

## **Modernity and Identity: Themes and Perspectives in the Study of Older Adults**

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*Developments in social gerontology have led to an increased awareness of the relationship between political economy, culture, and personal narrative as influences on social identity in later life. Central to this debate has been a growing interest in lifestyle choice as evidence of a change from modern to postmodern forms of aging. A key component of this process has been the erosion of a predictable framework for an aging identity, previously supplied by the welfare state. It is argued that, alongside the emergence of "no-care zones" in health and welfare, postmodern ideas on consumerism and the body have led to an assault on identity in old age. As a result, we may be seeing the emergence of "no-identity zones" which fail to sustain an authentic framework for supporting experiences in old age. A critical gerontology should include the study of identity as central to understanding the disjunction between aging from within and aging within society.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

During the 1990s, a number of elements emerged in the growing debate about the nature of an aging society. First, the continuation of political economy perspectives arose from the work of Estes (1979), Walker (1981), Guillemard (1983), and others (see Minkler and Estes, 1991 and 1997; Estes, 1993; Phillipson, forthcoming). Second, scholars such as Thomas

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Cole, Harry Moody, Andrew Achenbaum, and others made important contributions toward the consolidation of perspectives from the humanities. Some key contributors in this tradition were brought together in a number of volumes published in the early 1990s, combining the work of historians, ethicists, and other scientists (see, especially, Cole, 1992; Cole, Van Tassel and Kastenbaum, 1992; Cole et al., 1993; Schaie and Achenbaum, 1993; Bengtson and Achenbaum, 1993). A third influence has been that of biographical and narrative perspectives in gerontology, building on the work of Malcolm Johnson (1976) and Jaber Gubrium (1993). Advocates of this biographical approach have contributed substantially to critical gerontology, as well as extended the knowledge about the social construction of later life (Ruth and Keynon, 1996).

Taken together, these intellectual trends may be seen as illustrating the emergence of a critical as opposed to a traditional gerontology (Baars, 1991; Phillipson and Walker, 1987). The critical facets in this gerontology center around a number of elements. From political economy, awareness exists of the structural pressures and constraints affecting older people, with divisions associated with class, gender, and ethnicity being emphasized (Estes, 1993; Phillipson, forthcoming). From both a humanistic as well as a biographically-orientated gerontology, concern exists over the absence of meaning in the lives of older people and the sense of doubt and uncertainty that seems to pervade their daily routines and relationships (Moody, 1992). Finally, from all three perspectives comes a focus on empowering older people through the transformation of society (for example, through the redistribution of income and wealth) or the development of new rituals and symbols to facilitate changes through the life course (Kaminsky, 1993).

Critical gerontology, in fact, draws on a variety of intellectual traditions including: the Marxist critique of political economy; the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse), and more recent researchers from this tradition such as Jurgen Habermas (1972; Moody, 1992); psychoanalytic perspectives (Biggs, 1997). Contemporary sociological theorists such as Anthony Giddens (1991) and Ulrich Beck (1992) have also contributed to this development. These different approaches challenge traditional perspectives within gerontology and promote the development of an alternative approach to understanding the process of growing old.

Central to the idea of a critical gerontology is the idea of aging as a socially constructed event. With respect to political economy, this idea reflects the role of elements such as the state and economy in influencing the experience of aging. The humanities, on the other hand, emphasize the role of the individual actively constructing his or her world, while biographical approaches focus on an interplay between the self and society (Keynon, 1996). The idea of *lives* as socially constructed is perhaps the key theme