Bridges and Boundaries: Humanities and Arts Enhance Gerontology

With this issue, we are pleased to announce The Gerontologist’s explicit interest in promoting scholarship on aging, humanities, and the arts as an important thread in the fabric of the study of aging. We encourage authors to develop and submit manuscripts in all categories (research articles, forum, practice concepts and policy analysis, and brief reports) described in the Instructions to Authors. All submissions will be subject to the same standards of excellence and policies of peer review currently used by the journal.

To ensure disciplinary competence in reviewing and editing these manuscripts, H. Q. Kivnick, PhD, has been appointed as Editor, Humanities and Arts. She will oversee all editorial decisions regarding these manuscripts. Additionally, five scholars with diverse experience and expertise across the humanities and arts have joined our editorial board, enriching the journal’s ability to review, edit, and make accessible manuscripts in these two broad realms. We will consider theoretical and research papers that challenge, provoke, and excite thinking about the experience of aging. Humanities and arts scholars are concerned with human struggle and success; their research focuses on meaning and interconnection, not on prediction or explanation as does empirical research. Disciplinary approaches from the classics, fine/performing arts, literature, linguistics, rhetoric, history, theology, philosophy, and more will be welcome in the exploration of aging as it is portrayed, understood, and/or experienced.

History of Humanities and Arts in GSA

In 1946, the inaugural issue of the Journal of Gerontology marked the beginning of the Gerontological Society of America. A member of the Society’s first Board of Directors, Lawrence Frank (1946) described gerontology at that time as a new field of inquiry emerging in response to scientific and social needs and opportunities of an aging population. While Frank envisioned an agenda focused on understanding the biological, physiological, psychological, and social aspects of old age through a growing subspecialty of research and practice, he cautioned against the dangers of “large, impersonal rigidity...more terrifying than the ills, hazards, and insecurities against which they are organized to defend us” (p. 9). As the Society has been organized around Biological, Medical, Behavioral and Social Sciences, and Public Policy, so have its journals emphasized these specific disciplines. When the pendulum swings too far in this direction of specialization, we run the risk of courting Frank’s feared “large impersonal rigidity.”

Thirty years after the Society’s founding, Council created a new Subcommittee on Humanities and Humanism of Aging, with David Van Tassel as the committee’s first chair. The committee was renewed annually until, in 1979, it became the Standing Committee on Humanities and the Arts (Ansello, 2007). Historian Andrew Achenbaum, the standing committee’s first chair, described the group’s primary goal as “...increas[ing] the visibility of arts and humanities within the Gerontological Society and among those engaged in research and training in aging” (Achenbaum, 1979 in Ansello, 2007, p. 273). Underlying this goal was an overall plan to infuse a humanities and arts perspective throughout the activities of GSA and of other aging-related organizations and programs.

Since then, GSA has regularly presented humanities and arts sessions, posters, and special events.
at annual meetings. At the 2010 Annual Meeting, the Humanities and Arts Committee organized the Biological Sciences Presidential Symposium: What is the Measure of a Good Old Age?, thoughtfully integrating biological knowledge with humanistic analysis to get at the deeper meaning of the “good old age” we all hope for. Committee members have shared expertise with practice groups and academic institutions. Indeed, it is the early Chairs of this committee who are responsible for creating the academic field of Humanities of Aging and producing three editions of the widely respected Handbook on the Humanities of Aging (Cole, Kastenbaum, & Ray, 2000; Cole, Ray, & Kastenbaum, 2010; Cole, Van Tassel, & Kastenbaum, 1992). In these ways and more, the Committee has been extremely successful in meeting the original goals of increasing visibility and broader dissemination of a humanities and arts perspective.

**Humanities and Arts Perspective**

What is a humanities and arts perspective? In the introduction to A guide to humanistic studies in aging: What does it mean to grow old?, Cole and Ray (2010) assert that “. . . the arts and humanities are . . . concerned with mysteries—those things that have no definitive explanation—while the hard sciences are concerned with certitudes—those things that can be tested and verified” (p. 7). The arts and humanities contribute to knowledge through ways of knowing that transcend the verbal, linear, and measurable. Old people themselves confirm that the “other ways known” information and wisdom—processed within the same brain as the one that has mapped the human genome—have always been part of the human life that ends, if we are lucky, after a good old age. The humanities and arts perspective is distinct in terms of the types of questions that are asked as well as the ways they are answered. As the field of gerontology pushes the boundaries of “how” questions, researchers have begun to recognize the importance of “why” questions and the persistence of “perhaps.” Humanities and arts scholars draw on analytic methods to address complex questions that have no definitive answers. Such methods as textual analysis, semiotics, deconstruction, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and ethnographic description have long been practiced and respected in the traditionally humanistic disciplines (e.g., history, philosophy, fine arts, literature, religious studies); they are slowly coming to be recognized as essential to the social sciences as well. At the same time, scholars in the traditional humanities and arts have come to recognize the importance of research on aging.

While contributions to the study of aging from the natural and social sciences mainly focus on matters of causality and intervention (e.g., diseases and cures, social inequities, and their amelioration), frameworks and methods of the arts and humanities focus on interpretation and expression of the multiple, the elusive, the awe inspiring, the disturbing, and even the ineffable aspects of growing older. Inclusion of the arts and humanities complements and adds unique dialogue to this journal. Bringing together the many voices engaged in the study of aging can only enliven the pursuit of knowledge in a field whose subject matter can never be fully captured or explained; “aging” is, after all, a matter of changing perceptions and perspectives. “Aging,” itself, is the invention of those who hold it under their gaze.

**Humanities and Arts in The Gerontologist**

To be sure, The Gerontologist has always been a multidisciplinary publication, although representation of the humanities and arts has been inconsistent. At least as far back as the early 1960s, the journal published occasional research articles on humanistic concerns such as “The personality of those who care for the aging” (Mullan, 1961), “Development of care of the elderly: Tracing the history of institutional facilities” (Gold & Kaufman, 1970), “Perceptions of work and leisure among the elderly” (Roadburg, 1981), and “Old age in America represented in 19th and 20th century popular sheet music (E. S. Cohen & Kruschwitz, 1990). The Gerontologist has published reviews of films and eclectic books on aging, highlighting the ways in which cinematographic works and literature explore meaning, excite thinking, inform practice and policy, and promote deeper understanding of what it is to be human and aging. In the past fifteen years, The Gerontologist has published several humanistic and arts-related articles. Recent review essays considered the experience of dementia (de Medeiros, 2010) and the meaning of old age as it is expressed by writers (Wyatt-Brown, 2010). Several articles have explored the arts as forms of intervention. G. D. Cohen et al. (2006) documented the multiple impacts of professionally conducted participatory arts and cultural programs on elders, and Worley...
and Henderson (1995) described using creative drama to relieve elders’ emotionally isolating fear about loss of control around dying.

However, the rapidly growing and changing field of aging requires more than the presence of occasional articles if *The Gerontologist* is to continue to help the Society stimulate complex, interdisciplinary thinking and creativity. Earlier, we noted that the Humanities and Arts Committee succeeded at increasing visibility and disseminating its perspective. But the committee has not yet succeeded at infusing a humanistic perspective throughout the Society and the field. We do not imply that all gerontological research must rest on explicitly discussed humanistic foundations. However, we do believe that a more consistent presence of humanities and arts research in *The Gerontologist* expands the boundaries of our field in directions that have not traditionally interested science. More important, we believe that such a consistent presence may begin to foster truly groundbreaking cross-fertilization among disciplines.

The journal’s intentional inclusiveness of humanities and arts material follows on the heels of its comparable inclusiveness of qualitative research. As recently as 2007, the journal published an editorial demonstrating that qualitative research articles were not being published in adequate number (Schoenberg & McAuley, 2007). The authors offered several explanations for these oversights, including bias or ignorance about qualitative epistemology, inadequately specified research protocols, and a general mismatch between the preponderance of scientific publication traditions and the approaches, formats, and logistics of qualitative articles. The authors then presented a table clearly articulating guidelines for both authors and reviewers. These same guidelines are likely to be useful to scholars writing from the humanities and arts disciplines, and we encourage future authors and reviewers to consult them.

With the expansion of *The Gerontologist* to promote humanities and arts scholarship, along with its commitment to supporting qualitative research studies, we are beginning to address past oversights in the field that have privileged empirical research over more speculative inquiry. Both are essential, independently and in cooperation, to creating the comprehensive understanding that must undergird sound policy and effective practice. We recognize that the humanities and the arts have much to add to gerontological dis-

## References

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