Integrating Aging Topics Into Psychology
A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR TEACHING UNDERGRADUATES

Susan Krauss Whitbourne and John C. Cavanaugh, Editors
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A Practical Guide for Teaching

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Integrating Aging Topics Into Psychology
That the population of the United States and the rest of the developed world is “graying” is a well-known fact. Over the next few decades, the baby boom generation will roughly double the number of people older than age 65, a situation that will create unprecedented public policy challenges (Binstock, 1999). These changes clearly give rise to a pressing need for the general public to understand the issues pertaining to older adults and for professionals educated to deal with them.

Since the beginning of the scientific field of gerontology in the mid-20th century, psychologists have been at the forefront of research and theory related to older adults. For example, Division 20 (Adult Development and Aging) was the first division in the American Psychological Association (APA) added beyond the initial set of original divisions (in 1947), evidence
that interest in aging in professional psychology has deep roots (Birren & Stine-Morrow, 1999). The interest continues to grow; in the early 21st century, this is one of the fastest growing subdisciplines in psychology.

Despite the long history of involvement of psychologists in the field of adult development and aging, most psychology students are not exposed to research and theory on the topic. Few psychology programs require a course on adult development and aging, and few psychology courses contain significant coverage of issues related to aging.

As documented in detail throughout this volume, there is a dearth of materials on aging in psychology texts. The lack of course coverage and textbook material creates a serious learning gap given the coming demographic changes in the United States and the world. As described in detail in the chapters, however, this situation can be remedied because many ways are available to incorporate information on aging into core psychology courses without undue difficulty. The purpose of this book is to provide instructors with suggestions for infusing aging into psychology courses and to point them toward the resources necessary to provide their students with an introduction to the key issues in each area.

Division 20 has a long history of promoting ways for instructors to include aging content in their courses. Each year, the Division 20 Education Committee sponsors a teaching symposium at the annual meeting of the APA. The current volume also builds on an earlier volume that was based on the work of the Education Committee of Division 20 (Parham, Poon, & Siegler, 1990), and it provides important updated and expanded material to this previous volume. It is written by leading individuals in the field who not only help create the knowledge but also teach the courses. Most of the authors have been presenters at the annual Division 20 Education Symposia, as well as similar sessions presented at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America. The collection of authors in this volume represents a cross-section of the best teacher–scholars in the field of adult development and aging.

This chapter provides an introduction to the overarching issues confronting an instructor who wants to incorporate aging content into core psychology courses and a summary of each of the constituent chapters. Three main issues related to integrating aging content are discussed: how to organize material on aging, what types of materials can be used, and who should present the material. Each remaining chapter provides specific examples of these issues.

At the outset, we want to make a strong case for including an understanding of aging as one of the learning goals for any course in psychology. We argue that understanding the developmental course of any psychological phenomenon is essential. Anything less than such a treatment means that the issue under study is treated as static throughout life. Few, if any, psychological phenomena remain unchanged throughout adulthood. More
important, given the demographic trends in the nation and the world, it is essential that aging content be included in core psychology courses.

HOW SHOULD AGING CONTENT BE PRESENTED?

One of the most challenging issues confronting an instructor is deciding what content to include. Every course presents a conundrum: Should the emphasis be placed on depth of understanding (i.e., cover fewer topics but in more detail) or on breadth of understanding (i.e., more topics but in less depth)? We argue that the inclusion of aging content should not be viewed as a matter of “if” but “how.” It is not a dispensable topic but rather one that is vital to every area of psychology.

Aging content can be included as an extension of the depth of coverage of a topic, or it can be approached as a way of expanding the breadth of the course. A course on psychopathology might include clinical interview techniques in diagnostics. If the focus is on depth of knowledge of specific forms of psychopathology, this topic might not be included. In contrast, aging content could still be covered as relevant for understanding differences in symptoms of specific disorders.

Once an instructor decides to include aging content in a course, the first issue is how this content should be presented. Fundamentally, the choice is either treating aging as a separate topic or infusing aging into all topics throughout the course. Conceptually, the former approach is equivalent to having a separate chapter or section of the course on aging in which all of the other topics are viewed developmentally; the latter approach views aging as an inherent component of every topic in the subdiscipline under study.

Aging as a Separate Topic in the Course

Having a separate section of a course devoted to aging is probably the easiest way to add significant aging material, especially for instructors who have little if any background in aging. For example, as described in Anderson D. Smith's chapter on cognitive psychology (chapter 6), a section on aging and cognition could include a developmental perspective on all of the major aspects of cognition (e.g., attention, memory, and resources). Similar inclusive sections can be added not only for the areas discussed in this book but for others as well (e.g., human sexuality, marriage and the family, environmental psychology, and community psychology).

Several advantages of this approach are apparent. The concentration of aging content makes it clear to students that researchers and theorists have examined a broad range of topics from a developmental perspective. By including the content in a separate section, instructors draw more overt attention to aging. As discussed later, having a separate section on aging
may facilitate the use of time-limited activities (e.g., class demonstrations) or nontraditional material (e.g., film or music). These supplements may help students better understand the role of aging in the topics under study if they are considered together. Along these lines, if the section on aging is included at the end of the course, then the opportunity to use it as a way to review the entire course is also available, given that all of the key topics are examined developmentally. Finally, it may be easier for instructors who do not have extensive background in aging to create a separate section, which can very closely follow the overall organization of the rest of the course. An instructor can capitalize on the fact that researchers in aging study the same issues as so-called mainstream researchers and bring in an expert on aging as a guest lecturer.

The separate-section approach has downsides. By organizing all of the aging content into one section, it may be difficult for students to understand that age-related changes are an integral part of all psychological phenomena. This issue could be adequately addressed, however, by ensuring that all of the major topics in the course are included in a section on aging. Still, if the aging content is included too early in the course, then some issues may have not yet been discussed in sufficient detail for students to grasp. This is a more serious problem when the section on aging occurs earlier in the course. Finally, including aging as a separate section may make it vulnerable to the extent that an instructor then views it as content that could be deleted to cover fewer topics in more detail. Although, as we have argued, aging content should not be viewed this way, it nevertheless may be considered by some as an “extra” that could be sacrificed.

### Aging as Integrated Throughout the Course

The alternative to combining all of the discussion of aging into one section is to integrate it into all sections of the course. As indicated previously, this approach provides the best way for students to understand that aging is an inherent aspect of psychological phenomena. However, integrating aging across the course poses several key challenges.

Integrating aging throughout the course usually requires the instructor to supplement each section of the course, given the few textbooks that actually include any discussion of aging content. In turn, this means that the instructor must do more restructuring of the course compared to simply adding one section on aging. Managing such supplements successfully often requires more expertise in aging-related work.

Including aging content throughout the course has the additional advantage of creating better opportunities for alternative, more protracted supplements such as service learning, discussed in the next section. Such activities take longer to complete and are richer learning experiences if the topic is still relevant throughout the course. This is important to the extent
that the instructor has “understanding aging” as a key learning goal for the course.

Using Either Approach

Clearly, either approach (aging as a separate section or aging as integrated throughout the course) can be used effectively to get content on aging into any core psychology course. The choice is more a matter of preference depending on the instructor’s comfort and expertise level and the availability of other personnel as guest lecturers or co-instructors. The most important outcome is that aging is included.

WHAT TYPES OF MATERIALS ARE AVAILABLE?

Once an instructor has decided how to cover aging content in his or her course, a much more difficult issue is next: the actual selection of materials to be used as supplements to the core text or readings. Given the enormous volume of journal articles, books, Web sites, literature, film, music, and class activities available on various aspects of aging, the problem is certainly not the lack of material; rather, it is how to choose the best mix for a particular course.

A very common approach is to use supplemental readings as the primary way that aging content is covered. In general, one can use the same guidelines for selecting material on aging as are applicable for other supplements in deciding whether to use primary or secondary source material for coverage of research and theory. The remaining chapters in this book provide several excellent suggestions on where to go for these types of supplements, as well as advice on what types of materials work best in different situations.

A more challenging (and often more compelling) approach to including aging content is to use literature, film, music, and class activities such as writing and research projects (Blieszner & Buffer, 1999; Cavanaugh, 1999a; Fingerman & Bertrand, 1999; McGuire & Zwahr, 1999; Smith & Kohn, 1999; Whitbourne & Collins, 1999a, 1999b). Articles are available that discuss in detail how to select and use these effectively in courses on aging and related topics (e.g., Blieszner, 1999; Cavanaugh, 1999b). Additionally, several authors describe how to create, manage, and integrate service-learning projects into courses in gerontology (Blieszner & Artale, 2001; Brown & Roodin, 2001; Cavanaugh, 2001; Hanks & Icenogle, 2001; Long, Larsen, Hussey, & Travis, 2001; Nichols & Monard, 2001; Peacock, Bradley, & Shenk, 2001; Whitbourne, Collins, & Skultety, 2001). Lessons learned from gerontology courses can be readily applied to other core courses in psychology.

In general, these alternatives to traditional course supplements help students see how research and theory connect to “real-world” phenomena.
This is especially true in the case of class activities, such as writing exercises or research projects, and service-learning projects that are appropriately integrated into classroom content. Interested readers should consult the examples cited previously for specific details about how various supplements are best used and integrated in the course. As noted, these activities are easier to include if aging is integrated throughout the course as writing and service-learning projects take considerable time. Because students would be exposed to aging issues on a regular basis, those who choose aging as the topic for one of these activities would have their topic receive regular review.

**OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK**

The remaining chapters in this book address how to incorporate aging content into the core courses that are required in most psychology programs in the United States. Each chapter includes specific examples of which aging content could be included, suggestions on how to include it, and examples from the authors’ experiences. Chapters are organized by the typical level of the course, from introductory to advanced.

In chapter 2 on introductory psychology courses, Susan Krauss Whitbourne shows how aging can be included in every major section and can be used to demonstrate the importance of topics such as physiological psychology or sensation and perception that students may view as tedious. She offers numerous examples of in-class supplements and other types of activities to supplement the readings. Many of these activities may also be used in more advanced courses. She also provides helpful Web sites that can be used for supplemental material or student assignments.

Antonio E. Puente’s chapter on neuropsychology courses (chapter 3) reflects a growing trend in psychology programs to focus on this and other topics that bridge the clinical and neuroscience areas. He argues that knowing about aging is essential to a full understanding of neuropsychology. Puente provides many examples of material that blends clinical diagnosis, cognitive psychology, and physiological psychology. Several suggestions for supplemental material and assignments are offered.

Raymond J. Shaw discusses in chapter 4 several ways that aging can be incorporated into research methods and statistics courses. As he points out, developmental research questions provide much fertile ground for discussing challenges in research (e.g., sampling and representativeness), framing of research questions, and various approaches to data analysis. Shaw provides numerous suggestions for projects that can be used either as in-class demonstrations or actual opportunities for students to collect and analyze data.

In chapter 5, Frank Schieber offers many excellent ways in which aging can be brought into courses on sensation and perception. In this case, aging could also serve as an organizing theme; one could use the question, “How
does _____ change with age?" as a way for students to distinguish between those aspects that change with age and those that do not. Schieber provides a link to a superb Web site that contains a wealth of information, links to other sites, and demonstrations of various phenomena.

Because the topic of cognition and aging has been researched more than any other, Anderson D. Smith argues in chapter 6 that aging provides an avenue for understanding all basic cognitive topics. In each section of the course, students can use aging to ask about the relative stability of a process over time and how the study of changes (or lack thereof) in a process enhances our understanding of it. Smith’s many examples of demonstrations and course supplements provide ways to make a course in cognitive psychology more engaging and inclusive.

As Manfred Diehl indicates in chapter 7 on personality courses, aging offers an excellent way to introduce students to hotly contested issues such as the relative stability of personality traits and the very definition of personality itself. Diehl also points out that personality courses provide fertile ground for understanding how the continuing evolution of theory drives research. He provides several suggestions for supplemental readings, other materials, and hands-on experiences.

In their discussion incorporating aging into social psychology courses in chapter 8, Karen Kopera-Frye, Richard Wiscott, Dean Blevins, and Ana Begovic present several examples of how phenomena that are well-established in younger adults may differ with older adults (e.g., self processes, prosocial behaviors, intergroup processes, health and politics). Bringing aging into these areas provides several opportunities for introducing supplemental material (e.g., readings, videos) and assignments. Additionally, adding a focus on aging is a powerful way to discuss the effects of stereotypes in a new way.

Aurora M. Sherman notes in chapter 9 that health psychology is an area that is ripe for a focus on aging. As she describes, many phenomena are best exemplified from an aging perspective (e.g., the impact of increased longevity and dealing with chronic illness). This course also provides opportunities to address such key issues as diversity and the quality of and access to health care as well as aging and disease. Sherman offers suggestions on how to apply various criteria to case studies and provides several sources for supplemental material and projects.

Students’ inherent interest in abnormal psychology presents both good opportunities and significant challenges for introducing aging, as Daniel L. Segal points out in chapter 10. He presents several reasons why aging content is critical, such as refuting myths about aging and mental health and underuse of mental health services. Segal provides several types of supplemental content, sample case studies, and other activities that will help instructors address a general lack of content in most texts.

Victoria Hilkevitch Bedford points out in chapter 11 that texts for courses on the psychology of gender rarely discuss the issue of aging despite
well-grounded data showing that age is an important source of differences. Aging and gender are complementary concepts; one ought not to consider one without the other. Bedford provides a wealth of suggestions for supplemental material, assignments, and activities that demonstrate the true interconnectedness of gender and aging.

Although it may appear that there is little need for suggestions on incorporating aging into courses on life span development (as the topic is included in every text), Karen L. Fingerman shows how to use it more effectively in chapter 12. Because few instructors of this course are gerontologists, the tendency is to overemphasize childhood and adolescence. Through her many examples, Fingerman demonstrates how aging can be used to provide advance organizers for the course and provide a better understanding for the entire life span. Instructors can also use aging to provide a preview of what students may experience in their own future lives. Numerous excellent examples of classic readings and other teaching suggestions are offered.

Harvey L. Sterns, Ana Begovic, and Diane L. Sotnak discuss in chapter 13 how aging can be a critical component in courses on industrial/organizational psychology. Such topics as retraining older workers, the older labor force, human factors, job performance, and the changing nature of work all lend themselves well to including content about aging. This course also permits instructors to address topics such as myths relating to older workers and attitudes toward older workers held by students. Sterns et al. provide an excellent list of supplemental materials.

Bert Hayslip, Jr., provides considerable assistance in chapter 14 for instructors of courses on death and dying so that they can include aging content but not equate aging with death. He presents strong arguments for experiential projects and provides several examples. Hayslip also shows how the course can be used to help students identify their own fears and attitudes toward death and the dying. Several excellent supplemental sources are provided.

Finally, Rosemary Blieszner's chapter on personal relationships courses (chapter 15) provides ideas for challenging students to think about whether key aspects of personal relationships remain constant or change over time. These issues help instructors to get students to think about the future of their own relationships. In addition to many suggestions for supplemental materials and activities, Blieszner provides some Web sites that contain additional ideas for enhancing this course.

We hope that these chapters stimulate your thinking about your own teaching and provide ample evidence that aging is a critical topic in any course in psychology. Should the course you teach not be one specifically discussed, we trust that you will still have enough suggestions from the authors to begin incorporating some topics in any case. Each of the authors asked us to make certain that readers know that they are available for consultation and discussion. Please feel free to contact us.
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Introductory psychology courses hold an enormous potential for integrating the topic of aging in coverage of fields ranging from methods to social psychology. Unfortunately, introductory psychology texts present a negative view of aging or, at best, mixed messages (Whitbourne & Hulicka, 1990; APA Commission on Ethnic Minority Membership, Recruitment, Retention, and Training–2, in press). Many opportunities are available to integrate aging as a dimension of the course. In this chapter, the intersection of aging and mainstream psychology is explored with a focus on making the material accessible and interesting to students in introductory psychology courses. Each main area of the introductory course is approached from the standpoint of the aging dimension, or the developmental implications of the material for incorporating research and theories in the psychology of adult development and aging, as well as social gerontology.

OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE

As a survey course that reaches students from a wide array of majors, introductory psychology presents a special challenge to the instructor. For many students, the course satisfies a general distribution requirement, one
that may or may not have been chosen on an elective basis. In addition to students representing a diversity of interests and motivations, the course is made more challenging in that it is often a first-year course, and the students lack sophistication in reading, test-taking, and writing skills. However, on the positive side, because the course is so broad, it is possible for the instructor to weave in areas of personal interest as a theme or as a way to give the course more relevance to students. The topic of aging fits perfectly into this framework, because the concept of the developing individual can serve as an integrative theme across many areas within psychology. Moreover, aging is becoming an increasingly relevant topic as the world population grows older. Students will appreciate learning about the aging process because many of them are likely to interact with older adults in the course of their careers, regardless of the field they enter. Furthermore, many students have an inherent interest in the topic because of its relevance to family life, specifically their relationships with parents, grandparents, and other older relatives.

Objectives

The introductory psychology course is intended to provide students with a basic understanding of the principles of behavior. Within this overall objective, the instructor may wish to emphasize the applied utility of knowledge about psychology and its relevance to everyday life. The instructor also may choose to orient students to psychology as a scientific discipline, emphasizing the importance of empirical research methods. The topic of aging fits into these objectives, as it provides students with an appreciation of the way that principles of behavior apply to development in later life, has direct applications, and provides ample opportunities to discuss the need for a scientific approach to understanding behavior. For example, in teaching about the topic of sensation and perception, instructors can make the point that these processes change over adulthood in significant ways. In terms of applications, the topic of aging has relevance to, for example, the area of abnormal psychology. There are important ways in which diagnosis and therapy ideally should be modified to take into account the particular concerns of older adult clients. Finally, in the area of research methods, numerous ways are available in which studies of aging can be used to demonstrate the need for appropriate controls, especially because age is not a true independent variable.

Topics Covered

The syllabus of the introductory psychology courses typically includes a broad representation of the subdisciplines of psychology and the background in the history of psychology and research methods. The majority of instructors set their syllabus on the basis of the textbook they are using, although obviously, it is possible to present chapters in a different order than they
appear in the book. Furthermore, a text may be chosen because of its inclusion or exclusion of particular topics. In the case of aging, the instructor may wish to choose a text that has two chapters on developmental psychology, as this increases the chances that aging will be covered in a satisfactory manner within that unit of the course. Because few textbooks now include aging in any chapter other than developmental psychology, it is likely that most of the coverage of aging in other topics requires the introduction of new material during lecture or in the form of additional readings.

One of the challenges of teaching introductory psychology in a one-semester course is that not enough time is available to give sufficient emphasis to every topic, assuming that the instructor wishes to present a balanced approach to the field. Therefore, it may seem difficult to work any new content into a course that is already jammed with information. However, if the instructor wishes to incorporate at least some material on aging into the course, it is possible to do so without sacrificing basic areas. Examples relevant to aging can be used just as readily as examples relevant to any other age group or subtopic, and in this way, no time is lost from the existing course schedule. If the instructor is using multimedia material to enhance the lecture (videotapes, digital video discs, or streaming video), these examples can be sought from movies, television programs, or documentaries that present examples of psychological processes in older adults.

GENERAL CONCERNS REGARDING AGING

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, introductory textbooks tend not to do justice to the topic of aging. When material on aging is included in the text, it is often presented in a negative fashion. Stereotypes about aging are then reinforced, and students are not given the opportunity to learn important principles about individual differences and that old age is not equivalent to disease.

A good example of this problem of stereotyping and negative information is the topic of Alzheimer’s disease, which may be included either in the chapter on aging or in the chapter on the brain. It is typical for the prevalence of Alzheimer’s disease to be overestimated in the popular media as affecting 4 million adults older than age 65 (or about 12% of the population in this age range). These estimates also tend to state that the percentage of adults older than age 85 with the disease is about 50%. More recent estimates of the prevalence of this disease are 2 to 2.5 million among the older population as a whole and perhaps up to 29% in those older than 85 (Brookmeyer & Kawas, 1998; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1998). However, given the ubiquitous nature of the “4 million” estimate, it is likely that introductory textbook authors would use this number as the stated prevalence of the disorder. The problem with using this number is that it perpetuates the myth of
old age being equated with senility. The more conservative estimates of prevalence clearly differentiate Alzheimer’s disease from normal aging or other forms of dementia. A useful demonstration to illustrate this point would be to ask students to estimate the prevalence of Alzheimer’s disease in the population, based on media representations of its prevalence. The instructor can also show a videotape of a recent news item on the disorder, as advances in this field are often covered in nightly network news broadcasts.

Another example of a topic that tends to be treated incorrectly in introductory psychology texts is that of the “mid-life crisis” as a predictable event that primarily affects men in their 40s. Many texts present the Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee (1978) chart depicting the “seasons” of a man’s life, with the mid-life transition given particular emphasis. The problem with this coverage is that the mid-life crisis is a discounted notion in adult developmental psychology. By presenting the concept in an uncritical fashion, textbook authors perpetuate the mistaken idea that personality changes occur at definite ages in adulthood. An exercise that can be useful in this topic to help instructors convey these points is to ask students whether they think one or both of their parents has had a mid-life crisis. The instructor can then discuss whether these experiences would technically qualify as a mid-life crisis by asking the age of the parents. Most likely, even those parents who fit the criteria will have a wide variety of ages. Excerpts from movies with a mid-life crisis theme can also be shown, such as American Beauty.

A reluctance to make large changes from edition to edition of a text presents yet another problem in the presentation of information on aging. Information and theories that were correct at one point in time may fail to be replaced in later editions because textbook authors are not keeping up with the literature on aging, a literature with which they may not be particularly familiar. As a consequence, texts continue to cover data and theories that have long been discarded or replaced.

Disengagement theory provides a good example of the problem of outdated literature remaining in introductory texts. According to disengagement theory, older adults are more satisfied with life if they are allowed to withdraw from social obligations and focus on their inner lives. At one time, this theory was considered to present a viable alternative to activity theory, which presents the opposing view that older adults are more likely to be well-adjusted if they are allowed to remain involved and active in their social roles. The activity versus disengagement theory debate was long ago declared defunct in the field of gerontology (Whitbourne, 2001), but it still breathes life in many introductory psychology texts. Consequently, students are forced to learn (and instructors to teach) an outdated and negative view of the social aspects of the aging process. The situation is even worse in the areas of physical and cognitive aging, in which outdated cross-sectional studies presented uncritically still form the bulk of information presented about
older adults. As with the previous examples of inaccurate depictions of aging, instructors can stimulate class discussion around how older adults are portrayed by these studies and question students to determine whether they agree or disagree with these portrayals. Presenting antistereotypical examples of older adults through videos and movies can further reinforce these points. Older adults such as John Glenn who have made remarkable accomplishments can be featured by showing brief video clips.

At best, introductory texts present too little material on aging, and at worst, they present incorrect material. Exacerbating the situation is the tendency to leave aging out of all chapters other than the chapter specifically devoted to aging. This segregation of material that would easily fall into the scope of other areas of substance means that students do not have the opportunity to learn about how the aging process intersects with other topics in the field.

Many of the problems inherent in the current presentation of aging could be remedied if textbook authors presented the more general principles of developmental psychology. These principles include multidirectionality of development, multidimensionality, plasticity, and contextualism. Multidirectionality means that development can occur in more than one direction with both gains and losses throughout life. Multidimensionality means that it is important to look at more than one facet of the individual, ranging from the biological to the psychological to the social, or as a biopsychosocial process. Plasticity is a related concept, meaning that losses in development can be compensated by behaviors in which the individual engages and which maximize functioning. In the case of the brain, for example, plasticity means that although neurons may be lost with aging, new synapses can be formed, and increases in the elaboration of dendrites occur. Finally, contextualism means that individual behavior is examined in terms of its social context. Individuals may show losses in environments that deprive them of potential growth experiences and opportunities.

Although textbook authors may fail to do justice to these principles of life span development, instructors can present these ideas in simple and concrete ways as part of the overall orientation to the course. Such a presentation sets the stage for the inclusion of developmental processes, from childhood to old age, as a normal and expectable part of the treatment of psychology as a whole. Individuals are not static in their behavior over time, and continued emphasis on this fact should be as fundamental to the introductory psychology course as are the principles of behaviorism or social psychology.

INCLUSION OF AGING INTO COURSE TOPICS

The typical syllabus in introductory psychology proceeds from background material (history, systems, and research methods) and then moves
through the topics of physiological, sensation and perception, learning, intelligence, development, personality, social and abnormal psychology. Health psychology, stress and coping, motivation, and emotion tend to be interspersed in individual chapters throughout this order of topics. As shown in this chapter, instructors can readily incorporate aging into each topic.

**History, Systems, and Research Methods**

The topic of aging can first be introduced in the course in discussions of contemporary psychology, in which the branches of psychology are described. Within the American Psychological Association, aging is represented by Division 20, Adult Development and Aging, and it is also represented in several other divisions, most notably Section II (Geropsychology) of Division 12, Clinical Psychology. The changing demographics of the United States and the world can be brought into this discussion of the field of psychology to emphasize the need for trained specialists in the field to work with the growing population of individuals older than age 65. Students are invariably impressed and surprised to learn that by the time current undergraduates reach 65, they will constitute about one quarter of the entire U.S. population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002). With the availability of the 2000 Census data, instructors have plentiful resources to document these points.

Because research methods is an area that encompasses all of psychology, aging provides as good a topic as any to use for illustrating principles of the scientific method. Examples relevant to aging can emphasize the need for controls. The fact that cohort differences are linked to age differences in all cross-sectional studies provides a clear-cut example of confounding variables. Furthermore, all studies on aging are, by definition, quasi-experimental. Therefore, studies on aging can be used to illustrate basic points about research design in psychology. Although developmental research designs are a relatively advanced topic and more appropriate for a psychology of aging course, the example of sequential methods provides a good illustration of how researchers attempt to control for cohort and time of measurement effects that either obscure or exaggerate the effects of aging. Examples of documentaries covering major new studies such as the Harvard Medical School New England Centenarian Study (http://www.med.harvard.edu/programs/necs/) and the Nun Study being conducted at the University of Kentucky (http://www.mc.uky.edu/nunnet/) can provide students with concrete examples of fascinating approaches to studies of the aging process.

Statistical procedures can also be taught with examples from geropsychology. Correlational studies on aging can be used to illustrate the relationship between age and other variables. For example, a positive correlation exists between age and reaction time, and a negative correlation exists between age and depression scale scores. Even if instructors do not wish to
include examples or studies from the aging field, they should nevertheless explain that the majority of studies in psychology are conducted on college-age samples. This point relates to the problem of sample selectivity, and the need to obtain representative samples of age and other characteristics should be emphasized both in this and in other units of the course.

Brain and Behavior

The brain and behavior unit of the course provides several areas in which aging can be covered. In the area of brain imaging, the instructor can show slides of magnetic resonance imaging or positron emission tomography scans that compare the brains of older adults with those of younger adults. This material is readily available on the Internet at Whole Brain Atlas, which includes aging slides and is located at http://www.med.harvard.edu/AANLIB/home.html. Examples of research on aging also have provided evidence for plasticity in the nervous system, and animals raised in enriched environments have shown elaborated dendritic and synaptic processes. The topic of Alzheimer's disease also fits in well with this topic to illustrate diseases that can affect the brain and hence behavior (keeping in mind the prevalence statistics mentioned previously).

Circadian rhythms and sleep are often included in the topic of the brain and behavior. Within this topic, instructors can cover sleep disorders, some of which become more pronounced in later life, such as sleep apnea. Decreases in REM sleep occur across the life span, starting in infancy and progressing through old age. Changes in circadian rhythms also take place. Studies on circadian rhythms have shown that older adults are likely to be “morning” people and younger adults to be “evening” people (Li, Hasher, Jonas, Rahhal, & May, 1998). The “Morningness–Eveningness” Questionnaire (Horne & Östberg, 1976) can be administered in class to illustrate this concept and will invariably demonstrate that the majority of college-age students are evening people (expect about 1% of the students to say they are morning people).

The endocrine system is often covered in this unit. Although sufficient time to discuss this system adequately is not available, mention can be made that changes in growth hormone, estrogen, and the androgens occur throughout adulthood (Whitbourne, 2003). As with other topics receiving increased attention in the media, it is likely that the instructor will be able to find a recent example from one of the network news programs on this topic.

Sensation and Perception

The unit on sensation and perception includes many areas, each of which has potential relevance to aging. The topic of vision, which tends to receive the most attention, should include a description of presbyopia, the
hardening and thickening of the lens with age that leads to loss of accommodation of the eye to focus on near objects. This process begins to be noticed by most adults in their 40s, and it is universal. The type of hearing loss that occurs in middle and later adulthood, called presbycusis, should be mentioned in the section on hearing. Several types of presbycusis exist, but the loss is at least in part linked to environmental damage. There is preventative value in including this topic, even if only briefly. Students can be told that the headphones and loud speakers they use to listen to music may very well lead to hearing loss in middle age if not sooner.

Adaptation to visual changes in later life can be illustrated by showing the opening scene from *Driving Miss Daisy*, in which the main character finds that she can no longer drive and now must depend on others to get around. This scene depicts in a sensitive manner the many conflicts around the issue of aging and driving, a matter that draws media attention and the expression of strong opinions from the undergraduates (who will undoubtedly hold negative attitudes toward aging drivers).

In teaching about perception, relevant material on aging is available within the areas of feature analysis theory and top-down versus bottom-up processing. Relatively little information is available on the effects of aging on depth perception or the illusions.

**Cognition and Intelligence**

The topics of attention, working memory, problem-solving, intelligence, and language have a great deal of relevant information on aging that can potentially be included in the introductory psychology course. Research on memory failure has the greatest applicability to adult development and aging. It is an area in which the instructor can counter myths about aging, such as the belief that young and middle-age people have about memory slips being a sign of Alzheimer’s disease. Memory failure is a common occurrence throughout adulthood, and it is only in later adulthood that significant declines are observed. However, these declines are more likely to occur in some memory tasks such as working memory and are not likely to affect other areas such as semantic and procedural memory. Excellent examples can be drawn from Schacter’s (2001) book, *The Seven Sins of Memory*.

Some texts already include crystallized-fluid theory and the Seattle Longitudinal Study findings (Schaie, 1996) in the chapter on intelligence; therefore, this is a natural topic to incorporate into lecture. In addition to presenting results on the effects of aging on intelligence, this study has also yielded fascinating data linking lifestyle and personality to intelligence test performance.

Wisdom and creativity in later life are additional topics that can be presented within this section of the course. The model of wisdom developed by Baltes and colleagues (Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, & Smith, 1995)
presents an intriguing view of intelligence in later life. Discussion of studies of creativity throughout adulthood conducted by Simonton (1999) help dispel the myth that older people are not capable of productive output.

Developmental Psychology

Developmental psychology provides the most clear-cut area for application of material on adult development and aging. Instructors can do a real service to their students by presenting the latest information on the field in this area, particularly as it is likely that the introductory textbook (as mentioned previously) is unlikely to present current theories and data.

As stated earlier, instructors who wish to incorporate aging into the introductory psychology course should give preference to textbooks that present material on development throughout the life span rather than just in childhood and adolescence. Emphasis should be given to principles of multidirectionality, multidimensionality, plasticity, and contextualism (Lerner, 1995). The typical introductory textbook presents development from a chronological rather than a process-oriented perspective. A case can be made for taking the chronological approach in an introductory-level course because this is intuitively easier for students to grasp than the more abstract process perspective. If this is the approach taken, then such information should be prefaced by making students aware of the notion of individual differences, both within and across people. Students should also be oriented to the role of sociocultural factors. Development at all ages reflects these processes, not just development in later adulthood, and by taking this approach, the instructor gives emphasis to the important notion of continuity of the individual across periods of the life span.

Finally, because aging is typically presented within the text in the development chapter, the instructor should be sensitive to the tendency of some texts to present stereotyped or unduly negative characterizations of aging. As antidotes to the text, the instructor should seek examples of people who do not fit society's norms and stereotypes of older adults. Multimedia material can be shown during class that highlights such examples, and some of these have already been suggested. Additionally, instructors can draw from segments shown on television magazine programs, which often make available videotapes that focus on unusual older adults. These segments, which can be shown within a certain time limit for educational purposes, often present a story on an older person who has accomplished a remarkable feat, such as climbing a mountain or winning a race. Along the same lines, many popular movies exist in which an older adult is presented as a character demonstrating wisdom, strength, humor, or other positive attributes that defy ageist stereotypes. Some examples of these characters include *Grumpy Old Men*, *Harold and Maude* (which also explores aging and sexuality), and the grandmother in *The Wedding Singer*.
Personality

Personality theories and research provide many potential intersections with aging. Erikson’s theory specifically includes adult development and aging in the series of psychosocial issues proposed to occur over the life span (Erikson, 1963). Plentiful examples illustrate themes from Erikson’s theory regarding later life. For example, the death scene of Caesar in the film Gladiator reflects the processes of generativity and ego integrity.

Within the trait theory tradition, the Five Factor Model (McCrae & Costa, 1990) not only has been examined in terms of aging, but also has received support from cross-sectional and longitudinal studies of personality based on the primary measure derived from the theory, the NEO–PI–R. Data obtained with this instrument are used to reinforce the claims of the theory that personality is stable in adulthood; in addition, cross-national studies have suggested that there is generality of the five factors outside the United States (McCrae et al., 1999). Thus, examining the data in which the Five Factor Model was applied to adults gives students a firmer grounding in the theory.

The teaching of psychodynamic theory in introductory psychology often includes a listing of defense mechanisms along with examples from everyday life. As with trait theory, research on adults that was based on measures of defense mechanisms helps underscore important aspects of the psychodynamic perspective. Older adults use more mature defense mechanisms than do younger adults (Diehl, Coyle, & Labouvie-Vief, 1996). Incorporating this finding into the lecture helps students think of personality in adulthood as changeable and provides an important contrast with the stability approach emphasized by trait theory.

Cognitive theories of personality can also be examined from the standpoint of aging. Studies of the self in adulthood have examined how individuals react to changes in their lives brought about by the aging process (Whitbourne & Collins, 1998). In keeping with the tradition of cognitive psychology, these studies emphasized that it is the interpretation of experiences rather than the experiences themselves that determine the impact on the individual’s sense of self.

Motivation and Emotion

In many texts, the topics of motivation and emotion are presented in the same chapter. However, it is difficult to cover both topics in the same lecture, as a variety of theoretical perspectives within each require careful explanation. Traditional approaches to these topics have emphasized alternative theories such as the James–Lange versus Schachter–Singer theories of emotions and the instinct versus incentive theories of motivation.
Research on aging and emotions can provide students with a concrete example of current work in the field of emotions. For example, socioemotional selectivity theory proposes that older adults maximize the positive emotions they experience by spending the limited time they have in life with familiar people rather than strangers (Carstensen, 1992). This fascinating theory has applicability to undergraduates, as the principles of the theory apply equally to younger as to older adults. This theory is of interest because it emphasizes continuity over the life span in basic psychological processes and because it presents an antistereotypic view of older adults as capable of strong, positive emotions. Films depicting loving relationships between older individuals can capture this point; an excellent example is On Golden Pond.

A small but noteworthy point that can be made in the area of motivation is that Maslow’s theory of self-actualization is more applicable to middle-age and older adults than it is to young adults. Maslow studied more than 3,000 individuals to identify those who were self-actualized, and no one younger than age 50 met the criteria specified by his theory.

Social Psychology

Within the field of social psychology, the topics of attitudes, social cognition, and discrimination in the form of ageism can all be examined from the standpoint of older adults. Older adults are a common target of stereotyped attitudes that mainly are negative (Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994). With concerns over issues such as Social Security and Medicare having become so much a part of the political agenda, attitudes in these areas can be used just as readily as attitudes toward other topics commonly discussed in introductory texts (e.g., attitudes toward abortion).

The targeting of older adults can also be examined in advertisements that portray aging in a negative light. For example, many health advertisements on television depict older characters as having a variety of physical and mental ailments. With proper editing equipment, the instructor can construct a montage of these advertisements, which will illustrate this point effectively. Students can be asked about the impressions that these advertisements make on them about the physical and mental characteristics of older adults.

Characters in movies and television shows also tend to be depicted in a stereotyped manner, and these examples can be shown in class using videotaped examples. One particularly effective example of a negatively portrayed character is the grandmother in National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation, who arrives at the door for Christmas dinner with her cat wrapped up as a present. Conversely, the character of Martin Crane (from the television series Frasier) is an older adult portrayed in a more realistic light. His relationship with his sons also demonstrates in a favorable manner family relations between adult children and their parents.
Another approach in the area of social psychology is to demonstrate the problems of measuring attitudes by administering scales of attitudes toward older adults among the students in the class. Difficulties with measurement and the actual attitudes expressed by students can be a starting point for discussion of the substantive nature of attitudes toward aging and the technical aspects of measuring these attitudes.

The depiction of nursing homes and institutional life in the popular media is another way to open discussion about attitudes toward older adults. A brief segment in the film *Happy Gilmore* shows a sadistic nurse’s aide threatening a new resident, a scene that captures many people’s worst fears about what will happen to them in an institution.

**Stress and Health Psychology**

The topic of stress and coping has become a staple within introductory courses, often in the context of health psychology. Both areas have clear relevance to adult development and aging. The greater proneness of the person with a Type A personality to cardiovascular disease can be discussed as a phenomenon that applies largely to middle-age adults, particularly men. Similarly, the topic of stressful life events applies primarily to individuals in middle age and later who are at greater risk for negative health consequences from experiences such as divorce or death of spouse; loss of job; and the daily hassles of managing roles in home, family, and the community. Although many texts apply these concepts to college students, they were initially developed on adult samples (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980), and a case can be made that these populations are at greater risk for stress-related diseases than are college students.

The field of health psychology has broad applicability to many age groups, ranging from children to older adults. The processes involved in teaching compliance to medical patients can just as readily be discussed using middle-age people who have heart disease as it can with children who have diabetes. Students can gain the most from this topic by selecting a wide range of examples to illustrate how psychologists work with medical health professionals to ensure that patients are able to benefit optimally from medical interventions.

**Sexuality and Gender**

Although aging is often equated with lack of interest in sexuality, it has long been known that older adults are interested in and able to maintain an active sex life. Nevertheless, a national survey of sexual dysfunction in the United States conducted in the late 1990s indicated that a large percentage of adults experience inhibited sexual responsiveness (Laumann, Paik, & Rosen, 1999). Discussions in this area can include how the expression of
sexuality varies throughout the adult years and defining the nature of psychological interventions that can help treat sexual dysfunction.

**Abnormal Psychology**

Incorporation of material on adult development and aging into the abnormal psychology unit of the course provides an important dimension to a topic, which by its very nature involves an understanding of individual change over time. Just as the topic of childhood disorders is rising to prominence in abnormal psychology, so is a focus on how disorders develop throughout the middle and later adult years (Whitbourne, 2000). The incidence of disorders varies across the adult years and, contrary to myths about aging and mental health, there are lower rates of anxiety and mood disorders. However, depression does occur in later life, and it should be differentiated from normal aging, as it is a treatable disorder.

Diagnosis and treatment also should be examined from the standpoint of the age of the individual. Fascinating issues emerge in examining the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship between a younger therapist and an older adult client. The issue of transference, often discussed in the context of psychoanalytic psychotherapy, therefore takes on a very different form than when the therapist is older than the client. The film *Analyze This* portrays such a relationship in an amusing, if not realistic, manner. Other forms of treatment, such as psychotherapeutic drugs, also require that the clinician take into account the age of the individual.

**SUMMARY**

Clearly, instructors teaching this course face many choices and demands to cover interesting topics within a limited time frame. However, by including at least some material on the topic of adult development and aging, both the course and the students will benefit from the enriched perspective that such material provides.

**REFERENCES**

