Editorial

Cracks in Social Gerontology’s Pro-Aging Edifice

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“...I sometimes point out the parallel with the situation 100 or so years ago when we figured out that hygiene could actually save rather a lot of lives of infants. You know, we could have said to ourselves, ‘Oh dear, there will be terrible overpopulation if we save all these lives with everybody having 10 kids. Let’s not do it. Let’s carry on letting these infants die.’ But we didn’t do that... to deny that saving lives is a good thing, it’s not something that most people are willing to say.”

—”Scientist 8″ in Ref. 16

In addition to a welcome smattering of contributions by others in the same vein,1–6 I have dedicated a fair proportion of my remarks in this space over the years7–14 to railing against the “pro-aging trance”—the suspension by otherwise careful thinkers of any semblance of rationality when it comes to the question of whether the defeat of aging would be a good thing. Foremost among the targets of my opprobrium, largely because of the influence they have over this debate on account of the perceived authority attaching to their field, have been social gerontologists: Those who study the role of aging in society, the way in which it molds intergenerational relationships, and such like. There have, to be sure, been exceptions to the predominantly pro-aging position of such researchers—but they have been woefully rare. That may, finally, be changing.

One sign of this is the growth of the, if not resolutely anti-aging then at least aging-agnostic, faction within social gerontology into a coherent movement that is reasonably visible to those who are not already looking for it. This is truest in the United States, where I am unofficially told the Special Interest Group on Social Implications of Anti-Aging Medicine has, after existing only as an informal body for several years, finally been accorded formal status within the Gerontological Society of America (GSA). This group was set up by perhaps the foremost voice of reason within the senior echelons of social gerontology, Bob Binstock, with the assistance of the biogerontologist Tom Johnson. Its meeting at the 2005 GSA conference consisted of a robust and highly productive debate on the likelihood that “real anti-aging medicine” will materialize any time soon.

The longer-term future is also looking bright if my interactions with the younger generation of social gerontologists are a guide. As the best example so far, at the 2008 GSA conference I had the pleasure of meeting a finishing Ph.D. student in social gerontology who is strongly supportive of the mission to defeat aging, who keenly appreciates that this position is not shared many of his colleagues, and who is determined to do something about that during his postdoctoral and subsequent career. I pointed him in the direction of some senior sympathizers, and my hopes are high that he will make a difference.

Perhaps the most significant development of all, however—and the one that induced me to choose this topic for this editorial—is the appearance of a few papers that attempt to lift the lid on what people really think about the desirability of aging. Most conspicuous among these are some articles15,16 reporting the results of interviews with gerontologists, whose identities were anonymous, but whose quotes indicate that many of them were biogerontologists.

Why is this so important? Simply because, as with any experimental science field, researchers are trained and encouraged to report results, to engage in cautious interpretation of the direct implications in those results, and absolutely not to opine publicly about the broader significance of their work to humanity as a whole. While this is only right and proper in fields whose significance to humanity is indeed tenuous, for biomedical fields it is a habit that I have long decried,17 since it merely ensures that policy-makers and opinion-formers will make up their own opinions on the basis of information necessarily inferior to that available to experts. This is in marked contrast to the situation enjoyed by sociologists, who are very much trained and paid to say what they think.

Anonymous assertions are not so valuable as attributed ones, but they are a great deal better than nothing, since the expertise of the quoted researchers is vouched for by the authors. The comments quoted in these papers are largely informal, with the result that it is not straightforward to meld them into a coherent picture (though, of course, the authors do their best to do that). An additional shortcoming, especially for the Australian paper,15 is the small sample size. However, given that the only case I know of18 in which these limitations were avoided was one in which a journalist asked researchers two specific questions about future human longevity and clearly received answers more often motivated by the urge to get him off the phone than by actual thought, this must be considered a major step forward.

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What would I like to see next? Different answers in many cases, of course, but that’s a longer-term goal. What I’m looking forward to soon is a more comprehensive version of this sort of paper—one in which the sample size is larger, the demographics of the interviewees more detailed, the answers more regimented (“multiple choice” or similar), and ideally in which the interviewees are asked to comment on each other’s comments. Any volunteers?

References


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