

# Gerontologists: Who We Are and What We Can Do

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# Who We Are

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Macro Level

Gerontology as an Emerging Discipline

# Process of Discipline Creation of Professional Practice

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“Foundational” disciplines in gerontology include biology, sociology, psychology.

New disciplines emerge from the intersections of existing ones, and fields of practice evolve by combining information from more than one discipline, e.g. –

- social psychology
- biochemistry
- social work
- psychiatry
- public health
- occupational therapy

# Characteristics of Disciplines

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- ◉ Identifiable theories
- ◉ Research methodologies
- ◉ Formalized organization (i.e., professional socialization, information dissemination)
- ◉ Formal academic degree programs
- ◉ General body of knowledge

# Gerontological Theory

## Early Psycho-Social Models

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These generally combined more than one discipline and applied to gerontology but were not necessarily formulated to explain or predict age/aging over time

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- Disengagement
- Activity
- Exchange
- Symbolic Interaction
- Political Economy

# Gerontological Theory

## More Recent Developments

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- Life Course perspective focuses on life span development.
- Ecological theories incorporate social and environmental characteristics with individual age-associated change.

# Gerontological Research Methods

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Longitudinal data allow

- cohort and cross-sequential research designs
- relatively new ways of analyzing data –
  - Event-History Analysis
  - Hierarchical Linear Modeling

# Gerontological Organizations & Dissemination

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- Professional organizations, e.g., CAG, GSA, ASA, AGHE, NCOA
- 35+ scholarly journals, e.g., Journals of Gerontology, Gerontologist, Gerontology and Geriatrics Education, Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics
- As of 2010, over 100 degree programs (Assoc. Arts, Baccalaureate, Masters, Doctoral) in Canada and the U.S.

# As a body of knowledge **Gerontology is . . .**

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- the scientific study of the processes of aging using a multidisciplinary perspective;
- the study of the biological, psychological, and sociological aspects of aging;
- an interdisciplinary field in which two or more disciplines are intertwined to offer complex insights and understandings about the processes of aging and the elderly population;
- the study of aging as change over time within physical and social environments.

# Body of knowledge: **Our Perspective**

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- Gerontology is the interdisciplinary study of the processes of aging within the context of multidimensional environments (physical, social, historical, cultural) in which people interact with environments.
- ***The synthesizing component of Gerontology as an interdisciplinary field distinguishes it from aging content offered in other traditional disciplines; it is different from and greater than the sum of its parts.***

# Body of knowledge: **Our Perspective (*continued*)**

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- If aging content resides only in the curricula of other disciplines, the academic study of aging will become fragmented.
- To fully emerge as a discipline and take its place in the academy, Gerontology must become professionalized, including developing an accreditation process for academic programs and integrating that with the existing credentialing process for individuals offered by the National Association for Professional Gerontologists (NAPG).

# What We Can Do

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Micro Level

Gerontology as an Emerging Profession:  
Skills, Advocacy

# Toward Legitimizing and Professionalizing Gerontology

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- Currently AGHE Standards and Guidelines at every degree level refer to Gerontology as “multidisciplinary” and specify “bio-psycho-social” aspects of aging as core knowledge.
- *Journals of Gerontology* are divided by discipline.
- Only in 2005 did GSA include “Gerontology” as a disciplinary option on its membership form.
- There is currently no accreditation process for Gerontology degree programs.
- The U.S. Administration on Aging network of agencies does not include “Gerontology/ Gerontologist” as a hiring category.

# Professionalizing Gerontology

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- Professionalizing Gerontology will require accreditation of academic gerontology programs, credentialing of graduates (with eventual licensure), and advocacy for hiring trained Gerontology professionals.
- AGHE is beginning to move toward accreditation.
- NAPG credentials graduates but cannot go beyond existing AGHE guidelines (based on bio-psycho-social core).
- A focus on skills and competencies is crucial for employment opportunities and central to accreditation/credentialing.

# “Operationalizing” the Body of Knowledge

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(Re)organizing our thinking about Gerontology (a new paradigm):

- From multidisciplinary “bio-psycho-social” to interdisciplinary “themes” or “core principles.”
- From static to dynamic.
- From “what we know” (knowledge) to “what we can do” (skills).
- From “field” to “profession” (skill-based competencies).

# An Organizing Scheme: **Interdisciplinary Themes**

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- Stability and directions of change\*
- Structures and contexts of aging\*

*\*(taken from *Core Principles and Outcomes of Gerontology, Geriatrics and Aging Studies Instruction*, P. Wendt, D. Peterson, E. Douglass, Assn. for Gerontology in Higher Education, 1993)*

# Stability and Directions of Change

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*“The processes and outcomes associated with individual, familial, and societal aging, defining and describing:*

- the trajectories of stability, improvement and/or decrement in individual functioning;
- the dynamics of the immediate interpersonal environment within which aging takes place (e.g., family, social supports); and
- the reciprocal effects of aging on groups, social institutions, and social policy over time.”

# Structure/Contexts/ Heterogeneity

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- “The study of aging occurring at both the macro- and micro-levels built on an understanding that the underlying biological processes of aging unfold within an environment and are manifest as a result of the person-environment interaction.
- The outcomes of this interaction are affected by diverse dimensions including, but not limited to, culture, demography, ethnicity, economy, geography, gender, history, political and social environments, and mental, physical and social status.”

# Stability and Change: Skills and Competencies

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- Employ appropriate assessment procedures.
- Employ appropriate intervention strategies.
- Enhance the adaptive capacity of organizations to deal with change.
- Prepare individuals/families to recognize and manage change.
- Apply ethical principles to decisions on behalf of older persons, especially those with diminished capacity.

# Structures and Contexts: Skills and Competencies

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- Work effectively with other professionals (multidisciplinary teams) to provide necessary services, support, and team leadership.
- Identify, access, and organize community resources.
- Frame effective policy (e.g., social, economic, health).
- Review and evaluate effectiveness of programs.
- Conduct, use, and disseminate applied research to improve practice.

# Put Your Education to Work: Inventory Your Resources

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Translate what you have learned into what you can do:

- What are your skills?
- How can your skills be used and where?
- With whom would you like to work?
- Who are your contacts from previous employment, volunteer experience, internships?
- Who are your ideal clients?
- What is your passion?

# Put Your Education to Work: Do Your “Homework”

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- Interview/job shadow possible employment opportunities.
- Learn the language of job descriptions and tailor your resume.
- Practice interviewing skills.
- Find resource material (e.g., *101 Careers in Gerontology*, C.J. Grabinski, Springer, 2007; *Careers in Aging: Opportunities and Options*, D. Peterson, E. Douglass, & J. Whittington, Assn. for Gerontology in Higher Education, 2004).

# Put Your Education to Work: **Network, Network, Network!**

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- Join and participate in professional organizations (e.g., CAG, CAG Student Connection, NAPG); start your own groups.
- Use social media (e.g., LinkedIn “Future Leaders in Gerontology”).
- Find and participate in professional groups in your own geographic area.

# Join us in **Advocating for Gerontology**

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- **NAPG: Promoting and credentialing the education of professionals in the field of Gerontology (4 levels of credentials: graduate; baccalaureate; associate arts/certificate; professional/scholar affiliates; and student memberships). Visit us at Booth 12.**
- **Students and recent graduates have the opportunity to define Gerontology for the future by synthesizing and integrating knowledge across disciplines, contexts and themes.**

# Other References

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National Association for  
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