

# Theory, Explanation, and a Third Generation of Theoretical Development in Social Gerontology

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*Efforts at cumulative knowledge building in social gerontology have been lax, judging from research articles published in journals between 1990 and 1994. Too little attention has been paid to the cumulative development of theory; readers are left with many empirical generalizations but underdeveloped explanations by which to interpret findings and build upon them in subsequent research. To assist future theory development in social gerontology, we review seven theoretical perspectives referenced most frequently in recent journals: (1) social constructionist, (2) social exchange, (3) life course, (4) feminist, (5) age stratification (age and society), (6) political economy of aging, and (7) critical theory. We suggest that, taken together, these represent a "third generation" of explanation in social gerontology, noting their debt to older and more established traditions in social science theory. We argue that authors and journal reviewers should place more emphasis on theory development — which means, most simply, the construction of explicit explanations in accounting for empirical findings — if knowledge development about social aspects of aging is to be cumulative, systematic, and incremental.*

THE purpose of this article is to review current theoretical developments in social gerontology and the sociology of aging as reflected in recent published research. A second intent is to urge researchers (and journal reviewers) to pay more attention to theory, since this is such a crucial component to the process of creating cumulative knowledge. By theory we mean *the construction of explicit explanations in accounting for empirical findings*. Within the relatively short history of the social sciences and aging our field has accumulated many findings, and we have by now begun to establish several important traditions of theory. We argue that these traditions — reflecting a "third generation" of social gerontological theories — should be exploited for explanatory insights and not ignored, as too often seems to be the case in recent journal articles.

Further, we argue that interpretive frameworks cannot help but be employed in gerontological research, whether or not one is an open advocate of conceptual models. While some researchers in aging who prepare and review empirical papers may disavow an interest in theorizing per se, nonetheless they filter their data through a lens that is tantamount to a theoretical model. We feel it is better to be explicit than to deny conceptualization as a screen to empirical interpretation. Traditionally, methods and theory have been viewed as distinct enterprises; it is our contention that they are, in fact, inextricably linked.

## Epistemology and Explanation in Social Gerontology

The cumulative and systematic development of knowledge over time is the standard of progress in any field of research, and this is particularly true in science (Brown, 1986; Hagstrom, 1965; Kuhn, 1962). To cumulatively create knowledge requires that scholars and researchers must concern themselves with *epistemology*, the analysis of the origin, nature, and limits of knowledge. One aspect of epistemology

focuses on *methods*: the means by which we conduct empirical investigations to discover or understand phenomena, in a manner that is reliable and valid across the observations. If our methods of observation are flawed, according to the standards in our field of research, then the basis of the "knowledge" we report will be suspect. A second aspect of epistemology concerns *theories*: accounting for what we have empirically observed in the context of previous knowledge in our field. If our theories (explanations) are underdeveloped, we may end up with many empirical generalizations but little cumulative understanding; we may, in fact, run the risk in our colleagues' eyes of "rediscovering the wheel."

In gerontology social scientists are faced with a wide variety of research problems ranging from the abstract (what are the effects of population aging on present and future social structures?) to the practical (what public policies can best reduce poverty among the aged?). To adequately understand these problems requires not only findings (data), but also explanation (theory). Moreover, attempts to explain and understand findings should build on previous attempts to explain; they should be based on the successes and failures of those who have investigated similar phenomena before us.

## Why Theory?

Much recent research in gerontology appears to have disinherited theory. In their quest to examine aspects of individual and social aging, researchers have been quick to provide facts but slow to integrate them within a larger explanatory framework, connecting findings to established explanations of social phenomena. Yet theory plays a crucial role in research on aging. While it is no longer worthwhile to attempt a grand, all-encompassing "theory of aging," as was the goal in the 1950s and 1960s, we now have multiple theories representing various aspects of the aging process that provide different lenses through which to view and explain phenomena of aging.

Theory is often unacknowledged. Whenever a research project is undertaken, it is operating under an implicit theory about how a set of phenomena may be related, and these expectations or hunches are derived from previous explanations. The problem is that *explicit* theorizing is often missing. Rather than stating that variables were included because they are expected to be related to and explain a phenomenon in a certain way, too often research agendas proceed absent of any stated, and therefore falsifiable, theory about how things work. And consequently, when empirical results are described, they are not presented within the context of more general explanations; thus the process of building, revising, and interpreting how and why phenomena occur is lost. It is important that the theoretical premises under which research proceeds be stated.

It has been argued that the act of theorizing has “become excessively elitist, obscure and socially marginal” (Seidman, 1992, p. 64). Perhaps this is how many researchers and practitioners in the field of social gerontology feel today. Yet in research, and perhaps particularly in the area of public policy applications or program interventions in gerontology, it is crucial to acknowledge the theoretical assumptions of a research investigation or program intervention before investing large sums of money in it. There is nothing so practical as a good theory. If the theory is inadequate, the research, intervention program, or public policy will fail because it will not achieve its intended goals. If the explanation is not backed by theoretical assumptions which are tested by research, then it is difficult to judge whether the findings or intervention policy is grounded in supportable assumptions about why things happen.

Consider, for example, a proposed program intervention which provides funds to Alzheimer’s patients to cover the costs of home care. This intervention has embedded within it an implicit theory about what motivates caregivers, that home care can make a difference, and what delays costly institutionalization. The implicit theory is based on assumptions: for example, that families of individuals with Alzheimer’s disease are burdened, that the care they provide is financially devastating, that home care assistance would provide a respite to caregivers and help elderly individuals remain in the community (which is good for them), and that this in turn benefits society by delaying institutionalization. We suggest that a mini-theory such as this, reflecting how phenomena can be related to produce a desired outcome, can and should be linked to broader explanatory frameworks from exchange theory, political economy of aging, and perhaps feminist theory in aging. If this is done explicitly the intervention can become a part of the theory building process, utilizing the concepts of resource distribution, reciprocity, and state influence in the lives of aging individuals. It should be noted that a policymaker would have difficulty supporting a program which does not have clearly stated goals and a plan for how they will be achieved. And it is intellectually irresponsible for a program of research to proceed without a similar set of statements — in short, a theory.

#### *Journal Citations Reflecting Theories in Aging*

How adequate are current efforts at cumulative knowledge-building in social gerontology? How much em-

phasis are we giving (as authors, journal reviewers, and editors) to the progressive and explicit development of *explanations* for our empirical findings that reflect the scholarly and scientific activity in theory building that has preceded us?

To examine this question, we reviewed articles published between 1990 and 1994 in eight major journals relevant to the sociology of aging. These included: *The Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*; *The Gerontologist*; *Research on Aging*; *Ageing and Society*; the *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*; the *Journal of Aging Studies*; the *American Sociological Review*; and the *American Journal of Sociology*. We found 645 articles from over the five-year period that reflected topics of research in the sociology of aging. We coded the articles according to three general categories: (1) those which, in interpreting research findings, mentioned any of 16 previous or current theories in the sociology of aging (as will be identified later; see Figure 1); (2) those which mentioned other, more general social or behavioral science theories in interpreting findings; (3) those which made no mention of any previous theoretical contexts in interpreting findings. [Articles using both (1) and (2) were included in category (1).] Results of this analysis are summarized in Table 1.

We were surprised (and dismayed) by what we found from this survey. Less than one out of five (18%) of the 645 published articles mentioned or made use of theoretical formulations from the sociology of aging in interpreting or explaining its empirical results. An additional one in 10 (9%) utilized some other behavioral or social science theoretical perspective in explaining results. But by far the majority — 72% of the articles reviewed — made no mention of *any* theoretical tradition as relevant to interpreting or understanding their findings.

For example, in the *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, where the majority of articles published between 1990 and 1994 focused on macro-social research issues and were based on large-scale datasets, 80% of the 177 articles contained no mention of theory or of theoretical perspectives, and only 12% referenced any theories in the sociology of aging. (It should be noted that the *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, in its masthead statement published with every issue, invites submissions from 10 disciplines, not just the sociology of aging; it may be true that scholarship in some of these disciplines, for example, epidemiology and demography, is happily atheoretical.) The rate for *Journal of Aging Studies*, a more qualitatively oriented journal, was higher: 33% referenced sociological theories of aging. During the same period the *American Journal of Sociology* published only five articles related to the sociology of aging, but 100% of these referenced previous theoretical traditions.

In short, we found the vast majority of research articles published between 1990 and 1994 included no mention of any previous or current theoretical framework in the sociology of aging as they discussed the interpretation or explanation of their findings. Even more troubling to us is that most of these authors did not attempt *any* systematic, theoretically based explanation for findings. Instead, they appeared to feel that their findings (whether qualitative or quantitative)

Table 1. Theory Content in Social Gerontology Journal Articles, 1990–1994

Journal	Social Gerontology Theories <sup>a</sup>	Other Social Science Theories	No Explicit Theory	N
<i>Journal of Gerontology, Social Sciences</i>	22 (12%)	13 (7%)	142 (80%)	177
<i>The Gerontologist</i>	18 (17%)	7 (6%)	84 (77%)	109
<i>Research on Aging</i>	11 (10%)	8 (7%)	87 (82%)	106
<i>Journal of Aging Studies</i>	35 (33%)	6 (6%)	65 (61%)	106
<i>International Journal of Aging and Human Development</i>	22 (24%)	19 (21%)	52 (55%)	92
<i>Ageing and Society</i>	14 (16%)	8 (9%)	66 (75%)	88
<i>American Sociological Review</i>	1 (20%)	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	5
<i>American Journal of Sociology</i>	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	0 (0%)	5
Total	127 (18%)	65 (9%)	496 (72%)	645

<sup>a</sup>Specific social gerontology theories cited:

- 39 Social Constructionist Perspectives
- 39 Life Course Perspective
- 18 Exchange Theory
- 9 Feminist Theories
- 7 Modernization Theory
- 6 Political Economy of Aging
- 5 Critical Theory
- 4 Age Stratification Perspective
- 4 Activity Theory
- 3 Continuity Theory
- 2 Disengagement Theory

should stand on their own, without formal explanations of how their findings relate to previous theory-based explanations in the sociology of aging.

We suggest that the ad hoc, largely descriptive, model-based (rather than explanatory or theory-based) approach to research is ineffectual, over time. If authors, journal reviewers, and editors ignore the need for explicit explanation in data analyses, it is not likely that we will achieve much cumulative knowledge development. If we ignore the attempts of previous scholars to search for explanations, especially in light of mainstream social theories, it is not likely that we will build “shoulders of giants” upon which future researchers may stand.

Yet there are a number of theoretical traditions that have been emerging within the sociology of aging that do provide useful explanatory frameworks for empirical findings. As seen in Table 1, the most frequently cited of these during 1990–94 are the social constructionist, life course, and exchange perspectives, followed by feminist, political economy, age stratification, and critical theory. Later in this article we summarize the explanatory focus of each of these theoretical perspectives, hoping to encourage future researchers (and journal reviewers) to take advantage of the insights these theories can provide in explaining and understanding empirical findings. But first it will be useful to examine some epistemological and historical considerations in theory construction within social gerontology and the sociology of aging.

#### *Methods, Explanation, and Understanding*

In the social sciences today, scholars have addressed empirical research questions from one of two approaches to theory development: *positivistic* or *interpretive* epistemolog-

ical frameworks. The *positivistic* paradigm has been the traditional method of discovery in science since the early 19th century, and here the theory-building process involves several stages: (1) observation and description of data; (2) classification of observed data into categories reflecting similarities and differences; (3) explanation of the differences observed; and (4) prediction (Achenbaum and Bengtson, 1994; Schrag, 1967). This is a cybernetic process involving informational feedback, whereby hypotheses defined on the basis of previous findings and theory are judged by current empirical results, and where researchers are continually looking for confirming or contradictory evidence by which to refine or dismiss theory. Often the process of theory development leads to a further step (5) of intervention: controlling diseases, developing more effective service delivery systems, improving lives. Intervention — to alter and to improve — is the goal of applied science, just as it is the goal of policies and programs for the elderly. In the sociology of aging today most analyses based on quantitative data (especially from large survey or population records) seem to be based on the positivistic paradigm, although — unfortunately — explicit hypothesis-testing is a step that seems not to be required by gerontology journal reviewers as an epistemological tool.

By contrast, *interpretive* researchers in the sociology of aging emphasize *understanding* and *meaning* in the development of theory and are less concerned with *prediction* and *control*. Following the tradition articulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), many interpretive researchers attempt to begin their data-gathering with a minimum of a priori assumptions concerning relationships between phenomena. As observations are made and data collected, themes of meaning begin to emerge, and researchers use these patterns to

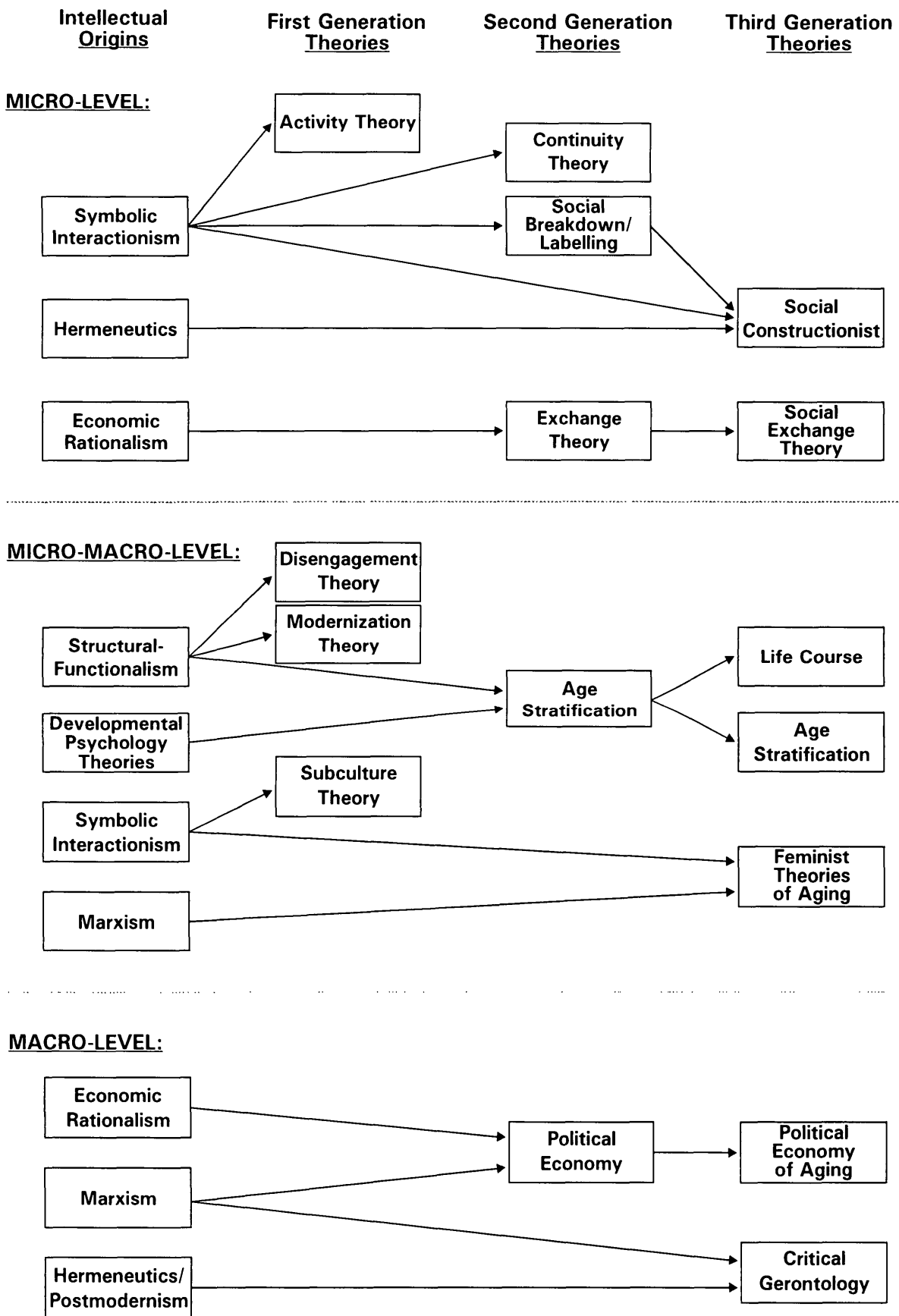


Figure 1. The generation of theories in social gerontology.

guide understandings and explanations about their findings. Advocates of this approach emphasize that it allows for the discovery of new research questions and a better understanding of how social worlds are interpreted. Some interpretive researchers, in particular those taking seriously the “critical theory” approach in gerontology, argue that the positivist paradigm is inherently value-laden, which obscures understanding of nonanticipated empirical observations. Many researchers who use the interpretive paradigm are examining research problems at the micro-social level of analysis, based on smaller samples of informants with whom the researcher can gather extensive verbal or observational data.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that theory development is seen as essential by both positivistic and interpretive researchers in the sociology of aging (Climo, 1992; Gubrium and Wallace, 1990; Hendricks, 1992; Marshall, 1996; Passuth and Bengtson, 1988; Turner, 1982).

### *The Historical Foundations of Our Explanations*

In the relatively short history of gerontology much intellectual effort has been invested in theory building. The pioneering work of early researchers on aging, such as Hall (1922), Cowdry (1939), Linton (1942), Parsons (1942), and Havighurst (1943), integrated empirical findings into theoretical insights and established the foundations of gerontology, as described in Achenbaum's (1995) comprehensive examination of the emergence of gerontology as a science. Out of these grew the 10 sociological theories of aging summarized a decade ago by Passuth and Bengtson (1988), who described their antecedents in more general social theory. Four of these theories, published between 1949 and 1969, may be termed the “first generation” of social gerontology theories, to borrow the apt metaphor that Hendricks (1992) has introduced (see Figure 1): activity theory, disengagement theory, modernization theory, and subculture theory of aging. The most explicitly developed of these, the “disengagement theory of aging” (Cumming and Henry, 1961), attempted to explain age-related decreases in social interaction, psychological involvement, and biophysiological decrements in terms of a unified, structural-functional rationale: aging individuals must inevitably begin to withdraw from society in anticipation of death, so they (and their social networks) withdraw from engagements prior to death. Achenbaum and Bengtson (1994) have described the subsequent history of disengagement theory, and why it was unfortunately discounted by most gerontologists only a few years following its introduction: it attempted to explain both macro- and micro-level changes with one grand theory, and the data cited in support of this explanation were simply not sufficient to support its claims. In a second period of theoretical development, from about 1970 to 1985, new theoretical perspectives emerged such as continuity theory (Atchley, 1993), social breakdown/competence theory (Kuypers and Bengtson, 1973), exchange theory (Dowd, 1975), life course (Dannefer, 1984a), age stratification (Riley, Johnson, and Foner, 1972), and political economy of aging (Estes et al., 1984). These can be termed the “second generation” because some built on (or rejected) the first set of theories, while others emerged from older and more basic sociological traditions (see Hendricks, 1992).

Since the late 1980s, many of these theories have been refined and reformulated; at the same time, new theories and perspectives have emerged. We have depicted the progression of these “third-generation” explanatory developments in Figure 1. Many third-generation theories are multidisciplinary, drawing from sociology, psychology, history, and economics. In contrast to earlier theoretical formulations, they reflect a more limited level of analyses, attempting to explain or understand aging phenomena that occur at either the micro-social (individual, group, and family) or macro-social (age group and population) levels of society — but not both.

The distinctions drawn in Figure 1 between first-, second-, and third-generation theories are open to interpretation, and other scholars may disagree with our classification. Nevertheless, the “generations of theories” metaphor is helpful in understanding our central point: that current theories in social gerontology and the sociology of aging have an intellectual history which is important to recognize, since previous successes (and failures) at explanation provide crucial viewpoints from which to assess the adequacy of our own empirical efforts. It should also be pointed out that the distinction drawn between micro-, micro-macro, and macro-social levels of analysis in Figure 1 is somewhat arbitrary. Micro-social level theories focus on individual agency, that is, the individual and his/her social interactions, while macro-social level theories examine social structures or structural elements as they influence experiences and behaviors. Some social processes operate on both levels, as will be noted in the discussion of several theories below. Marshall (1995) uses a similar organizational typology in his recent landmark review of social science theories in aging, differentiating between macro-level, micro-level, and what he calls “bridging” perspectives. He also makes a second distinction between “normative” and “interpretive” theorizing — the first more common among researchers using the positivistic epistemological paradigm, and the second more linked to qualitative research approaches.

The point we want to emphasize is this: many contemporary researchers appear unaware of (or consider as irrelevant) the significant theoretical traditions that have developed in our field as indicated by the analysis in Table 1 concerning theory content in sociology of aging journal articles. Thus, in the remainder of this article we provide an overview of the most frequently cited theoretical perspectives in the sociology of aging from 1990–94. For each of these we describe: (1) the scholarly origins of the theory or perspective; (2) the research problems that the theoretical perspective attempts to explain (e.g., the research questions which are addressed); (3) some of the key concepts used in analyses; (4) recent examples of the theoretical perspective applied to specific research problems; (5) some comments about the contributions and limitations of each perspective.

### **Theoretical Perspectives at Micro-Social Levels of Analysis**

While both the social constructionist perspective and social exchange theories are micro-social in orientation, they stem from different theoretical traditions. Social constructionism tends to employ interpretive frameworks in order to under-

stand the problems of aging, often using qualitative research techniques. In contrast, social exchange theories rely more on the positivist tradition of research, using quantitative analyses of interactions that occur as individuals age.

### *Social Constructionist Perspectives*

What has recently become known as the “social constructionist” perspective of aging reflects a long tradition of micro-level analysis in the social sciences focusing on individual agency and social behavior within larger structures of society: symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), phenomenology (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967). Following an even earlier tradition pioneered by Max Weber (1905/1955), social constructionism uses hermeneutic approaches, the science and methods of interpretation.

It may be argued that few of the emerging social constructionist theories have built explicitly upon earlier micro-level gerontological theories, and only recently have social constructionist theories gained recognition in gerontology (Neugarten, 1985). Some earlier theories, such as Kuypers and Bengtson’s (1973) social breakdown theory which called attention to the process of “labeling” older individuals as incompetent at both the micro- and macro-levels of social mechanisms, have received attention primarily as intervention strategies for practitioners. Other theoretical approaches reflect epistemological continuity across time — for example, the work of Gubrium, whose *Living and Dying at Murray Manor* (1975) was an early application of ethnomethodology in social gerontology and whose *Speaking of Life: Horizons of Meaning for Nursing Home Residents* (1993a) expands this tradition.

Researchers who employ social constructionist theories emphasize their interest in *understanding*, if not *explaining* (a distinction that is important to many scholars in this tradition), individual processes of aging as influenced by social definitions and social structures. First, by examining the social construction of age and aging, these researchers link individuals to social-structural contexts. For example, labeling the elderly as dependent, asexual, or deviant is defined socially, as can be seen by examining attitudes toward aging and stereotypes of the aged. Second, these theories explore the “situational, emergent and constitutive features of aging” (Passuth and Bengtson, 1988, p. 345) by examining how social meanings of age and self-conceptions of age arise through negotiation and discourse. Third, social constructionist theories of aging emphasize that social reality shifts over time, reflecting the differing life situations and social roles that come with maturation (Dannefer and Perlmutter, 1990; Kuypers and Bengtson, 1973). Key concepts of social constructionist theories of aging include: social meaning, social realities, social relations, attitudes toward aging and the aged, life events, and timing.

Examples of this perspective include Gubrium’s (1993a) investigation concerning the subjective meanings of quality of care and quality of life for residents of nursing homes. His goal was to explore, from the interpretive tradition, “the horizons of meanings drawn by the patterns of narrative linkages” that each resident constructs from her or his own experiences out of the home (Gubrium, 1993a, p. 9). By

focusing on life narratives rather than life histories, Gubrium emphasized subjective meanings: how qualities of life “might be included and evaluated in the life by the experiencing subject whose life it is” (p. 186). This cannot be measured, he argued, by predefined measurement scales such as those used by most survey researchers.

Similarly, Kaufman (1994) examined how frailty “is socially produced through the interaction of older individuals, their caregivers, and their health professionals” (p. 49). Her analysis focuses on (1) how the subjective experience of frailty becomes interpreted and defined in a “medical/social idiom”; (2) how frailty is framed in terms of surveillance and independence; (3) how rules set out by the professional team become “facts.” A similar perspective was reflected in Lyman’s (1993) analysis of stress in caregiving relationships for Alzheimer’s patients.

Diamond (1992) investigated the social world of nursing homes through the eyes of a participant observer, drawing upon his three years as a nursing assistant. He described the social construction of this job, discussing how the meanings of caring are constantly negotiated as the invisible work of caring for the emotional needs of elderly residents clashes with the daily assigned duties of nursing assistants. Diamond illustrated how the positions of patients are also being negotiated as they learn “patienthood,” and how patients reconcile interactions that clearly would be inappropriate or unnatural in the outside world but are unavoidable in the institutionalized setting of the nursing home.

*Comments.* — Social constructionist theories were among the most frequently cited perspectives in our review of recent gerontological research (see Table 1). These micro-level theories contribute to social gerontology in several different ways. First, social constructionist theories recognize how individuals actively participate in their everyday lives, creating and maintaining social meanings for themselves and those around them. These “social processes of interaction” can be seen as dialectical — individual behavior produces a “reality” which in turn structures individual lives (Dannefer and Perlmutter, 1990, p. 120). Second, this perspective is particularly useful in the multidisciplinary setting of social gerontology because it can be adapted to research on a wide array of topics. Third, social constructionist theories have influenced other contemporary social gerontological theories, particularly feminist and critical theories.

At the same time, criticisms of social constructionist theoretical perspectives in aging should be noted. First, by focusing on the individual level, social constructionist theories may obscure macro-level effects such as cohort, historical, and age stratification influences (Passuth and Bengtson, 1988). Second, those using this perspective often give limited attention to social structure (Baars, 1991) and may minimize the role of social power. Third, to researchers trained in the positivist tradition, social constructionist theories may seem impossible to falsify more like assumptions than disprovable propositions awaiting evidence.

### *Social Exchange Theories*

The origins of social exchange theory in sociology are reflected in the classic formulations by Homans (1961) and

Blau (1964) and work in economics assuming a rational model of decision-making behavior developed in the 1930s (for a discussion see Lindblom, 1959). In social gerontology, Dowd (1975) and Bengtson and Dowd (1981) drew from these theorists to suggest that the reason there was decreased interaction between the old and the young, relative to the middle-aged and the young, was that the old had fewer resources to offer in the social exchanges and thus had less to bring to the encounter. More recently, research in the areas of social support and intergenerational transfers has used the social exchange framework as a starting point for explanations of the occurrence of intergenerational social and financial exchanges, the structure of exchanges (who gives and who receives), and the patterns of these exchanges under varying conditions (Antonucci, 1985; Cox and Rank, 1992; Eggebeen and Hogan, 1990; Hogan, Eggebeen, and Clogg, 1993).

Applied to aging, this perspective attempts to account for exchange behavior between individuals of different ages as a result of the shift in roles, skills, and resources that accompanies advancing age (Hendricks, 1995). Second, social exchange theories of aging offer explanations of the balance (or lack thereof) in what is received and given between generations. In the case of unbalanced social exchanges, the analysis turns to the perceived costs and benefits of the exchange and whether the calculations are rational and self-interested or altruistic in order to understand the structure of the exchange. For example, one line of inquiry might consider why elderly persons withdraw from interactions with some people and increase interactions with others. A third concern of social exchange theories of aging is to understand how exchange behaviors reflect the changing circumstances of the elderly and those with whom they interact, such as family members or others who are in their social support network.

A central assumption in the social exchange framework is that the various actors (such as parent and child or elder and youth) each bring resources to the interaction or exchange, and that resources need not be material and will most likely be unequal. A second assumption is that actors will only continue to engage in exchanges for as long as the benefits are greater than the costs and while there are no better alternatives (Hendricks, 1995). Third, it is assumed that exchanges are governed by norms of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960): when we give something, we trust that something of equal value will be reciprocated. The key concepts used in social exchange explanations include: social costs and benefits, social resources, social interaction/contact, reciprocity norms, social power, and altruism.

Exchange theory has been used as an explanatory framework in many recent studies in the sociology of aging, particularly those focusing on intergenerational social support and transfers. Hogan, Eggebeen, and Clogg (1993) found that social support exchanges in families are either constrained or aided by family structure, including opportunities for family interactions, and by family needs — all part of the social resources brought to bear on exchanges in families. At the macro-social level of analysis, Schlesinger and Kronebusch (1994a, 1994b) applied these ideas to findings from the AARP “Generational Linkages” survey con-

cerning perceptions of social justice and the amount of social support and volunteer time given and received between age groups. At the micro-social level of analysis, Bernheim, Shleifer, and Summers (1985) reported that contact between parents and children was greater when parents had a larger amount of “bequeathable wealth.” This supports earlier work by Sussman, Cates, and Smith (1970), which indicated that children who took care of their elderly parents inherited the largest share of their parents’ property. In both studies, exchanges persisted because adult children judged the benefits of an inheritance to be greater than the costs parental dependency entailed.

Social exchange theories of aging have also been applied to housing policy. Danigelis and Fengler (1991) described a program of intergenerational homesharing in which older homeowners share extra rooms with college students or couples in exchange for housekeeping or light caregiving. Homesharing arrangements “maximized the possibility of mutual satisfaction between elders and their younger sharers” (p. 140), and provide one example of a transaction in which elderly people have an equal amount of resources with which to enter the social exchange.

Hendricks (1995) noted that a new line of inquiry utilizing social exchange theories of aging has been in the analysis of how older persons “impose their will” in various situations to influence the behavioral patterns of others. A recent example of social exchange theory applied to micro-social phenomena of social aging, Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) (Carstensen, 1992, 1993), illustrates this. SST, which has its origins in developmental psychology — particularly the selective optimization with compensation model developed by Baltes and Baltes (1990) — suggests that reasons for social interaction and the exchange of nonmaterial resources change over the life course from a need to acquire information, to affirmation of self-concept, to regulation of emotion. Through mechanisms of socioemotional selectivity — reflecting an ability by older persons to impose their will on interactions, individuals reduce interactions with some people over time while increasing emotional closeness with significant others, such as an adult child or an aging sibling. In this model, social contact is explained by the self-interested need for emotional closeness with significant others, which leads to increasingly selective interactions with others in advancing age. Interactions reflect the rewarding exchange of emotional support by older persons with a select group of individuals. The process described by SST is a developmental explanation for why the social exchange and interaction network of older persons is reduced over time (a phenomenon which disengagement theory attempted to explain three decades earlier, as Carstensen notes).

*Comments.* — The major contributions of exchange theory in the sociology of aging include its ability to explain exchanges of contact and social support, as well as how these exchanges are influenced by emotional, social, or financial resources. Carstensen’s (1993) SST, for example, provides a concise developmental-behavioral explanation for selective interaction in old age, focusing on the elderly and *their* self-interested reasons for interaction and exchange of emotional support (rather than explanations of why youn-

ger persons might interact less with the elderly). Current social exchange theories of aging emphasize that interaction may be driven by emotional needs and resources (for example, altruism in the case of social support) rather than merely the rational calculation of costs and benefits (which has been a criticism of past exchange formulations). Implicit in exchange theory is the notion of power — that individuals with greater social resources or interactional opportunities have more power in exchanges, a proposition first introduced by Simmel (1904/1966). This focus on social power, in combination with the emphasis on opportunity structures, provides a link to the political economy of aging, a macro-social theoretical perspective reviewed in a later section.

However, several cautions should be mentioned. First, simplistic formulations of social exchange theories that are strictly economically based ignore the fact that many interactions are not driven solely by rationality, and may in fact be guided by other irrational motivations such as altruism or affection. Indeed, individuals may not ever have all the information necessary in order to make a purely rational exchange decision. Second, these models are limited in cases where situations are completely reciprocal; social exchanges are best understood when they are imbalanced because then the disparity in the exchange is what is explained. Third, adding a longitudinal component to exchanges — as must be done when considering aging and changes in life-cycle roles and levels of dependency — enhances the usefulness of exchange theories but increases the complexity of assessing exchange relationships, interactions, and the perceived rewards and costs. Fourth, in contrast to social constructionist theories, the quality and the meaning of the exchanges are virtually ignored in exchange theories; the positivist tradition underlying this perspective leads to the calculation of exchanges and prediction of exchange behaviors, rather than to the interpretation of exchange events.

### Theories at Both Micro- and Macro-Social Levels of Analysis

Bridging both the micro- and macro-social levels of analysis, the life course perspective and feminist theories incorporate the dynamics and social processes of aging that occur at *both* levels of analysis. Each perspective simultaneously highlights aspects of social interaction and social structure in order to understand and explain research findings in aging.

#### *The Life Course Perspective*

The intellectual origins of the life course perspective are rooted in the 19th-century theory developed by social economist Rowntree (1901) which provided explanations of poverty in terms of stages in family structure; early anthropologists' analyses of age-grading (Mead, 1934; Van Gennep, 1908/1960); Havighurst's (1943) categorization of "developmental tasks" across the life course, and Erikson's (1950) stage theory of psychosocial development; the seminal analysis by Cain (1964) concerning the life course and social structure; and the work of Riley and her associates culminating in the age stratification perspective (Riley, Johnson, and

Foner, 1972). As it has evolved in the area of aging, the life course perspective reflects several research traditions at the micro-social level, as evidenced by the work of Hill and Duvall (1948), Elder (1971, 1991), Riegel (1977), Hagestad and Neugarten (1985), Hagestad (1990), and Elder, Rudkin, and Conger (1994). At the macro-social level the perspective is reflected in work by Clausen (1972), Hareven (1978), Kohli (1986, 1988), and Mayer (1986, 1988).

It is debatable whether the life course perspective should be considered a theory, a model, or a paradigm (Bengtson and Allen, 1993; Dannefer, 1984a, 1984b; Marshall, 1995). In any event it represents a convergence of thinking in sociology and psychology about processes at both macro- and micro-social levels of analysis and for both populations and individuals over time. Researchers who incorporate the life course perspective in their work are attempting to explain the following: (1) the dynamic, contextual, and processual nature of aging; (2) age-related transitions and life trajectories; (3) how aging is related to and shaped by social contexts, cultural meanings, and social structural location; and (4) how time, period, and cohort shape the aging process for individuals, as well as for social groups (Baltes, 1987; Bengtson and Allen, 1993; Elder, 1991, 1992; George, 1993). Although studies to date have not been able to incorporate all four of these aspects of the life course perspective, new methodological advances suggest such a multi-level, cross-time model in the future (Schaie, 1992; Schaie and Willis, 1995). Key concepts used in life course analysis (for definitions see Bengtson and Allen, 1993) include: temporal contexts, social time clocks, and norms of "on-time" and "off-time" events; social ecology (structural location, social construction, and micro-macro connections); dialectic, interactive, and non-linear processes; heterogeneity in life trajectories and transitions; and, of course, age roles and norms.

Elder, one of the pioneers in developing the life course perspective, provides a recent example in an analysis of psychological stress. Elder, George, and Shanahan (1996) focused on life course concepts of social context, structural location, social construction, age roles and norms, and major life transitions in their discussion of how caregiving relates to stress. They noted that, due to historical and demographic changes, caregiving is now a standardized (or at least predictable) part of the life course. However, its timing and duration have great variability, and its meaning is culturally interpreted based on a lifetime of experiences rather than the current stressful or beneficial event of caregiving.

Similarly, O'Rand (1996) uses the concept of cumulative advantage-disadvantage across the life course, building on earlier work by Dannefer (1988; Dannefer and Sell, 1988) and Crystal and Shea (1990). O'Rand uses the life course perspective to examine the macro-level issue of variations in aggregate individual savings and private pensions; she also operationalizes the concept of heterogeneity in analyzing employment and retirement trajectories.

Other applications of the life course perspective at the macro-social level are reflected in analyses by Kohli (1988) and Mayer (1986). Both independently demonstrated the usefulness of examining social structure, organization, and



life events in the explanation of the effects of history on the behavior of cohorts. Kohli (1986, 1988) discussed the "standardization of the life course" focusing on the "work society" as a social structure that influences individual lives. The question Kohli raised is this: "Given that social life is structured around work and its organization, how can we theoretically cope with a situation in which a large (and still growing) part of the population has left the domain of formally organized work, and left it for good?" (1988, p. 371). His focus on the social structure of work suggests that the "typical" life course has become organized around gainful employment (Kohli and Meyer, 1986); the last standardized part of the life course is, however, spent organized around retirement. Similarly, Mayer (1986) suggested a standardized life course but points to the meaning and satisfaction that can be obtained from such a socially institutionalized life course because future events are anticipated and known.

*Comments.* — The life course perspective was one of the two most frequently cited perspectives in our review of current journal articles (see Table 1); it has provided major contributions to the study of aging in the social sciences. First, the life course perspective attempts to bridge the macro- and micro-levels of social-structural analyses by incorporating the effects of history, social structure, and individual meaning into theoretical and analytical models. These explanatory mechanisms are possible because of methodological advances concerning macro-micro longitudinal issues in models of individual change over time (Campbell and O'Rand, 1988; Schaie, 1988). Second, this approach is interdisciplinary, or at least multidisciplinary, in content and methods: it brings together seemingly disparate approaches to the life course, reflected in traditional academic disciplines such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and history, and suggests what is common to each of these approaches as well as how they are complementary (Bengtson and Allen, 1993). Third, the life course approach is explicitly dynamic: rather than focusing on one segment of the life of an individual or a cohort, it attempts to reflect the life cycle in its entirety and allows for deviations in trajectories (Dannefer and Sell, 1988).

However, as an explanatory vehicle the life course perspective is as yet too broad, or too diffuse in specific conceptual linkages, to be called either a "theory" or a "paradigm." Perhaps the most problematic limitation of the life course perspective is that it is very difficult to incorporate into a single analysis the many contextual variables of the social aging processes that this approach identifies conceptually. For example, data are simply not available to test the effects of age, period, and cohort on behaviors of individuals or groups over time (Campbell and O'Rand, 1988), although the life course conceptual framework suggests these are necessary for full understanding. As the life course perspective has evolved, it is still a guiding framework pointing to a specific set of problems requiring explanation and exploration (George, 1996). Marshall (1995) criticized what he termed the "hegemony of the life course perspective" because of its determinism, but some gerontological theorists might disagree with his criticism because,

as things currently stand, the life course perspective is more a framework than anything else; it has yet to offer many explicit explanations of aging phenomena. Nevertheless, Marshall (1995) advocates the integration of interpretive orientations (such as that reviewed in the discussion of the social constructionist perspective above) with the study of the life course, and several studies have attempted to integrate social constructionist and life course theoretical perspectives (Allen and Chin-Sang, 1990; Rubinstein, 1990).

#### *Feminist Theories and Perspectives*

The origins of feminist theories in social gerontology reflect the diverse tradition of feminist theorizing in sociology and the social sciences (Connell, 1987; Hess and Ferree, 1987; Smith, 1987). Since the 1970s, feminist theorists have highlighted the importance of gender by recognizing the absence of women in social scientific research, rethinking the differences between women and men and examining gender biases within the social sciences (Ferree and Hess, 1987). Feminist theorists argue that gender should be a primary consideration in attempts to understand aging and the aged. Gender is an organizing principle for social life across the life span (Rossi, 1985), which significantly alters the experience of aging (Ginn and Arber, 1995; Hess, 1985). In addition, feminist theorists argue that current theories and models of aging are insufficient because they fail to include gender relations, or the experience of women in the context of aging (Blieszner, 1993; Reinhartz, 1986).

At the macro-level of analyses, feminist perspectives on aging focus on the economic and power relations between older men and women. For example, socialist-feminist theories emphasize the importance of "historical materialism as a basic form of domination" (Hendricks, 1993, p. 115). In micro-level analyses, feminist perspectives postulate that gender must be examined in the context of social meanings. Influenced by symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and ethnomethodology, this strand of feminist theory closely parallels the social constructivist approach discussed earlier. For example, Diamond's (1992) ethnography of nursing assistants was strongly influenced by the work of feminist ethnomethodologist Smith (1987). Feminist theories also attempt to integrate micro and macro approaches to aging by focusing on the links between individuals and social structures, in particular regarding power relations (Bury, 1995; Calasanti, 1996). Key concepts of the feminist perspective in aging include: gender stratification, power structures, social institutions at the macro-level of analysis; and social networks, caregiving and family work, social meanings and identity at the micro-level of analysis.

Calasanti's (1993; Calasanti and Zajicek, 1993) analysis of women's retirement illustrates one application of this perspective. Calasanti argued that women are traditionally ignored in retirement research either because work is assumed to be unimportant to women, or because of the lack of data on women's retirement. She found that occupational segregation and labor market discrimination by gender and race lead to differentials in post-retirement pensions, Social Security, and other forms of income. Moreover, she noted that retirement from paid labor does not release women from the responsibilities of domestic work, which may be

compounded by caregiving responsibilities for partners or older kin.

Stoller (1993) used socialist-feminist theory in aging to examine the organization of informal health care. She focused on the significance of gender for understanding the structure of unpaid help in providing instrumental care for frail elderly kin. In order to better explain structural factors perpetuating gender inequality in caregiving, Stoller argued that caregiver research must incorporate feminist perspectives on unpaid family labor.

A third example of recent feminist theorizing uses a structural approach to differences in aging for women and men. Arber and Ginn (1991) proposed a feminist political economy of aging, arguing that there is differential access to the key material, health, and caring resources which substantially alters the experience of aging for women and men. They emphasized that "a person's role in production and reproduction during working life has a profound influence on the material and health resources they have at their disposal" (p. 178). Older women's diminished access to power is compounded by the interrelationship of these factors.

*Comments.* — Although feminist theories are new to the field and are less frequently cited than established modes of explanation such as social constructionist, life course, and exchange theories, they have much to contribute to social gerontology. First, feminist perspectives focus on the needs of the majority of the aging population, women; yet at the same time, they emphasize the need to explore other forms of difference among the aged. Feminists attempt to create a more inclusive portrait of aging through challenging of traditional androcentric biases (Calasanti, 1996; Russell, 1987). Second, by addressing issues that are relevant to the life worlds of everyday women, feminist research in gerontology is linked to practice (Arber and Ginn, 1991; MacDaniel, 1989). Third, feminist theorists provide models for macro-micro conceptual linkages in the sociology of aging by addressing both structural and individual levels of theory (Bury, 1995; Lopata, 1995). Finally, feminist gerontologists critique the ageist biases in "mainstream" feminist theories which traditionally ignore issues of age (McMullin, 1995; Reinhartz, 1986).

Feminist theories of aging are open to several criticisms. As with the life course perspective, they are as yet too broad and unfocused to represent a single theoretical tradition. Perhaps this is due to the fact that feminist theories challenge most mainstream theories of aging by connecting gender and aging (Arber and Ginn, 1995) and incorporating diversity (Calasanti, 1996). Second, feminist theories face the criticism that they are partisan or value-laden. Feminist theorists assert that all social science is based on underlying systems of values as do the critical theorists discussed later; while most feminist theorists attempt to explicitly state their perspectives when presenting their research, their partisanship is often criticized. Third, feminist research in aging for the most part has ignored the gendered component of aging for men (Bengtson, Rosenthal, and Burton, 1996). Thompson (1994) has argued that academic discourse which focuses on the "feminization of aging" denies issues of men, masculinity, and age.

### Theories at the Macro-Social Level of Analysis

At the macro-social level of analysis, three perspectives — age stratification, political economy of aging, and critical theory — each provide understanding of how social structures influence experiences and behaviors. Age stratification is rooted in the theoretical tradition of structural-functionalism and largely approaches the study of divisions among groups and cohorts from a positivist framework. Political economy of aging is theoretically rooted in Marxian traditions, but takes mainly a structural and economic approach to questions of aging, relying on both interpretive and positivist techniques in pursuit of understanding or prediction and control. Critical theory also has its roots in Marxian theoretical traditions, but follows the path of hermeneutic and cultural analysis, which relies almost exclusively on interpretive approaches to theorizing. "Postmodern" theory (Lyotard, 1984), which is only beginning to be applied to social gerontology (Featherstone, 1989), combines elements of political economy and critical theory.

#### *The Age Stratification (Age and Society) Perspective*

Over the past 25 years Riley and her colleagues have put forth a uniquely sociology-of-aging perspective, one which focuses on the role of social structures in the process of individual aging and the stratification by age in the society. Recently Riley (1994) has suggested that these efforts are better described under the label of the "aging and society paradigm." Certainly the age stratification perspective represents one of the oldest traditions of macro-level theorizing in social gerontology. Riley, Foner, and Waring (1988) trace this perspective's intellectual roots to structural functionalism, particularly the works of sociologists Sorokin (1947), Mannheim (1928/1952) and, later, Parsons (1942). They note three main components to this "paradigm": (1) studying the movement of age cohorts across time in order to identify similarities and differences between them; (2) examining the asynchrony between structural and individual change over time; and (3) exploring the interdependence of age cohorts and social structures. Key concepts of the age and society perspective include: age cohorts, social structures, structural lag, and cohort flow.

Recently Riley and her associates have applied the age and society perspective to the concept of *structural lag* (Riley, Kahn, and Foner, 1994; Riley and Riley, 1994). Structural lag occurs when social structures cannot keep pace with the changes in population dynamics and individual lives (Riley and Loscocco, 1994), of which the most obvious example is the increase in average life expectancy beyond age 65 and the lack of available societal structures to accommodate or utilize post-retirement elders. Using the age and society perspective, Riley and Loscocco argue that a more age-integrated society can compensate for structural lag. They discuss how policy changes such as extended time off for education or family can bring social structures in balance with individuals' lives, by restructuring the social institutions of work, education, and the family.

A second application of the age stratification perspective concerns the influences of social change on the family. Riley and Riley (1993) argue that contemporary social change has

created a new dimension to extended family relationships which they call a *latent matrix of kin connections*. Because successive cohorts are living longer lives, individuals remain in a large and complex web of family connections throughout their lives. They used the age stratification perspective to explain how kinship patterns among younger cohorts suggest a shift toward a latent kin matrix of support. Current social trends such as remarriage, cohabitation, and reliance on fictive kin, as well as the persistence of intergenerational relationships, provide possible kin support networks which can be called on in times of need throughout an individual's life course, despite dissolutions of nuclear family ties through divorce.

*Comments.* — The age stratification perspective has contributed a great deal to explanation in social gerontology. First, it remains one of the few theoretical perspectives to link theories in aging to mainstream sociology; it was among the first to bring attention to the notion of aging and social structures (Marshall, 1996). Second, age stratification has played a crucial role in disentangling the effects of cross-sectional age stratification from longitudinal life course patterns (aging). Third, it provides valuable links between individual development and historical change. The age stratification perspective calls attention to variation within the aged population by cohorts; it provides new ways to explore differences related to time, period, and cohort.

The age stratification perspective has been criticized on several grounds. First, despite its focus on macro-level social relations, it does not adequately address issues of power (Marshall, 1995). It ignores the ways in which social structures may be controlled by an elite few. A critical theorist would argue that, since change is not in the interest of those in power, social structures may continue to "lag." Second, because it focuses on social structures, the age stratification perspective appears to neglect individual agency (Hendricks, 1992). Although Riley (1994) suggests that this is a misinterpretation based on connotations of the "stratification" label, recent work has been inconclusive in linking individuals' roles to social structures and events. Third, the perspective may not adequately recognize variability *within* age cohorts, an important factor for critical gerontologists such as Dannefer (1988). By systematically exploring heterogeneity and aging, the age and society perspective could inform research not just on cohort flow, but could also shape findings on the interactions between age cohort and the dimensions of social differentiation such as race, class, and gender.

#### *Political Economy of Aging*

The political economy orientation has its classical origins in Marxism (Marx, 1967/1867), conflict theory (Simmel, 1904/1966), and critical theory (reviewed in the following section), and developed as a reaction to structural-functionalism. Political economy theory in aging reflects several traditions, including work by Estes (1979), Graebner (1981), Walker (1981), Olson (1982), Guillemard (1983), Myles (1984), Williamson, Shindul, and Evans (1985), and Quadagno (1988). This perspective attempts to explain how the interaction of economic and political forces determines

how social resources are allocated, and how variations in the treatment and status of the elderly can be understood by examining public policies, economic trends, and social structural factors (Minkler, 1984; Walker, 1981). Political economy perspectives applied to aging maintain that socio-economic and political constraints shape the experience of aging; they result in the loss of power, autonomy, and influence for older persons. Life experiences are seen as being patterned not only by age, but also by class, gender, and race and ethnicity. These structural factors, often institutionalized or reinforced by economic and public policy, constrain opportunities, choices, and experiences of later life. Key concepts used in political economy explanations include: structural constraints, control of social resources, marginalization, and social class.

Examples of this perspective applied to aging are found in recent examinations of health care. Olson (1982), Estes et al. (1984), Williamson, Shindul, and Evans (1985), and Stoller (1993) have examined the problem of access to health care for older Americans within a political economy theoretical perspective. While each place emphasis on different factors within the political and economic structure, they all conclude the following: health care for America's elderly has become an economic and bureaucratic activity promoting capital (profit) and thus economic control of the elderly by managing their dependencies through control of medical resources. Moreover, they argue that the current structure of the health care industry disadvantages subgroups of the older population such as minorities, women, and those who are poor.

In linking the social construction of disease with aging policy and the health care industry, Robertson (1991) combined a political economy framework with a social constructionist perspective to explain the politics of Alzheimer's disease and its consequence, what she calls "apocalyptic demography." She argued that Alzheimer's has been politicized in a way that minimizes the social and economic contexts of labeling, caregiving power relations, medical control, and increased spending on health care. She concluded that the construction and politicization of Alzheimer's should be critically evaluated in order to counter claims of impending demographic catastrophes: social structural contexts, constraints, and problem construction are the real culprits for the compromised status and treatment of the elderly in American society.

Overbo and Minkler (1993) combined a political economy perspective with critical gerontology (reviewed next) and a feminist perspective to explore the lives of older women, demonstrating how "multiple jeopardies" face older women who are poor and also minority group members. They argue that poor minorities experience inequalities that persist into old age, interacting with inequities that are structured and maintained through old age policies. Walker (1993) has applied the political economy perspective to the problem of intergenerational relationships and "generational equity." He pointed out the bridge between macro-social public policy and micro-social caring relationships, such as the care of aging family members, noting how state policies affect family relationships.

In an extensive cross-cultural study, Keith et al. (1994)

have examined variations in the influence of economic and political forces and the subsequent well-being and economic circumstances of the elderly. They found that as socioeconomic structures changed, not all elderly were negatively impacted by these forces. For example, the elderly in a community in Ireland were not marginalized despite state intervention on their behalf and the use of chronological age to determine entitlement to income and health care resources.

The political economy of aging has been aptly applied to such diverse areas as retirement, pensions, "gray" marketing, caregiving, community services, and the nursing home industry (see Minkler and Estes, 1991).

*Comments.* — The political economy perspective emphasizes influences that social structure, economics, and public policy have on elderly individuals, and the limits these place on the options available to the elderly. When combined with a critical theory analysis, the political economy perspective suggests that the experience of aging is variable based on such structural constraints as social class or minority group status. Political economy of aging can also be linked with social constructionist perspectives to point to the ways in which structural forces manage and control the social construction of aging and how old age is experienced.

One criticism of the political economy framework is that it relies too much on social structure and economic determinism to explain the status of the elderly. Political economists assume that conflicts exist between the elderly and economic/political institutions, and that dominance, control, and marginalization of the elderly are common in today's social structures. Whether or not this is accurate, it suggests individuals are passive reactors to structural forces, ignoring individual agency. Second, it has been argued that this perspective overstates the poor socioeconomic status of the elderly and paints a picture of all elders as powerless, forced to exist under oppressive structural arrangements with no control over their own lives. Third, as cross-cultural analyses suggest, there are crucial variations in the meaning of age and dependency in different social settings. Not all states of dependency are considered negative.

A relatively new twist in the political economy perspective has been to combine it with a "moral economy of aging" approach, a development which deals with the criticism that political economy is too focused on economics and social control. By examining the "shared moral assumptions about reciprocity and fairness" (Minkler and Cole, 1991, p. 45), a more thoughtful analysis of oppressive and emancipated situations is yielded. This is a theoretical orientation that is related to critical theory, reviewed next.

### *Critical Theory*

Critical perspectives of aging are reflected in a variety of theoretical trends in contemporary social gerontology including the political economy of aging, feminist theories, theories of diversity, and humanistic gerontology (Minkler, 1996; Phillipson, 1996). Following critical traditions including the "Frankfurt school" of Critical Theory (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944; Habermas, 1981/1984), interpretive perspectives of German philosophy (Husserl, 1965; Schutz,

1967), structural approaches to the political economy (Marx, 1967/1867) and post-structuralism (Foucault, 1979), these perspectives share a common focus in criticizing "the process of power" (Baars, 1991, p.235). While the basic tenets of critical theory in aging can be traced to the "radical gerontology" proposed two decades ago by Marshall and Tindale (1978), "critical gerontology" has developed two distinct patterns. One focuses on the humanistic dimensions and the other on the structural components.

Leading the humanistic discourse, Moody (1988, 1993) identified four goals of critical gerontology: (1) to theorize subjective and interpretive dimensions of aging; (2) to focus not on technical advancement but on praxis, defined as action of involvement in practical change (such as public policy); (3) to link academics and practitioners through praxis; (4) to produce "emancipatory knowledge." On the other hand, Dannefer (1994) has suggested that critical gerontology should not merely critique existing theory but create positive models of aging emphasizing strengths and diversity of age. Here the focus is on the critique of knowledge, culture, and the economy. In order to reach the goals of critical gerontology, researchers focus on the key concepts of power, social action, and social meanings in examining the social aspects of age and aging.

Using a humanistic critical gerontological framework, Atchley (1993) has conceptualized retirement in three ways: (1) as a social institution, (2) as a body of distributional issues, and (3) as a human life stage. Critical gerontology questions the taken-for-granted assumptions behind each of these categories of retirement, asking *who benefits* from each conceptualization. Retirement must be understood as an emancipatory stage in the life course, according to Atchley; but this will not be accomplished in a society where retirements are coerced or where retirees are viewed as disposable populations. Atchley suggests that critical gerontology must question traditional positivistic assumptions and measures in an attempt to understand the multiple dimensions of retirement.

Tornstam (1992) applied the perspectives of critical gerontology to the field itself and argues that conventional gerontology is based on limited positivist notions of knowledge and science producing a model of aging based only on social problems. By contrast, a more humane gerontological approach would allow the aged, themselves, to define the research questions — for example, Tornstam's (1992, 1996) own theory of "gerotranscendence."

On a different level, Dannefer (1988) has used a critical approach to examine the "neglect of variability" in the study of aging. Dannefer argues that the concept of increasing heterogeneity with age does not fit into existing theoretical frameworks of social gerontology, most of which he suggests are primarily individual level perspectives emphasizing development and socialization and focusing on normative aging. (An exception is the life course perspective, which to some extent does incorporate heterogeneity into its explanatory framework.) In consequence, many theories frequently equate variation with deviance, and thus neglect or discount it. Through critically examining traditional gerontology and its previous explanatory mechanisms, Dannefer concluded that this neglect of variability is not a simple

matter of timing or method, but rather, it is a reflection of the limitations embedded in traditional positivistic theorizing in social gerontology to date.

*Comments.* — Although it is not often cited or well-understood, critical theory has become the site of much theoretical discourse in contemporary social gerontology (Bookstein and Achenbaum, 1993; Cole et al., 1993; Minkler, 1996; Phillipson, 1996). By questioning theoretical traditions in mainstream social gerontology, critical theory calls attention to other perspectives relevant to understanding aging, often drawing from older traditions in the humanities which may be more relevant to problems involving age (Luborsky and Sankar, 1993). Critical gerontology acknowledges humanistic dimensions of aging (Gubrium, 1993b), a contribution that has influenced current social constructivist and feminist theories of aging. Moreover, the self-reflexive nature of critical theory constantly challenges gerontologists to understand the impact of social research and policy on individuals as they negotiate the challenges of growing older (Tornstam, 1992).

Critical theory is difficult for many social scientists trained under the positivistic paradigm to appreciate. American social gerontologists are rarely schooled in models of social sciences based on European philosophical traditions (Dannefer, 1994; Moody, 1992). Without some understanding of these intellectual origins, critical gerontology may appear unintelligible, an effect compounded by the fact that critical theory itself is highly abstract. Nonetheless, many current scholars using the political economy, feminist, and social constructivist perspectives in aging have found the tradition of critical theory very useful as they develop understanding of empirical observations.

### Discussion

We have argued that researchers should be giving more attention to the process of cumulative theory development in research on aging in the social sciences. Contrary to what many recent contributors to social gerontology journals may seem to assume, theory is not a marginal, meaningless “tacked-on” exercise to presenting results in an empirical paper. Rather, cumulative theory-building represents the core of the foundation of scientific inquiry and knowledge.

First, the systematic progression of knowledge — explanations — over time is the standard by which any field of scholarly or scientific research is judged (Brown, 1986). Second, the way in which a research field deals systematically and explicitly with problems of epistemology and explanation determines its future progress in knowledge-building (Hagstrom, 1965). Third, understanding or discovery of phenomena is seldom achieved by the solo investigator, but rather is a social process within a community of investigators involving discussion and criticism between new and previous findings and explanations (Kuhn, 1962). Fourth, only in the context of such theory-driven debates about empirical findings do “anomalies” surface — findings which cannot be explained or understood within the current body of knowledge. These anomalies (and their emergent explanations) are the basis for “paradigm shifts”

and “scientific revolutions” which can leapfrog the progress of knowledge forward (Kuhn, 1962).

In gerontology today, however, we find ourselves “data-rich but theory-poor” (Birren and Bengtson, 1988: ix). What Bromley (1974) observed about our field is still relevant two decades later: “Much of what we have learned consists of detailed, low-level, empirical observations, lacking system and explanation. It is not sufficient merely to observe that certain age changes take place; we need to know *why* they take place” (p. 372). This echoes what Royce (1965) observed: “A solid observational base is absolutely essential for the growth and development of a young science. But, if it stakes too much of its future on naive empiricism, it runs the same risk of extinction which befell the dinosaur, which could not survive because of an overload of bodily bulk” (p. 447). Our review of articles published between 1990 and 1994 suggests we have reason to worry.

Too seldom in recent years have research articles in the sociology of aging addressed the challenge of theory development. But when researchers have made the effort to utilize theoretical perspectives in predicting relationships and explaining findings, the knowledge base of the field has grown. And a rich diversity of explanatory frameworks at the micro- and macro-level of analysis has emerged, as our evaluations of seven theories in social gerontology demonstrated. Thus, whether we consider the social gerontology and/or sociology of aging a part of “science” (within the positivistic paradigm) or a “field of inquiry” (in the constructivist or humanistic tradition) we should be giving more attention to theory — the cumulative development of explanation and understanding about observations and findings — as we publish the results of our empirical investigations.

A noteworthy illustration of just such a concentrated endeavor is represented in *The Gerontologist* (1996, Vol. 36, No. 2), which published 17 papers from three different symposia on theory development in gerontology and the social sciences under the guest editorship of Jon Hendricks. Moreover, in 1995 the *Canadian Journal of Aging* (Vol. 14, No. 1) devoted an entire issue to reviews of theoretical developments in aging from across the disciplines, from molecular biology to social policy. *The Gerontologist* continued its commitment to encouraging theoretical development and inquiry with the publication of another symposium on progress and pitfalls in gerontological theorizing in the December 1996 issue (Vol. 36, No. 6). It is precisely these kinds of discussion concerning cumulative theory-building which we feel are necessary in order to advance our knowledge and methods of inquiry into the sociology of aging.

Our purpose in this article has been to urge researchers (and journal reviewers) to pay more attention to theory-based attempts to explain and understand empirical results. A second goal has been to provide a useful summary of recent theoretical developments in the social gerontology, including both micro- and macro-level theoretical problems. Third, we have argued that the most credible way for such findings to add to the cumulative development of knowledge is through theory building. Despite the relatively short history of social gerontology and the sociology of aging, our field has accumulated a rich tradition of theory concerning social phenomena and aging reflecting now a “third genera-

tion" of theoretical developments. Using Hendricks' (1992) apt metaphor of "generational succession" in gerontology, we have focused on seven theoretical perspectives reflected in current empirical literature, noting their debt to older, more established traditions in social science theory and social gerontology.

Social constructionist, social exchange, life course, feminist, age stratification, political economy of aging, and critical theory perspectives suggest a rich and diverse theoretical future for knowledge development in social gerontology. For each of these perspectives we have summarized their intellectual origins, explanatory focus, and key theoretical concepts; we have provided examples of recent research applications; and we have commented on their utility as explanatory frameworks. It is clear that no one theory can explain all social aging phenomena. Each of these theories represents a slightly different lens from which to view social aspects of aging, from interpretive to positivist and at micro-to macro-level, creating a mosaic of theoretical understanding within the field of aging. We have argued that by building on this third generation of theories, we can explore the questions of contemporary aging research and create a greater understanding of aging and social phenomena for future generations of researchers.

We have also noted the significance of theory on several levels. Theory is not important merely for the sake of perpetuating the history of social gerontology, but also for the purpose of explaining and understanding research in the field of aging. We found that the majority of recent research articles on sociology of aging in seven of the major journals in the field provided no explicit theory in their discussion and interpretation of findings. When theoretical perspectives are represented in these same journals, however, a rich and potentially useful set of theoretical frameworks can be seen. Thus, the lack of theory in current research is not due to a paucity of relevant explanations within our field. Contemporary researchers, journal reviewers, and editors must acknowledge contemporary sociological theories of age and must recognize the ability of these theories to inform understanding and explanation of a wide array of research topics, as suggested in the many examples shown here. In short: in gerontology, there is nothing so practical as a good theory.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article grew out of a class at the University of Southern California on "theories of aging" in conjunction with Training Grant T32-AG00037, "Multidisciplinary Research Training in Gerontology," from the National Institute on Aging. Preparation was supported by Grant R37-AG07977 from the NIA. The order of authors is alphabetical: each of us is equally responsible for the research and conclusions. An earlier version was presented in the Presidential Symposium on Theory at the Annual Scientific Meeting of The Gerontological Society of America, November 18–22, 1994, Atlanta, Georgia.

We are grateful for the suggestions of three anonymous reviewers, whose detailed and constructive suggestions helped our thinking. We acknowledge the helpful comments of Lars Andersson, Alexander Bucur, Dale Dannefer, Tim Diamond, Jaber Gubrium, Jon Hendricks, George Maddox, Victor Marshall, Teheran Mills, Karen Pyke, Judith Richlin-Klonsky, Maria Schmeeckle, Susan Stewart, Merrill Silverstein, and Lars Tornstam; and the superb technical assistance of Linda Hall and David Sharp.

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Received December 1, 1995

Accepted October 29, 1996