

Intergenerative Transdisciplinarity in a Future of Aging Professions: New Words Are Not Enough

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Age Studies. Let's start with a few questions but not expect too many clear answers. Is the better adjective “age” or “aging” or something else like “gerontological,” and is the noun a research project, general scholarship, or just a bunch of students cracking books? And is the compound expression, “age studies,” an emerging discipline, a new profession, a subfield, field, or just rich fertile dirt at the root of other intellectual activities? Who are the studied students—academic scholars or citizens or both, the young or old or everyone? I ask these questions not to answer them but to raise the issue of scope and inclusion. Who are playing these Age Study games, and why? And can they play a leading role in rethinking our humanity at a critical time in our species history? Is it a time for Big Humanities modeled after the ambitions of Big Sciences like particle physics (e.g., supercolliders) and molecular biology (e.g., the Human Genome)? I propose that it is through the creation of life-affirming and diversity-celebrating narratives and their included intergenerative metaphors that we might survive and actually flourish.

Everything about aging and studying is changing. And the life-threatening problems of our young and still-maturing human species available to study (and “solve”) are beyond our comprehension—even beyond our collective wisdom. Whatever “age studies” are they should be pursued with spirit and humility.

I start my own prayer for the future of age with words, then worship for a moment the false gods of data, and end with the truth of narrative in the quest for our humanity. I revere the gods of the wisdoms recognizing their ethereal and ever-changing nature. I challenge the devilish ought-to-be more minor gods of Scienticism and Capitalism and lament their current control over the qualities of our lives.

Our most life-sustaining, species-defining human ability (perhaps more essential, even, than biological procreation) is to create words (and images) that tell ever-changing stories. Take an important age-related word, “Alzheimer’s,” for example. Can we explore the historical, medical, and cultural aspects of that word and go beyond the dominant, demented (cognitively impaired in a way that affects our daily living), psychotic (out of touch with the reality of brain aging), and false narrative that with enough money, science, and ego we can fix dementia and every other human problem that technocrats claim as their purview? “If we can just measure it, we can control it” Take cerebral amyloid (a sticky protein at the core of “senile” plaques in the brain) assessed by PET (positron emission tomographic imaging based on matter/antimatter collisions in the brain), a perfect folly disconnected from individual lives (except those feeding at the scientific trough), and the real needs of society. Large, even humongous, data sets of clinical and biomarker (like neuroimaging) data will not solve our problems. They may help but they may be a quantitative distraction from and distortion of the qualia of life. Regardless of what scientists say, data do not “speak for themselves.” Subjective interpretations of numbers lead to summary narrative descriptions of the findings, which get more complex the bigger and more expensive the study. Randomized control studies dominate our epistemological thinking about what constitutes an evidence base. We need to find new, intergenerative blends of science and narrative (Whitehouse and George), new syntheses of quantitative and qualitative research.

The humanities and social sciences should be well placed to help us address our big challenges associated with aging. We need to make them “big” enough, however. Context is key, and the context of aging is life. The biggest threat to all of us (including, especially, dependent children and elders, not to mention other species) is us and our human-induced global climate change. We need to learn and seek wisdom together to address this imbroglio of interrelated challenges. Perhaps new educational organizations are needed to foster collective intergenerational wisdom. Yet our universities are expensive and perhaps increasingly

irrelevant in the era of monstrous for-profit educational enterprises that assault students and taxpayers alike and MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses) that promise to be a disruptive innovation and but threaten the sense of place that universities foster.

Big physics relinquished—or, at least, shared—its hold on the public’s imagination when the genetics and neuroscience revolutions fostered collaboration on large-scale projects like mapping the human genome and human brain. But humanities scholars are not naturally collaborative; rewards are usually based on individual scholarship and teaching. I propose that age studies leads the move to Big Humanities through the application of information technology, like social networking and digital storytelling. The creation and distribution of collective wisdom through narrative production, dissemination, and analysis will be key to the survival of the humanities and social sciences and the flourishing, if not survival, of our societies and perhaps even species.

But can age studies move beyond the goal of academic scholarship to impact in the real world? Aging is changing. In *Composing a Further Life: The Age of Active Wisdom*, Mary Catherine Bateson writes of “Adulthood II”—the creative life space emerging between an adult career and retirement of some form, perhaps driven by frailty. Encore careers, perhaps less economically successful but more meaningful, are a watchword for this transformation. Bateson also points, as I do, to the importance of intergenerational relationships (Whitehouse et al.). Age studies needs to incorporate this life-span perspective. We are at risk of making children the sickest and most disadvantaged citizens of the world, replacing elders who were in that position fifty years ago, at least in the West. Of course, the growing division between the economic haves and have-nots in general is perhaps the major threat to health and social justice. And we should add the urbanizing of the world to the forces that will alter aging and the relationships between the generations. Climate change and new patterns of distribution of both people and diseases, not to mention floods, droughts, and fires (i.e., weather weirding), will dramatically alter the human condition.

Wars over water and other resources will alter all our lives, especially those vulnerable at each end of the age spectrum.

If we are to seed the future of North American age studies through such projects as “Generate” (coordinated by the North American Network in Aging Studies), we must be intergenerative, looking “between” and among the disciplines, professions, nations, and faiths of all kinds in order to go “beyond.” We need to look East, not just back to Europe, as the Western Enlightenment structure-based rationality is getting stale. An enlightened Eastern perspective focusing on process, where truth, goodness, and beauty are more blended, can help age studies. Most importantly, we need to look at the metaphors that fuel our new stories. If we want to seed a future, we need to understand the historical soil in which we plant and the current methods of sowing. If the humanities and social sciences connect socially to real humanity, courageously challenge dominant biomedicine, and keep grounded in the profound challenges of today, they will both blossom and be fruitful.

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Age, Culture, Humanities 1 (2014)

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