple interdependent levels of the system, and on the multidimensionality of sociological concerns as they touch on related aspects of other disciplines. The field is concerned with both basic sociological research on age and its implications for public policy and professional practice.

The Life Course as Both Friend and Foe to the Sociology of Aging

The renaming of the Section to include "the life course" foreshadowed what would perhaps become the most significant development in our field in the years that followed to today. And it is a development around which we sense some new tensions growing.

The life course has gained tremendous momentum in our field. This is evidenced in a search we conducted using Sociological Abstracts from 1975 through 2008. The number of articles indexed with the term "life course" was essentially nonexistent in the 1970s; grew very slowly in the 1980s, reaching an annual peak of 88 publications by the late 1980s; and stayed fairly steady over the early 1990s, growing to no more than 148 annual articles by the late 1990s. It was in the 2000s that the presence of the life course surged: with annual numbers between 200 and 300 in the early 2000s, the numbers nearly tripled between 2003 and 2004 (to almost 800) and have remained relatively steady since, with a shift upward in 2008 and no doubt jumping further today.

From our perspective, the life course is both a friend and a foe to the sociology of aging. On the one hand, the life course perspective, at its most basic level, reminds us that the biological, social, and psychological aspects of aging outcomes are often not determined by chronological age itself but by the constellation of social factors that accumulate over a lifetime. It has therefore been central to the task of reclaiming the "social" in social gerontology, particularly in emphasizing how experiences in late life are shaped by those in earlier periods, and how aging experiences are shaped by a range of social institutions and forces (for further discussion, see Dannefer and Settersten 2010).

It has emphasized the great degree and types of diversity among older people, and that dynamics of aging are a collective process characterized by the accumulation of inequality over the life course. It has also emphasized that although age is important in every society, societies vary dramatically in how they use age and the meanings they attach to it. These are all very crucial lessons for sociologists of aging.

On the other hand, so much attention to the life course could also threaten the sociology of aging. As attention to the life course seems certain to grow exponentially in the years ahead, it is our hope that this attention will not ultimately compromise the scope and clarity of the sociology of *aging*. There are questions about aging that do not entail the life course, and many more questions about the life course that do not entail aging. They are not one and the same. Both are naturally treated in our work, but how we put the two together has tremendous implications for future scholarship. The life course perspective has offered valuable insights and transformed scholarship in our field. It is important for researchers to consider what is gained and what is lost or put at risk in our understanding of the sociology of aging if too great an emphasis is placed on the life course. In pursuing an understanding of "aging and the life course," the field seems to become ever bigger and broader, and therefore difficult to draw boundaries around. Are we becoming a field of every possible age, and every possible transition, in every possible domain of life? As the life course perspective gains momentum in other areas of sociology (e.g., family, education, work, health, and criminology), the overlap between these fields and ours also grows. What is it, then, that leaves our own subject matter distinct?

To explore the status of publications on "aging," we conducted a parallel search of Sociological Abstracts for the same period. It tracks in exactly the same way. But more important, the number of annual publications on "aging" are surprisingly higher by hundreds more articles (as many as 500 more at the peak). The fact that sociological articles on "aging" far outnumber those on the life course is, in some ways, reassuring. Nonetheless, we sense growing concern that the life course might also compromise the sociology of aging. And it is our prediction that the tensions that sociologists of aging feel around these difficult and critical questions will become increasingly strong in the near future.

The Social Organization of the Field

Finally, in reviewing 30 years of scholarship on the sociology of aging, we were often aware of the social organization of our science and the power of social relationships in producing knowledge. We were aware of the strong roles that leaders in the sociology of aging expectably play in shaping the intellectual agenda of the field and the theories and methods used to advance it. These dynamics were especially apparent in the early years of the field, before there was an infrastructure to support it. Keep in mind the conditions we noted at the beginning of this chapter. The actions of individuals and small groups in education, government, or practice were instrumental in forming the infrastructure we take for granted today. The history of the Section on the Sociology of Aging and the Life Course of the American Sociological Association is a good example of that.

We could trace generational lineages in the sociology of aging and see how the intellectual preoccupations of particular times are rooted in those relationships and exert their influence over time. We could see the influence of mentors at work, and how their capital and visibility played roles not only in promoting their success but also ultimately in forwarding the field. A "sociometrics" of our field becomes visible – the emergence of stars, networks of in-groups and out-groups, old guards and new ones; the control and circulation of the elite; and the statuses of the universities where members train or work in shaping their mobility or the allocation of resources.

We wondered about the infamous file drawer problem: the sociological research on aging that we will never know because it does not make it into the published scientific record, especially if it does not reinforce or if it critically challenges the ideas and methods that are in fashion at any given moment. We were also aware of the bias to publish findings of difference rather than findings of no-difference, though the latter may be just as important as the former to developing theory and our knowledge base on the sociology of aging.

We wondered about the things that are also not revealed in the record of published papers: how nonlinear the research process is; the complex and nuanced decisions that are made on the spot as research is being conducted; the leaps of faith in interpreting data; findings that are downplayed or dismissed, even unconsciously, because they run counter to theoretical lenses, prior findings, or personal convictions; admissions of what went wrong or was not done well.

We wondered, too, about the ambivalence so many scholars seem to have about writing, and about writing in ways that often seem artificial and distanced – as if we are in the world but not of it, as if we are bystanders to our work, wholly detached from the people and topics we study. At the same time, sociologists of aging are not fully insiders to the people and topics we are seeking to understand: That is, while we are all aging, most of us are not yet old. And yet we play roles in creating expectations, conducting research, making policies, and designing practice related to both aging and old age – and we carry assumptions and values with us as we do.

We have much to gain in more often turning a critical sociological lens on the social forces that promote or inhibit the advancement of knowledge, careers, and professional organizations. With greater consciousness of the social organization of our field comes the possibility to change that which is questionable or problematic.

Concluding Comment

In this chapter, we have outlined some of the broad trends in the sociology of aging over the past 30 years. In the final chapter, we will highlight some of the most provocative and pressing prospects for the decade ahead. In between, readers will find 36 chapters devoted to 30 years of inquiry on specific topics, and seven additional reflections from senior statespeople about their personal experiences in the field. The future holds great promise for the field of sociology, but there is much work to be done. With the new generations of scholars making their way into the field, we know that the next 30 years of the sociology of aging will be as exciting as the last thirty.

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