The Self and Society in Aging Processes
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PART 1

Theoretical Perspectives on Self and Society Linkages
CHAPTER 1

Linking the Self and Society in Social Gerontology: Crossing New Territory via Old Questions

Carol D. Ryff, Victor W. Marshall, & Philippa J. Clarke

Social gerontology is a broad field in which a number of disciplines come together to advance understanding of aging individuals and societies. These disciplines range from psychology, with its traditional emphasis on the individual, to sociology and anthropology, which focus much of their attention on large-scale social structures and on cultures. Because social gerontology attempts to bring together this wide array into a common enterprise, it faces important theoretical and methodological challenges in linking the micro and the macro, or self and society.

Our primary objectives in this chapter are twofold. The first is to provide a historical overview of prior efforts to link individual and social structural factors in social gerontology. The nexus between micro- and macro-levels of analysis has been a leading intellectual theme, not only in prior gerontological theorizing and research, but in the social sciences more generally. The disciplines in social gerontology, and in broader theoretical work, have approached this challenge with differing theoretical...
assumptions and emphases on the micro level, the macro level, or the linkage between the two. The premise of this volume is that we are entering a new era in scientific discourse about such micro-macro linkages in social gerontology.

Over the last three decades, much of the best theory construction in social gerontology has occurred in efforts to map the intersection of individual and social structural factors that shape the aging process. We review these prior attempts and also examine efforts outside social gerontology, specifically work in the personality and social structure tradition that embraced similar broad scientific territory. Our aim is to bring to mind the notable contributions of these traditions as well as their limitations. This section concludes with an overview of new developments in social gerontology and beyond (e.g., recent scholarship on the self), designed to move the self-society linkage forward. Our intent is to take the best from past and current work to chart new courses through the expansive territory ahead.

The second objective of the introductory chapter is to provide an in-depth overview of the chapters that follow. Written by social gerontologists trained in different disciplinary contexts (psychology, sociology, social work, economics, human development), some are oriented toward individual-level processes, while others incline toward social-structural questions. All, however, share a commitment to bridge the two levels of analysis. Collectively, their questions represent exciting diversity in the content of current questions about micro-macro linkages.

**SOCIAL GERONTOLOGY’S FASCINATION: THE LINKAGE OF INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE**

Dominant gerontological theories of the 1960s and 1970s were explicitly about efforts to link the aging of the individual to societal influences (Bengtson, Burgess, & Parrott, 1997; Marshall 1996a, 1996b). Disengagement and activity theories offered contrasting perspectives on the optimal adjustment of the individual to the social order. Subsequent formulations, such as role perspectives on aging (Rosow, 1974, 1976), or the social breakdown syndrome (Kuypers & Bengtson, 1973), continued to elaborate social-structural influences and their consequences for individual functioning. Modernization theory (Burgess, 1960; Cowgill, 1974), in contrast,
pursued the “fit” between the aging individual and the society from a macro-level perspective.

Concern with the link between individual and society can be traced to early social scientific interest in aging—specifically, adaptation of the aging individual to society. In a 1940 memo to the Social Sciences Research Council Committee on Social Adjustment, Ernest Burgess argued that there was a poor fit between older individuals and modern society. He argued that the problem could be rectified by adjusting the society to the needs of the older individual, or conversely, by helping the older individual adjust to modern society (Calhoun, 1978). This committee, which Burgess chaired, played a key role in the development of social gerontology, through stimulating research at major U.S. universities (Shanas, 1971).

How well did these early efforts fare in bridging the gap between individual and social structural levels? Generally, hindsight judgment has been fairly negative. Marshall and Tindale (1978–9) castigated social gerontology for its individualism and neglect of social structure, particularly the political economy of aging and socioeconomic forces. Modernization theory, in contrast, was been faulted for ignoring the individual as well as failing to recognize the complexities of societal modernization processes and how societies are located within a world socioeconomic system (Quadagno, 1982; Stearns, 1977; Thomas, 1976).

Disengagement theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961), which postulated that with age there is a mutual severing of the ties between the individual and society, is illustrative of the former problem. That is, the theory and its refinements (Williams & Wirths, 1965) had strongly micro-level conceptualizations of social structure (i.e., measuring it by counts of social role occupancy, number of interactions, and subjective ratings of time spent in normatively governed interaction with others). Marshall (1994) summarized the general program of research as follows:

The major independent variables entered over this period into models to predict variability in life satisfaction were either themselves dispositional or personality factors, or largely restricted to three domains: health, income security, and social integration. These, in turn, were largely unexamined variables. Few scholars theorized about the causes of variability in health, wealth, or social integration. To do so would have shifted attention away from the social psychological levels toward a social structural level of analysis (p. 771)
Ironically, disengagement theory, despite its micro-level focus, did not adequately characterize the self, viewing the individual largely as a collection of social roles. In reaction to the individualism of disengagement theory, later approaches, such as the age stratification perspective (Riley, 1971; Riley, Foner, & Waring, 1988; Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972), shifted the focus to social structure; but did so without reference to intentionality at the individual level (Hendricks, 1992; Hendricks & Leedham, 1992). Through processes of socialization and role allocation, age stratification postulated explicit links between the individual and society. Social structure in this formulation did not address macro levels of social power and domination in allocation of resources, and the individual was conceived largely as passive or reactive (i.e., being socialized). Complex, multilayered selves were missing; the focus was on individuals comprised as role constellations and need dispositions. The “individual-structure dialectic” (Hendricks, 1992; Hendricks & Leedham, 1992), seeking to bridge the gap between social structure and individual life worlds, was never brought explicitly to the fore, and remains a major challenge in contemporary social gerontology (Bengtson et al., 1997).

Social structure has thus been undertheorized in social gerontology (as in the broader field of sociology) and all too rarely dealt with macro-level social relations of power, domination, and allocation of opportunities and resources, while simultaneously avoiding the reification fallacy (i.e., treating social structure as if it exists independently of the actions of human beings). Anthony Giddens (1993) views social structure in terms of complex rules and resources, which are as much constrained by, as constitutive of, individual action. He argues, “Structures . . . have to be treated for purposes of analysis as specifically ‘impersonal’; but . . . it is essential to recognize that structures only exist as the reproduced conduct of situated actors with definite intentions and interests” (1993, p. 134). Social structure is therefore not a stable, external object (although it can be usefully theorized as such), nor, of course, is the self or identity.

Running in parallel over the past two decades have been efforts by developmental psychologists and sociologists to link the individual and society in theories of life course development (Baltes, 1987; Dannefer & Perlmutter, 1990; Elder, 1991, 1997; Lerner, 1984; Riegel, 1975). These scholars saw human development as extending beyond adolescence and generated conceptual frameworks to study it. Their perspectives gave attention to the dynamic interrelationships between the developing individual and the changing sociocultural context. That is, selves and societies were brought together with an explicit goal of tracking processes of
change at both the micro and macro levels of analysis. Much focus was given to research designs and analytic methods that could disentangle age, cohort, and period effects (Schaie & Baltes, 1975). The challenges of dealing with temporally complex data that links individuals to surrounding societal contexts persist into the present (see Roberts and Bengtson, Chapter 16).

At the conceptual level, theories of human development were criticized for their failure to specify "the ways in which social structures and human beings mutually influence one another" (Dowd, 1990, p. 138). Extant models of human development were also faulted for failing to give sufficient attention to the differential distribution of the "opportunities" for human development, which occur via the "allocation of economic and cultural resources that are the enabling requisite of development" (p. 150). Human subjectivity—"the tendency for workers to truncate their aspirations in the face of obdurate social reality" (p. 150) was deemed a critical route of influence on developmental trajectories. Dowd thus reconceptualized human development as a process of self-realization, which requires both opportunities and desire.

Taken together, work in social gerontology and life course development addressed both the individual and social structural factors, although invariably, one side was more richly elaborated than the other, and none theorized the link itself adequately. Outside these realms were other efforts to build micro-macro linkages; specifically, research in the personality and social structure tradition.

**THE PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE RESEARCH**

Work in this tradition had disciplinary origins in anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Emphasis was placed jointly on personality, defined as enduring characteristics of the individual (e.g., values, attitudes, beliefs, needs) and social structure, defined as normative characteristics of social systems (e.g., roles, norms, organizational features, socialization processes). The goal was to bring these levels of analysis together.

Historical reviews (e.g., House, 1981) point to Marx and Weber as foremost theorists in this tradition. Marx's conceptions of alienation and class consciousness inherently concerned the relation (both actual and ideal) of societal institutions (industry, government, economy) to individual beliefs,