CHAPTER 1
SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION
AND HUMAN AGING

As a senior citizen was driving down the freeway, his cell phone rang. Answering, he heard his wife’s urgent voice warning him, “Herman, I just heard on the news that there’s a car going the wrong way on Interstate 77. Please be careful!”

“Hell!” said Herman, “It’s not just one car. It’s hundreds of ‘em!”

Three old guys were out walking.
First one said, “Windy, isn’t it?”
The second one said, “No, it’s Thursday!”
The third one said, “So am I. Let’s go get a beer!”

During John McCain’s presidential campaign, he visited a senior community in Florida. He was surprised that two women residents he encountered at a community center did not seem to recognize him. “Do you know who I am?” he asked.

One of the women answered, “No, but if you check with that nurse at the desk, she can tell you”.

You know you’re getting old when you get that one candle on the cake. It’s like, “See if you can blow this out.”

Jerry Seinfeld

“No one reached out to me and said, ‘As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?’” But if they had? “If that is the exchange, I’m all in.”

Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick speaking about COVID risk, on Fox TV News, 3/23/2020

AGE CONSCIOUSNESS AND AGEISM IN CULTURE AND SCIENCE

Although we live in an era in which political correctness and basic civility and respectfulness inhibit jokes and stereotypical commentary across multiple domains including race, religion, ethnicity and gender, the subject of age remains fair game. The manifestations of ageism in popular culture are wide-ranging, from the open season on old age of late night comedians to well-documented practices of discrimination in the workplace or other settings, which often continue unchecked even when they are subject to legal sanction.
A decided lack of attention to ageism as a research problem in the social and behavioral sciences has been well documented by several scholars (Nelson 2005; North and Fiske 2012; Palmore 1999). In the US, where age discrimination is illegal, older scientists who submit grant proposals through peer-review processes that claim to be purely objective and meritocratic encounter an unapologetic and often overt ageism (Kahana, Slone, Kahana, Langendoerfer, and Reynolds 2016). At least one leading expert has recently presented a strong case that ageism in general, as a standard component of contemporary popular culture, is actually on the increase (Gullette 2011).

Neither the cultural impulses that generate ageism nor the ease with which it is popularly accepted can be reduced to any single cause. Yet one force that clearly provides a legitimating framework for such ideas is a largely unquestioned inclination to subscribe to the idea that development and aging are self-contained matters of the individual—anchored in time-bound, chronometrically governed processes working themselves out within the organism, within each human body.

Reinforcing such notions is the counterpart belief—so deeply rooted that it typically goes unquestioned and unremarked—that aging is a largely inevitable process that pervades the body, driven by imperatives of physical change with the passage of time. Indeed, that is how it typically appears in everyday life, as we observe family members or other longtime acquaintances going through gradual but seemingly predictable long-term patterns of physical and social change. And if so, perhaps there is nothing to do but accept it—and joke about it.

**SOCIOCY, LIFE-SPAN DEVELOPMENT AND THE LIFE-COURSE FALLACY: A FIRST WAVE OF CONCEPTUAL TRANSFORMATION**

For gerontologists and other scientists studying age-related phenomena, the idea that aging inevitably entails a one-way process of pervasive and multidimensional decline and adverse change was largely rejected several decades ago in an intellectual revolution that transformed the scientific study of aging in the 1960s and 1970s. A key factor in this revolution was the discovery that people who are born at different times grow up and grow older in dramatically different ways with regard to functioning, health and cognitive performance, and also with regard to lifestyle, attitudes, activities, social relationships and even longevity. How people age and how people change with age was found to be, in considerable measure, historically contingent.

Until this realization, it was common practice to assume that patterns of aging could be inferred “cross-sectionally”—that is, by comparing individuals of different ages at a single point in time—just by looking at the differences between, for example, 25-year-olds and 65-year-olds. A classic example of the extent to which this broad-based discovery called into question the then-current “established wisdom” concerning age and aging is provided by Warner Schaie and Sherry Willis’s (1986) comparison of cross-sectional and longitudinal data on cognitive performance (see Figure 1.1). In contrast to the
dramatic declines suggested by a cross-sectional analysis, longitudinal data follow the same individuals over time, and present a dramatically different picture: A relatively high degree of stability, with a long-term gradual trend of increase, followed after age 60 followed by an equally gradual decline. In this work, Schaie and Willis (1986) highlighted the risk of reaching erroneous conclusions about aging (as has indeed often has been done) based on evidence from cross-sectional data (see Figure 1.1).

If the contrast between the two lines in Figure 1.1 initially appears puzzling, a key to understanding it can be found by considering trends in education over the same time period. The plummeting cross-sectional line in Figure 1.1 representing an age-related cross-sectional decline in cognitive performance is mirrored by the historical trend of educational attainment in the US over the same time period, as can be seen in Figure 1.2. However, since educational attainment is not a reversible characteristic, it quickly becomes apparent that the age-related decline in education requires a conceptual recalibration. It is factually correct, yet it is obvious that it cannot be interpreted as an effect of age, since graduating from high school cannot be undone. Thus, this figure reveals nothing whatever about the process of aging; it reflects instead the dramatic expansion of mass education in the US (and elsewhere) across the decades of the 20th century. It is an artifact of the long-term 20th-century historical trend of educational expansion, just as is the cross-sectional pattern of cognitive performance.
Figure 1.1 thus illustrates the dangers of the life-course fallacy (Riley, Johnson, and Foner 1972; Riley 1973), which is the practice of assuming that cross-sectional comparisons can be relied upon to represent biographical, life-course patterns. It demonstrates dramatically the difference between how individuals of different ages appear at a particular point in time compared with the actual experience of individuals as they move through the life course.

With a proliferation of such discoveries across a range of characteristics and throughout the life course in the 1960s and 1970s, longstanding assumptions about aging were suddenly subjected to unprecedented scrutiny. Along with a recognition of the dangers of the life-course fallacy came a compelling new set of insights, a fresh sense of intellectual and existential possibilities with respect to aging and several new principles to guide research:

First, that understanding how people change with age requires tracing individuals and cohorts over time, and cannot be inferred from “cross-sectional” comparisons of old and young people at a single point in time, immediately rendering suspect the longstanding research practice of making pronouncements about the effects of age based on such cross-sectional comparisons. Second, that an accurate understanding of how people change as they age could not be inferred from age alone but required data on what specifically happens to them as they age. This principle, in turn, compelled a recognition of the essential need for longitudinal data as a basis for an adequate characterization of patterns of aging. Finally, it compelled the recognition of the methodological centrality of cohort analysis (Alwin 1991; Riley et al. 1972; Riley 1973; Ryder 1965; Uhlenberg 1988). The discovery of the importance of cohort analysis was not limited to a single discipline. While its basic logic

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**Figure 1.2** Proportion graduating from high school in the US, 1920–2000

*Source: Derived from Table 223, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1992, p. 145*
and the associated techniques are derived from demography (Ryder 1965), its importance was recognized in psychology (Baltes 1968; Schaie 1965), sociology (Riley and Foner 1968), epidemiology (Breslow 1985) and other social science fields (e.g., Cline 1980).

As the life-course fallacy became recognized in the scientific specializations that study aging and human development, its insights and implications had a cataclysmic impact, prompting a paradigm change that spread rapidly across disciplines. It fueled the development of the contemporary field of the sociology of age (see, e.g., Matilda White Riley’s landmark paper, “Aging and Cohort Succession” [1973]), and the establishment of the life-course perspective (Cain 1964; Clausen 1972; Elder 1975), which was launched to prominence by the publication of Glen Elder’s classic monograph, Children of the Great Depression ([1974]1999)—the study which provided a foundational introduction to the importance of life-course circumstances and experiences in shaping subsequent patterns of aging.

In psychology, parallel developments were also occurring, with the emergence of life-span psychology in the late 1960s similarly deriving from a recognition of the dangers of inferring biographical, life-course patterns from cross-sectional data (Schaie 1965; Baltes and Schaie 1976). On this basis, reviewing at the end of the 1970s what he then accurately called the “explosion” of life-span work, Paul Baltes wrote that life-span research had demonstrated that traditional views of human development were “unduly restrictive”. He argued that an adequate conceptual framework for approaching human development and aging must include “multidimensionality, multidirectionality, and discontinuity” (1979:263) as integral features of human aging. While such arguments were not readily embraced in psychology (Baltes and Schaie 1974, 1976; Horn and Donaldson 1976, 1977; Horn, Donaldson, and Engstrom 1981), their evidentiary grounding combined with an expanding interest in adulthood and aging earned them growing respect and interest. Thus, the traditional views and established organismic approaches to age and human development were being rapidly supplanted across multiple disciplines.

These major theoretical breakthroughs were soon accompanied by advances in the domains of data, methods and techniques of analysis based on the establishment of large-scale longitudinal data sets. In 1988, the National Institute on Aging convened a panel that led to the Health and Retirement Study (HRS), a large-scale longitudinal study of 50+-year-olds that began in 1992, which was designed to facilitate the study of longitudinal life-course change and cohort differences. The HRS study design has been replicated in other nations, which include the English Longitudinal Study of Aging (ELSA), the Study of Health, Aging, and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) and the China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study (CHARLS) with further longitudinal studies continuing to be launched elsewhere, including in developing countries such as India and Mexico. In the US, other studies with similar designs and purposes quickly followed, some focusing on younger participants, including the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Newly developing riches in multi-cohort panel data also led to the refinement of relevant analytic techniques (e.g., event history analysis) and the development of new ones (e.g., latent growth curve modeling, sequence analysis) (Collins and Sayer 2001; Singer and Willett 2003; Yang and Land 2016).
In sociology, the initial theoretical developments paralleled and stimulated scholarly
development of work on aging from other theoretical traditions—interactionist,
constructivist and critical—that also challenged the traditional approach to human
development and aging. Working from an interactionist approach, Vern Bengtson (1973)
demonstrated the potentials for applying labeling theory to aging, and Jay Gubrium (1976)
demonstrated how aging in nursing homes and medical settings could be usefully viewed
as a constructed social reality as well as a biomedical one.

Early examples of a critical approach were introduced soon thereafter. Carroll Estes
(1979) posed a challenge to the normative and “natural aging” assumptions of the
biomedical model and its ideological underpinnings with her monograph *The Aging
Enterprise*, and Victor Marshall and Joseph Tindale (1979) introduced the potentials of a
“radical” approach in correcting the normative biases inherent in the field. Estes’ analysis
was soon followed by further articulations of the political economy critique (Phillipson
1982; Walker 1981). At the same time, historians and demographers began to focus on age
and old age with a new scrutiny, examining how the *meaning* of age—from the childhood
and teenage years to old age—has changed historically, in response to demographic shifts,
technological developments and broader changes in social structure (Achenbaum 1978,
2015; Demos 1978; Haber 1983; Hareven 2013 [1978]; Laslett 1965; Uhlenberg 1974,
1978).

Taken together, these contemporaneous efforts had a powerful effect. They posed a serious
challenge to adherents to the traditional dogma that treated age as a uniform and inevitable
process of decline largely unaffected by social and environmental variation, and prompted
a period of intellectual reflection and paradigmatic ferment. They offered a fresh array
of contextualist perspectives to the scholarly discourse on aging, each proposing fresh
approaches to understanding age-related change, from childhood to old age.

One result of this theoretical expansion was that commonly observed patterns of aging—
long assumed to result from the inevitabilities of human nature from birth to death—began
to be scrutinized as situational and conditional, as potentially modifiable and as influenced
in previously unrecognized ways by experience and by an array of social forces. Thus, the
subject matters of human development and aging were interrogated with new levels of
energy and intellectual rigor and scrutiny—opening a new and exciting field of inquiry
across and beyond the disciplines of the social and behavioral sciences. In such times of
paradigmatic turbulence, it is especially important to think clearly and proactively, and to
exercise a lively intellectual and sociological imagination.

**SCIENCE—AS LONG AS IT’S NOT TOO MUCH SCIENCE!**

One of the most perplexing and unfortunate elements of the intellectual history of age
and life course studies is the record of the *reactions* of researchers to this initial flurry of
intellectual energy and theoretical ferment. Given the developments just reviewed, there
was clearly both an ample evidentiary basis and an emerging set of theoretical tools to
challenge and rethink longstanding assumptions about the causal mechanisms underlying human development and shaping the life course. If patterns of age-related characteristics and trajectories of aging vary significantly across historical time, cohorts and context, they obviously are not fixed by imperatives of physical change over the life course. Clearly, then, the age trajectories of many key characteristics respond to the social setting and the specifics of individual experience, and cannot be reduced to intraindividual, ontogenetic factors.

Fresh questions about human nature and human possibility were logically compelled by these insights into the dynamic and contingent nature of individual change across the life course. What are the characteristics of human beings that allow for such a multiplicity of outcomes? What are the forces that shape such a diversity of life-course patterns and trajectories? What, if any, are the limits of changing how human beings develop and age? And why is it that life-course development often seems to be in many ways orderly and predictable, yet can assume such very different forms, within as well as across social and historical contexts? And what is the role of that wild card (Dannefer and Perlmutter 1990) in social life, intentional human action—sometimes called agency—in producing such predictable societal life-course patterns?

Another line of questions derived from contrasts with what we know of the aging processes undergone by other life forms. The recognition of historically and culturally diverse patterns of human aging appeared to be largely a human phenomenon—not so applicable to other species. What is it about Homo sapiens that gives the species such a seemingly wide array of age-related possibilities? What do these discoveries imply for the basic paradigmatic assumptions that should guide our understanding of human development and aging? Why are human beings so variable in the patterning of development and aging? And, if traditional notions about the causality related to patterns of aging are fundamentally incorrect, what known explanatory principles and intellectual perspectives are most promising for the task of accounting for age-related outcomes?

Such questions cried out for attention. Clearly, a vista of new explanatory potentials and intellectual possibilities that could place the fundamental understanding of aging on a more contextual and social foundation awaited to be developed—seemingly, a wide and newly opened door for the exercise of sociological imagination.

Remarkably, however, the mobilization of intellectual energies to pursue such questions did not happen. Looking back over the history of research and theorizing on aging and the life course in sociology (and in life-span psychology as well) over the past few decades, one of the most remarkable things to note is that after a brief initial flurry of intellectual excitement and ferment, these questions received almost no attention by most researchers and scholars interested in these areas. The obviously logical “next steps” were not taken. Instead, behavioral and social science research on aging took more cautious directions, turning back to familiar and more conventional paradigmatic formulas for posing questions and designing studies. Rather than intellectual expansion, the body of developing research on aging and the life course was marked by a disinclination to probe too deeply into such questions, and by tending to limit inquiry to a few areas close to the comfort zone of established theoretical assumptions. Instead of viewing the newly discovered importance of cohort differences as a clue—as just one category of factors in a broader matrix of social
forces—researchers sought to “control” for those forces simply by controlling for cohort—with the assumption and hope that the “true pattern of normal aging” might yet manifest itself (see, e.g., Dannefer 1984a; Broughton 1987; Maddox 1987; Morss 1995).

Thus, rather than recognizing the dangers of reductionism, researchers across disciplines tended to resurrect it, hastening back to the safety of traditional, individual-level explanations. What we see time and again is that each time a new set of insights about the importance of social factors is introduced into the discourses of human development and aging, a tendency to resist the implications of the discovery regularly surfaces. In general, this resistance takes the form of attempting to reframe the discovery of age-related outcomes attributable to social forces as individual-level phenomena. Or, alternatively, they are regarded as diffuse and random in their origins. Since we will see this “seduction of reduction” occurring again and again throughout the history of developmental and life-course studies and of life-span development as well over the past several decades, it is worth considering in detail from whence these impulses come.

This broad reaction allowed some key conceptual restraints on attention to social and environmental effects that had been there from the beginning to remain undisturbed and to go uninterrogated. Why? Given the evidence of the need for a new approach, this is an important question. It is a question that does have an answer, an answer that reveals how the intricacies of logical, paradigmatic assumptions can end up having consequences far removed from their origins.

One key part of the answer concerns a paradox surrounding the concept of social change. The intellectual developments in question cannot be understood without considering the special position of social change and its effects on patterns of aging. As evident in cohort-based and historical comparisons, social change has of course been central to the discovery of the importance of cohort analysis. The rapidity of educational expansion and technological change across the 20th century produced marked differences in the patterns of aging manifest in successive human cohorts, and thus benchmarked the effects of social change on patterns of aging, as illustrated in the work of Schaie and associates.

Inevitably, such trends prompted a strong conceptual focus on issues of history and the impact of social change. Yet the emphasis on change as a source of variation in the patterns of aging outran itself because researchers across disciplines tended to equate “change” and “context”—thus creating a spurious equivalence between social change and the entirety of the social environment. This equivalence had the very costly effect of obscuring attention to other forms of contextual influence besides those prompted by social change.

**THE CONFLATION OF SOCIAL FORCES AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

It is clearly true that social change is crucially important in generating conditions that lead to novel developments and variation in patterns of aging, and that much can be learned by studying the resultant cohort differences. As noted previously, the seminal idea that cohorts
born at different times have quite different kinds of life experiences leading to contrasting patterns of aging was tightly bound up with historical comparisons and trends of change, and with an emphasis on cohort analysis not only in sociology but in psychology and other disciplines. Thus, the attention given to social change was indeed understandable as a first logical step in advancing the study of aging and the life course.

Yet this discovery of historical change and the resultant cohort differences is really only the beginning of attention to the broad and vast arena of context, and logically raises more questions about the scope of the interrogation. Why do history and social change matter? What is it about *homo sapiens* that makes human individuals so responsive to change? In reality, of course, historical change is only one of many axes of social variation upon which social and contextual effects operate and need to be analyzed. And across disciplines and across fields, one thing that is evident is a remarkable absence of attention to the implications of the discovery that “change matters” for considering the impact of social context and experience on how people age. If change is so important (and clearly it is), why should that be? Such questions, while important, received scant attention.

Symptoms of this problem are evident from the beginning, in the earliest formulations of the new “social paradigm” of aging and development. Ironically, such symptoms are contained within the formulations of the pioneers whose work stimulated the paradigmatic challenge in the first place. For example, consider the paradigmatic schemes that were initially introduced to characterize the fields of sociology of age and life-span psychology, reproduced in Figures 1.3 and 1.4.

![Figure 1.3 Processes of cohort flow and aging showing selected cohorts over time](source: Riley 1973)
Figure 1.3 presents the well-known figure from Matilda Riley’s (1973) groundbreaking formulations. This figure demonstrates the intersection of cohort location, age and history—biographical time and historical time. This is a paradigmatic figure to capture the logic of cohort analysis, but at the same time it is a framework from which all other contextual variables are omitted. Figure 1.4, a similarly foundational paradigmatic scheme introduced in life-span psychology by Paul Baltes, provides for systematic consideration of only “history-graded” environmental effects, relegating all other environmental effects to the “nonnormativity”, which in effect meant relegating them to the error term.

These paradigmatic approaches are important to consider; they are canonical, foundational formulations, and they continue to inform and guide research (see, e.g., Gerstorf et al. 2020). Yet in neither of these models is there room for explicit consideration of any kind of contextual influence other than social change. As we will see, however, there are many other ways in which social forces shape aging.

The pervasiveness of the inclination to equate social forces with social change can also be seen in the emphasis in life-course work on the specificity of historical events and change (e.g., the Great Depression, 9/11, the Baby Boom) in this body of work, extending across disciplines. Ironically, the same pioneers of the field who compelled a challenge to the traditional dogma by pointing to the importance of historical change, thus lacked a framework that could take matters beyond it.

Thus, despite what Paul Baltes called an explosive “surge of life-span thinking” (Baltes 1979:256–7) to challenge traditional developmental approaches, studies that took any note of social-structural factors that impact development and aging other than those related to societal change were very few in number. In those rare cases when they were included, the results were promising. For example, Gribbin, Schaie and Parham’s (1980) longitudinal investigation of cognitive performance suggested an effect of “lifestyle” factors related to social class (education- and occupation-related variables) over a period of 14 years. Although such studies deserve credit for encouraging at least a modestly broader view of
context, their discoveries have seldom been elaborated or pursued in subsequent research. In sociology, the life course as a field of study was, as noted earlier, launched to prominence by Elder’s *Children of the Great Depression* (1999 [1974]). Similar to the life-span approach, the life-course perspective placed great emphasis on the importance of cohort location in historical time and the crucial intersection of age and historical events and change. This emphasis is especially telling in the case of the life-course perspective, since in many analyses presented in this classic work and subsequent research, Elder and colleagues document the effects of contextual variables, including social-structural variables such as social class and family configuration. Thus, the effects of social structure are often evident in the patterns of findings reported by Elder and his associates. Without question, *Children of the Great Depression* stands as the classic American cornerstone of empirical research in the sociology of the life course, contributing a wide-ranging and provocative set of findings and initiating a long and flourishing research tradition. At many turns, the findings reported are intricate and ingenious—for instance, by attending carefully to the intersection of age, gender, family resources and varieties of hardship experience brought by the Great Depression in accounting for later-life outcomes. As one example, boys in deprived households aspired to enter adult roles earlier and showed little evidence of persistent disadvantage from the Depression, whereas girls who assumed domestic responsibilities while their mothers sought out work were more vulnerable to psychological disturbances and frequently stopped working after marriage or childbirth. A major difference in late-life outcomes was also attributed to the timing in which the Great Depression was experienced with dependent children born a decade later experiencing financial deprivation that left them more vulnerable to family instability and conflicts than those born earlier (Elder 1999 [1974]:239, 279; see also Dannefer and Settersten 2010:7–8).

Thus, it is noteworthy that—despite the inherently interactive nature of these patterns—the primary thematic interpretation for which Elder’s work is known has remained heavily focused on the social change side of the interaction. Work in this tradition has emphasized what can be learned from social change and comparing cohorts who develop and age under different circumstances, and stops short of developing a detailed analysis of the enduring and stable aspects of social structure through which individual life-course patterns and aging are constituted on a daily basis in everyday social interaction. Indeed, throughout his scholarly career, Elder has consistently emphasized the importance of “changing social contexts”, “history and the life course”, “aging and social change” and so on. He has singled out the omission of consideration of social change and related issues as a major limitation in the work of other scholars—whether sociologists of the stature of C. Wright Mills or child psychologists (Elder and Shanahan 2007). In one sense, the preoccupation with change is clearly warranted, as it has been a crucially important source of evidence for variation in life-course patterns and the contextual factors accounting for such variation. Yet it is also more than ironic, given Elder’s numerous findings that demonstrate dramatic effects of social class or economic deprivation in which social change is itself incidental, except for providing the opportunity to observe varying contextual conditions (e.g., Elder 1994:11, 1984:187). As we will see, such socially structured effects are robust and have been demonstrated for the parents as well as the children of the Great Depression (e.g., Elder and Liker 1982). Although many of Elder’s findings and contributions demonstrate the importance of such socially structured variation in distributing age-related resources at a given point in time, he positions it as secondary
to change: “[E]ven more valuable is a focus on exposure to a particular contextual or historical change” (Elder and Shanahan 2007:676).

Thus, paradoxically, one of the places where the tendency to limit social investigation can be clearly seen has been in the pursuit of cohort analysis itself. Although cohort analysis had rightly compelled attention to the importance of social context by calling attention to the effects of social change upon individuals’ life-course patterns, the intense focus of researchers upon the impact of “historical events”, “cohort differences” and “intercohort comparisons” had the consequence of obscuring from view some of the most challenging implications of the initial discovery of cohort differences—implications concerning the broader and more general power of social forces to create variation and diversity, and shape patterns of human development and aging.

The potential explanatory cost involved in the problem of equating and conflating the significance of social context with social change can be seen by considering a counterfactual question: What if there were no change?

Imagine a society that existed for many generations in a state of great cultural, technological and demographic stability, instead of the marked long-term trends of social change with which we are all familiar. In such a case, would we expect that social forces play any role at all in shaping age-related patterns and outcomes? If the observed patterns of aging in this hypothetically stable society also manifested a high degree of stability and predictability in cohort after cohort, could we then assume that the observed pattern of aging represented true human nature, and dispense with the notion that social forces play a role in the shaping of life course and developmental patterns?

Obviously, the answer to this last question is an unequivocal and resounding “no”! For if *homo sapiens* is a species in which individuals develop, change and age differently under different social conditions (which we now know to be the case), one would fully expect stable and repeated patterns of development and aging as a direct result of conditions of high contextual stability. Stability in patterns of individual aging is no less contingent on social stability than are changes in patterns of aging contingent on social change. Thus, the observation that historical change produces cohort differences and cohort effects should not be construed as the grand finale of social science insight or the primary fulcrum on which to leverage an understanding of the impact of the social world on aging. Rather, it is simply a starting point—again, a clue to the broader set of underlying forces and processes that require attention.

In this context, the significance of change is simply that it provides some of the variable conditions of an experiment of nature or “social technique”, as Thomas and Znaniecki put it (1927:75; see Elder and Shanahan 2007:667), thereby making visible the reality that variation in social circumstances and experiences are related to varying patterns of human development and aging over the life course. This is clearly a major heuristic benefit of making intercohort comparisons in age-specific circumstances and life-course trajectories. Yet at the same time, what the conflation of social forces and social change does is to block from view a consideration of types of social forces that operate regularly, in stable societies as well as changing ones, and within each cohort as well as between them.
Thus, as we will see, one of the primary consequences of researchers’ obsession with social change has been to allow scholars collectively to avoid confrontation with anything like the full scope of the implications of social structure for aging, and with attention to the mechanisms by which, and the depths to which, social forces shape the life course. Again, this is paradoxical because it was the discovery of the effects of social change, deriving from cohort analysis and cohort comparisons, that pried open the closed organismic paradigm that assumed universal patterns of normal aging. The point that has been steadfastly unnoticed is that the effects of change are not the only way to see the effects of social forces on the life course but simply one window through which those effects can be observed.

COHORT EFFECTS, CONTEXT EFFECTS AND SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Perhaps it was that the “Pandora’s Box” of possibilities of social and contextual explanation opened up by the discoveries of the 1960s and 1970s were overwhelming, or even frightening. Perhaps they brought too close to home C. Wright Mills’ observation that a rigorously applied sociological imagination is “‘in many ways . . . a terrible lesson . . . as well as a magnificent one” (1961:5). Perhaps it was due to bewilderment in the face of the complexity of a continuously interacting array of powerful contextual forces, prompting researchers to retreat to the security of familiar ways of thinking about human development, human aging and human nature—limiting, yet also comforting—without implications that necessitate a radical rethinking of, perhaps, existential as well as theoretical assumptions. Perhaps it was, for some, the ontological angst involved in taking seriously the implications of having to confront the power of social forces in organizing human experience and what is often thought of as “human nature”.

Despite the relevance of such concerns, such worries do not appear to have been the primary factors. The sources of denial appear to be intellectually deeper and more systemic than a mere “fear reaction” would suggest. For in order to be frightened by the possibilities implied by a confrontation with the social dimensions of aging, one has to operate from a perceptual field that allows one to glimpse those possibilities in the first place. And it is clear that—despite their foundational achievements—the early leading figures of both the sociology of age and of life-span psychology operated, with few exceptions, within conceptual paradigms that inhibited or precluded their thinking from coming fully to terms with the reality they had discovered: the reality that aging and human development are not reducible to the individual level and can never be adequately understood as individual-level phenomena. Instead of embracing the implications of this discovery, they—perhaps inadvertently—in many cases—resisted those implications.

Thus, the key to understanding the resistance to a thoroughgoing sociological analysis across these areas is to be found not primarily in anxiety about Mills’ “terrible lessons”, but in the theoretical underpinnings of the mainstream approaches to age taken in both psychology and sociology. Especially as applied to human development and aging, sociology and psychology have each had their own governing paradigm: structural-
functionalism in sociology and the organismic paradigm of developmental theory in psychology. And in both cases it is probably not an accident that these paradigms resonate with the reigning cultural ethos of Western individualism. They also have a remarkable compatibility with each other.

With the growth of recognition of the importance of interdisciplinarity in efforts to understand human development and aging, the default intellectual approach in each discipline was provided by the intellectual resonance of these two paradigmatic approaches. These approaches share several key (albeit largely unexplicated) assumptions, which have enabled scholars across disciplines to rely on each other’s work in a synergistic interdependence based on shared but largely invisible paradigmatic assumptions.

REDUCTIONISM AND THE FUNCTIONAL-ORGANISMIC NEXUS: A HEURISTIC OF “CONTAINMENT”

Beyond their continuing influence within their respective disciplines, these two paradigms—structural-functionalism and the organismic paradigm—intellectually complement each other (Dannefer 1984a, 2008; Estes, Binney, and Culbertson 1992). They have supported each other in a relationship of symbiotic co-dependence, with a logic that resists evidence demonstrating the relevance of social and experiential contingency, social causation and the invisible force of naturalized power. Constrained by conventional paradigmatic assumptions, such insights are neutralized—contained within peripheral spaces of discourse where they do not intrude upon the reductionist comforts of mainstream thought. I call this symbiotic relationship the functional-organismic nexus. It will be important to examine carefully the contribution of each of these two perspectives to the heuristic logic of these multidisciplinary impulses of containment.

THE ORGANISMIC PARADIGM IN PSYCHOLOGY

In psychology, the organismic paradigm is premised on the idea that basic maturational processes are an enduring part of human nature and, hence, effectively universal. Within psychology and the field of human development, the claim or hypothesis of universality has been challenged and discredited (e.g., Broughton 1987; Dannefer 1984a; Dannefer and Perlmutter 1990; Lave and Wenger 1991; Lerner 2002; Rogoff 2003; Stetsenko 2012, 2016), yet those committed to it continue to pursue efforts to sustain their claims and arguments (e.g., Arnett 2016; Baltes 1979; Carstensen 1992, 2006; Gutmann 1987; Levinson 1994). But the claim of universality is not merely a contentious point to be resolved with more data on larger samples. It is symptomatic of an underlying paradigmatic preference that logically entails a specific form of inquiry.

It is instructive to consider the sweep of presumption with which such assumptions have often been pursued. For example, Daniel Levinson (1978, 1994) advanced an influential hypothesis of a universal sequence of adult stage development in his best-selling and still-influential volumes *Seasons of a Man’s Life*, and *Seasons of a Woman’s Life*. *Seasons of
a Man’s Life was based on interviews conducted with a sample of 40 men, ages 35 to 45 (10 novelists, 10 managers, 10 biologists and 10 blue-collar workers) in the Boston-New York corridor in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This volume was criticized on a number of grounds including, unsurprisingly, his small, unrepresentative and all-male sample. Yet it sparked widespread debate in the academic study of human development and had an impact in related disciplines and professional fields. Given the sustained interest it generated, Levinson and associates addressed the gender critique in Seasons of a Woman’s Life, published 16 years later, in which women were the subject and the sample size was increased by 50% (from 40 to 60). Based on these interview data, Levinson proposed that he had discovered a reliably discernible and universal pattern of human development that he expected would hold up transculturally and transhistorically:

We energetically offer the following hypothesis: this sequence of eras and periods exists in all societies, throughout the human species, at the present stage of human evolution. The eras and periods are grounded in the nature of man as a biological, psychological and social organism, and in the nature of society as a complex enterprise extending over many generations.

(1978:322)

By almost any standard, this has to be regarded as a remarkably reckless contention, when one considers that this claim is based on such small and unrepresentative samples. What logic would justify such a claim?

Other researchers operating from similar premises sought to strengthen claims of universality by expanding the scope of their sampling. For example, David Gutmann (1987) proposed a different but also putatively universal and gender-differentiated pattern based on small samples drawn from five societies, claiming a “gender crossover” in midlife (with an increase in instrumental and agentic action for women, and the reverse for men). Although Gutmann’s own data did not unequivocally support his claims of universality, his work also garnered considerable positive interest and attention.

But the more fundamental issue with such a work, as noted previously, is not a matter of methods or samples. Rather, it is an issue of fundamental paradigmatic assumptions (Dannefer 1984a, 1984b).

To illuminate this theoretical preference, we must again ask: Why would one expect that the universals of human development could be discovered based on the lives of 40 men in New England in the early 1970s, and a few dozen women interviewed a few years later or, in Gutmann’s case, on the lives of a handful of respondents from each of a few 20th-century societies? And even more fundamentally, why should a universal pattern have been a theoretically expected claim to make in the first place? What mode of inquiry and what kinds of assumptions would lead one to expect such an invariance? The answer to such questions lies in the underlying paradigmatic assumptions that guide such thought. Those assumptions began with a core conception of development and aging as rooted in essentialist processes of maturational unfolding. The individual’s life structure and changes in that structure—physically, mentally, socially—are seen as contingent on the
age of the organism, as in biological models of clearly delineated age-graded stages as are observed, for example, in the life cycles of frogs, moths or opossums. Thus, it follows the traditional paradigm of developmental change, which typically assumes the following characteristics: sequentiality, unidirectionality, an end state, irreversibility, qualitative-structural transformation, as well as universality (Lerner 2002; Baltes 1979:262–3; Lerner 2002; Reese and Overton 1970).

Given these premises, the organismic paradigm has strong implications for the structuring of inquiry. Specifically, it dictates the following sequence: 1) identify and define a sequence of age-based progression, 2) describe the “normal” (nomothetic, normative) character of each stage (and in some cases the exact age at which the respective stages emerge) and 3) establish the claim of universality by denying the existence of alternative ones—attributing them to errors of measurement or individual pathology. Such organismic theories include stage theories like those in the traditions of Erikson, Freud, Piaget, or Kohlberg, and in adulthood, Erikson and Gilligan together with the notions of Levinson and Gutmann referenced earlier.

In gerontology, the paradigm of disengagement theory rests on just such assumptions (Cumming and Henry 1961; Hochschild 1975). Such age-based theories of decline have traditionally been in good paradigmatic company. As neuropsychiatrist Norman Doidge describes the “common wisdom” of medicine and science, it has been generally taken for granted that “after childhood the brain changed only when it began the long process of decline” (2007:xvii). The fact that such common wisdom is now debunked has, at least to date, done little to reduce its influence. As we will see later, nuanced forms of such approaches, including disengagement, continue to flourish as part of a heuristic logic that continues to delimit inquiry.

Even if not explicitly adopted, the influence of the organismic model of individual development remains influential, within and beyond the discipline of psychology. As will be discussed in Chapter 8, it continues to shape thinking across disciplines, even among some who regard themselves as its critics. Its essential features encourage researchers to think of the study of human development, change and age as, even if more qualified than formerly imagined, still having as its goal the identification of transhistorical, transcultural universals and, therefore, to organize research agendas around the task of describing the essential developmental or age-based pattern that remains after cohort-based or other socioenvironmental variation is taken into account. This practice raises a number of problems.

**SOCIOLGICAL STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALISM**

Like developmental theory, the idea of society as a functioning system also rests on an organismic metaphor in the works of classical sociological thinkers, especially Emile Durkheim. Durkheim’s core ideas—society as a reality *sui generis*; societal relations as *systemic, social facts* having obdurate “*thingness*” (*choseite*)—are foundational to the discipline of sociology and are of enduring importance. A significant problem arises, however, in Durkheim’s view of the social system as analogous to a biological organism.
The very idea of a system as a healthy, functioning organism implies its inherent integrity and legitimacy and is not conducive to thinking in terms of structural change, nor of recognizing conflict, exploitative power and struggle as inherent to social relations, and as sometimes leading to humanly destructive consequences. Like a bacterial infection in a physical organism, social conflict is instead implicitly assumed to be aberrant, unusual, pathological and outside the paradigm of a smoothly functioning system or “organism”. Despite its impressive scope and illumination of some systemic aspects of social organization, Talcott Parsons’ framework (e.g., 1951) similarly avoided dealing with conflict and power dynamics and is thus characterized by the same limitation.

Structural-functionalism is known for having difficulty incorporating into its framework such centrally important social phenomena as power, innovation conflict, and change. For this and other reasons, it has long been recognized as a fundamentally inadequate paradigm in social theory generally and has long since been abandoned by many substantive arenas of sociological inquiry. Nevertheless, it has remained alive and well—although often implicit and unremarked—in some less rigorously theorized areas of sociology, including the study of aging and life course.

Given functionalism’s inclination to accept and naturalize existing social arrangements and especially in a context where microfication and a tendency to return to the individual are underlying intellectual impulses, one can perhaps see the interlocking appeal of the functional and organismic paradigms. Both of these frameworks are intuitively appealing in their seemingly straightforward simplicity and elegance. Each offers a self-contained closed system that, under the guise of established paradigmatic science, authoritatively claims to systematize the descriptive realities in which we live—offering immediate “face validity” to what Berger and Luckmann (1967) called the world-taken-for-granted, the “normality” of human existence as we know it and of the familiar social practices and arrangements of late modernity. The familiarity of such ideas gives them a plausibility that makes it easy to accept them uncritically. And the perspectives they are offered are generally comforting, both existentially and politically. It is “not for nothing” that researchers find them appealing.

This plausibility also includes a taken-for-granted acceptance of the power differentials and relations that underlie the social arrangements that end up shaping individual lives. Power relations in every everyday form—whether youth or age, patriarchy, or White privilege—can easily remain entirely unnoticed when one begins by thinking of dominant social institutions as beneficently arranged systems designed to accommodate individual needs and address their limitations, rather than as possibly suppressing their needs or contributing to their limitations. Functionalism “is committed to making things work”—as Gouldner put it—“despite wars inequities, scarcity, and degrading work, rather than to finding a way out” (1970:281). The issue of “imbalanced flows of power” and their institutionalization (Schwalbe 2008:26), which in reality pervade all social life, never arises as a problem to be directly addressed.

More generally, the functional-organismic nexus often makes it easy to overlook the diversity of individuals in a society. Instead of recognizing such diversity, the focus is on
searching for what is “normal” in the course of human development. It is thus no accident that functionalists have no difficulty embracing the premises of the organismic paradigm.

It is noteworthy that Talcott Parsons (1961) wrote the preface to Cumming and Henry’s treatise advancing disengagement theory, an organismic theory of “old age” (1961; see also, e.g., Smelser and Erikson 1980).

Social normality has often been equated with statistical normality, thereby justifying statistical averaging and characterizing populations based on means or other measures of central tendency. Of course, it is now increasingly recognized that such characterizations, equating central tendency with what is normal across entire populations, are themselves a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1986; Burawoy 2019). They legitimate and reinforce assumptions of “normality” that disrespect the subject matter under study and often serve to lay the foundation for “othering”, ignoring that many of us do not conform to dominant or normative depictions of “healthy development”, “normative aging” and “age-appropriate conduct” that the nexus expects.

Specifically with respect to aging, this logic has made it easy to overlook that many social institutions based on assumptions about aging are taken-for-granted fixtures of common knowledge and everyday life. Such institutions are assumed to be legitimate, even when they are humanly restrictive and sometimes destructive, as in the case of the conventional nursing homes in the US. Consider this paradox: The daily lives of individuals in many indigenous cultures, judged by habits and expectations comfortable to late modern citizens are also not “normal” (and certainly not generally regarded as desirable or “ideal”). Yet immigrants from such societies who work in low-paying jobs in US nursing homes often comment with alarm and even outrage upon what they regard as the barbarism of these institutions in their treatment of the elders that they are intended to serve. Such reactions were already offering a challenge to the modern “normality” of forced social disengagement and warehousing of frail elders long before the currently prominent issues of “culture change” became fashionable and before gerontologists took up the cause.

In sum, the symbiotic relationship between sociological functionalism and the organismic paradigm allows a cross-disciplinary view of aging that shares assumptions of a benign social order that has been designed to accommodate individual needs, and to which individuals are best served by adjusting, and of the “naturalness” of the world within which mainstream researchers tend to operate. Within such a cultural and intellectual framework, the idea of interrogating the constitutive force of social systems and the stratification of interests served by this benign social order cannot arise.

Understandably, those who pursue what Thomas Kuhn (1962) calls “normal science” within these paradigms are made somewhat uncomfortable by the growing traces of a different and much deeper order of social causation revealed by a rigorously social paradigm of aging. These are, of course, traces that point to the actual and empirically documented state of affairs, which is that social forces shape human growth, development and aging much more deeply than has generally been imagined, and likely more deeply than is yet understood by any of us. Even if challenging, the science of aging nevertheless requires a paradigm that can apprehend this actual state of affairs, which means one that is open to heretofore
unrecognized dimensions of societal effects on individual patterns of development and aging.

What is needed is a paradigm that displaces the stability and predictability of the functional-organismic nexus with what Berger and Luckmann (1967) call the “world-openness” of the human organism and the human species. World-openness recognizes the uncertainties and the possibilities that are part of open-ended change and unconstrained potentiality. However, neither Berger and Luckmann nor others who have explicated this important characteristic of *homo sapiens* have extended their analysis to consider its specific implications for human development and aging. That will be the task of the next two chapters.

**CHAPTER SUMMARY AND PLAN OF THE BOOK**

The great contributions of late 20th-century scholarship provided the insights upon which to found a comprehensive approach to theorizing age and the life course—an approach which acknowledges that aging is not fixed but contingent, and that opens a new horizon along which the relentless yet largely unrecognized power of social forces in shaping processes of aging can be explored. Yet to date, those potentials have been explored only to a limited extent because research on age and the life course has been effectively contained by the heuristic logic of outdated theoretical assumptions that are premised on paradigmatically rigid and limited views both of individual development and aging and of social structure.

As a field, we have yet to interrogate the constricting assumptions underlying the functional-organismic nexus. In the chapters that follow, I will propose a foundation for a critical and scientific alternative, and I will also review the intellectual, explanatory and practical human costs of the symbiotic relationships of these two paradigms—costs deriving from their effectiveness in blocking developmental and life-course thought from an accurate and realistic assessment of the magnitude of the influence of social forces in shaping aging. This can be seen again and again in different domains of research. It can be seen in the reluctance to confront intracohort diversity and inequality. It can be seen in the uncritical response to an increasingly medicalized approach to aging in the professions and in the society as a whole. It can be seen in the unwarranted alliance between the age and family as academic areas of study, and it can be seen in the astructural microfication of some ethnographic research and in other micro-interactional studies of aging. It can be seen in the approach initially adopted by gerontologists as by other social scientists in approaching the topic of gene-environment interactions.

NASCAR auto racing has faced the problem that redundantly powerful and aerodynamic race cars can generate so much speed that on the superspeedways they can too easily become airborne. To prevent this dangerous possibility, restrictor plates are placed between the carburetor and intake manifold to limit the flow of fuel to the engine and reduce its performance. In science, paradigmatic assumptions can sometimes perform a similar function—controlling the scope of inquiry by directing it along established, well-ordered lines that remain “under control” and squelching unfamiliar questions
and novel observations that may open one’s assumption to fundamental challenge and threaten to launch inquiry beyond the established paradigmatic boundaries of permissible research topics. That is, there is a desire to do science in a way that allows for empirical inquiry and the testing of ideas, so long as it doesn’t go so deep and wide as to overpower the comfortable and entrenched daily operations of normal science. The heuristic of containment, produced by the functional-organismic nexus, serves to protect the normal science assumptions of the study of human development, aging and the life course from such a danger. Analogous to Herbert Marcuse’s (1955) notion of “surplus repression”, we may consider the result to be a kind of surplus individualization in the conduct of normal science.

In the quest for knowledge, however, there is no warrant for the kind of limits on performance that are permissible in auto racing. For in the enterprise of science, no basis exists for restricting inquiry even if the challenge calls into question paradigmatic assumptions that are not only taken-for-granted and unquestioned but cherished. Unlike in NASCAR, science is not entitled to the safety and comfort of “throttling back” the questions that confront us even if they sometimes are, as Mills puts it, “terrifying” and even if they threaten, like an overly powerful V-8 engine, to send us “over the wall” into an unfamiliar domain of intellectual exploration. As we will see, that may be the case when one understands that both human beings and social systems are under human control (and not nature’s control) to a remarkable extent, giving the matter of “how we age” both existential and political dimensions that we could avoid dealing with, if only the functional-organismic view were correct and most of the contours of human existence were fixed and largely out of human and social control.

As will become clear, many features of human development and aging are not out of human control at all, and for human beings to fail to recognize the power and capacities of their own actions for control and change is a form of alienation in the most classic and fundamental sense, just as is our failure to recognize their power in shaping our own existence. In this regard, it will also be necessary to visit the paradox that the potential magnitude of human possibility and human change is obscured by the familiar and rather glib emphasis on “agency” and “choice” that adduces both of these terms to explain residual variance but offers an analysis of neither (Dannefer 1999; Dannefer and Huang 2017; Marshall and Clarke 2010).

Despite such ongoing issues and challenges for the field and despite the restrictor-plate assumptions of past work, great credit must be given to the intellectual pioneers—Baltes, Birren, Cain, Elder, Neugarten, Riley, Schaie and numerous others—who forged openings within which such questions and issues can be raised. When the discovery of cohort differences cracked open the “closed system” of the static and reductionist organismic model, it created tasks for social science inquiry in at least three major domains of sociological investigation—three frontiers along the explanatory potentials of social forces for shaping the realities of individual aging warrant careful investigation. These frontiers are 1) the social-structural frontier, 2) the biosocial frontier and 3) the reflexive-critical frontier. The social-structural frontier deals with the role of macro-, meso- and microstructural forces in organizing aging and will be the focus of Chapters 4 through 6. The biosocial
frontier links these social-structural dynamics to the physical body—how do life-course experiences interact with and impact the physical bodies of aging individuals? This is the question of Chapter 7, and it is a matter that is also addressed in Chapters 2 and 3. The reflexive-critical frontier, considered in Chapters 8 through 10, examines age as a product of the meaning-making processes of science itself, and by its interaction with political and economic as well as cultural forces within that context. These broader social forces impose constraints on inquiry, further limiting sociological imagination. Chapter 10 offers some examples of what is humanly and socially possible when such constraints are interrogated and deconstructed by offering some actual examples of the potentials of sociological imagination to rehumanize everyday personal and institutional practices that shape the life course.

However, before turning to an examination of these three frontiers, it is necessary to clarify the basic anthropological and developmental features of the human species responsible for the remarkable diversity of patterns of human development, aging and the life course. Why is it that we see such variation and environmental contingency in human development and aging? The internally guided structuring of aging and development into universal stages or trajectories that is assumed by the organismic approach does indeed appear in many respects to be applicable for many other forms of life. That is an understandable part of the reason why scholars from multiple disciplines have expected them to be applicable in the human case as well. Why aren’t they? What is it about the character of homo sapiens as a species that means the organismic assumptions do not apply in the same way? And what is it about homo sapiens that causes human environments to be so dynamic and variable? These foundational questions are the subjects of the next two chapters.

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