Sociology of aging takes a social lens to the complex processes of aging from birth to death. It focuses not only on older adults, but on the entirety of the life course, and how social factors such as education, income, and ethnicity, for example, contribute to lifelong aging. Structural factors in societies, such as the degrees of inequality, political systems, or policy regimes also have consequences for how we age, or even whether we age or die young.

Sociology of aging has a relatively short history among sociology sub-areas. It only became a Research Committee (which is a thematic specialization) in the International Sociological Association in 1974, although there had been a working group on “Sociology of Old Age” earlier. The Research Committee is now called “Sociology of Aging and Life Course,” indicative of the expanded focus of the field. Sociologists turning their attention to aging or older people had to fight for recognition in the discipline. Identity questions arose on whether sociologists of aging were really sociologists or gerontologists. The latter focus on older populations with an interdisciplinary and often a practice-oriented lens. Sociologists studying ageing, like older adults themselves in society, were not seen as having high status.

This sociological sub-area has been both constrained and advantaged by its early focus on empirical and often policy-relevant research questions. Methods used initially were often descriptive, cross-sectional, and both quantitative and qualitative. The often practical and easily interpreted research made sociology of aging interesting for policy makers and the public. It did less to encourage acceptance in wider sociological circles which tended to see it as less than real sociology. The field has been sharply critiqued in recent decades for its lack of theory (Marshall and Bengtson 2011). That is now changing, and indeed, may have been an overplayed critique.

Age stratification theories infused some early studies in sociology of aging, essentially taking the classical sociological theories of Durkheim, Marx, and Weber and applying them to age. Disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry 1961) was a truly transdisciplinary theoretical innovation, one which brought both interest and acclaim to the field. It posited that with the physical and psychological decline of older adults, they withdrew from society, serving a purpose both for the aging individuals of whom less was expected, and for the society in preparing for eventual death of older people. Activity theory,
which still contrasts with, and contests, disengagement, begins with the practical concept of remaining active to stay younger longer. The degree to which this is an actual sociological theory remains open to debate, but it is popular in policy and research circles, as well in the popular mind perhaps particularly in US sociology of aging.

As both sociological theories of aging such as the life course perspective (McDaniel and Bernard 2011) advanced, sociology of aging gradually moved out of the margins of sociology. It is now a vibrant field, infused with feminist sociology, globalization, theories and research on intergenerational relations and dynamics, and, perhaps most importantly, with insights and methods of biology, psychology, and public policy. The infusion of other disciplines makes sociology of aging research no less sociological; in fact, the contribution of social factors to the aging process become more not less vivid.

The current emphasis on life course theory as central to sociology of ageing is both welcome and concerning. Life course theory, with its emphasis on life transitions and linked lives, has enabled deeper understanding of aging as a social process. So central is life course theory to the sociology of aging that the ISA research committee on aging has added life course to its title. There is no doubt that life course theory as a fully complex sociological theory adds much to the sociology of ageing. That said, concerns have been expressed that it is perhaps too individual-focussed without taking social structures as much into account. Whether this is a justified critique or not remains to be seen. Matilda White Riley (1987) in her very early exposition of life course and aging, argues that individual processes of aging over the life course change social structures while, at the same time, social structures change aging.

Future directions that sociology of aging might take include a remarkable breadth and depth. Caring and care provision remains a huge topic to explore, particularly in the context of globalized care, both families that are multinational and thus caring across borders, and carers who are imported. Intergenerational supports, dynamics, and inequalities, both micro and macro are another area likely to be mined in future for new insights (Biggs and Lowenstein 2011). Social supports and their absence is another ongoing direction for research, particularly with new insights about the negative health impacts of loneliness. Changing work and non-work life course patterns and their implications for ageing in future is a big challenge. Lastly, but no less importantly, data sets that link various records about health, lifestyle, families, education, and work enable deeper understanding of the factors and forces that contribute to mortality and illness differentials as we age.

SEE ALSO: Body, the; Demography and Population Studies; Family and Kinship, Sociology of; Life Course

References


**Further Reading**