

Feature Article: Teaching Tips

The Aging Dimension in Undergraduate Psychology Courses: Suggestions for Integration

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The topic of adult development and aging is often the basis for specialized courses within the undergraduate psychology curriculum. However, by limiting the coverage of aging to such specialized courses, both instructors and students are missing a valuable opportunity. The psychology of adult development and aging has many applications throughout the field of psychology as a whole. In courses ranging from physiological psychology to social psychology, there are important intersections with findings and applications on changes in the middle and later years of adulthood. By making these connections to the "aging dimension," instructors can broaden the coverage and relevance of their courses.

The presenters in this symposium each addressed a separate course in the undergraduate curriculum with specific suggestions for integrating the topic of adult development and aging.

Susan Whitbourne discussed Introductory Psychology, showing the many possible intersections between the broad survey of topics covered in this course with research and theory on aging. There are many opportunities to integrate aging as a dimension of the course and ways to make the material accessible and interesting to students in introductory psychology courses.

Each main area of the introductory course can be approached from the

standpoint of the aging dimension by incorporating research and theories in the psychology of adult development and aging as well as social gerontology. In the area of methods, developmental data collection strategies and the problems of generalizing findings beyond college-age populations can be discussed. Within the section on the brain and behavior, there are ample intersections with aging, such as normal changes with age in brain functioning and the use of brain imaging techniques to study dementing diseases in later life. Sensation and perception provide many examples to use for the aging dimension, including normal changes in vision, hearing, balance, taste, and smell. Furthermore, research on "top-down" processes in the area of perception can be examined from the standpoint of the effects of age and experience on viewing the illusions and other perceptual problems. The fields of information-processing, memory, language, problem solving, and intelligence provide excellent opportunities to enhance the course by incorporating aging.

Developmental psychology provides the most clear-cut area for application of material on adult development and aging. Instructors can do a real service to their students by highlighting the latest information on the field in this area, as many texts still present somewhat outdated issues, such as the mid-life crisis and disengagement theory. Along similar lines, personality theories and research provide many potential intersections with aging, such as application of the Five Factor Model to personality in adulthood. Social psychology has many other possibilities for bringing in the aging dimension: attitudes, social cognition, and discrimination in the form of ageism can all be examined from the standpoint of older adults. Finally, abnormal psychology presents many opportunities to include findings and

This article is a summary of a symposium presented at the 108th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Washington DC, S.K. Whitbourne & J. C. Cavanaugh, Co-Chairs

approaches relevant to older adults.

Anderson Smith then presented the application of aging to Cognitive Psychology courses. He pointed out that incorporating aging research into mainstream Cognitive Psychology is an easier task than with many other sub-disciplines of psychology. He conducted a survey of 17 cognitive and memory textbooks and found that there is an already existing representation of cognitive aging research. By contrast, introductory textbooks include only limited focus on aging.

One reason for the "head start" in cognitive aging texts is that contemporary cognitive aging research often directly informs the theories current in cognitive psychology. Phenomena associated with age differences in cognition, and dissociations found when adult age is a variable in cognitive research, provide crucibles for tests of important theoretical ideas. Recent theoretical emphasis on resource allocation, for example, has been developed with much reference to the influence of resource limitations in understanding adult age differences. A second reason is simply the rapid growth of cognitive aging research both in quality and quantity, much of which is conducted by mainstream cognitive scientists and found in mainstream cognitive journals. The fact that many research leaders in basic cognitive psychology (e.g., Craik, Schacter, Hasher, Jacoby) also conduct research in aging increases

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the likelihood of finding discussions of aging studies in the cognitive psychology literature.

Specific areas that instructors can focus on were presented, including age and intelligence, psychometric vs. practical intelligence, age and memory systems, age and long-term memory (including autobiographical) and expertise and skill maintenance. In each of these areas, cognitive aging research not only increases our understanding of cognition and aging, but also directly influences our understanding of cognition itself.

Harvey Sterns, Karen Kopera-Frye, and Richard Wiscott covered the application of aging to social psychology and industrial-organizational psychology. These important areas within psychology have particular relevance to aging in view of present and anticipated changes in the age structure of the population. They identified a number of areas in which aging research can be incorporated into the course material to enhance information both about social psychology and the aging process.

In social psychology courses, Kopera-Frye pointed out that instructors can focus on areas of natural overlap with gerontology, including stereotypes, social cognition and the self, and prosocial behavior and relationships. Stereotypes about aging can be addressed by administering Palmore's Facts on Aging Quiz, using greeting cards as examples of social attitudes toward age, role playing older and younger adults, and asking students to provide self-perceptions of future possible selves. Oral histories can be taken to provide personal reflections by older adults and can be analyzed in terms of social psychological constructs relating to the self and roles. Prosocial behavior can also be studied in older adults through observing them in roles such as custodial grandparents and volunteers.

Sterns provided examples of topic areas and references that are available in aging and industrial/organizational psychology. These include: the aging of the workforce and stereotypes regarding older workers, human factors intervention and workplace design with age-related physical changes and ADA accommodations, training and retraining of older workers, career development and self-management of career, maintaining professional competence, and job performance and appraisal. Each of these areas offers important examples of individual differences and provides an opportunity to address life-span development and work.

Daniel Segal then addressed the coverage of aging within

abnormal psychology. This field also has tremendous relevance to aging, as mental health researchers are beginning to broaden their understanding of the causes and treatment of psychological disorders in later life. He pointed out that this course provides an excellent opportunity to educate many people about aging, as abnormal psychology is a popular course in many schools.

He surveyed the leading texts to determine the percentage with significant material on aging. Of 22 texts, 5 devoted a chapter to aging. When aging was discussed, either in a chapter or as a topic within other chapters, greatest attention was given to dementia and related disorders. Depression and anxiety disorders were given the second greatest attention related to aging. Personality and sexual disorders were not discussed at all in terms of aging. There is a strong case to be made for including aging in texts particularly in view of the fact that 12% of older adults have diagnosable mental disorders and 15-25% demonstrate clinically significant psychological symptoms such as anxiety and depression.

There is also a need to combat myths about older adults and to address the problem of under-utilization of mental health services. Moreover, there is currently a disturbing lack of trained professionals and unless new training programs are put into place, by the year 2020, this will become a significant problem given the aging of the population. In terms of topics that instructors can include in courses, options include prevention of mental health disorders, myths about mental health and aging, common geropsychological disorders, stability vs. change in the symptom presentation of disorders, and theoretical considerations with regard to ageism, assessment, and research methods. Case presentations are recommended to enliven classroom discussions about aging and mental health.

Discussant **John Cavanaugh** provided commentary about the presentations in two ways. First, he focused on the many ways in which aging content can be added to core psychology courses. Instructors have two options: they can infuse aging content into each course module, thereby making it a theme throughout the course; or they can create a separate module dedicated specifically to aging issues. Which approach is used depends more on how the instructor wants to organize the course rather than any inherent advantage of either approach.

Second, the dearth of information about aging in most textbooks in core courses was, unfortunately, a common theme across presentations. This indicates a general lack of knowledge about aging among many textbook authors

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as well as a reluctance to “break the mold” and include this important content. Clearly, gerontologists need to pressure authors, instructors, and publishers to include aging content.

The symposium raised a number of challenging issues for instructors who specialize in the psychology of aging to incorporate their expertise into the mainstream psychology courses they teach. As a follow-up to this symposium, the organizers are preparing a volume to be published by APA Books in conjunction with the Division 20 Education Committee. This effort is intended to make the “aging dimension” a vital component of every psychology course taught in the undergraduate curriculum to enhance both the study of aging and the study of psychology as a discipline.

Wish Powel Lawon a speedy recovery!
Send cards and letters to: 3337 Arcola Rd.,
Collegeville PA 19426.

APA Convention Dates

2001 San Francisco, CA, August 24-28
2002 Chicago, IL, August 23-27
2003 Toronto, August 8-12
2004 Honolulu, HI July 30-August 5
2005 Washington, DC, August 19-23
2006 New Orleans, LA, August 11-15

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profit and private sectors.

The aims of the conference are to:

Identify the “state of the art” basic and applied cognitive and behavioral research being conducted to increase the use of computers and the World Wide Web by older adults, their caregivers and health service providers;

Identify the impediments that older adults face as they use the World Wide Web to access health information and make decisions;

Address current issues regarding the presentation of health information to older adults and their caregivers via the World Wide Web; and

Increase knowledge of how to develop local and regional applications of new research findings.

Students!

Hello there,

I am the new division 20 student representative. I am the person that you should contact if you would like to voice any comments/concerns or simply chat about issues pertaining to students in the area of adult development and aging. I will be attending several executive meetings and this is the forum where I can represent concerns on behalf of students. There are several pressing issues that I would like to get your feedback on:

I will be working on organizing a symposium for this summer's APA conference in San Francisco, which is to be focused on issues relevant to students. Last year, it had a professional development/career planning theme. Toni Antonucci spoke about the publication process. Judith Sugar spoke about academic jobs and postdocs. Ronni and Harvey Sterns spoke about careers in non-academic settings. I am interested in receiving any feedback from students as to what they thought about last year's symposium and any suggestions for APA 2001.

Now for another nontrivial issue...social events! I am responsible for organizing at least one student social event to take place during the APA conference. In past years, these events usually involved pizza dinners in the Division 20 hospitality suite. Historically, these social events were not that well attended. I would like to change that and request that anyone who is planning to attend APA this year, let me know what would be most preferred as a social activity. Perhaps a wine and cheese party? Depending on the number of persons attending this event, perhaps we could organize some other type of event off the premises (e.g., restaurant in Chinatown).

Creative suggestions are welcome.

Sincerely,

Anna-Lisa Cohen

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The Division 20 **Graduate Student Listerv** was designed to facilitate communication among psychology graduate students interested in studying aging. More specifically, it is intended that the individuals use the list as a forum to post questions, comments, concerns, or information pertaining but not limited to: (1) research, (2) education, and (3) graduate student life. If you wish to subscribe to the list, please send an email to **Jason Allaire** (<mailto:j.allaire@wayne.edu>).