

What Is Age Studies?

Stephen Katz

Let us imagine this situation for a moment: In the universities and centers of research, learning, and advocacy on women and gender, the majority of courses and programs are about health and medicine, demographic patterns, voting behaviors, family relations, and individual roles, lifestyles, and places of residence. There is data-rich empirical research on gender inequality, work, and income, and occasional but ambivalent attention paid to political activism, international and multicultural dimensions, and media imagery. But outside of a few writers and graduate students, very few resources are directed to theoretical issues of agency discourse, the body, and sexuality; or the history of the women's movement; or feminist treatments of film, art, spirituality, transgender relationships, prisons, domestic violence, or race. Thinkers from Simone de Beauvoir to Judith Butler are rarely part of required reading lists, while terms such as "feminist epistemology" or "intersectionality" and well-trod critiques of the medicalization, deviantization, and criminalization of women are hardly mentioned. Only a few sessions at major conferences on sex and gender are usually permitted on discourse, narrative, resistance, bodies, governmentality, and textuality, and even so get lumped together as 'postmodern theory' or derided as inappropriately 'political.' In this imaginary world, leading researchers believe that their anti-sexist research on women, however uncritical, is a sufficient indication of their radical identity and ideological solidarity with all suffering women. And traditional mainstream psychological, sexological, and medical fields are still the authorities despite the feminist movement's exposure of the narratives of patriarchal power underlying their scientific truths.

Would we or our students tolerate this situation of such embarrassing backwardness? Yet, this is what we face in age/aging studies today, where aging research and teaching are akin to the imaginary situation I present above, the difference being that it would be unacceptable in women's/gender/sexuality studies. In far too many of our universities and learning

centers, aging and the lifecourse are marginal concerns (outside of medical faculties). This is just plain sad, especially if we acknowledge that the early gerontological thinkers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries drew from the world's interdisciplinary philosophies, literatures, medicines, poetics, spiritualities, and aesthetics: in other words, "age studies." Optimistic that aging could attract a range of intellectual and social energies, writers such as Elie Metchnikoff, G. Stanley Hall, and E. V. Cowdry mapped out the conversations we are still having. For example, in his introduction to Cowdry's edited volume of the foundational text, *Problems of Ageing* (1939), John Dewey says, "We need to know the ways in which social contexts react back into biological processes as well as to know the ways in which the biological processes condition social life. This is the problem to which attention is invited" (xxvi). In this light, the aging population, which is today projected as a monstrous entity set upon destroying welfare states and generational futures, is both a bio-demographic reality and a social construction reacting back into each other. Historians Thomas R. Cole and W. Andrew Achenbaum have pointed out that gerontological specialization has undercut the field's earlier and wider critical aspirations.

But criticality has resurfaced in other areas, specifically critical gerontology and age studies, which are comprised of scattered and splintered distributions of academics, advocates, public intellectuals, and political leaders working across various organizations with different resources and mandates. What unites them, paradoxically, is their marginality and, as I have written elsewhere, their nomadic forms of thought ("Critical Gerontological Theory"). What are the elements that fuel criticality within such forms of thought? I suggest the following:

1. The term "critical" is associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory, whose thinkers such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno emphasized theoretical reflexivity, not taking for granted the assumptions, principles, and practices that any field or political agenda claims as its canonical heritage. In gerontology, reflexivity is important because it asks not only "what gerontology

says” but also “what gerontology does.” This is what Harry Moody, Ruth Ray, and many other humanities scholars have in mind, whereby one looks forward and backward, outward and inward at the same time. Thus, in my own work, I have been inspired to reflect on the gerontological genealogies of “activity” and “functionality,” treatments of memory, and the construction of gerontological texts and “handbooks.”

2. Postmodernism, poststructuralism, discourse analysis, governmentality, phenomenology, the sociology of the body, social studies of science and technology, and feminist, LGBT, and disability studies: These are some of the banners under which current critical thinking has emerged and radicalized many fields. I am intrigued by what these forms of thought have done and might do to the study of age and aging. Critical gerontology, in this sense, has a responsibility to guide the introduction of radical work in other fields into age studies and, at the same time, to press forward issues of age and aging into other fields. A success story is the work on aging bodies, where writers have taken the sociology of the body (where little attention is paid to age) to gerontology (where little attention is paid, paradoxically, to the body). Other crosscurrents between aging, feminist, and disability studies are similarly illuminating, as have been adaptations of postmodern and “post-traditional” cultural models to the changes in life-courses and aging futures.¹
3. A mainstay of gerontology is the critique of ageism and age-inequality; however, in the same way that not all research on women is feminist, nor is all work on labor Marxist, all work on ageism and age-inequality is not necessarily critical. We know that within some political economy approaches to aging, including feminist ones, research results can be fairly descriptive accounts of different income levels and differential access to resources, with a critique of class structure largely absent. In gerontology, there are many theoretical opportunities to explore aging issues from

critical perspectives, especially where they target ageism or age-in-equality, but such perspectives need to demonstrate precisely *how* they are critical as perspectives, apart from the issues they target.

4. Critical thinking has always claimed a theory-practice (or “praxis”) relationship. Gerontology again presents an interesting case because of its practical fields. Indeed, people in the aging field work hard at putting theory into practice, which is why I often look to nursing, dementia care, or physiotherapy journals for some of the most imaginative ideas arising from practice. Here is where one finds the questions raised by the “practical professions” that deal with care, bodies, policies, spaces, pain, and death, and the intimacies of everyday life for older people. This was a point Foucault made as well, that it is in the practical worlds of doing and making that profound ideas arise, and not necessarily from the armchairs of the great thinkers and philosophers.
5. An advantage of critical gerontology and age studies is how they emphasize the “inside of aging” and what it *means* to grow older. Here the humanities have been especially vital as they promote questions of identity, the body, experience, language and metaphor, life-course continuity and disruption, sensation, emotions, and biography. These are the subjective and everyday aspects of aging by which we live out our lives; thus research requires careful observation and participation, discourse analysis, qualitative interviews, deconstruction of images and texts, and close attention to the ordinary. Narrative is particularly important because it anchors the inside of aging, bringing together self and society and animating our biographies as we borrow, adapt, interpret, and reinvent the languages, symbols, and meanings around us to customize our personal stories. Critical perspectives also deconstruct dominant cultural narratives and give voice to suppressed and marginal narratives. Barbara Ehrenreich has shown that women dying of breast cancer have as much, if not more, to say about their lives as the pink-ribboned

“survivors” trotted out on award shows. Ultimately, a subjective dimension in age studies means that we include ourselves in what we study and write about. As Jon Hendricks says, “If we cannot see ourselves in our explanations, perhaps we should pause before proffering these explanations to the profession” (113).

These reflexive, critical and subjective dimensions moor critical gerontology to age studies, whether they are expressed in the humanities, the sciences, or the social sciences. But the advantage of age studies is that it is not necessarily a form of gerontology, and it can be liberated from some of gerontology’s disciplinary and scientific commitments. Indeed, we can say that, from the humanities, age studies looks to biographical, feminist, and narrative perspectives on self, memory, meaning, and wisdom, and imaginative alternative resources and experiences in performative, artistic, fictional, transsexual, poetic, and futuristic fields. From the social sciences, age studies elucidates the new cultural processes redefining later life and old age based on late-capitalist and globalized retirement lifestyles, cosmetic and body technologies, consumer marketing, and age-based hierarchies. We already have exceptional models whereby women’s studies, race/ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, and LGBT studies have become transformed into exciting educational programs, and this can also happen through age studies. Moreover, there are many exceptional scholars who move across disciplinary boundaries to create new hybridized and multidisciplinary inquiries, such as neuroscientist Peter Whitehouse, who favors the arts and education as much as the sciences when it comes to dementia care, or historian Thomas Cole, who teaches the medical humanities in Houston, or dramatist Anne Basting, whose programs on Alzheimer disease in Milwaukee are nothing short of revolutionary. They and others recognize that we live in a rapidly changing world, where aging is migrating imaginatively into fuller experiences of life to which we are all running to catch up, and for which we need new emancipatory resources.

Age studies can provide a platform from which to catch up together, push against the restrictions on creative research and funding, establish

new graduate opportunities, and, as feminism has done with almost every form of thought built against it over the last century, critique the practices by which current forms of knowledge and power about aging have assumed their authority as a form of truth. In the *Encyclopedia of Aging* I defined “aging” as, on the one hand, “the elegant and continuous means by which the forces of nature, from the microscopic to the universal, create the conditions for regeneration” (45) and, on the other hand, as having “inspired the human artistic and cultural imagination for millennia” because it makes us confront “the paradoxes of living and dying in time” (48). It is this tremendous scope of issues that gives age studies its identity, and I am very pleased that my work can make a contribution to it. Age studies belongs in university programs and research centers, where it can gather, cluster, and aggregate together the scattered people, ideas, publications, and energies now fomenting scholarly and social change in the aging scene. Like the European Network in Aging Studies (ENAS), the North American Network in Aging Studies (NANAS) is a way forward towards this enterprise.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Woodward; Katz, *Cultural Aging*; Katz, “Hold”; Gilleard and Higgs.

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