#### CHAPTER 1: THE GROWTH OF SOCIAL GERONTOLOGY

**Chapter Outline**

I. The Field of Gerontology

A. Social Gerontology

B. What is Aging?

C. An Active Aging Framework

D. A Person-Environment Perspective on Social Gerontology

E. Organization of the Text

F. Why Study Aging?

II. Growth of the Older Population

A. Changes in Life Expectancy

B. Maximum Life Span

C. Centenarians

III. The Oldest-Old

A. Ages 85 and Older

B. Population Pyramids

IV. Support Ratios

V. Population Trends

A. Elders of Color

B. Geographic Distribution

C. Educational and Economic Status

VI. Impact of Demographic Trends

VII. Longevity in Health or Disease?

VIII. How Aging and Older Adults Are Studied

A. Development of Gerontology as a Specific Discipline

B. Formal Development of the Field

C. Major Research Centers Founded

IX. Research Methods

A. The Age/Period/Cohort Problem

B. Cross-Sectional Studies

C. Longitudinal Studies: Design and Limitations

D. Sequential Designs

E. Problems with Representative Samples of Older Persons in Research

X. Summary

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter 1 introduces the field of gerontology, which addresses social, psychological, physical, and demographic concerns related to aging. The person-environment perspective provides a backdrop in which to study issues relevant to aging. Due to an increasing interest in understanding the process of aging and the changing U.S. and global demographics, gerontology is a growing field. More and more people in the U.S. are living beyond age 65 or even 85, with these “oldest old” as the fastest growing age group among Americans. Of special interest are centenarians, those aged 100 years and older, and the information they can provide about the role of genetics and environment on aging. The population of older adults in the U.S. is also becoming more ethnically diverse, although elders of color generally have a lower life expectancy due to health and economic disparities. The growth of the older population has raised questions as to whether our nation is prepared to meet the health care and social service needs of this group and their families.

Given the growth in the number of older adults, society needs to address the public policy issues related to aging, including assessing the appropriateness of current policy and exploring innovative policy to meet the changing needs of older adults. Professional groups have organized researchers, practitioners, and policy makers interested in gerontology and geriatrics. Researching policy and social issues related to aging poses some challenges to gerontologists. An important research question centers on being able to distinguish age differences from cohort differences. Improvements in gerontological research, such as the use of longitudinal studies and sequential designs and the inclusion of elders of color as research participants, have been made, but more exploration is needed.

**Learning Objectives**

*After reading chapter 1 the student should be able to:*

1.1 Define aging, gerontology, social gerontology, and geriatrics

1.2 Describe the active aging framework and the person-environment perspective

1.3 Understand reasons for studying social gerontology and the development of the field

1.4 Discuss the important demographic trends affecting the U.S.

1.5 Illustrate life expectancy, life span, and longevity in terms of health and disease

1.6 Explain research methods and designs for studying older adults as well as the importance of representative sample for social gerontological research

**Key Terms and Key People**

*Active Aging*: a model of viewing aging as a positive experience of continued growth and participation in family, community, and societal activities, regardless of physical and cognitive decline (p. 7)

*Active* versus *Dependent Life Expectancy*: a way of describing expected length of life; the term active denoting a manner of living that is relatively healthy and independent, in contrast to being dependent on help from others (p. 30)

*Ageism*: negative attitudes, beliefs, and conceptions of the nature and characteristics of older persons that are based on age that distort their actual characteristics, abilities, etc. (p. 1)

*Aging*: changes that occur to an organism during its life span, from development to maturation to senescence (p. 6)

*Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging*: a federally funded longitudinal study that has examined physiological, cognitive, and personality changes in healthy middle-aged and older men since 1958, and in women since 1978 (p. 32)

*Cohort*: a group of people of the same generation sharing a statistical trait such as age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status (for example, all African American women between the ages of 60 and 65 in 1999) (p. 6)

*Competence Model*: a conception or description of the way persons perform, focusing on their abilities vis-à-vis the demands of the environment (p. 9)

*Compression of Morbidity*: given a certain length of life, a term referring to relatively long periods of healthy, active, high-quality existence and relatively short periods of illness and dependency in the last few years of life (p. 29)

*Cross-Sectional Research*: research that examines or compares characteristics of people at a given point in time and attempts to identify factors associated with contrasting characteristics of different groupings of people (p. 31)

*Environmental Press*: features of the social, technological, or natural environment that place demands on people (p. 10)

*Geriatrics*: clinical study and treatment of older people and the diseases that affect them (p. 3)

*Gerontology*: the field of study that focuses on understanding the biological, psychological, social, and political factors that influence people’s lives (p. 3)

*Life Expectancy*: the average length of time persons, defined by age, sex, ethnic group, and socioeconomic status, in a given society are expected to live (p. 15)

*Life Course:* a broader concept than individual life span development that takes account of cultural, historical, and societal contexts that affect people as they age (p. 8)

*Longitudinal Research*: research that follows the same individual over time to measure change in specific variables (p. 31)

*Maximum Life Span*: biologically programmed maximum number of years that each species can expect to live (p. 17)

*Person-Environment (P-E) Perspective*: a model for understanding the behavior of people based on the idea that persons are affected by personal characteristics, such as health, attitudes, and beliefs, as they interact with and are affected by the characteristics of the cultural, social, political, and economic environment (p. 9)

*Resilience:* capacity to overcome adversity, in part due protective personal, family, community, and societal factors (p. 8)

*Selective Survival:* elders who remain in longitudinal studies tend to be the healthiest and from the higher socioeconomic levels of their cohort (p. 35)

*Senescence:* gradual decline in all organ systems, especially after age 30 (p. 6)

*Sequential Research Designs*: research designs that combine features of cross-sectional and longitudinal research designs to overcome some of the problems encountered in using those designs (p. 35)

**Discussion Topics**

* Distinguish between different types of aging. To what extent would one expect consistency among these types of aging?
* Describe the difference between gerontology and geriatrics; define social gerontology.
* What historical and cultural factors have differentially influenced the cohort of people who are currently aged 65 to 75 and those aged 35 to 45?
* Distinguish among the young-old, the old-old, and the oldest-old in terms of social and health characteristics.
* Discuss the benefits of studying social gerontology from a person-environment perspective, focusing on the competence model.
* Discuss your own reasons for learning about older adults and the aging process, and the benefits you expect to gain from your learning experience.
* Describe some factors that are responsible for increased life expectancy at birth, and factors that may significantly extend life expectancy beyond age 65 for future cohorts.
* What are the economic, political, and social implications of the increasing rectangularization of the survival curve in the U.S.?
* Discuss the geographic distribution of the older U.S. population and implications for policies in states with higher and lower than average proportions of older persons in their population.
* What evidence is there for potential biological differences between centenarians and others who survive to their 70s and 80s?
* Compare your own experiences as members of a birth cohort with those from the cohorts of the 1920s and 1930s.
* Describe the age/period/cohort problem in social gerontological research. What research designs have been developed to overcome some of these problems? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each design?
* Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of conducting longitudinal research in aging.