

Aging and the Exploration of Lived Ambivalence

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Studies of *age* and *culture* from the perspective of the *humanities* may well be one of the most important emerging fields of scholarly work. In the following short text, I will present some considerations to back up this bold claim and give some comments regarding possible directions.

The dominant culture of late modern society is characterized by powerful instrumental orientations, from the global run for power and profit to an emphasis on finding instrumental answers to the many practical problems of population aging. This situation puts great pressure on all scientific disciplines that are targeting aging processes to come up with clear solutions for practical problems. The instrumentalist narrowing of scholarly and public discussions about aging has drained the resources for the humanities to reflect on a broader range of issues, including practical ones, in connection with aging. These reductionist strategies are even dominating academia, although the major problems which are produced by this one-sided instrumentality, such as blunt neglect of basic needs and identities, demonstrate that it lacks perspectives that go beyond it, perspectives that could serve as horizons of reflection. It is, therefore, urgently necessary to bring together the relatively isolated and scattered scholarly work which occupies itself with the many questions regarding age and aging that can be articulated and explored by the humanities.

One of the questions asked by the editors of this section was: “What are the possibilities and/or dangers of “age studies” being envisioned or enacted as the study of the old rather than the study of age across the lifespan as a category of analysis?” There are several aspects to this important issue. Whether *Age, Culture, Humanities* should embrace studies across the life span is also an important strategic question: although *age* tends to come to the foreground in both growing up and growing older, it may be that including childhood, centenarians, and everyone in between

would overstretch the span of attention and expertise. It seems that positioning the journal within the broad field of aging studies and seeking cooperation with organizations such as the Gerontological Society of America (GSA) would offer better opportunities to develop a robust and fruitful scholarly community. But to define aging as a “study of the old” risks reproducing uncritically the assumption that at a certain age people enter a residual and static phase of life, called “old age,” inhabited by “the old,” “the aged,” “elderly,” or “seniors.” This idea becomes even more problematic as the qualifying age to join “the old,” for example, to become a member of the AARP, the former American Association of Retired Persons, (or some other national organization) has, in a few decades, been lowered from retirement age (60-65 years) to 50 years. As, paradoxically, life expectancies have been rising over the same period and most people in their fifties or even sixties don’t feel “old,” these processes lead to many interesting responses that are important to describe and understand. Therefore, although aging in a broad sense takes place from conception to death, I propose to use the term aging to refer to the different ways in which people continue to lead their lives after having been defined as (too) “old” by others with “labeling power.” This experience introduces new meanings of *age*.

In the accelerating context of late modernity, aging processes result in dynamically changing configurations that, moreover, take place during a socially constituted phase of life that may last almost twice as long as “normal” adulthood. Its manifestations may vary with different cultural contexts, with different cohorts, and within these cohorts with gender, race, class, and even with specific professions; just think of the different onset and impact of aging for older dancers and for older politicians or priests. In all of this, experiences of *aging* should be distinguished from processes of *senescing* (and not: senescence) that refer to functional dynamics and biological processes over the life span. Insofar as chronometric *age* plays a categorizing role in the organization of the life course, it will not fail to affect people as they are aging, but neither aging processes nor processes of *senescing* take place in synchrony with chronometric age.

The humanities are rich in experience with basic dimensions and concepts that are easily neglected in instrumental objectifications of aging, where much experiential content gets lost as it is processed into empirical data. As *time* is inherent in aging—which is, basically, living in time—it should be one of the dimensions that deserve more attention than it has been given. Although in many public debates and policy plans age categories are neatly related to certain characteristics, such generalizations usually create more problems than they solve. Chronometric time, a term that—in contrast to chronological time—underlines the predominance of spatial measurements in the dimension of *time*, may seem to be neutral, but it tends to distort the temporal dimensions of human life as it narrows them to one measurable dimension. The widespread tendency to organize care from the perspective of chronometric time (as time budgets) is just one example of a more general tendency to “improve” activities, processes, or situations by making them more “time efficient.” It may seem as if we would lose as little time as possible when we count the years and keep our eyes on the clock, but we risk losing the manifold experience of living in time, as I have discussed extensively in my recent book, *Aging and the Art of Living*.

Another example of a fascinating and crucially important issue in aging would be the role of *ambivalence* in aging, undercutting either-or dichotomies: ambivalences of showing and hiding, of participation and withdrawal, of continuity and discontinuity, of increasing vulnerability and subtleness of experience. One particular challenge would be to articulate experiences in those dimensions of aging that we can objectify and analyze, but only to a certain extent because we are always already involved in them and must presuppose our own lived but barely known form of them. In studying embodiments we are always already embodied; in analyzing discursivity we are always already discursively involved with others and ourselves, and in describing gender or ethnicity we are always already gendered and ethnically situated. Experiences of aging might reveal something about the basic but unknown familiarities we are involved in, as we are living through time.

Exploring aging and culture from a humanities perspective not only counterbalances the many quantitative studies on aging but, more importantly, it also corrects one-sided instrumentalist perspectives on these deeply humane processes and experiences. The exploration of dimensions in which we are always already involved requires subtle interpretations to articulate the many inside/outside ambivalences that are typical of such issues and which, moreover, have the potential to create major frictions among contemporary world citizens (Nussbaum). The humanities share a rich and vivid tradition of approaching these complex issues, such as the many varieties of hermeneutic interpretation. As their resources have come under pressure in many contemporary academic environments, there is an urgent need to facilitate and organize networks and professional media where representatives of the multiform humanities share enough common interests to commit to discuss with colleagues, learn from each other, nourish young talent, and optimize scholarly standards.

WORKS CITED

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