

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In this second edition of *Aging: The Social Context*, we have worked to sharpen and strengthen our original focus, to expand some of the topics included within that focus, and to provide updated information. We were assisted in this task by feedback from users of the book. Our intent with the first edition was to provide an alternative to existing texts, which generally focus on summaries of current and classic research on aging. These existing texts give limited attention to the value and uses of the social construction/social context approach to the study of age and aging. Our second edition continues to emphasize the depth, richness and breadth of the social construction perspective. Through examining aging individuals' opportunities, choices and experiences as the product of their individuality interacting with the surrounding social structure, we hope to highlight how aging is much more than an individual journey through time. Our emphasis on encouraging students to step back from the typical individual-based point of view to examine social structure is designed to help students see the play of these social forces in all of our lives and their implications specifically for aging. As in the first edition, we make explicit reference to the social construction of age throughout the text as we review and synthesize the literature on various topics. The emphasis on factors related to social location—especially gender, race, ethnicity, and social class—and the impact of these contextual variables in creating diverse realities of aging, continues to be an important thread throughout this edition.

In our teaching experience, most students can relate easily to aging through their personal or family experiences. Seldom do they come to the course understanding the implications of the aging of societies or the critical ways that the dynamics of aging work to reshape the major institutions of society. It is this macro-level, structural perspective on aging that we wish to add to our readers' intuitive understanding of individual aging—and to correct some misunderstandings that they may bring from their personal experience about what it means to grow older. Since human aging does not occur in isolation, but rather is fundamentally social, it is critical to examine interactions with the sur-

rounding society, which show how we shape and are shaped by the social contexts in which we grow older.

We have used two major vehicles—discipline-based chapters and special “applying theory” inserts within chapters—to present major theoretical and analytical frameworks from social gerontology and the core disciplines which inform the field. Theoretical perspectives throughout the text are connected to age-related issues and problems, such as retirement, health care, and economic inequality. These analyses explicitly look at varying questions, assumptions, and conclusions that derive from these theoretical viewpoints. We take a broad look at societal institutions (such as the family, the economy, employment and retirement, politics and public policy, and social services and health care) that affect older adults and are affected by the aging of our society. Students will acquire tools for analyzing social issues and societal institutions from different theoretical points of view and different ideological frameworks from reading these chapters.

In addition to emphasizing theoretical perspectives and social construction, a third guiding focus is on the cross-cutting of age with gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. One manifestation of this focus is the consistent discussion of heterogeneity and diversity among older adults. These discussions of diversity in later life allow a reformulation of the basic questions in the field—away from the question “What changes does aging bring about for the typical older person?” to questions such as “What are the variables on which older people differ from one another? What are the patterns of difference on those variables, and why do those differences exist?” Consistent discussion of diversity among older people, and of how it is patterned, helps to further illustrate the fact that the experiences and meanings of age and aging are socially constructed, and are not predictable results of a set of fixed biological processes.

Teaching with This Book

We have directed this text to undergraduate or beginning graduate students in social gerontology or sociology of aging courses. Because we have included chapters on physical and psychological aging in Part II, the book is appropriate for multidisciplinary survey courses, especially those taught from a sociological point of view. These chapters broaden the usefulness of the text and allow a discussion of how the important influences of both psychology and physiol-

ogy interact with social forces to shape the meanings and experiences of aging. These chapters were written by experts from those discipline. In the second edition these chapters have been revised with editorial support from the authors to present a “seamless voice” speaking to the reader.

We have also included some special pedagogical features that we think help students to absorb critical theories and concepts. First, we have interspersed among the chapters six “speculative essays” on timely and sometimes unusual topics to encourage lively discussion and application of ideas presented in various chapters. A second teaching feature is a series of within-chapter inserts focusing on applying theories. Each of these inserts augments the more basic theoretical issues presented in the discipline-based chapters in Part II of the book. In each case, the theory is applied either to an individual’s own aging or to policy or practice. The “insert” format gives instructors greater flexibility as to how, when, and how fully to utilize these theories in their teaching.

Third, we have highlighted key terms in each chapter with bold type when they are introduced and defined. These key terms are listed for study purposes at the end of each chapter and are included in a glossary at the end of the book for easy reference. In the second edition we have added “Questions for Thought and Reflection” at the end of each chapter and essay to prompt consideration of key issues presented in the chapter and serve as a focal point for classroom discussion.

Other New Features of the Second Edition

In addition to the augmented features mentioned above, the second edition includes new and updated web sites at the end of every chapter in our “Web Wise” sections. Instructors may wish to investigate these sites and may build student assignments or exercises around them. We have also endeavored to make the visual presentation more engaging by including photos and cartoons in the text, in addition to the graphs and charts found in the first edition. The majority of graphs and charts have been updated with more recent data, and the text in all chapters has been refreshed with new information that has appeared since completion of the last edition.

Beyond editorial revision, the chapters on Physiology and Psychology include considerable new information. In the case of the physiology of aging, new findings and further information have been presented. In the psychology

chapter a new section, focusing on memory and memory change, is included in this edition. Other chapters have been reorganized so that material appears in only one chapter, removing redundancy. Finally, at the suggestion of some reviewers, we have enhanced information on death and dying, family caregiving, memory and other topics that were viewed as receiving insufficient attention in the first edition.

Our original and continued purpose in writing has been to provide a new type of textbook on social gerontology/sociology of aging, one that is neither encyclopedic in its coverage of research findings nor overly weighted down with jargon. We hope that we have brought added strength in this second edition to the message about the dynamics of aging within a changing social world.