Integrating Social Psychology and Aging Research: Toward a Social-Developmental Theory of Behavior

Leslie A. Zebrowitz
Department of Psychology
Brandeis University

Joann M. Montepare
Department of Psychology
Emerson College

We consider 2 questions in this commentary. One is the extent to which the understanding of aging can be advanced by the application of social psychological theories. The second is the extent to which social-psychological theories can be enriched by considering issues in aging. We argue that the focus on situational causes of behavior in social psychological theories provides a vital balance to accounts of aging that have emphasized internal causes, and that the social psychological focus on process provides an important addition to more descriptive emphases. We also argue that applying social-psychological theories to issues in aging will strengthen their predictive power by necessitating greater attention to descriptive content as well as by revealing new moderator variables and domains of inquiry. Finally, we offer several methodological suggestions for future research. Ultimately, integrating social psychology and aging research will build social-developmental theories that are more powerful than either social or developmental theories alone.

The integration of basic social-psychological research with issues in aging and life-span development holds great promise for enriching both fields of inquiry. Not only can research and theory in social psychology provide us with valuable insights about aging, but also addressing questions raised by issues in aging can deepen the explanatory power of basic social psychological theories. Although we limit our discussion to those domains addressed by the articles in this special issue, we hope that our commentary inspires investigators with interests in other domains to pursue the advantages of such an integrative effort. We also hope that our brief discussion of methodological issues helps investigators to make the most of their integrative research.

HOW THE STUDY OF AGING CAN BE ENRICHED BY SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY THEORIES

Many models of adult development view the behavior of aging adults as reflecting internal traits, motivations, and challenges. Erikson (1959), for example, described the adult years as a time during which people face the conflict of generativity versus stagnation. Moreover, it has been suggested that one way aging adults resolve this conflict is by participating in volunteer activities as they move beyond work and family roles. The findings reported by Warburton and Terry (this issue) challenge the notion that volunteerism is an emergent age-related behavior. Exploring the extent to which the components of a revised theory of planned behavior predict the intentions to volunteer among older adults, these researchers show that the underlying process that predicts volunteer decision making in older adults is similar to that which predicts the behavior of younger adults. Although the basic process of volunteerism does not vary with age, research comparing the weighting of the components of this process across the life span could reveal age differences. Indeed, Omoto, Snyder, and Martino (this issue) found interesting age differences in the predictive power of the felt obligation to volunteer.

The research by Martin, Leary, and Rejeski (this issue) also challenges the assumption that the behavior of older adults is guided by internal personal factors. Specifically, their social-psychological approach suggests that certain age-related behaviors are driven by strong social forces because older adults make use of a wide range of self-presentation strategies to enhance their social image, just as younger adults do. What may differ is a function of age is not the basic process of self-presentation, but rather the specific aims and strategies that are utilized due to the special circumstances brought about by...
These theories to issues in aging and life-span development necessitates greater attention to meaningful content, which serves to strengthen their predictive power. For example, social-psychological writings on self-presentation have focused on the general aims and consequences of various self-presentation strategies like self-promotion, supplication, and ingratiation. Raising the question of age-related changes makes clear the need for self-presentation theories to specify who will adopt what strategies in what situation. The data provided by Martin et al. (this issue) add some meaty content to the bare bones of self-presentation processes by specifying older adults' self-presentation concerns and impression management strategies in the domains of appearance and health. Extending this research across the life span would further strengthen self-presentation theories by providing needed content that can enrich their predictive power at all ages.

The attention to content that emerges when social-psychological theories are applied to issues in aging can also strengthen self-concept theories. For example, the emergence of health-related concerns in the content of older adults' possible selves provides clues to the origins of possible selves that can enrich the general theoretical model (Frazier et al., this issue). Extending this research across the life span would reveal how possible selves unfold or change over time, something that has been largely ignored by social-psychological investigations of the possibilities that are perceived either at one future time or in the present.

Applying social-psychological theories to issues in aging can also uncover new moderator variables that, like the specification of content, will strengthen their predictive power. For example, the finding that reminiscence and current life satisfaction can moderate the outcome of upward and downward social comparisons highlights the need to refine social comparison theory so that it more clearly specifies conditions under which particular comparisons will have positive or negative effects (Reis-Bergan, Gibbons, Gerrard, & Ybema, this issue). Moreover, the effects of reminiscence and life satisfaction in this research may reflect a more general phenomena whereby downward comparisons have deleterious effects on people of any age if the comparison evokes a feared self, whereas upward comparisons have positive effects if the comparison evokes a possible self. As such, it would be interesting to expand this research to examine the effect on young adults of social comparisons with older adults.

Research on elderly stereotypes has important implications for social-psychological theories of stereotyping because this research makes clear that the theories must be able to account for negative attitudes toward a group that one will someday join. Similarly, theories on coping with the stigma of membership in a stereotyped group can be informed by considering the implications of moving from a nonstigmatized status to an age-stigmatized one (cf. Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2000). Chasteen's results suggest that what may change with age are perceptions of the typicality of older adults with negative attributes, which can reduce negative stereotyping of the elderly by older adults.
Finally, attention to age in social-psychological research can reveal new domains of inquiry. The research in this issue on filial piety provides one example (Liu, Ng, Weatherall, & Loong, this issue). Although social psychologists have devoted considerable attention to interpersonal relationships, particularly friendships and romantic relationships, they have largely ignored adult family relationships. Incorporating this domain would strengthen theories of interpersonal relations. For example, can attachment theory, used to predict variations in romantic relationships, also explain variations in filial piety (cf. Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987)? The research in this issue on persuasive communications provides another example of questions central to social psychological theory uncovered in research on aging (Duval et al., this issue). Although communicator credibility is integral to theories of attitude change, little attention has been paid to the effects of a communicator’s age. Duval et al.’s finding that communications by older adults have more influence on age stereotypes raises the interesting question of whether this is a general phenomenon or specific to particular communications. Considerable social psychology research has shown that expertise and trustworthiness both increase communicator credibility. Were older communicators more persuasive in the Duval et al. study because they were perceived as more expert or less biased on the particular topic or are they generally more credible communicators, consistent with the greater wisdom attributed to older adults?

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Questions regarding the proper interpretation of Duval et al.’s interesting findings highlight an important methodological issue in research on aging, namely what exactly is the variable of age? Discovering age effects, be it the age of those whose behavior is the focus of interest or the age of those who influence that behavior, will not substantially advance psychological theories unless we have some understanding of what causes those differences. As life-span developmental theorists have argued, age is a proxy for a host of factors reflecting personal experience, social position, educational level, historical circumstance, and biological condition (Birren & Cunningham, 1985). Moreover, Von Dras and Blumenthal (this issue) make clear that even biological age differences reflect the interplay of social-environmental factors, psychological factors, as well as genetic predispositions. Indeed, Ickes and Dugosh’s (this issue) intersubjective perspective suggests that the social context in which people operate may account for age-related changes attributed to biology. Ascertaining the meaning of age in research on social psychology and aging is an essential task.

A second methodological issue concerns what particular age groups are selected for comparison. Typically, and likely the result of convenience, young adult college students are compared with a broad range of adults over the age of 65. Although such comparisons can be informative, social psychologists interested in developmental phenomena should consider what the study of middle-aged groups and better differentiated older aged groups might reveal. Grouping 55-year-olds with 85-year-olds will surely obscure interesting age effects, and for many research questions, comparisons across the entire life span will provide maximal insight. Studying only one age group can teach us something about other variables, but it will not tell us anything about age differences.

A third methodological decision involves research design. A cross-sectional design leaves open the possibility that apparent age differences actually reflect cohort or generational effects. As such, any differences in the behavior of 40- and 80-year-olds, for example, may not be due to differences in age per se. A longitudinal design, on the other hand, can implicate age as the cause of those differences so long as various confounding variables that plague any repeated measures design are ruled out. More complex, mixed designs can help to eliminate various rival explanations, pinpointing age as the cause (cf. Schaie, 1965). However, even with such confounds discounted, the question still remains what it is about changes in age that produce changes in behavior.

CONCLUSION

As illustrated by the articles in this volume, the interplay of social psychology and age provides a fertile and challenging ground for empirical investigation and theory building. For maximal reward, the interplay must be bidirectional. Whereas existing social psychology theories can provide useful models for explaining age effects, the application of these theories to issues of aging will inform and broaden social-psychological theories. Ultimately such an endeavor will build social-developmental theories that are more powerful than current social or developmental theories alone.

REFERENCES


