

Introduction: Social Gerontology – ‘New Science, New Concepts’

Social gerontology is a relatively new and dynamic scientific field reflecting increasing interest in ageing across the world.

Throughout the centuries, old age and ageing have been ever-present, but have received minimal attention from social thinkers. Education and research in ageing have not been a high priority in terms of research funding or policy, until relatively recently. As James Birren states, ‘gerontology is an ancient subject but a recent science’. Gerontology as a subject area is becoming increasingly global, with predominantly undergraduate programmes in the USA and Australia and postgraduate courses in the UK.

Demographic ageing has raised issues for policy and practice as well as creating new and increasing markets for business and commerce. Consequently, the need for an evidence base for policy decisions or best practice, or for reviewing the market, has led to an increased interest in research in ageing. New research questions are being asked, new theories in ageing are developing and new researchers are crossing disciplinary boundaries with novel methods to study ageing.

A social perspective and social analysis of ageing, which this book addresses, stands alongside biological and clinical perspectives in helping us understand the processes of ageing. The multidisciplinary nature of gerontology is emerging as a ‘new science’ (Walker, 2008). With this comes particular challenges of discipline recognition embedded within gerontology, and difficulties of drawing the boundaries of ‘the social’.

Traditionally, social gerontology has concentrated on the study of the social, economic and demographic characteristics of older people and an ageing population; however, in recent years the definition has expanded to include health, technology and overall lifestyle. The gerontological concepts in this book are therefore taken from a range of disciplines.

Over the last 25 years the social perspective has grown in importance and is reflected by the burgeoning literature and courses in social gerontology. Such courses attract students of social work, occupational therapy, nursing and, geriatric medicine, and students come from backgrounds in sociology, psychology, biology, design, planning and geography.

This book addresses the need for concise, lucid knowledge on what constitutes the 'building blocks' of social gerontology. It provides a review of the core concepts, both classic and emerging, in this subject area.

Students embarking on their journey into social gerontology will find this book particularly relevant, providing a readily accessible guide to key concepts in the discipline. It will cover both theoretical and practical work in the area, presenting concepts that reflect well-established and contested issues, as well as new concepts emerging through cutting-edge research.

Additionally, new research programmes focusing on ageing (e.g. ESRC 'Growing Older' and the 'New Dynamics of Ageing' programmes in the UK, and training programmes funded by the National Institute of Ageing in the USA) have produced a new generation of researchers. There is a need, therefore, for accessible information on the key issues and concepts in gerontology that draws from sound evidence-based research.

It is not only in relation to growing agendas of research but also the impact gerontology has on policy and practice that is also increasing. Ageing is a global issue, as demographic change critically demonstrates. Policy needs an evidence base because governments across the globe are looking for solutions to the challenges of an ageing population and for sound evidence on the effectiveness of policies and practices.

A further consequence of new research in the area is that new concepts have been developed and applied. The field is a dynamic one, drawing on ever-increasing subject areas (e.g. criminology, technology). Over the last 20 years the literature on social gerontology has burgeoned. From a relatively small number of publications, today there are books and journals on every aspect of social ageing. Alongside there has been a growth in courses and programmes on gerontology run by social scientists from a variety of different fields, thus providing a rich tapestry of teaching on gerontology.

In summary, this book will be of particular interest to:

- Students in a variety of undergraduate and postgraduate social science programmes, particularly in gerontology, who need an easily accessible and an appropriately priced book.

- Social and health care students and practitioners: the book will be of interest and relevance as both a core text and reference book for qualified social workers and nurses who are in practice.
- Academics across a wide range of disciplines interested in ageing: the book will provide a valuable source of reference to academic staff and researchers.
- Specialists such as planners (environmental aspects of ageing) and geneticists (biology of ageing): the book will introduce a new audience to aspects of ageing.

The book is organised alphabetically and covers 50 of the key concepts in social gerontology, drawing on a discussion of each concept – its history, application, its usefulness to theory and research as well as its significance in practice. It goes beyond a simple definition of the concept to look at how it has shaped the discipline of social gerontology today and provides a critical evaluation of its application. At the end of each chapter a short list of references is provided. Cross-referencing between concepts is a feature of the book, enabling students to get a broader perspective of the concept. The book is intended to inform debate on particular issues and to set the scene for further exploration of the key issues in ageing. The 50 concepts have been carefully selected on the basis of the currency with which they are used in teaching and research in gerontology. Our selection too is based on the disciplines from which we come – geography and social work (JP); social policy, family sociology and demography (SH-N); and sociology (KA) – and our perspective is primarily western. We are conscious that our chosen concepts have different meanings and understandings in other cultures and the reader should be sensitive to this when assessing different applications of the concept. For example, we have used the terms ‘elders’ and ‘older people’ to reflect the cultural contexts in the USA and the UK. Some of the concepts in the book may not focus exclusively on social gerontology, either because they are underrepresented or are newly introduced into gerontology, with a good example being global ageing.

REFERENCES

Walker, A., Address given at the ERA AGE conference in Brussels, February 2008.