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Introduction of Psychology and Aging: Nebraska Symposium on Motivation 1991

Theo Sonderegger

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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Introduction

Theo B. Sonderegger

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Through the years, the Nebraska Symposium on Motivation has reflected topics of current interest to psychologists. This year is no exception: “psychology and aging” is a subject of concern to all readers no matter what their particular psychological specialties happen to be. All of us—if we are lucky, hope that we will experience the aging process and will join (or continue our membership in) the ever increasing population of the elderly. The quantity of research in the area is growing rapidly; new ideas and theories about the aging process are far from complete and are still emerging—as will be seen in this volume of the Symposium. As happens in so many other areas of psychology, there are many myths about aging that have been perpetuated by erroneous application of “commonsense” principles. The contributors to this volume, all active and well-known researchers in the arena of aging, share state-of-the-art information about their particular areas of expertise.

Of interest to readers, and very appropriate for this particular Symposium, this volume includes several contributors who have had or currently have a close association with the Department of Psychology at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. K. Warner Schaie was at one time on the staff of the department. Paul B. Baltes was here as a graduate student, and Irene Mackintosh Hulicka re-

ceived her Ph.D. from this university. Ross A. Thompson is currently a member of the faculty in the Department of Psychology.

The papers in this Symposium present a broad array of new information about the aging process, and the first chapter is a good example. James E. Birren and Laurel M. Fisher discuss slowness of behavior as a general condition widely associated with advancing age, exploring its implications at three levels of complexity. At the highest, or superordinate level, there are associations with survival and wisdom; at the coordinate level, there are consequences for perception, cognition, attention, memory, and other behavioral functions; and at the subordinate level, slowness is linked with lack of exercise, disease, and poor health. Thus speed of behavior is regarded as a characteristic of the organism that is involved in a wide range of hierarchical functions and, in turn, helps explain aging as a behavioral process. In this chapter, speed of behavior is alternatively considered as a dependent and an independent variable in the organization of psychological processes of aging.

Half a century of basic research has confirmed one of the common complaints of older people: failing memory. Only in the past decade, however, have efforts been made to find ways for older persons to compensate for age-related memory decline. In the second chapter of the Symposium Martha Storandt discusses "Memory-Skills Training for Older Adults." Using either group or self-instructional techniques, people are taught a variety of encoding and retrieval strategies. Some strategies work better than others. For example, organizing the information to be remembered is helpful; visual imaging seems less so. Part of the complaints about failing memory may be based on anxiety about the aging process rather than on actual memory deficits. Storandt presents the results of several of her studies and reviews the work of others on memory in older adults. She also points out that it will be necessary to devise methods to help people maintain newly learned memory skills and incorporate them into their daily lives.

For readers not familiar with many of the issues in the arena of aging, the third chapter provides an excellent context for understanding the field. It also is a "first" for the Symposium series—the first time we have been fortunate enough to include a G. Stanley Hall lecture. Although previously presented at the American Psychological Association meetings, the lecture is published here for

the first time. Irene Mackintosh Hulicka presents compelling reasons for her view that information on aging should be put into psychology courses—a view that many of us share. As she says, there are many misconceptions about aging that need to be corrected. In addition, up-to-date knowledge about aging and the aged is essential if we are to provide adequate services, legislation, and a foundation for interacting with the elderly. Hulicka shares procedures she uses in achieving these informational goals and gives many illustrations of how material on aging will fit into a wide variety of college courses. She also makes her point concerning our misconceptions about the elderly by sharing some priceless anecdotes. In her concluding remarks she addresses the topic of “successful aging.”

Paul B. Baltes, Jacqui Smith, and Ursula Staudinger pose the question, “Is cognitive aging identical with decline?” Theory and research concerning changes in intellectual and cognitive performance in adulthood have moved beyond this view toward a more differentiated, double-sided scenario. This new scenario encapsulates one of the central beliefs of the life-span developmental perspective—that development always consists of the joint occurrence of instances of gain (growth) and loss (decline). On the one hand, it is well known that as people age, some aspects of performance of memory, reasoning, problem solving, and intellectual tasks indeed deteriorate relative to preadult and early-adult levels. On the other hand, there is increasing empirical evidence that during our adult life we can maintain and update old (previously acquired) skills and areas of expertise. Moreover, individuals can continue to learn, expand, and extend their knowledge in new domains and skills.

One area in which the potential for continued development has been demonstrated is the domain of wisdom, defined as expert knowledge of the fundamental pragmatics of life. Our research has demonstrated that some older people are among the top performers in this domain. Furthermore, our analysis of successful strategies for good aging suggests that knowledge about balancing gains and losses, and about principles of selection and compensation, may constitute another instance of wisdom.

Personality psychology has seen two fundamental advances in the past 15 years, according to Paul T. Costa, Jr., and Robert R. McCrae. Lexical and questionnaire studies have shown that most personality traits can be understood in terms of five broad factors, and

longitudinal research has demonstrated that personality traits are remarkably stable in adulthood. These five stable factors provide a coherent framework for studies of adult lives. These authors describe the five factors and some of the traits that define them, then present new data from two longitudinal studies. Analyses of self-reports from a small group of men who have been assessed repeatedly over a period of 20 to 30 years illustrate the long-term stability of personality; analyses of peer ratings of a larger set of men and women over a 7-year interval examine stability or change in perceived personality. The effects of initial age, mental and physical health, and psychotherapeutic intervention upon personality stability are briefly examined. In conclusion, applications of the stability model to understanding adulthood and aging are discussed.

K. Warner Schaie and his colleagues feel there is substantial evidence of cohort differences in cognitive abilities that have been attributed to improvement in educational levels and life-styles or technological change. These differences have previously been studied only by comparing groups of genetically unrelated subjects. The Seattle Longitudinal Study, which has followed many individuals over as long as 35 years, has recently been expanded by assessing the adult offspring of many of the original study participants. This chapter describes problems and methods of studying natural cohorts within the context of a longitudinal study, comparing genetically related and unrelated cohort findings. Parent-offspring correlations have traditionally been studied in young adult parents and their children. Here, however, Schaie and his colleagues report the first data on adult parent-offspring similarity, which has been determined specifically as a function of the age of the pair when studied.

The Symposium is also fortunate to have had Ross A. Thompson serve as discussant for the "Psychology and Aging" sessions as well as prepare a commentary chapter, "Maturing the Study of Aging." Usually the discussions, though a rich experience for both the speakers and the audience, are not published. This year I wanted to share some of that information with readers of this volume. In his commentary Thompson has summarized some major points made by the speakers and by the audience as well as presenting his own perspective. As a developmental psychologist, he approaches the issue of just what "aging" is and what constitutes the definitive aspects of the "aging process." He raises doubts that the

meaning of development as applied to early growth is the same as its meaning as applied to later years. After analyzing the connotation of the terms "aging" and "development," Thompson discusses the social evaluation of developmental periods—the way later life experiences are socially conceived and interpreted. Such evaluations include attributions concerning losses and gains the older person has made in comparison with others, and Thompson includes the views of the contributors, where appropriate. Another theme presented by some Symposium participants is that aging is a source of stability and continuity. According to the discussant, "Stability in personality functioning and intergenerational continuity in cognitive processing may also be fostered by selecting environmental settings that are consistent with one's self-perceptions. Older adults can control and regulate the environmental demands they experience to a greater extent than in earlier years, and they can do so in a way consistent with how they perceive their needs, interests, and capabilities." He believes that the chapters in this Symposium provide an important agenda for the next generation of research on aging and adult development—"an area of study that is maturing nicely."

Finally, I express my sincere appreciation to all the members of the university and friends who supported and assisted me in many ways over the course of this Symposium. Special thanks go to John J. Berman, series editor, and to Ross A. Thompson, discussant, for their help in conducting the Symposium. A special note of recognition is due Patricia J. Rand for her excellent work on the publicity brochure. I also thank the many graduate students in the Department of Psychology for their assistance in all aspects of the Symposium work—including meeting speakers at the airport, attending luncheons, and enthusiastic participation at all sessions.