

Aging, narrative, and performance: essays from the humanities

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Challenging the Disciplines

Scholars and politicians agree that demographic trends resulting in increasing proportions of older people in Europe and North America pose major societal challenges, which will become more pressing over time. There is also shared recognition that addressing these challenges will require significant advances in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research. Advocates for such interventions can be found not only among individual academics and local research groups, but also on the level of structural international collaboration, such as the expert team that recently brought together 23 partners from across Europe to participate in the *FUTURAGE Road Map for European Aging Research*, which was ordered by the European Commission in the 7th Framework Program to set priorities for future aging and health research.

There is less agreement, however, about what inter- and multidisciplinary should entail, and efforts to move beyond disciplinary boundaries often remain rather limited. On the one hand, scholars from social sciences often neglect to include the humanities—research in literary criticism and visual and performance studies as well as in history and philosophy

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(beyond the area of medical ethics)—in their considerations of approaches to aging. On the other hand, humanities scholars often fail to make their contributions accessible and relevant to social scientists. As a result, although the need for inter- and multidisciplinary research is commonly acknowledged, social studies of aging and later life and humanities' approaches seem to be developing along two different academic circuits.

Several problems emerge from this division. First, it risks leaving out of the scholarly conversation significant domains of research. It also puts scholars at the risk of rereading ground that has been effectively addressed in other fields. It discourages opportunities for productive collaboration among scholars in different fields on related topics. In addition, it risks limiting the potential for innovation through interdisciplinary cross-fertilization. The work of both social scientists and humanities scholars would be enriched by greater familiarity with the valuable work on aging being done in other fields.

Why, then, is it so difficult to build bridges between social sciences and humanities approaches to aging and later life? What are the challenges that scholars who seek to engage in inter- and multidisciplinary dialogues encounter? The answers lie in the conventions with which each discipline undertakes its inquiries. Different types of research questions; different methodological choices in attempting to answer those questions; different interpretations of research results and their implications; and different sets of concepts and terminologies—or, even more disruptively, different interpretations of the same concepts and terminologies—all contribute to the difficulties scholars face in trying to work across disciplinary boundaries. These differences emerge from the long history of science and the construction of the respective disciplines. Moreover, the conditions for inter- and multidisciplinary work are not always available; resources are still predominantly distributed within institutional frameworks that discourage work across disciplines, and limited time and resources hinder commitment and endurance for cross-disciplinary projects.

The benefits that each field seeks to gain from greater interdisciplinary engagement, however, outweigh these acknowledged challenges. By integrating social science research into their work, for example, humanities scholars can benefit from engagement with living people—in addition to texts and ideas—in the diverse contexts that affect them, which could

improve interpretive practices across fields in the humanities. Familiarity with scholarship undertaken in the sciences can also help humanities researchers translate their own ideas and findings in a way that would clarify their implications and help tailor academic knowledge and skills for use by society at large, enabling more people to benefit from them. Humanities scholars can also learn from social scientists how to more effectively organize in order to exert influence over policy making, including the formulation of research priorities.

Attending to aging-focused scholarship in the humanities would similarly benefit social scientists. For example, engagement with humanities research would encourage scholars to reflect systematically on the presumptions of research priorities and designs as well as on the position of the researcher himself or herself. It could also help put the desire for objective truth into perspective and call attention to the complexities and multiformity of lived realities. Enhanced recognition that texts (both verbal and in print) are never simply reflections of the reality of inner or outer lives might also result from greater exposure to humanities research.

Theorizing Age

On October 6–9, 2011, the conference “Theorizing Age: Challenging the Disciplines,” took place in Maastricht, The Netherlands, with the aim of building bridges across the circuits of sciences and humanities, on the model of the *Cultural Gerontology Symposia*, the first of which was convened in 1997. To implement this process, participant groups across Europe together founded the European Network in Aging Studies (ENAS). In January 2013, ENAS was joined by a North-American counterpart, NANAS.

In the framework for the conference in Maastricht, the organizers identified four different conceptualizations of age that inform research practices in both the social sciences and the humanities. The idea was that adopting a meta-reflective position towards one’s research—making explicit the conceptualizations of age beneath research designs—would make it easier to connect with a larger community of scholars from a variety of disciplines who work—perhaps unexpectedly—from the same

angle. In other words, these conceptualizations served as tools to build bridges between the circuits.

The conference's call for papers identified three approaches to aging, but the panels were eventually organized around the following four conceptualizations:

Cultural age: This category understands age not only as a biological function nor simply as a calendar mark, but also as an accumulation of all the meanings various cultural contexts ascribe to categories of age across different historical periods. This intellectual perspective entails focusing on the ways knowledge about old age is constructed in the field of gerontology and its sub-disciplines. It also calls attention to the diverse realities of aging by considering how age intersects with other identity markers, such as disability, gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, class, etc., and how power and values are distributed in meaning-making processes. Discourse analysis is a prominent example of a methodological tool that reveals the underlying mechanisms through which meaning is constructed and helps in identifying the relevant stakeholders.

Age as a narrative: A narrative approach to age starts from the metaphor of life as story and refers to the way age identities are constituted in and through narratives. *Narrative*, as a travelling concept, helps to define aging as a development through time, negotiating between personal circumstances and aspirations, and the expectations of the master narratives in which we are inscribed. Narratives of age range from the autobiographical to the fictional and include oral accounts as well as representations in literature and other art forms.

The performativity of age: The notion of performativity defines age not only as a state of *being* but through acts of *doing*. Theories of performativity claim that age identities are formed and perpetuated through the repetition of behavioral scripts connected to chronological ages and life stages. Since a repetition can never be identical to its original script, there is always the possibility of subversion and change. The concept of performativity has particular significance in performance studies, as actors both enact age upon the stage and negotiate behavioral norms associated with their own chronological ages. But it also offers an illuminating conceptual approach to understanding the actions and behaviors of individuals and groups across the life span.

The materiality of age: Focusing on materiality emphasizes the conceptualization of age as an embodied experience, drawing attention to the physical changes that undeniably come with age and to the way people manage these changes in their daily lives. This includes research varying from the study of how bodies are disciplined to people's body images, the management of disabilities, and (post)phenomenological approaches to bodily aging. Attention to the economic conditions of aging and its material effects may also be considered from this perspective.

Of course, these conceptualizations of age are not fixed categories. The boundaries between them are fluid and most scholars practice several approaches to age at the same time. However, this division into different theoretical lines of inquiry offers a direction through which scholars on either side of the science/humanities divide can find common ground and a shared language through which to build productive bridges across the too-often separated intellectual circuits.

Essays from the Humanities

The six essays included in this special issue, which have been developed from papers presented at the Maastricht conference, offer examples of humanities approaches to aging. We are glad that *IJAL*, an interdisciplinary journal with a social science focus, has, for the first time, agreed to cluster humanities essays resulting from a conference in a special issue. This effort links to other initiatives aiming to highlight humanities approaches to research on aging, such as:

- *Guide to Humanistic Studies in Aging* (and the previous *Handbook of Humanities and Aging*), edited by Thomas Cole, David Van Tassel, Ruth Ray and Robert Kastenbaum (1992, 2000, 2010)
- *Journal of Aging, Humanities, and the Arts*, edited by Dana Bradley and Anne Wyatt-Brown (2007–2010)
- The *Aging Studies* book series, series editors Ulla Kriebner, Heike Hartung, Roberta Maierhofer (initiated in 2008)
- The “Humanities and Arts” section of *The Gerontologist*, edited by Helen Kivnick (initiated in 2011)
- “Age Studies,” a special issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, edited by Heike Hartung and Rüdiger Kunow (2012)
- “Aging, Old Age, Memory, Aesthetics,” a special issue of *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*, edited by Marlene Goldman, Andrea Charise, Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon (2012)
- *Age, Culture, Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, edited by Cynthia Port and Aagje Swinnen (forthcoming, January 2014)

We trust that the work included here furthers the communal project of encouraging the sharing of knowledge and approaches across disciplines,

and helps to illuminate the many meanings of aging and their implications for some of the societal challenges that lie ahead. The texts considered in many of these articles happen to be films (documentaries and features) and plays, but the insights they offer, which are drawn from approaches to cultural age and age as narrative as well as the performativity of age, model the ways in which these categories can help highlight the interdisciplinary relevance of humanities research on aging.

In “A public secret: Assisted living, caregivers, globalization,” Kathleen Woodward draws a parallel between the invisibility of frail Caucasian elders and that of the female-gendered caregivers from diverse backgrounds who operate in globalized chains of care, in the public sphere and representational circuits alike. She argues that (auto)biographical stories such as the magazine feature story “The Last Best Friends Money Can Buy” and the documentary film *Paper Dolls*, which address the experiences of older people and caregivers *together*, are needed to increase popular understanding of the cultural and material conditions of aging and of caring. While this essay draws to some degree on all four conceptualizations of age identified at the conference, its attention to storytelling situates Woodward’s contribution as an example of the narrative turn in gerontological studies.

“Reimagining care: Images of ageing and creativity in *House Calls* and *A Year at Sherbrooke*,” by Sally Chivers, also frames her analysis from the perspective of narrative approaches to aging. Examining how two National Film Board of Canada documentaries—*House Calls* and *A Year at Sherbrooke*—reimagine care for older people and move beyond narratives of decline, she explicitly addresses the potential and limits of the aesthetics of documentary and photography as two distinct media. Chivers illustrates how these texts can potentially help to change the cultural imaginary of aging and care in Canada.

Amir Cohen-Shalev and Esther-Lee Marcus’s contribution, “An insider’s view of Alzheimer: Cinematic portrayals of the struggle for personhood,” aims to bring the relatively unknown films *Cortex*, *Pandora’s Box* and *Old Cats*—which, in their reading, departs from mainstream stereotypical dementia representations in film—to the attention of scholars of gerontology. The authors consider how these films open a window into the inner

lives and ongoing personhood of people with dementia through cinematographic means.

In “*No country for old men: A search for masculinity in later life*,” Benjamin Saxton and Thomas Cole offer an analysis of the film *No Country for Old Men*, an adaptation by the Coen brothers of the novel by Cormac McCarthy. Rather than focusing on the many changes the narrative undergoes by shifting from one medium to another, they analyze and contextualize how the experience of Sheriff Bell at the end of his career is performed at the intersection of age and gender in the film. The article’s analysis of Bell’s age performances draws attention to the prospect of multiple late-life masculinity scripts.

Valerie Lipscomb’s article, “‘The play’s the thing’: Theatre as a scholarly meeting ground in age studies,” identifies avenues for theatre research in aging studies and vice versa. She focuses on the performativity of age both on and off stage, and the potential of theatre staging and role playing to question implicit norms for age appropriate behavior and ageist assumptions. Drawing on both professional theatre and community performances, Lipscomb draws attention to the interaction of those experiencing the aging process—actors, audience members, playwrights—with master narratives of age as they are actualized on stage.

Finally, in “Critical turns of aging, narrative and time,” Jan Baars builds on his archive of scholarship on the conceptualization of (lived) time, its interdependence with narrative, and its implications for aging studies. Baars argues that the disciplinary organization of social sciences and humanities tends to reproduce the dichotomy of systemic versus life worlds, as theorized by Paul Ricoeur, and calls for research focusing on the intermediary level, i.e., connecting aging experiences with socio-political macro narratives of aging.

These essays present only a glimpse of the contributions that were shared at the conference. We thank all of the participants for their papers and for their lively engagement in the event. Also, we would like to thank the authors of articles that could not be included in this issue for sending us their papers for consideration. We look forward to future opportunities to highlight the exciting research on aging being pursued in the humanities and to help facilitate the exchange of ideas and scholarship across disciplinary circuits.