

THE NEED FOR THEORY

Critical Approaches to Social Gerontology

Edited by
Simon Biggs, Ariela Lowenstein and Jon Hendricks

SOCIETY AND AGING SERIES

JON HENDRICKS: SERIES EDITOR



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**THE NEED FOR THEORY:
Critical Approaches to
Social Gerontology**

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INTRODUCTION

The Need for Theory in Gerontology

*Simon Biggs, Jon Hendricks,
and Ariela Lowenstein*

WHAT IS THEORY AND WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

Knowledge is more than an accumulation of so-called facts. At a fundamental level, knowledge is about explaining things and drawing associations. That is where theory comes in; theory also goes beyond the collection of data and tries to uncover the “why” as well as the “what” of occurrences and relationships. Theories are about the way we understand the world and about understanding the world differently. At an elemental level, theory is about the first order constructs that individuals use to explain events in their lives. At a more conceptual level, the second order constructs of gerontology supply the conceptual architecture we inhabit and the tools we use as part of the work of interpreting adult aging.

Some theories are more conceptual than others. At one end of the spectrum, there is accepted wisdom that hardly constitutes theory at all. These positions consist of exhortations to certain forms of conduct of the “be more active” or “keep on keeping on” variety. They may involve the classification of phenomena into increasingly refined and extensive categories, such as has arguably happened in the study of elder abuse, with, it must be said, little advancement in the understanding of abuse itself. The investigators have, in other words, become lost among the trees. This general approach also lends itself to meta-modeling, as a sort of theoretical stamp collecting. Different theories and traditions are grouped or re-grouped according to the collector’s fancy, with little evident disciplinary progress and scant connection to the world of experience.

Sometimes intellectual work is called theory, but it is closer to modeling. The author has created a reflection, a model or copy of the world, which seeks to re-describe the systems under study. These approaches are rather like planispheres, brass models of the solar system so popular in eighteenth-century Europe. You can name the parts and watch them whirr and click. Nomothetic knowledge of this type is positivistic in nature, based on an assumption that the relationships described are images of naturally occurring patterns, discovered by the modeler. Often model metaphors are themselves borrowed from another discourse, such as computing to understand mental processes or economics to understand interpersonal exchanges. In each case modeling tends not to ask why a certain analogy is used, and how the assumptions that come with it affect our understanding.

Critical approaches are more likely to produce identifiably theoretical positions insofar as they attempt to go beyond the surface of events and point to underlying processes. These theories often include a movement from theses, based on common-sensual or dominant explanations of events, to antitheses pointing out underlying power relations that maintain the status quo. Theory is seen to develop through a sort of dialectical spiral, as each antithesis becomes in its turn a thesis for the next generation of counter-theories (Hendricks, 1992). Carroll Estes' (1979) critique of *The Ageing Enterprise* is an apt example of critique building to a novel and antithetical understanding of the growth in services for older adults. It is suggested from Estes' view that the ostensive development of services to meet a growing need, in reality disguises the exploitation of new markets and the consolidation of new forms of professional power. At the extreme end of theory building, the ideas and explanations are infused with novelty and open new directions. They are less dependent upon the import of ideas from elsewhere or the critical comparison of existing ideas. They appear to arise from the first order constructs of the phenomenon under study, yet set them in an entirely new light, thus occasioning a paradigmatic shift in the way the issue is thought about. In gerontology we are still early in the process and have a way to go before we have such a sound grasp of the nature of aging.

We are, then, in the territory of ideas, their formulation and reformulation. And as Victor Marshall (1999) pointed out, data rarely leads to the resolution of debates in its own right. For Marshall one of the tests of a good theory is whether it lends greater logical coherence to a field or discipline. To this might be added the notion of *zeitgeist*—the spirit of the times, and whether a theory becomes popular because it fits its historical and social circumstances. To understand the growth and use of a particular perspective on aging, then, one would need to examine the social conditions together with the history of ideas that gave rise to new theoretical models.

James Birren (1988), now rather famously, opined that gerontology had become data rich, yet theory poor. There may be a number of reasons why this has been the case. First, contemporary gerontology cohered as a discipline shortly after the Second World War, when behavioral and structural-functional

views of society held sway in Western social and human science. These positions left little room for critical analysis and have since been characterized as markedly unreflective on their own social and cultural assumptions (Lynott & Lynott, 1996). Second, the collection of knowledge at the time was seen as an almost exclusively empiricist endeavor, mirroring the methods, and it was hoped, the success of the physical sciences. Third, gerontology became part of the great push for social improvement that filled the post-war years. To this day, gerontology is closely, and possibly uncritically, allied to public policy on aging. This combination of factors has been succinctly expressed as “the union of science and advocacy” (Butler, in Moody, 1993), however it sometimes leads to the collection of data for data’s sake and an overly pragmatic approach to the public presentation of knowledge. Neither of these trends facilitates critical reflection on how gerontology is developing, where it is heading, or the nature of adult aging beyond the concerns of established interests and habits of thought.

Moody (1993) noted that when it comes to philosophy, contemporary social gerontology reflects the influence of European rather than Anglo-American theory. Whether Moody’s claim withstands close scrutiny or not, the influence appears slim when compared to the historical burden of structural-functionalism and the largely atheoretical and pragmatic empiricism of North American gerontology from which Western social gerontology takes its cue. There are, of course, a few notable exceptions to this a-theoretical blanket. A list would include: Marxism in the work of Estes (1979, 2001), Phillipson (1982), and Olson (1982); Psychoanalysis (Biggs, 1993; Woodward, 1991); Foucault (Frank, 1998; Katz, 1996; Powell & Biggs, 2000; Tulle-Winton, 2000); Existentialism (Cole, 1992; Tornstam, 1989); the Frankfurt School (Moody, 1993); and in Phillipson (1998) and Holstein and Gubrium (2000) who attempt a fusion of traditions. Undoubtedly there are others as well, but the point is that they stand as exceptions rather than the rule.

It is striking that the 1999 *Handbook of Theories of Aging* was marked by an absence of structure by theoretical orientation. Although the *Handbook* (Bengtson & Schaie, 1999) had become more extensive and inclusive than its predecessor, *Emergent Theories of Aging* (Birren & Bengtson, 1988), it retained essentially the same shape. This consisted of a mix of the progress within disciplines, method-driven, and problem- or site-based approaches. What emerged was a surprisingly atheoretical handbook on theory. Perhaps it is reflective of the historic nature of the field rather than the state of the art.

Does this mean, then, that social gerontology is creating its own theories and does not need to sit on the shoulders of these philosophical giants? Unfortunately not. The longevity of the disengagement versus activity debate, reflected in contemporary positions around gero-transcendence and productive aging, attests to both the poverty of homegrown theory as well as to the endurance of two key ideas that still speak to the construction of contemporary aging. Indeed, these trends may even repeat divisions and strengths noted at the first stirrings of the

discipline in the late nineteenth century (Katz, 1996). Adapting this bifurcation as a facile characterization of the experience of aging is not likely to add insight or accumulate knowledge.

A close examination of how theory has developed suggests a picture of an emergent focus that has imported ideas from the wider social and medical sciences, plus politics and the humanities. It has generated debate and alternative interpretations of aging and contributed to the development of public policy and professional practice. What it has not yet done is generate convincing theorization from its own field of study. Hopefully this volume and similar efforts will redress that charge.

GERONTOLOGY AS A FIELD FOR THEORY

If Manheimer (1993) is correct, then the study of adult aging begs the big philosophical questions: why are we here and to what purpose? What is a life well lived? It is also, and perhaps in part because of these questions, a meeting place of extraordinary disciplinary fecundity (Weiland, 2000). Gerontology has, in fact, been characterized as having certain key characteristics, including its multidisciplinary nature, its applied nature and its preoccupation with the relationship between individual and social aging (Hendricks & Achenbaum, 1999).

First, gerontology is referred to as multidisciplinary and in its practical element, inter-professional. This focus may reflect the increasing interdependence of the social, soma, and psyche in later life. A mixing of disciplines can add richness, arising from different styles and paradigms. However, the notion of disciplinary interaction upon the ground that gerontology creates also raises questions about boundaries and dominance. With respect to boundaries, Katz (1996) has suggested that the multidisciplinary nature of contemporary gerontology may include little dialogue. It may be a space that disciplines co-inhabit rather than one where they interact. Clair and Allman (2000) presented a catalogue of innovation by participatory disciplines, but regret the barriers that persistently resist meaningful collaboration on shared initiatives. Cole, Kastenbaum, and Ray (2000) made a plea for rapprochement between the critical and radical ends of social science and the humanities. While postmodernity has promised the erosion of professional boundaries, especially between health and social care workers and the older people that they assist, there appears to be little movement between disciplines (Biggs, 1997). Rather, contemporary gerontology may have experienced what Estes and Binney (1989) referred to as the bio-medicalization of old age. According to this view, powerful disciplinary and commercial lobbies have achieved a hegemony around policy thinking on aging, which then creates a particular momentum through the legitimation of its own research and program priorities. In other words, the power of a particular perspective, supported by research funding and commerce which then reinforces that very power, runs the risk of eclipsing the very possibilities that multidisciplinary promises. One result

can be seen in the increasingly close exchange of ideas between the social sciences and humanities, while such exchanges appear to have been met with indifference by the bio-medical sciences.

Second, gerontology has emerged largely as an applied focus and has been referred to as both a “problem oriented discipline” (Nydegger, 1981) and a “problem-solving discipline” (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, & Sherraden, 2001). This has become its great potential and its great curse in terms of theory building. The potential lies in the fact that in the study of aging one is never far away from real-life issues. Theorizing requires the examination of the way that certain aspects of aging come to be seen as problems while others do not. It requires dialogue between ideas and experience and between levels of conceptualization. It suggests that theoretical formulations should affect both professional practice and everyday aging. The downside is that applied approaches require ideas that are relatively quick and easy to comprehend, often at the expense of an understanding of complexity. They are subject to political and popular fashion and forms of short-termism that argue against debates that appear at first to have no obvious practical outcome. This is another way of saying that an applied gerontology pushes for models, rather than theories.

Two issues have dominated the application of gerontology to policy and practice; these have been social ageism and bodily decline. Both have had a longstanding presence in the developing discipline (Hendricks & Achenbaum, 1999; Katz, 1996), although concern with ageism is most commonly linked to Robert Butler’s Pulitzer prize-winning *Why Survive? Being Old in America*, published in 1975. Butler has also been instrumental in advancing the cause of a challenge to ageism in the areas of policy and medical practice and takes an optimistic approach to gerontological progress through science. This is in contrast to Estes’ (1979) equally seminal critique of the aging enterprise and observations on the near hegemony produced by biomedicalization. Moody (1993) claimed that the influence of instrumental reason, for example, reproduces structures of domination rather than confronting their underlying assumptions. This would suggest that the role of theory is as much to critically interrogate changes in policy and practice, as it is to act as an advocate. The surprising volte-faces of public policy, for example, from survivor to dependency, to burden, to victim, to consumer, to active citizen in the space of half a century, may require critical interrogation rather than being subsumed within a metaphor of scientific and social progress (Biggs & Powell, 2002).

Third, scholars, particularly in social gerontology, have attempted to explain aging through an understanding of the tension between the individual and the social, so much so that Ryff and Marshall (1999) have referred to it as “social gerontology’s fascination.” This fascination has taken the form of linking macro and micro influences on aging (Marshall, 1999; Marshall & Tindale, 1978), identity with social structure (Calasanti, 1999; Hendricks, 1992, 1999), individual inequality with political economy (Estes, 2001; Phillipson, 1998), personal

experience and social attitudes (Biggs, 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000), lifestyle and popular culture (Blaikie, 1998). In fact the list is virtually endless. There are sub-arguments around the role of the family (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997), the relationship between social stereotyping and personal integration in later life (Cole, 1992; Tornstam, 1996), gender (Arber & Ginn, 1995; Holstein, 1992), and ethnicity (Blakemore & Boneham, 1994). Hendricks (1992) has even turned a gerontological fascination with generations on the discipline itself to suggest a genealogy of gerontological development. Generations of gerontologists, have been studied: their social context, who followed whom and in what allegiances, creating paradigms of intellectual kinship. Marshall (1999) used this approach to great effect to examine the "debate" between disengagement and activity theories, both he suggested, "invented" by Cumming and Henry, with activity only later theorized. Lynott and Lynott (1996) claim that 1961 and the publication of Cumming and Henry's *Growing Old: The Process of Disengagement* marked the beginning of serious theorizing in gerontology. It was, of course, also the first attempt to theorize the relationship between personal and social aging.

There is a tension in any critical analysis of a field, between trying to "track" developments within the field itself and assessing its interaction and responsiveness to wider social trends and ideas. At the turn of the millennium, social gerontology has been marked by the wider debate concerning the relationship between modernity and post-modernity. Modernity is associated with a belief in progress, of mass social identities dependent on ones relationship to productivity and a scientific approach to the problems of aging. Postmodernity, it is argued, thinks in terms of spaces rather than time, looks to consumerism as a basis for identity and sees science as one of many, equally relevant narratives for explaining events. Polikva (2000) has argued that this debate is closely linked to globalization and the erosion of the welfare state, with relatively affluent older people gaining access to a complex series of lifestyle options, while poorer elders are left increasingly vulnerable and insecure. The debate over postmodernity has divided social gerontologists into optimists and pessimists, or as some might think, fools and angels. Optimists such as Murphy and Longino (1997) in the United States and Featherstone and Hepworth (1989) in the United Kingdom maintain that lifestyle flexibility and bio-technical innovation have removed many of the disadvantages that have previously accrued in later life. Other theorists, such as Phillipson and Biggs (1998) and Katz (1999) are more reserved, noting an avoidance of important life course issues, inequalities, and new risks in such a view. Whether one errs on the side of the advantages or disadvantages of contemporary aging, the postmodern debate has had far-reaching effects on the way gerontologists think about later life. Polikva (2000) summarized one such effect as the perception of the life course as increasingly improvisational as older people cultivate the capacity to adjust to discontinuity. Old age has, in other words, become much less predictable, both as a social category and as a human

experience. One outcome has become an acceptance that the claim that one can establish “facts” about aging itself depends upon a particular theoretical view of the nature of knowledge. Social gerontologists are increasingly likely to consider aging to be a narrative, a story to live by, as they are to see it as an objective process (Kenyon, Ruth, & Mader, 1999). An interesting twist in this development has been dissatisfaction with age as simply another source of relativism, and attempts to articulate what might be special about the aging experience. Tornstam (1996) has suggested that later life consists of a process of gerotranscendence, a combination of continued but disinterested concentration on self-development and social values. Others (Gullette, 2000; Westerhof, Dittmann-Kohli, & Thissen, 2001) have rediscovered age as a key element in defining social existence. An emergent contention of postmodernist perspectives on aging is that the types of theorizing espoused by social gerontologists in part, affect social control of the elderly.

ADVANCING THEORETICAL FORMULATIONS

So what can a reader reasonably expect of a book extolling the need for theory in social gerontology? A critical awareness of the state of the discipline, certainly. That is, the volume should provide an outline of some of the key issues and contradictions surrounding adult aging, which have the power to project gerontology beyond the century of its birth. Also, a drawing out of implications, by degrees, for research policy and practice. And sometimes, if we are lucky, a glimpse of something more, a new way of thinking about adult aging. In the contributions to follow, the reader will encounter some of each of these agenda items and see that theorizing is neither ahistorical nor apolitical. The reader might also discern that theory is never just a form of conceptualization, like first order constructs, the theorizing of the scholars provides fundamental orienting perspectives for how questions are asked and solutions formulated.

Further, like the authors and editors, the reader should care about theory because it helps explain why we do what we do and may alert us to some of the currently unforeseen implications of unselfconscious assumptions about age. It may also provide conceptual tools to interpret complex events and critically evaluate the current state of aging. Most of all the contributions in this volume should help the reader to understand and imagine alternative possibilities. Without theory the findings of gerontology might actually be a disservice. By attending to how knowledge is created, the reader might also better grasp the course of their own thinking and that is perhaps the most that a reader can take away from an intellectual encounter.

Any division of the contributions presented here would be arbitrary as, with any critical approach, each contribution contains a wide variety of implications for personal and structural aspects of aging as well as for the discipline of

gerontology itself. We have attempted, below, to order the contents in a way that reflects the principal concern of the authors.

The first section mostly concerns the theorizing of gerontology itself. In other words, authors examine the patterns and directions that can be discerned in contemporary gerontology as a discipline and offer observations on the strengths and weaknesses of current trends. This is followed by sections two and three where key areas are examined in detail. The second section addresses the theorizing of micro relations. In other words, one's entry point to aging issues is through, primarily but not exclusively, individual and interpersonal aging. The third section considers the power of macro or structural relations and their influence on the construction of aging. Again, the observations and critique developed by authors have implications for the issues raised in the other sections. Throughout we have attempted to bring together established and emerging contributors to critical gerontology in an attempt to explore adult aging in a new millennium.

SECTION ONE: THEORIZING GERONTOLOGY

Chapter 1. Stephen Katz looks at the development of gerontology as a discipline and notes the relationship between its "late arrival" within the social sciences and the influence of many different streams of thought that coexist within it. He suggests that critical thinking in gerontology is a nomadic enterprise and can be best understood as an exercise in what he calls "intellectual fieldwork."

Chapter 2. Ruth Ray explores the perils and possibilities of theory within gerontology. She draws on the experience of feminist thought in order that critical gerontologists might learn from its changing fortunes and avoid similar problems within their own discipline. Ray reports her own use of the work of Paulo Freire, and offers a radical perspective on teaching gerontologically.

Chapter 3. Hans Joachim von Kondratowitz considers the legacy of social construction in sociology and its implications for social gerontology. Writing of the German and Polish intellectual traditions, he makes critical observations on changes that have occurred in the development and diffusion of gerontological knowledge over time.

Chapter 4. Jon Hendricks critically examines a key distinction that has historically divided the study of adult ageing into structured inequalities on the one hand and experienced identity on the other. He argues that this theoretical gap has inhibited an understanding of the social meaning of old age and suggests an integrative model for successful ageing.

SECTION TWO: THEORIZING MICRO RELATIONS

Chapter 5. Emmanuelle Tulle points out that one of the most obvious aspect of adult aging, namely our relationship to our own bodies has, paradoxically, been

one that has been underplayed by critical gerontology. She attempts to “map” the social nature of aging bodies and works toward a radical sociological perspective of the old body through an examination of athleticism.

Chapter 6. Ariela Lowenstein focuses on the importance of transitions in later life and the critical perspective that is thus allowed when static models of aging are examined. She argues that in order to understand age and identity within families an amalgam of individual, familial, and societal levels of analysis are required, and proposes an integrative framework for family identity.

Chapter 7. Gerben Westerhof, Freya Dittmann-Kohli, and Christina Bode begin by examining a contradiction between psychological stability across the life course despite adverse life conditions and social ageism. They suggest that both subjective experience and objective measures indicate that ageing is not as negative and experience not as positive as the original position assumes. Moreover, age is found to be a key source of meaning in itself and they argue that this should be reflected in gerontological theory.

Chapter 8. Simon Biggs relates age and identity to a wider debate on the post modernization of contemporary society. He argues that theories proposing that identities are becoming more fluid are challenged by the experience of adult aging. Key to understanding how older people negotiate intergenerational encounters is a distinction between surface impressions and deeper sources of the self.

SECTION THREE: THEORIZING MACRO RELATIONS

Chapter 9. Chris Phillipson suggests that critical gerontology must take globalization and its effects on the reconstruction of old age into account. He argues that the resulting social, economic, and cultural changes will influence both national and international regulation of population ageing. The policies of trans-national organizations such as the World Bank will add significantly to the risks associated with ageing in the developed and developing worlds and should be the subject of radical critique.

Chapter 10. Merrill Silverstein, Vern Bengtson, and Eugene Litwak propose that the context of modernization has created a series of challenges to understanding the problems faced by ageing families. They critically assess the value of task specificity and solidarity as theoretical approaches as a means of interrogating change in family systems with particular attention being paid to social support.

Chapter 11. Toni Calasanti criticizes the reluctance of social gerontologists to theorize power relations and the relationship between sources of inequality in later life. She argues that an increased sensitivity to diversity is not enough if similarities and differences between age based and other forms of oppression are not taken into account. Old age must be seen as a social location that is subject to intersecting relationships of power.

Chapter 12. Carroll Estes critically interrogates contemporary social policy toward aging. She examines the socio-cultural, economic, and political factors

that underlie old age policy and uses this perspective to highlight to limitations of prevailing gerontological theory. Critical approaches should, she argues, be used to subvert social domination based on race, gender, class, and age.

Taken together, the contributions to this volume begin to map out some of the key issues, paradoxes, and contradictions facing gerontology now and in the future. Each of the contributors has placed themselves within a critical tradition that attempts to improve the lot of older adults in contemporary society. Crucially, this tradition does not accept prevailing orthodoxies. It works toward a radical reexamination of adult aging and will hopefully engage the readers' understanding and act as an impetus for critical practice.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Knowledge advances to the extent that conceptual advancement and integration occur. Without theorizing and theoretical development social gerontology will stall-out with piecemeal empiricism but relatively few insights. We have to move beyond simplistic binary differentiation or the use of labels as explanations if we are to add insight to what we know and what we discover. Social experience and life course development do not simply happen, as if the course of nature were set and all that was required is putting life in motion. Rather, aging is a social construction and can unfold in myriad ways and follow numerous courses. The universality we think we see has as much to do with common institutional arrangements as it does with fate. For these reasons age will never become irrelevant, regardless of Neugarten's (1974) assertions. Behind the apparent obviousness of age categories and age-grades, political, economic and normative decisions shape the process. By the same token, any designs for intervention must take account of the underlying factors as well as the apparent age differentiation that society uses to organize itself. Social gerontologists face the task of explaining how the process unfolds as well as how the decisions take on the salience they do; neither are as transparent as they may at first appear. The quest for theories that help us make sense of what happens to people as they age is worthwhile. Hopefully it will be pushed forward by the theoretical formulations of those who have contributed to this volume, and further still by those who read them and make steps forward of their own.

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SECTION ONE

Theorizing Gerontology



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CHAPTER 1

Critical Gerontological Theory: Intellectual Fieldwork and the Nomadic Life of Ideas

Stephen Katz

In the past two decades critical gerontology has grown as a vibrant sub-field blending humanities and social science ideas to challenge the instrumentalism of mainstream gerontology and broaden aging studies beyond biomedical models. This hybridized literature has provided an important critique of prevailing social policies and practices around aging, while promoting the rise of new retirement cultures and positive identities in later life. There are also numerous approaches within critical gerontology, outlined below, that create an internal debate regarding the sub-field's constitution, accomplishments, and future directions. However, this debate has generally delimited criticality to research directly associated with radical theoretical traditions (e.g., Marxism, phenomenology, social constructivism) or radical social movements (e.g., feminist, anti-poverty, pension-reform), thus overlooking the intellectual and discursive contexts in which critical ideas attain their criticality within gerontology. This chapter steps outside of these associations to locate gerontological criticality within the contextual dynamics of its own development.

In this spirit of reflexivity I begin on a biographical note. Several years ago at a social science conference I participated in a session called, "After the Fall: New Directions in Critical Culture Theory." The "Fall" had several references: The fall of Soviet communist power and its many walls (both real and ideological), the fall of Marxism and Socialism as world political platforms, and the fall of politically-informed critical theory in the wake of postmodern scepticism. The invitation to present a paper on my area of research—gerontological theory—inspired me at the time to reflect on three questions that were related to the

session's theme. First, if Marxist political economy and affiliated critical discourses are *falling* by losing their prominent foundational and theoretical status in the social sciences, how is it that they are also resurfacing in rather unfamiliar places, such as gerontological studies of social aging? Second, in what ways does this resurfacing of major critical discourses serve to enliven professional fields; in this case the constitution of a critical gerontology? Third, compared to other established areas in the humanities and social sciences, what are the institutional and intellectual means by which new critical elements in the professional fields are incorporated and promoted?

Since the conference these questions have continued to be of great interest, and here I would like to highlight their relevance to a discussion of critical gerontological theory. This chapter's three sections and conclusions borrow from the theoretical work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to address critical gerontology as a pragmatic and nomadic thought-space across which ideas flow and become exchanged, rather than as a kind of model, theory, or method. By depicting critical gerontology as a thought-space, a magnetic field where thought collects, converges, and transverses disciplines and traditions, I also wish to distance it from ongoing assumptions about multidisciplinary in gerontology, especially the assumption that multidisciplinary is a precondition for critical thinking. In many ways gerontology is unique because it has embraced the tenets of multidisciplinary—diverse approaches, plural knowledges, and shared expertise. Indeed, these are seen as the fundamental intellectual resources by which gerontology grew as a profession since the early twentieth century (Achenbaum, 1995). It follows that much theoretical argument in gerontology today, concerned with the critical effectiveness of the field, questions whether or not gerontology has truly become multidisciplinary. However, multidisciplinary has also furnished mainstream gerontology with a rhetoric of criticality with which to articulate its objectives. As such, since the postwar period multidisciplinary has remained the critical hallmark of gerontology because practitioners draw upon its rhetorical appeal to shape their textbooks, curricula, journals, associations, funding organizations, and the overall cohesion of the field's "gerontological web" (Katz, 1996). As Bryan Green says,

The unproblematic collection of multiple perspectives on aging and the aged into unitary handbooks, textbooks, and readers asserts the objective unity of what they are about. Maximization of variant perspective is indispensable to gerontology in ensuring the objectivity and coherence of its subject matter. (1993, p. 167)

Despite the critical ideals that characterize multidisciplinary studies, therefore, multidisciplinary can limit rather than enrich critical thinking about aging in professional and institutional practices. Hence, this chapter looks to other

theoretical stories about gerontology, beginning with the one about its “data-rich but theory-poor” state of affairs.

I. DATA-RICH BUT THEORY-POOR: THEORY AND CRITIQUE IN GERONTOLOGY

James Birren and Vern Bengtson introduced their 1988 text, *Emergent Theories of Aging*, by claiming that gerontology is “data-rich but theory-poor” (1988, p. ix). In the same text Harry R. Moody further states “the paucity of theory in social gerontology is an embarrassment to academic students of human aging” (1998b, p. 21). Since that time, responsive gerontologists have enhanced the scope and quality of theories in aging in two main ways. First, they have revisited the development of gerontological theory in order to review or debunk its traditional knowledge claims. In the 1990s critical writers produced a series of instructive studies on the various schools of thought, “generations,” “phases,” or “periods” of theorizing that have emerged in gerontology especially since the postwar period (Bengtson, Burgess, & Parrott, 1997; Bengtson, Parrott, & Burgess, 1996; Bengtson & Schaie, 1999; Bond, Biggs, & Coleman, 1990; Hendricks, 1992; Lynott & Lynott, 1996; Marshall, 1999a). From these we learn how structural functionalism informed disengagement, modernization, and age stratification theories; symbolic interactionism influenced activity and subculture theories; social constructivist theories of aging built on phenomenology and ethnomethodology; and life course studies combined macro-micro perspectives in the social sciences. Or, as Victor Marshall points out in his creative interpretation of the Kansas City Studies that produced disengagement theory, gerontological theory can be understood in terms of “stories about theories, theorizing and theorists” (1999a, p. 435).

Second, certain gerontological thinkers (discussed below) have introduced ideas from political economy, feminism, the humanities, and cultural studies into their work to establish their critical stance. In the process these thinkers have turned to structural models of social inequality, interpretive and deconstructive methodologies, and international and cross-cultural frameworks to contest gerontology’s longstanding emphases on individual roles, masculinist life course models, biomedical frameworks, and liberal political agendas. The resulting books and papers produced through these critiques vary according to their authors’ approaches to critical thinking within gerontology. For example, when Canadian gerontologist Victor Marshall first called for “radical” methods in gerontology in the late 1970s, he had in mind the adaptation of symbolic interactionist, phenomenological, and ethnomethodological sociologies (Marshall, 1978). In the early 1980s, when the decline of Marxism dominated the agendas of most of the social sciences, British writers such as Alan Walker (1981) and Chris Phillipson (1982), Americans such as Meredith Minkler and Carroll Estes (1984), and Canadians such as John Myles (1984) along with others (Olson, 1982) broke with traditional gerontological studies by establishing a political economy of

aging. Specifically, their work focused on the history of capitalist production and the division of labor, and the political foundations of population aging and the welfare state. They criticized as well what Carroll Estes calls the “aging enterprise”; that is, the conglomeration of experts, institutions, and professions that arose in the latter half of the twentieth century to cater to individual needs while neglecting their underlying historical and structural sources (Estes, 1979). However, the political economy of aging does not represent a meta-theoretical endorsement of Marxism; indeed Marx is hardly referred to in the literature. Rather, the political economists merge selected aspects of Marxist theory with gerontological concerns in a creative bridging of theoretical discourse with professional practice.

In the late 1980s and 1990s the political economy of aging expanded by underscoring gender, regional, racial, and ethnic inequalities. This move gave gerontological theorists a wider foundation on which to build the parameters of a critical gerontology. An early example is the paper by Chris Phillipson and Alan Walker, “The Case for a Critical Gerontology” (1987), where the authors outline a number of feminist, discursive, and micropolitical issues typically neglected in formal political economy treatments. Two journals begun in the 1980s, *The Journal of Aging Studies* and *Journal of Women and Aging*, and later *Journal of Aging and Identity*, also radiated a widely critical approach. The influential text, *Voices and Visions of Aging: Towards a Critical Gerontology* published in 1993, further established critical gerontology with a potent mix of philosophical, literary, postmodern, historical, and scientific commentary. In the text’s “Overview,” Harry R. Moody defines critical gerontology in the tradition of the Marxist-inspired Frankfurt School and its sustained critiques of instrumental reason, and “by its [critical gerontology’s] intention of locating actual ‘openings’ or spaces for potential emancipation within the social order” (1993, p. xvii). This is also a direction Moody initiated in his earlier writings (1988a, 1988b) where he explored new critical directions in policy analysis by taking aboard Jurgen Habermas’ ideas on the rationalistic colonization of the “life-world.” Habermas uses the idea of “life-world” in much of his work to indicate a vaguely traditional realm of human resources, communicative practices, and domestic spaces that has become subject to incursions by modern forms of “system” (Habermas, 1991). To support his thesis that modernity has been a process whereby rationalizing systems “colonize the life-world,” Habermas points to new social movements whose leaderships use life-world issues such as human rights and environmental protection (in place of labor demands for equitable economic distribution) to resist global corporate domination. Thus, as Moody and others (Scambler, 2001) have discovered, Habermas’ ideas have great value in the area of critical health studies.

More recently, the collection of essays in *Critical Gerontology: Perspectives from Political and Moral Economy* (1999), edited by Meredith Minkler and Carroll Estes, compels its readers to think politically and ethically about age-based inequality, poverty, and injustice as widespread structural problems. As with

their former text, *Critical Perspectives on Aging: The Political and Moral Economy of Growing Old* (1991), here the editors fortify their political economy framework with E. P. Thompson's ideas on moral economy and include research papers that target the mostly American state agencies, health care systems, and social security policies that perpetuate these structural problems. In the "Introduction" to *Critical Gerontology* Minkler notes that critical gerontology consists of two paths: the political economy of aging, and the more "humanistic path" where the accent is on meaning, metaphor, textuality, and imagery in aging and old age. *Critical Gerontology* regards the second humanistic path as "an important supplement to political economy perspectives" (1999, p. 2; see also Minkler, 1996), hence the text appeals more directly to those interested in how political economy research strengthens critical studies of age and gender, race, disability, and class. Students interested in humanistic studies must turn to approaches innovated by Kathleen Woodward (1991) in the United States, Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth in Britain (1991), and others who elucidate the new cultural processes redefining later life based on retirement lifestyles, cosmetic and body technologies, popular imagery, and consumer-marketing (Biggs, 1999; Blaikie, 1999; Cohen, 1998; Cole & Ray, 2000; Featherstone & Wernick, 1995; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000; Gullette, 1997; Hepworth, 2000; Hockey & James, 1993; Woodward, 1999). Chris Phillipson's *Reconstructing Old Age* (1998) expands Minkler's synopsis of critical gerontology by identifying a third critical path or stream consisting of biographical and narrative perspectives that draw upon metaphysical humanist concepts of self, memory, meaning, and wisdom. In a parallel fashion, Achenbaum (1997), Brown (1998), Katz (1999), Laws (1995), and Ray (1996, 1999) discuss the co-development of critical and feminist gerontologies. I would also include within the critical gerontological fold those who work in the area of *Age Studies* and explore the alternative, performative, artistic, fictional, trans-sexual, poetic, and futuristic conditions of aging and their radical contributions (Basting-Davis, 1998; Gullette, 2000; Squier, 1995; Woodward, 1999).

Studies of metaphorical development and terminology in gerontology have also been important in shaking up conventions about aging (see Kenyon, Birren, & Schroots, 1991). For example, metaphors-turned-concepts such as "male menopause" or "midlife crisis" signify how individual and social aging are intertwined. The term social or cultural "lag" is used by many gerontologists to indicate that negative social expectations of older people lag behind the more positive realities of aging (Riley, 1994). However, when Chicago sociologist William F. Ogburn came up with the idea of "cultural lag" in the 1920s he used it to discuss his observations on the lag between changing women's economic roles inside and outside the home (1957). Nevertheless, the metaphorical strength of "cultural lag" created a theoretical opportunity for gerontology to borrow and critically use the term for other purposes.

On the one hand, these kinds of organizational exercises and reflections reaffirm that gerontological theory is potentially more expansive, flexible, and inventive than the typically instrumental purposes to which it is put in research applications. Although, as Lawrence Cohen insightfully remarks on critical gero-anthropology, the traditions of Habermas, Horkheimer, Marx, and others are often invoked in critical gerontology, but rarely engaged (1994, p. 139). Cohen warns that, “through the mobilization of anger and ambiguity, a disciplinary ethos emerges that envisions itself as mission practice against an empty past and writes itself through a mix of applied sociology and romanticized narrative” (p. 146). In other words, to account for its criticality gerontology cannot rely solely on its protective and positive mandate to liberate aging and older people from an ageist world, if it neglects to engage the theories and theorists it invokes in theoretically sophisticated ways. This not only romanticizes the narrative of gerontology’s development but can also justify weak theoretical and historical approaches. Rather, we need to extend critical ideas to new areas in aging studies while being wary of relegating critical status to the scholarly politics of a benevolent “mission practice.”

On the other hand, these exercises reveal that gerontological criticality is shaped by a destabilizing pattern unrelated to its horizon of critical positions. It seems that the more critical gerontologists attempt to “discipline” (or multi-discipline) the sub-field by refining its theories of stratification, exchange, social construction, feminism, and political economy, the less stable and more open critical gerontology becomes. In my view, it is this theoretical instability and indeterminacy that articulates gerontological criticality; that is, ideas become critical when they overflow their contextual boundaries, resist theoretical stasis, and accommodate emancipatory projects aside from professional pronouncements about their value and utility. Indeed, the critical force of ideas has much to do with the unpredictable life of the ideas themselves and the careers of those who conceive them, areas to which this chapter now turns.

II. INTELLECTUAL FIELDWORK AND THE LIFE OF IDEAS

While social theory appears confined within the covers of texts, biographical or genealogical treatments depict a more contingent and political story about social theory as a form of practice, especially where professional and intellectual worlds meet. The crises and experiments that produce theoretical knowledge involve material contexts where ideas emerge, travel, and mutate. There are many examples in the theoretical traditions to which gerontologists look for inspiration. Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* would not have existed without the covert work and risks taken by his partner Giulia and her sister Tatiana while Gramsci was imprisoned (de Lauretis, 1987). Max and Marianne Weber wrote and spoke in Germany about religious cults, race relations, the rights of women, and the moral