
Maria Malikiosi-Loisou

doi: 10.12681/grsr.374

To cite this article:

Leonard W. Poon, Editor

Aging in the 1980s: Psychological Issues

This is the third volume in a series of publications on aging issued by the American Psychological Association (APA). The first volume on the Psychological Aspects of Aging, published in 1956 and edited by J.E. Anderson, summarized the literature existing at that time. The second one on the Psychology of Adult Development and Aging, published in 1973 and edited by Carl Eisdorfer and M. Powell Lawton, presented the recommendations of the task force which represented APA at the White House Conference on Aging in November 1971, together with in-depth reviews of the major areas of research on the psychology of aging.

Aging in the 1980s: Psychological Issues, edited by Leonard W. Poon, is a collection of 43 articles organized into nine major areas. These nine areas are: clinical issues, neuropsychological issues, psychopharmacological issues, cognitive issues, stress and coping, environmental issues, interpersonal relations and methodological issues. The book starts with a prologue and finishes with an epilogue and each of the nine sections is preceded by an introduction of the editor of the section. The volume has two major purposes: (a) to summarize and put into perspective selected issues on the psychology of aging and to establish research directions for the 1980s and (b) to identify what we now know and what we need to know about nine selected areas in the field of aging. In order to fulfill these purposes, the editor tried to present complementary and competing views from researchers and clinicians of different backgrounds. Selection of topics was based on a model in which psychological aging was considered from a systems perspective, with the person, the environment, health, and behavior interacting over time.

The chapters examine the discrete effects of the environment, health and behavior, as well as the combined effects of all three, on the aging person.

Section 1: Clinical Issues

Edited by Margaret Gatz, consists of three chapters which examine the mental health delivery system for older adults, as well as relevant issues in the clinical diagnosis and treatment of maladaptive behaviors.

In the first chapter, the aged are viewed within the larger system of the delivery of mental health services which are not yet considered adequate to meet the psychological needs of older adults. Consulting psychologists of the 1980s should provide both direct and preventive psychological services, with a goal of optimizing their development.

The second chapter focuses on assessment. Current assessment procedures frequently used with the elderly are reviewed critically and specific directions are recommended for future research. The authors stress the need for evaluation of systematically obtained data from several different fields and careful integration of these data to formulate intervention programs.

The third chapter discusses psychopathology and treatment, both in the community and in the institution. Questions concerning process and outcome research design, as well as methodology, are also considered.

In summary, these three chapters discuss how well older adults have been served, examine the effectiveness of different assessment and therapeutic practices, and suggest what the 1980s will offer.

Section 2: Neuropsychological Issues

Edited by Marilyn S. Albert, consisting of three chapters, discusses the recent breakthroughs in neuropsychological techniques in relation to the understanding assessment, and treatment of aging dementia and decline in cognitive functions.

Chapter 7, the first of this section, reviews recent findings concerning the brainstem auditory evoked potentials (BAEPs) in the study of normal and abnormal aging. Event-related potentials (ERPs) are the spatial-temporal pattern of brain electrical activity that is synchronized to the onset of an afferent stimulus or that follows an expected event as Harkins himself defines them.

Chapter 8 deals with age changes in the neurological and cognitive areas, as measured by ERPs. The authors review recent research and discuss the relationship between brain and behavioral responses in the very health elderly.

Chapter 9 examines the feasibility of using a particular component of the auditory evoked potential as an objective means of evaluating cognitive functions in aging. The
authors conclude, that this component can be used to distinguish objectively between normal and abnormal changes in age-related cognitive functioning.

Finally, Chapter 10, the last in this section, reviews most of the research on brain aging, including chapters 11 through 15 and deals with the identification of physiological mechanisms involved in age-dependent changes in memory and other cognitive functions so that appropriate therapeutic treatment can be developed.

The chapters in this section illustrate the utility of the psychopharmacological approach to the understanding of memory and the massive changes it undergoes with age. Four of the five chapters deal with animal studies with only chapter 15, dealing with humans. All chapters reveal that common mechanisms may underlie the behavioral changes observed in aging animals and humans.

The findings of the chapters dealing with animal studies for example, show that young adults can retain less well than young animals in one-trial-learning situations. Multiple-trial learning, more often, shows either no age differences or only small ones. Extinction is more rapid in the older animal. Generally speaking, both older humans and animals learn less rapidly or less intensely and thus have poorer memory traces later for recall.

The next chapter emphasizes the importance of understanding the nature of the problem, for it is only because we understand the problem that we can begin to solve it. The next chapter deals with the diagnosis of memory and the effects of interventions on memory. This chapter serves as a bridge between this first part of Section 5 and the next one on speed of behavior.

In conclusion then, these chapters suggest that the greatest changes accompanying aging are the contexts in which people function. The changes of old age are multivariate in nature, and therefore, research should be addressing the extent to which several factors affect age differences and age changes.

Part 2 of Section 5, edited by James E. Birren and M. Virtue Williams, deals with Speed of Behavior. Its four chapters present a diversity of approaches to the organizational-interpretive problem found with aging.

Speed of behavior, along with memory, represent the two behavioral processes most consistently found to decline with age. Chapter 21, the first in this section, reviews evidence of a decline in speed of behavior with age, including its possible relation to memory. It suggests that this loss in speed is a reflection of a general mediating process in the central nervous system. Chapter 22 deals with reaction time as an expression of hemispheric dominance. The evidence suggests that reaction time does not show a differential hemispheric effect. The authors conclude that decline in speed of behavior is a general phenomenon not linked to an age-related speed of one hemisphere.

The third chapter in this section deals with slowness of behavior with age in the performance of complex aptitude tests. The last chapter, Chapter 24, examines the effect of task complexity on reaction time of the elderly. It appears that more complex tasks result in greater performance deficits for the elderly which is a consequence of a proportional slowing of the mental functions of the elderly.

In summary, then, Section 5 examines normative age changes in cognitive, attentional, and perceptual processes and behavioral slowing.

Section 6, Stress and Coping, edited by David A. Chiriboga, presents methods and models for studying stress and coping.

Chapter 25, the first in this section, compares stresses identified with a life-events instrument, with the stresses identified from questions dealing with chronic stresses, anticipation of stress, and even the nonoccurrence of life events. They conclude that life-event instruments can provide important information about stress and adaptation throughout life but that additional dimensions of stress also deserve study.

Chapter 26 describes three scales that measure the degree of subjective distress from a particular life event and/or assess coping strategies for adjusting to that event. It presents illustrative data to demonstrate that intensive clinical studies can lead to measurements useful in larger scale investigations.

The third chapter in this section reviews research studies that have investigated a particular stressful situation and/or assess coping strategies for adjusting to that event. The results suggest (a) that in certain health-care situations, where limited control over the stressor is possible, avoidance may be an effective coping strategy, and (b) that it may be difficult to provide patients with a sense of active control.

In the last chapter of this section an effort is being made to identify stressful events generated by the community. The results indicate that persons of different ages are affected by different kinds of community events. Older and younger persons are differentially vulnerable to the same environmental stimuli which suggests the wide range of conditions that are potentially stressful to older persons.

The chapters in the section urge research in the 1980s to devote more attention to stress and the elderly since this age group is more vulnerable to stressful situations.

Section 7, Environmental Issues, edited by Joyce Parr, includes three chapters which describe and analyze some of the limitations of our present knowledge regarding person-environment interaction. It is generally believed that the environment interacts with the characteristics of the individual to influence behavior.

In Chapter 29, the first in this section, the author proposes a four-component model of person-environment interaction for investigating potentially interactive influences on the behavior of elderly persons in their living environment. The argument is that it is important to differentiate and define as clearly as possible the separate components that participate in such interactions in order to interpret research findings.

The next chapter emphasizes the in separability of the person and the environment in that the person cannot be defined apart of the environment since s/he is sur-
rounded by it. It stresses that the person-environment interaction should be viewed as a process.

The last chapter in this section considers historical and contextual factors and their influence on the psychological well-being of older people. The author stresses the importance of memories and expectations by which people interpret the environments in which they find themselves and suggests that they act in their environments in terms of their past history.

In summary, then, Section 7 deals with the influence of the interpersonal and family environment on the well-being of the aged. Differences from that of children. Also, it stresses the need for the generation of theoretical models addressed to issues of parenting.

Chapter 33, the next in this section, examines the course of sibling relationships throughout adulthood and old age. It points to variation in functions of different siblings, at least by sex, with sisters having an effect different from that of brothers. It also suggests that the nature of sibling interaction—rivalry and affection—changes with time.

Chapter 34 focuses on the transition of midlife which is usually accompanied by predictable shifts in interpersonal relationships. The authors review recent research and theory on midlife development and midlife transition and conclude by proposing a series of research, methodological, and theoretical questions that can be searched and, hopefully, answered during the 1980s.

The last chapter of this section deals with grandparenting, and more specifically with the grandparent-grandchild relationship. A review of the literature to date, by the authors, leads to the conclusion that grandparent-grandchild interchanges are usually peripheral in the lives of both. However, more recent focus on this relationship suggests that it has more importance than was originally thought. This relationship may provide a clue to family integration and may also reflect coming shifts in family dynamics, such as those resulting from divorce and remarriage.

In summary, then, Section 8 examines the relations between the stresses encountered and the coping mechanisms adopted over life.

The last part of this volume, Section 9, on Methodological Issues, edited by John R. Nesselroade and Stephen W. Harkings, includes eight chapters and examines methodological issues, such as between—and within—subject research design, mathematical models of the aging processes, and the application of modern psychophysical techniques in aging research.

According to the editors of this section, the chapters included can be divided into three parts: (1) the first part which includes the first three chapters of this section, deals with design, measurement, and analysis of intellectual abilities and personality in relation to normal aging. Chapter 36, the first in this part, deals with measurement issues. Chapter 37, on statistical modeling procedures and methods in aging research, examines the benefits that modeling offers to scientific theorizing and data evaluation. Chapter 38, on qualitative aspects of the relationships such as the function they fulfill, commonality of values, and feelings involved.

The first chapter in this section considers research and theory on the effects of parenting on parents within each of five parenting stages: (a) before becoming parents, (b) childbirth and postpartum, (c) early and middle years of parenting, (d) parenting with adolescents, and (e) parenting with adult children. Emphasis is placed on how parenting affects and interacts with other major roles in adults' lives across stages. The authors stress that it is for the generation of theoretical models addressed to issues of parenting.

Chapter 41 treats in depth the application of Signal Detection Theory (SDT) procedure to the study of psychological aging. The last chapter in the second part of this section, deals with the measurement of sensation in the aged. While admitting to the validity of SDT for evaluating sensory and associated cognitive changes that take place with age and its contribution to understanding differences in sensitivity and response bias, the authors point also to its weakness in accounting for all changes in sensory functioning. They propose a new scaling method, called magnitude matching, for measuring sensation magnitude.

(3) The third, and last part of this section, concerns the complex impact of physical health on studies in psychological gerontology. Chapter 43, the only one in this part, reviews issues related to the assessment of health and behavior and their interaction with the psychology of aging. The authors point to the practical difficulty in the measurement of health status in psychological gerontology.

In summary, then, this section on methodological issues, emphasizes techniques and methods that appear to be promising for the study of behavioral aging.

This volume on Aging in the 1980s concludes with an epilogue including some thoughts on how to proceed from here by A.T. Welford, and a last word by the editor Leonard W. Poon.

In order to set some goals for the future of aging research the volume must look first of all at the progression that has been made up to now. The author sees progression along four dimensions: (a) from observation through the induction of unifying concepts to the formulation of models of process; (b) from studies of experience and behavior alone to their integration with data from other biological sciences; (c) from qualitative classification to quantitative measures; and (d) a to-and-fro progression between pure theory and application. Some thoughts are given on the research potential for development in any or all of these dimensions.

In the last word of this volume, the editor attempts to establish continuity between what has been accomplished and what lies ahead.

Any individual interested in gerontological research must read and study this volume. It is well-organized and very informative providing many interesting thoughts for future study and research. Although every aspect of psychological aging could not be covered in any one volume, nevertheless, the information included here is representative of what we now know in the nine areas covered by the sections of this book.

I believe that the major objectives of this volume have been achieved. Its success will of course be judged by the new thinking and research it will stimulate and the effects of which will be evident at the end of this decade.