

Fall, 2001

HDFR 340: AGING-- PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

Prof. Thomas Blank
Office: Rm. 210 Family
Studies Building
Hours: Wed. 1-3, or by appt.

Objectives and Scope of the Course

This course is designed to complement two other graduate aging courses, HDFR 341, Aging: Physiological and Cognitive Changes, and HDFR 347, Social Gerontology. Together these three cover a wide range of social and behavioral science approaches to studying aging. The focus of this course, obviously, will be on the personality and social psychological aspects of the aging experience. In terms of personality, we will look at how gerontologists have conceptualized and studied the "interior life" of older individuals, especially examining how personality and a sense of self in later life are both related to and different from those aspects earlier in life. At the level of social interaction, the objectives of the course are to provide you with an understanding of several very different ways of looking at the relationship of individual older persons to other individuals and to examine the changing nature of being an older person in our society. The ways include two relatively independent social psychologies of aging, deriving from psychology and sociology. Emphasis is placed on theoretical and methodological diversity in understanding the interplay of individuals with their personal social contexts, although this semester we will focus mostly on psychological approaches, trying to integrate personality and social psychological aspects of aging, including using what is called a "social cognition" approach. This is partly my own preference as instructor and partly because we also have a course on the Aging Family that goes more into close relationships, obviously. Throughout, we will adopt a lifespan perspective as outlined in the first class.

Course Plan

"Aging: Personality and Social Interaction" is an advanced graduate seminar. This does not mean that it will require an enormous amount of previous knowledge of aging or even psychology or sociology; it does mean that students will be expected to be self-directed both within and outside of class time. A considerable amount of reading both from required texts and handbooks and journals will be assigned; these will form the basis for discussion, but not be "rehashed" in class time, nor will discussion be limited only to what is contained in them. It is in the nature of a seminar that discussion will proceed from a set of questions or issues that arise in the readings but may take a number of different possible twists and turns. All of us should be as prepared as possible to contribute and lead as well as to follow the discussion and respond to what is said. In fact, this class even more than most will be a "working group," in which leading as well as following discussions is critical. Most class periods will be divided between a section of about 1½ hr. for discussion of the readings everyone did and one of 45 minutes to an hour in which discussion will be led by an individual student on readings he or she has done on a particular topic related to the broader focus of the materials.

It is important to remember that all members of the class are both amateurs and professionals in the areas under consideration-- amateurs because we are all learning (and it is likely none of us are elderly at the moment) and professionals because all of us have interactions with a wide

range of other individuals and have been able to observe our own developing personalities and those of others with whom we have been close as they (and we!) have aged.

As with most graduate courses, although the readings and plan of the course are designed to provide rudimentary knowledge of what social and behavioral scientists are doing in the areas of personality and social psychology of aging, the course is not designed to be a survey of those areas. Rather, we will be "picking and choosing" **topics** and **perspectives** and trying to obtain some depth of understanding on those as *examples* of ways to look at personality and social aspects of aging. What we examine can then be supplemented by further reading and reflection using the same techniques.

Roughly, the course will be divided into four parts: a brief introductory segment, a focus on self and social cognition, then one more centered on social and interpersonal aspects of aging from both sociological and psychological perspectives (mostly psychological), and finally a couple of sessions on what some have been terming "new aging" or ways that older persons in the future may function more fully personally and interpersonally than has been the case in the past.

Course Requirements

Obviously, the seminar nature of the course makes reading of materials prior to class time and active participation in class discussions a major component of the course requirements.

There will also be a number of *opportunities* for written presentation of information you have gathered beyond the readings and topics of the course:

- 1) **Interview with an older person.** You will interview an older person (roughly, 60+), either about his or her views of his or her personality and sense of self, major life transitions in her or his life, or else about his or her social relationships during the adult years. In each case, you will provide a) a description of who you interviewed and the questions you used; b) a brief report of what the person had to say, and c) a brief discussion of what that means. A general guide to the kinds of questions that may be asked will be provided and discussed, although you can tailor it to your own goals and those of your interviewee to a considerable degree. The report should be about eight pages total. **Due: Oct. 17**
- 2) **Major topical literature review or final essay exam.** You can choose either to take a take-home essay examination, do a small research project, or write a relatively major review of current literature on a topic of your choosing within the broad areas of personality and social psychology of adulthood and aging. In the first case, questions will be provided at least a week before the last day of class. In the project approach, you should complete a small research project, present your results, and discuss their implications. In the case of the literature review, you should do a reasonably good search for available articles and present a clear description of the general findings of your search and relate that to class; you must discuss the topic with me before getting much into it, most definitely prior to the middle of the semester. You may choose a topic we discussed in class which you want to pursue further (e.g., attributions, control, self-concept, autobiographical memory, social

networks) or a topic we really won't do more than touch on (caregiving, a personality approach we don't discuss much, such as Levenson or Loevinger, gender or diversity issues in social roles, etc.). It should not, however, be the same topic as what you do an in-class leadership role on, as indicated below. The major paper should be approximately 15-20 pages long. **Due Dec. 14.**

- 3) **Topical Leadership for Class Discussion.** On one or two occasions you will do some additional readings on a chosen topic or theorist, as will be indicated, and be prepared to lead a discussion on that topic for the last 45 minutes or so of a class period. You will probably want to provide your fellow students with a one or two page outline/summary of what you'll cover and, possibly, some interesting questions we can then discuss; when possible you should also integrate it with what the whole class has read for that week. **Obviously, due date varies.**

- 4) **Class participation and discussion.** As you know by now, a graduate seminar class cannot work well unless everyone participates on a regular basis. To be able to do so, you need to have read at least most of the reading assigned for the class and have thought about it enough to come with questions and ideas that you want to be sure come out in the discussion. To be sure that happens, you are to turn in *prior to class* two or three questions on the readings for that week for me to use to guide the discussion in ways that may relate to "issues" or difficulties members of the class had with the readings. Those questions should be sent to me (and preferably all members of the class) by email at least two hours before class, preferably a day before. Just sitting there and listening to others is not sufficient! Even if you've had a bad week and didn't get everything read, you can still come prepared to listen critically and ask intelligent questions.

Percentages of the grade comprised by each assignment are:

Report of interview	15%
Major paper or essay exam	40%
Class participation and discussion	25%
Topical presentation(s)	20%

Readings

There are two texts for the course, plus a number of chapters from several handbooks. The text, *Social Cognition and Aging*, (sorry about the cost!), includes chapters by researchers and theorists in the area of social cognition (obviously), while the monograph by Sheldon Tobin, *Preservation of the Self in the Oldest Years*, is based both in his previous research and in-depth interviews with very old persons. We will read almost all of each of these books. About 15 other readings will supplement these, especially in the areas of well-being, health, and more sociologically-based approaches.

As you can see, quite a bit of reading is assigned. I want to emphasize that I assign a lot of readings because there is a lot of relevant, interesting (I hope) material out there. However, I don't want keeping up with the readings to be a burden to you. Just do the best you can, reading enough, and in enough depth, each week to be able to submit thoughtful questions and to be a reasonable contributor to the discussions. Also, you should not expect to agree with all the readings (or to have them all agree with each other or me with them!). I am giving you a broad

selection of often competing views to give us a good basis for discussion and/or further reading of your own.

Almost all of the readings are indicated on the schedule, although there may be a few “late minute additions” to fill in gaps identified as we proceed. Both of the main texts *and* two books from which quite a few of the other readings are taken (Schaie and Hendricks, editors, *Evolution of the Aging Self*, and Ryff and Marshall, editors, *The Self and Society in Aging Processes*) are on reserve in the Reserve section of the Homer Babbidge Library. Those latter two books have about $\frac{3}{4}$ of all the readings not in our two texts. So, as needed you can make copies from those in the Library or from the copies provided here in the School.

SCHEDULE

In the Schedule, a name without an "in ..." after it means that it is from a source other than our two books. A name (or names) followed by "in H&B-F" is a chapter in the Hess and Blanchard-Fields text. "Tobin" followed by a chapter number is a chapter in Tobin's book.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Primary Topic</i>	<i>Readings</i>	<i>2nd Topic</i>	<i>Leader</i>
Part One: Introduction				
Aug. 29	Historical Overview; Discussion of Concepts	Bengtson et al, Marshall	-----	
Sep. 5	More Discussion of Concepts: Personality, Social Cognition, etc.	Foreword by Abeles and Blanchard-Fields and Hess (ch. 1) in H&B-F; Foreword, Preface, and Ch. 1 and 2 in Tobin; Ryff and Marshall; Ryff et al-1	-----	
Part Two: Personality, Selfhood, and Performance				
Sep. 12	Identity and Self I	Atchley, Whitbourne, Spence	Traits- Costa and McCrae	
Sep. 19	Identity and Self II	George-1, Hendricks-1 and -2	Erikson's later theory +/- Levenson's	
Sep. 26	Reminiscence and Autobiographical Memory	Fitzgerald in H&B-F, Tobin ch. 4, (Dixon in H&B-F)	Gender- David Gutmann, etc.	
Oct. 3	Sense of Control and Performance	Miller and Lachman in H&B-F, Berry in H&B- F, Tobin ch. 3, (Hertzog et al in H&B-F)	Blank, Levesque, and Winter; Schulz and Heckhausen	
Oct. 10	Role Transitions, Life Events, and "Adaptation"	Diehl, Hooker in H&B-F, Brandstatter in H&B- F, Ferraro	Dealing with death and dying	
Oct. 17	Mental and Physical Health and Losses	Tobin, ch. 10, Gatz and Smyer, George-2, Kane (and comments)	Depression- Blazer	
Oct. 24	Well-being	Tobin, ch. 5-7, George-3 (and comments on), Ryff et al-2	Religion/spirituality— George, Koenig, etc.	
Part Three: Social Connections				
Oct. 31	Stereotypes, Attitudes, and Attributions	Hummert in H&B-F, Erber and Prager in H&B- F, Hess in H&B-F, Blanchard-Fields in H&B-F	Social Constructions-Kuypers and Bengtson	
Nov. 7	Social Networks and Supports	Charles and Carstensen in H&B-F, Antonucci, Krause, Giarrusso et al	Relations with children— Matthews, ?	
Nov. 14	Caregiving and Dependency	Tobin ch. 8 and 9, Seltzer and Greenburg, Pearlin et al	Caregiver needs—Cicirelli	
Part Four: Next Steps for Older Adults (US???)				
Nov. 28	Wisdom, Creativity, Moral Judgments	Pratt and Norris in H&B-F, Sternberg and Lubart, Schaie	Transcendence—Gene Thomas	
Dec. 5	Beyond Personality and Social Psychology of Aging: "New Aging"	Staudinger in H&B-F, Tobin, ch. 11, Gergen and Gergen (and comments on)	TBA	