

AGING AS A PROCESS: DEFINING GROWING “OLD” IN TERMS OF EVENT CATEGORIES AS OPPOSED TO CHRONOLOGICAL AGE

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The measurement of aging as a process has traditionally been calibrated to chronological age, with the initiation of “old age” at 65 years, an arbitrary transition sometimes referred to as reaching the “Bismarck”. Both in terms of demographic characteristics and physiological change, the process of aging is a far more complex than a simple count of years lived and in fact represents a blend of physical age, environmental factors, health related habits and genetic history. Our reliance on chronological age as an indicator of “becoming old” reflects past limitations of measurement and estimation approaches that can now be expanded into new perspectives of the aging lifecourse. This paper examines the measurement of aging as a categorical process as opposed to a chronological one. What does aging mean in relation to disability, cognitive impairments and demands upon social and family support networks? We argue that it is more logical to define “aging” as a loss of homeostasis as opposed to a simple process of senescence, which allows us to group individuals based upon shared characteristics that reflect the need for care and the intensity of the breakdown of the body’s functions as a process that is only partially determined by chronological age. Using new statistical approaches including fuzzy set theory and Grade of Measurement (GoM) models, the paper will present a measurement of aging that controls for multiple factors beyond age and then groups individuals into categories of late-life homeostasis that reflect health related needs as opposed to simple age.