

Historical Aspects of Aging and Gero-Psychology

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EDITORIAL NOTE

Aging is one of the most complex subjects for human to face and for science to analyse and its subjective aspects have long been reflected upon and written about. The history of gero-psychology is long or short depending upon whether one includes the long cultural history of ideas about aging or whether the subject is restricted to the emergence of research on the changes and transformations that may occurs in behaviour.

Gero-psychology focuses on the manifestations or transformations that occur in human and animal behaviour related to the length of life. Use of the word behaviour restricts the scope of the study to processes mediated by the central nervous system. Modification of our behaviour is often required by a change in bones and muscle as we adapt to the institutions in which we grow up and grow old. For example, there is the process of retirement and adapting to its economic effects. In its fullest view, human aging is the result of ecological relationships, a particular genetic background is expressed in particular social and physical environments and modified by the strategic capacities of the individual. Aging has always reminded people of the likelihood of disease, dying and the transition of death. Simplifying the complexity of such changes to mythical forces has served as an escape from the threat of the unknown. In contemporary life, aging is viewed as though it is explainable by deterministic forces through the efforts of science, but death and life beyond are separate subjects.

The present history of gero-psychology does not include a review of non-western literature because it was not accessible. The roots of gero-psychology as a science lie in European scientific developments of the 19th century, The European zeitgeist

fostered a strong conviction that the scientific method could be applied to all phenomena and that rational and logical explanations of their causes could be ascertained. Science and its methodology became the doorway to knowledge.

Gero-psychology trailed the growth of experimental psychology and child development by many decades. One may speculate on the factors that contributed to this slower emergence of the study of geropsychology and then about the factors that released its dramatic growth.

Perhaps the answer lies in the high birth rates and the short life expectancy in the early 20th century and the need for psychology to meet practical needs of providing principles of development for the training of school teachers and helping parents raise children.

Because of the pressures for knowledge about the development of children, it seems likely that psychology departments added faculty members who were specialized in early life development. One might detect today a negative view of the emergence of gero-psychology because of its implications of competition with child development for faculty positions and financial support. It is more than passing interest that a large history of a century of development or gerontology and devoted only about a paragraph to life span developmental psychology. Apparently, developmental psychology is commonly interpreted as referring to child development and there has been a wide gap and lack of integration of the subject matters of the child and adult phases of the life span. Perhaps the expanding skills of childhood are on optimistic context for research in contrast to the more threatening rising probability of death associated with aging.

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