

The Importance of Aging Studies: Understanding the Influence of Diversity and Culture

Tamara A. Baker

“Aging should not be regarded as an affliction. It is a stage in life, like all others, that deserves to be celebrated and documented in all its natural grace and beauty” (9). The brilliant photographic work of Chester Higgins, Jr., *Elder Grace*, should remind us all of the gifts, wisdom, and legacies that emanate from the souls of our elders. The subjects of his portraits are individuals who convey a sense of strength and dignity.

The resilience of the elderly provides an opportunity for many to learn of (and from) this cohort of adults, and to do what is necessary to ensure that we understand all that is involved in the aging process. As a society, we should ask how one can dismiss the struggles of such an amazing generation of adults. Becoming older (aging) is inevitable, but it is also something that should be revered. Yet, the question beckons: What are we doing as a society to make sure that we adapt healthy lifestyles now to assure an inexorable transition into old age? This question is similarly posed as we strive to meet the demands of a growing diverse (racially and ethnically) aging population.

Over the last twenty-five years, there has been a growing emphasis in the field of gerontology to examine issues related to diversity across racial and ethnic groups. This has resulted in an evident need for an organized platform focusing on the scientific advances of the aged from diverse races and ethnic populations, while enhancing conceptual and theoretical models within and across varying ethnic and race groups. These concerns are reflected in my own scholarly work focusing on the behavioral, psycho-social, and cultural aspects of aging. Understanding the lifespan contributors to aging is critical as we are experiencing a “gerontological explosion” of adults nationally and internationally.

We must similarly recognize that individuals are now living longer and enjoying more years of an active lifestyle. The incidence of disease, while still high among this cohort of adults, is now more likely to be managed with improved healthcare and access to services that was not readily available some years ago. Yet, we must remain vigilant in recognizing that inequities continue to exist, and everyone does not have equal access or availability of optimal or affordable healthcare. This remains an important social issue that must be addressed if we are to continue our efforts in improving the well-being of the aging population.

To fully understand the contributions of older adults and to appreciate the subject of aging studies/gerontology in general, there must be a commitment to create a multidisciplinary overview for all to understand the aging process across diverse groups of individuals (taking into account race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, etc.). Recognizing the enormity of this challenge, leaders in the field of gerontology are now contributing to our knowledge and insight on matters most pertinent to understanding the changing demographic structure of the older adult population. This effort has resulted in a progressive and multidisciplinary compendium of research pertaining to aging among populations not only in the United States, but globally.

It is critical that we now focus on paramount public health, social, behavioral, and biological concerns as they relate to the needs of older adults. We must also distill the most important advances in the science of aging and incorporate the evidence of scholars in gerontology, anthropology, humanities, psychology, public health, sociology, social work, biology, medicine, and other, similarly related disciplines. It is time that our attention centers on areas pertinent to the well-being of the adult population such as work and retirement, social networks, context and neighborhood, discrimination, health disparities, long-term care, physical functioning, caregiving, housing, and end-of-life care. Bringing our knowledge of this understudied group in line with their needs and the impact they will have on society will be an “achievable” challenge of current and future generations of scholars.

WORK CITED

Higgins, Chester, Jr. *Elder Grace: The Nobility of Aging*. Boston: Bulfinch, 2000.

Tamara A. Baker is an Associate Professor in the School of Aging Studies at the University of South Florida. She received her PhD from Penn State University in Biobehavioral Health and completed her postdoctoral training at the University of Michigan in the School of Public Health. Dr. Baker's research agenda focuses on the behavioral and psychosocial predictors and outcomes of chronic pain and disease in older adults from diverse race populations. Dr. Baker has an ongoing project (NIH NCI) examining psychological, social, and cultural predictors in the management of cancer pain in older adults. Readers may write to Tamara Baker at tbakerthomas@usf.edu.

©2014 Tamara A. Baker

Age, Culture, Humanities 1 (2014)

Published by the Athenaeum Press at Coastal Carolina University. All rights reserved.

For permissions, please email athenaempres@coastal.edu.