This state-of-the-art handbook will keep researchers and practitioners in gerontology abreast of the newest theories and models of aging. With virtually all new contributors and content, this edition contains 35 chapters by the most highly respected luminaries in the field. It addresses theories and concepts built on cumulative knowledge in four disciplinary areas—biology, psychology, social sciences, and policy and practice—as well as landmark advances in transdisciplinary science. With its explicit focus on theory, the handbook is unique in providing essential knowledge about primary explanations for aging, spanning from cells to societies.

The chapters in the third edition place a strong emphasis on the future of theory development, assessing the current state of theories and providing a road map for how theory can shape research, and vice versa, in years to come. Many chapters also address connections between theories and policy or practice. Each set of authors has been asked to consider how theories in their area address matters of diversity and inequalities in aging, and how theories might be revised or tested with these matters in mind. The third edition also contains a new section, “Standing on the Shoulders of Giants,” which includes personal essays by senior gerontologists who share their perspectives on the history of ideas in their fields, and on their experiences with the process and prospects of developing good theory.

HALLMARKS OF THE THIRD EDITION:
• Highlights important gains in transdisciplinary theories of aging
• Emphasizes the future of theory development
• Provides insights on theory development from living legends in gerontology
• Examines what human diversity and inequality mean for aging theories
• Emphasizes interconnections between theory, research, intervention, and policy
• Underscores international issues with greater representation of international authors
• Includes section introductions by the editors and associate editors that summarize theoretical developments
Handbook of Theories of Aging
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Vern L. Bengtson, PhD, is AARP/university professor of gerontology emeritus and research professor, Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging, School of Social Work, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California. A senior statesman in gerontology, Bengtson is a world-recognized expert on the sociology of the life course, family sociology, social psychology, ethnicity and aging. He has been elected as president of the Gerontological Society of America and has been granted two MERIT awards for research from the National Institutes of Health. He has written or edited 17 books and published more than 260 research papers. Early in his career, Bengtson started the Longitudinal Study of Generations, a multigeneration and multidisciplinary investigation of families, aging, and social change, which now is in its 45th year of data collection from more than 350 multigenerational families. He has received research awards from the Gerontological Society of America, the American Sociological Association, the American Psychological Association, the National Council on Family Relations, and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. As the lead editor on the two prior editions of the Handbook of Theories of Aging, and coeditor of the book that preceded them, Emergent Theories of Aging, Dr. Bengtson has led the charge to transform gerontology into a field that is rich in both data and theories.

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Handbook of Theories of Aging

Third Edition

Vern L. Bengtson, PhD, and Richard A. Settersten, Jr., PhD
Editors

Brian K. Kennedy, PhD, Nancy Morrow-Howell, MSW, PhD,
and Jacqui Smith, PhD
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Contents

Contributors ix
Preface xv
Acknowledgments xvii

1. Theories of Aging: Developments Within and Across Disciplinary Boundaries  1
   Vern L. Bengtson and Richard A. Settersten, Jr.

2. Concepts and Theories of Age and Aging  9
   Richard A. Settersten, Jr., and Bethany Godlewski

PART I. STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS: PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES ON THEORY DEVELOPMENT IN AGING

3. Unlike Aging, Longevity Is Sexually Determined  31
   Leonard Hayflick

4. The Psychology of Aging  53
   K. Warner Schaie

5. How Theories of Aging Became Social:
   Emergence of the Sociology of Aging  67
   Vern L. Bengtson

6. Social Movements and Social Knowledges: Gerontological Theory in Research, Policy, and Practice  87
   Carroll L. Estes with Nicholas R. DiCarlo

PART II. BIOLOGICAL THEORIES AND CONCEPTS

7. Evolutionary Theory and Aging  113
   Devin Arbuthnott, Daniel E. L. Promislow, and Jacob A. Moorad

8. Inflammation and Aging  137
   Ming Xu and James L. Kirkland
CONTENTS

9. Theories of Stem Cell Aging  153
   Pedro Sousa-Victor, Joana Neves, and Heinrich Jasper

10. Proteostasis and Aging  173
    Matt Kaeberlein

PART III. PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES AND CONCEPTS

   Advances in Psychological Theories of Aging  189
   Jacqui Smith

11. Theories of Emotional Well-Being and Aging  193
    Susan T. Charles and Joanna Hong

    Nhi Ngo, Molly Sands, and Derek M. Isaacowitz

13. Theories of Social Support in Health and Aging  235
    Bert N. Uchino, Anthony D. Ong, Tara L. Queen, and Robert G. Kent de Grey

14. Age Stereotypes’ Influence on Health: Stereotype Embodiment Theory  259
    Brad A. Meisner and Becca R. Levy

15. Terminal Decline of Function  277
    Gizem Hüttür, Nilam Ram, and Denis Gerstorf

PART IV. SOCIAL SCIENCE THEORIES AND CONCEPTS

   Advances in Social Science Theories of Aging  301
   Richard A. Settersten, Jr.

    Melissa Hardy and Adriana M. Reyes

17. Families and Aging: Toward an Interdisciplinary Family-Level Approach  327
    Rosemary Blieszner and Marieke Voorpostel

18. Theories of Social Connectedness and Aging  349
    Jaclyn S. Wong and Linda J. Waite

19. Long, Broad, and Deep: Theoretical Approaches in Aging and Inequality  365
    Angela M. O’Rand

20. The Interpretive Perspective on Aging  381
    Victor W. Marshall, Anne Martin-Matthews, and Julie Ann McMullin

PART V. POLICY, INTERVENTION, AND PRACTICE THEORIES AND CONCEPTS

   Advances in Theory-Based Policy and Interventions  401
   Nancy Morrow-Howell

21. Aging in Place  407
    Andrew E. Scharlach and Keith Diaz Moore

22. Theories That Guide Consumer-Directed/Person-Centered Initiatives in Policy and Practice  427
    Nancy R. Hooyman, Kevin J. Mahoney, and Mark Sciegaj

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CONTENTS  vii

23. Theories Guiding Support Services for Family Caregivers  443
   Rhonda J. V. Montgomery, Jung Kwak, and Karl D. Kosloski

24. Theoretical Foundations for Designing and Implementing Health Promotion Programs  463
   Susan L. Hughes, Elske Stolte, and Renae L. Smith-Ray

25. Theories of the Politics and Policies of Aging  483
   Robert B. Hudson

26. Theories of Help-Seeking Behavior: Understanding Community Service Use by Older Adults  505
   Robbyn R. Wacker and Karen A. Roberto

PART VI. TRANSDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON THEORY DEVELOPMENT IN AGING

27. Successful Aging  539
   John W. Rowe and Theodore D. Cosco

28. Coping, Optimal Aging, and Resilience in a Sociocultural Context  551
   Carolyn M. Aldwin and Heidi Igarashi

29. Religion, Spirituality, and Aging  577
   Peter G. Coleman, Elisabeth Schröder-Butterfill, and John H. Spreadbury

30. Theories of Wisdom and Aging  599
   Monika Ardelt and Hunhui Oh

31. Theories of Environmental Gerontology: Old and New Avenues for Person–Environmental Views of Aging  621
   Hans-Werner Wahl and Frank Oswald

32. Theoretical Perspectives on Biodemography of Aging and Longevity  643
   Leonid A. Gavrilov and Natalia S. Gavrilova

33. The Multiplicity of Aging: Lessons for Theory and Conceptual Development From Longitudinal Studies  669
   Dario Spini, Daniela S. Jopp, Stéphanie Pin, and Silvia Stringhini

PART VII. CONCLUSION

34. The Past as Prognosis: A Prismatic History of Theories of Aging  693
   W. Andrew Achenbaum

35. Prospects for Future Theory Development in Aging  707
   Richard A. Settersten, Jr., and Vern L. Bengtson

Index  719
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Preface

What is theory, and why are theories important in research on aging? What are the most prominent theories in contemporary gerontology? How can we nurture the development of theories to better meet the needs of the field in the decade ahead? These are some of the questions that have propelled this third edition of the Handbook of Theories of Aging. The need for theory-based knowledge to address problems of aging has never been greater. Yet, the ready availability of Big Data has proliferated primarily descriptive and nontheoretical research reports. Explanations of aging processes and outcomes—in other words, theories—have often taken a back seat to the generation of factual information.

With 35 chapters by some of the most highly respected researchers in gerontology today, this edition of this handbook provides a state-of-the-art overview so that researchers and practitioners can stay abreast of the latest developments. It addresses theories and concepts built on cumulative knowledge in four disciplinary areas—biology, psychology, social sciences, and policy and practice—as well as landmark advances in transdisciplinary science. Because of their explicit focus on theory, the editions of this handbook are a resource for knowledge about primary explanations of aging, whether at the level of cells or societies.

In this edition, we asked authors to place a strong emphasis on the future of theory development, assessing the current state of theories and providing a road map for how theory can shape research and how research can shape theory, in years to come. We are especially excited about a new section, “Standing on the Shoulders of Giants,” which contains personal essays by four of the most senior gerontologists in our field, who share their perspectives on the history of ideas in their fields, as well as their experiences with the process and prospects of developing useful theory.

Many chapters also address connections between theories and policy or practice, especially in ameliorating problems of aging. This also means doing better by the varied populations we hope to understand and to serve. Thus we asked authors to probe matters of diversity and inequality, assessing how theories in their area address these matters and how theories might be revised or tested with diversity and inequality in mind.

Perhaps the most important feature of this edition is that its content also reflects our field’s increasing commitment to transdisciplinary research that stretches across traditional disciplinary boundaries to generate more complex and comprehensive explanations of how aging processes and outcomes are intertwined.

The contributors to this handbook were asked to discuss the most exciting ideas in their areas in ways that are highly readable for a wide variety of our multidisciplinary
audiences, whether researchers, practitioners, or students. On behalf of the three associate editors, 70 contributors, and ourselves, we hope you enjoy reading this handbook as much as we have enjoyed putting it together—and that you will find many ideas in its pages to stimulate your thoughts and shape your future research.

Vern L. Bengtson, PhD
Richard A. Settersten, Jr., PhD
Acknowledgments

To create a 35-chapter volume exploring the frontiers of theory development in aging is no small task, and we have been privileged to work with many creative people along the way. We want first to acknowledge the contributions of the associate editors: for the biological sciences, Brian K. Kennedy, PhD, president and chief executive officer at the Buck Institute for Research on Aging; for the psychological sciences, Jacqui Smith, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan and research professor at the Institute for Social Research; and for policy, intervention, and practice, Nancy Morrow-Howell, MSW, PhD, Bettie Bofinger Brown Distinguished Professor of Social Work at Washington University, and current president of the Gerontological Society of America.

We also want to acknowledge the extraordinary dedication of 70 contributors who share our intellectual passion for theories and concepts on aging. Whether senior, mid-career, or junior in status, the members of this cast are among the world’s brightest minds in our field. We are grateful for their willingness to further strengthen their manuscripts in response to the reviews of the editors and the thought-provoking discussions that ensued. The commitment of the authors to the highest quality scholarship is evident throughout the pages of this handbook. Their chapters offer wonderful windows into their fields, and we know that readers will be as inspired as we have been by the rich and playful ideas of the authors.

On our end, the smooth production of this volume has been aided by the fine work of Bethany Godlewski, PhD candidate in Human Development and Family Sciences at Oregon State University (OSU), who efficiently managed tasks while she advanced her graduate research. We are also grateful to Laura Smith, of the Hallie E. Ford Center for Healthy Children and Families at OSU, for her assistance in preparing the manuscript in the final stretch.

On the publisher’s end, Springer Publishing Company has, for several decades, maintained its status as the premier publisher of academic volumes in gerontology, thanks to the talents of editors such as Sheri W. Sussman, with whom it has again been a pleasure to work. Sheri’s encouragement and support throughout the project have been exceptional from beginning to end. This is the fourth book on theories of aging that Springer has produced (the first being Emergent Theories of Aging and the second and third being the previous two editions of Handbook of Theories of Aging), and we are grateful for their investment in long-range, cumulative knowledge development in the field. Thanks are also due to Mindy Chen, who skillfully managed the production process.

We are also grateful for the support of our academic homes at the University of Southern California (USC) and OSU. The Edward R. Roybal Institute for Research on Aging at USC and the Hallie E. Ford Center for Healthy Children and Families at OSU have both...
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If expressions of appreciation to families are often pro forma in the acknowledgment section of books, in this case, they have special meaning. Hannah Gruhn-Bengtson was a collaborator in editing and providing helpful suggestions for Chapters 1, 5, and 35. Dan Dowhower, Maya Settersten, and Mario Settersten were encouraging and patient during the years it took to bring this volume to fruition. Both families welcomed us on several occasions so that we could work together in person in Oregon and California. They supplied us with good company, good humor, and good nourishment. We cherish the memories of our time together.

Vern L. Bengtson
Richard A. Settersten, Jr.
CHAPTER 1

Theories of Aging: Developments Within and Across Disciplinary Boundaries

Vern L. Bengtson and Richard A. Settersten, Jr.

This is the fourth handbook that is focused on theory development within aging; the first was published almost three decades ago (Birren & Bengtson, 1988). Although there have been many handbooks on aging over the past 75 years, beginning with Cowdry’s (1939) Problems of Ageing and the three-volume Handbooks of Aging series two decades later (Birren, 1959; Burgess, 1960; Tibbitts, 1960), most have summarized research findings relating to specific topics or problems in aging, usually within specific scientific boundaries. By contrast, the handbooks of theories of aging (Bengtson, Gans, Putney, & Silverstein, 2009; Bengtson & Schaie, 1999; Birren & Bengtson, 1988) instead focused on theoretical and conceptual developments in research on aging, both within and across disciplines. This again has been the goal underlying the 35 chapters of this volume: to review current advances in theory across the wide spectrum of gerontological research today, and to spur theory-based research and interventions in research on aging in the next decade.

To ensure the scientific and humanitarian advancement of our field, we must periodically take stock of the state of the theories that undergird our knowledge and consider how we can nurture the future development of theory. In today’s era of Big Data, when huge secondary data sets are readily available for rapid analysis, the temptation to churn out principally descriptive publications appears irresistible and necessary—especially when promotion, tenure, and other forms of status in the academy place a premium on empirical papers built on the latest methods and statistical procedures. However, the availability of new data and methods should be harnessed to promote the development of compelling theories as well. Recent years have brought major investments in longitudinal data, investments essential to understanding aging as a dynamic, multifaceted, and interactive process. These have been accompanied by advances in methods and statistics that make it possible to more sensitively and rigorously treat the effects of time and social contexts.

There is a natural and important synergy that links theories, methods, and data, just as there is a linkage across theories, policy, and practice. It is unfortunate that the crafts of theory, synthesis, and application often take a back seat to the more immediate and fundable work of data collection and analysis. Thinking about theory may seem too remote or too abstract to be of relevance; or too costly relative to the rewards; or discussion of theory may seem beyond the limited scope of journal pages or the appreciation of editors or reviewers relative to the data at hand. This is woefully nearsighted.
Theory has been, and continues to be, the cornerstone of scientific inquiry and the gateway to systematic knowledge development. In the following sections, we summarize what we mean by theory, and why theory is so important to advancing aging-related research, policy, practice, and intervention.

## WHAT IS THEORY AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

### Theory as Explanation and Understanding

First and foremost, theories are explanations—explanations that lead to, and are driven by, cumulative knowledge. Theories guide the questions we ask and the research we design. Theories answer the “why” and “how” behind what we find in data. Such explanations can be formal or informal, long or short, but they should be clear and explicit. Most often, they assume the form of a causal statement: $X$ occurs because $Y$ caused it, in conjunction with (or because of the absence of) $Z$.

Theories also provide understanding, which is somewhat different from explanation. We can posit a theory about the causal relationship between two variables without knowing the mechanism that underlies the relationships; a theory that includes mechanisms achieves a deeper level of understanding. In some fields of the social sciences it can be said that there are two primary types of theory: (a) theories of explanation of why and how something occurs—for example, cumulative advantage/disadvantage theories that explain why variability among older people partly reflects social inequalities, and how social processes generate those inequalities over time; and (b) theories of orientation that provide a worldview and even a set of explicit assumptions or propositions, which lead us to see and interpret aging phenomena in particular ways—for example, postmodern theory, feminist theory, critical gerontology, or the life-course perspective. Although the latter are often called “theories,” they are, from another perspective, more often broader “paradigms” than theories. However, the frame and propositions they provide are extremely useful in developing more specific theories. In any case, both types are represented in gerontology today.

“An attempt to explain,” perhaps also adding “for now,” is probably the simplest and most direct way to define theory. This expression has the advantage of reminding us that theories are provisional and embedded in a process that involves rejections, refinements, and reconsiderations over time as we are confronted with new knowledge and data, and with changing people in a changing world. Another useful phrase, “theorizing,” turns the noun into a verb that reflects the ongoing dynamic of building explanations. Advances in methods, and in the identification of problems to be studied, are dependent on the knowledge—theorizing—that preceded them, just as they in turn shape the resulting knowledge.

The principal value of theory, then, lies in building knowledge in a systematic and cumulative way, such that empirical efforts will lead to integration with what is already known and help us to see gaps or inconsistencies in existing knowledge or between new knowledge and old. The principal use of theory is to provide a set of lenses through which we can view aging phenomena and make and interpret observations.

### Barefoot Empiricism, Empirical Generalizations, and Models

Theory should not be confused with other steps in the process of knowledge development or the terms that have been used to describe them. For example, what James Birren, one of the founders of the psychology of aging, described as barefoot empiricism
(Birren, 1973, p. 11) is particularly problematic. This can be seen in papers presenting table after table of data with little interpretation as to why these results occurred or why they matter. Many articles like this can still be found in gerontology journals today, but it is unclear what lasting contribution they make beyond mere description.

What have been called empirical generalizations represent a conceptual step up from barefoot empiricism: statements that describe findings that have been repeatedly observed across multiple data sources. Empirical generalizations are usually anchored in extensive reviews of previous research on a given problem, and are often the grounds for explicit and even competing hypotheses. The research process involves collecting data through methods intended to reduce sources of bias, especially reliable and valid approaches to measurement and, in the social sciences in particular, sound sampling. In all scientific fields, the statistical handling of data is highly scrutinized by reviewers.

These steps, taken together—a thorough review of previous knowledge, an explicit statement of the research problem, a concern for unbiased collection of data, and state-of-the-art statistical analysis—can produce empirical generalizations about a research problem that look impressive. Nevertheless, too many journal articles still consist of empirical generalizations that are basically accounts of covariation across or between variables. This limits knowledge development to a description of observations and relationships at a certain point in time, with little interpretation concerning mechanisms of why and how they are related—in other words, no theorizing.

Models represent another process in knowledge development. A model is a way to depict a theory. It portrays the relationships among the complex variables suggested by a theory. It is a prototype of how empirical generalizations might be related to each other. The development of models and approaches to model fitting are recent contributions of 20th-century statistical and engineering applications of basic science. However, a model is not yet a theory.

Why Theory Is Important

In the history of science, theory has proven to be of great importance. In addition to explanation and understanding, there are pragmatic reasons for investing in efforts to develop theory.

First, in fostering explanation through specifying why and how empirically observed phenomena are related, theory contributes to the integration of knowledge over time. A good theory identifies the problem and its most important components (concepts) based on the separate findings and empirical generalizations from research. It also describes the linkages among the concepts in a causal sequence, based on previous knowledge. A good theory does this in a way that is clear, concise, and testable. This enables future investigators to test, refine, or refute it, thus advancing future knowledge development.

Prediction is another pragmatic contribution of theory. Theory-driven studies can point to new research directions based on findings that are partial, unexpected, or even anomalous and might otherwise remain hidden. Predictions based on theory can create radical shifts in the way we understand human life and the world around us. This is most obvious in the natural and biological sciences: Darwin’s theory of natural selection led to a revolution in human biology; Mendeleev’s theory led to the prediction of new elements in the periodic table; Einstein’s theory of relativity led to the discovery of new planets and eventually to the atomic bomb.

Theories also guide interventions to improve human conditions. Theory is valuable when we attempt to apply or advance existing knowledge in order to solve problems
or alleviate undesirable human conditions. This can be seen in most organizations whose structures and actions are guided by popular theories about effective management, leadership, and communication. At a global level, the usefulness of theory in technological intervention is obvious in applications related to communication. In little over a century, communication has developed from the telegraph to Internet connections that can connect refugees in rural Somalia to reporters in London in a few seconds.

Other interventions are behavioral and social, though these have less often been informed by rational theories. At the macro-social level are the actions of governments, whose interventions through public policy are intended to ameliorate problems, such as subsidies meant to keep people above poverty in old age or supports meant to delay the institutionalization of older persons through the delivery of home health care and meals. These interventions can sometimes be evidence based, but they are rarely based on strong theory. At the micro-social level are interventions by practitioners who serve older people. These daily provide help and assistance to elders in need. Their efforts, which are routinely touted as being anchored in “best practice” models, most often reflect empirical generalizations concerning practices employed in the past.

The difficult task of implementing effective public policy and service delivery is exacerbated by the fact that little funding is available for the evaluation of these efforts. What is clear is that these interventions rarely rest on strong theory. If we do not understand the theory (the why and the how) of the problem, how can we best set up an intervention to fix it?

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEORY IN GERONTOLOGY

In looking back through previous handbooks on aging, one can see that the theories of aging have undergone several pendulum shifts during the relatively short history of gerontology. In the first handbooks, there was still an emphasis on “grand” theory, from Edmund Vincent Cowdry’s (1939) biological theory of aging as a disruption in homeostasis (see Park, 2008), to Ernest Burgess’s (1960) sociological theory of modernization as creating a “roleless role” for the aged (see Chapter 5), and to James Birren’s (1960) “counterpart” theory of psychological decrement. Later, the pendulum shifted back to an era that was “data rich but theory poor”—what C. Wright Mills (1959) would have called “abstracted empiricism” or Robert Merton (1968) “strict empiricism,” in which too much attention was given to data over theory. And the pendulum seems to be swinging back again today, as the chapters throughout this edition attest, to what Merton (1968) once called theories of the “middle range,” built around circumscribed topics and adequate, if not ample, data.

The first of the four volumes to date on theories of aging (Birren & Bengtson, 1988) was not called a “handbook.” With “only” 20 chapters, 480 pages, and 23 contributors, the publisher felt that it was not hefty enough to warrant such a designation; so it was more modestly titled Emergent Theories of Aging. It was also the most philosophical of the four editions, with chapters on basic assumptions in theories of aging, dynamics related to aging and time, heuristics and metaphors in aging research, and contributions from the humanities. The chapters were thoughtful and often speculative, and there were far fewer studies to review than in later editions.

Over a decade passed before the next edition (Bengtson & Schaie, 1999) appeared as the Handbook of Theories of Aging. This volume contained 25 chapters and 524 pages, representing the work of 49 authors. In it, one can see the movement of the field
toward greater specialization, a narrowing of focus on research topics, and a more problem-oriented perspective. For example, the biological and biomedical section contained a chapter on stress theories of aging; the psychology section, a chapter on everyday competence and aging; and the social sciences section, a chapter on political economy and aging.

The 2009 edition (Bengtson et al., 2009) expanded significantly, with 40 chapters, 789 pages, and 79 authors. In it, the editors observed one major theoretical development in the years since the previous edition: a significant increase in theories and research that crossed traditional disciplinary boundaries. Indeed, that edition also contained a new section on “Translating Theories of Aging,” with chapters on topics such as jurisprudential gerontology, spirituality, a wisdom-based model of psychotherapy, and educational gerontology. Commitments to theory-based translational research have continued to grow, with this section of the current edition being the strongest to date.

In this 2016 edition, readers will find a strong emphasis again on theories related to health, but this time with greater attention to health-related processes and a wider range of health outcomes. This reflects movements in medicine, public health, and health sciences that are focused on prevention and treatment and on health disparities. Research in sociology and psychology, too, has more rigorously examined broader conceptions of well-being and the influences of close relationships, wider social networks, and life-course dynamics. Much of the action in biology has similarly shifted away from longevity and toward “health span” and aging well, not just aging long. Health and well-being are clearly central nodes around which scholars are fostering theories that bridge disciplines and levels of analysis, from cells to societies. The trend toward transdisciplinary work is also very apparent in this edition. In fact, it is now the longest section, and one can see the influence of transdisciplinary commitments in the disciplinary sections and in the section on policy, intervention, and practice as well.

AN OVERVIEW OF THIS EDITION

Goals and Emphases

Since the previous edition of this handbook, important developments have occurred within each of the disciplinary areas reflected in gerontology—the biology, psychology, and social sciences of aging, as well as in policy, intervention, and practice. A primary goal of this edition—with 35 chapters, 718 pages, and 70 contributors—is to update researchers, professionals, and students of aging on the latest theoretical developments across these traditional areas of gerontology.

A second goal is to foster “transdisciplinary” theories of aging by expanding concepts and explanatory systems across traditional boundaries. Critical advances have been made in transdisciplinary theories on circumscribed topics. Indeed, this is where much of the action in theory now resides and will continue to move.

A third goal is to increase attention to matters of variability and diversity in aging processes, from the cellular level of biological aging to the societal level of public policy. We asked chapter authors to consider the following issues: How sensitive are theories and concepts to matters of variability and diversity in aging—for example, to differences by gender, race and ethnicity, social class, or culture? How might theories and concepts be revised or tested with these matters in mind? In an effort to treat matters of globalization, we have also increased the coverage of international topics and the roster of international authors.
A fourth goal is to be a catalyst for developing future theories. To this end, we have asked contributors to contemplate common questions that bridge past, present, and future:

- **The state and evolution of theories**: What is the current state of theories and concepts and how far have they come? What theories and concepts have generated excitement? Which have fallen away, and which might be reclaimed but reshaped in light of contemporary conditions or intellectual currents?
- **The synergy between theories and research**: How have key theories and concepts shaped research and the current knowledge base? What research needs to be done to ensure vibrant theories in the decade ahead? What steps need to be taken in order to propel theory development in these directions?

### Organization

The body of this handbook is organized into seven sections, six of which have its own introduction by an editor or associate editor. The section introductions not only highlight the key contributions of the specific chapters therein, but also provide a global orientation to the theories in that area and an integrated story about the section as a whole.

The next chapter provides an overview of the volume and an examination of age and aging as our central theoretical constructs. Part I—“Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: Personal Perspectives on Theory Development in Aging”—is a new feature of this edition. This part contains chapters from four of the most senior gerontologists of our day from the fields of biology, psychology, social sciences, and the policy and practice of aging. The essays give readers an intimate backstage view into history of theory development in their respective fields. They share their personal experiences with the process and prospects of developing good theory: disappointments and victories, barriers and opportunities, and solutions and advice.

Parts II, III, and IV—on biological, psychological, and social science theories and concepts of aging—have been mainstays of this handbook since its initiation. Each discipline has an important set of theoretical traditions of its own. In this edition, we have built up the section on policy, intervention, and practice theories and concepts (Part V) to reflect commitments their field is making in theory-based, in addition to evidence-based, application.

Part VI highlights the surge in transdisciplinary theory development. Despite the challenges of bridging disciplines, and of working with different research paradigms and methods, researchers have made significant breakthroughs in explanations of aging phenomena that crossed and integrated disciplinary perspectives. This cross-pollination has been fostered by interdisciplinary graduate programs and training grants, as well as by funding agencies, which have placed a premium on interdisciplinary team science. It is exciting to see the emergence of theories and models that have as centerpieces concepts around which multiple scientific disciplines can collaborate.

Part VII, the conclusion, discusses some of the challenges of theory building in gerontology and advances an agenda for the development of theories in the future. As the field of gerontology and research on aging continue to rapidly expand, the need for a strong theory will only grow.
REFERENCES


