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Cumulative Advantage/Disadvantage and the Life Course: Cross-Fertilizing Age and Social Science Theory FREE

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The Journals of Gerontology: Series B, Volume 58, Issue 6, 1 November 2003, Pages S327–S337, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/58.6.S327>

Published: 01 November 2003 **Article history** ▼

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Abstract

Age and cumulative advantage/disadvantage theory have obvious logical, theoretical, and empirical connections, because both are inherently and irreducibly related to the passage of time. Over the past 15 years, these connections have resulted in the elaboration and application of the cumulative advantage–disadvantage perspective in social gerontology, especially in relation to issues of heterogeneity and inequality. However, its theoretical origins, connections, and implications are not widely understood. This article reviews the genesis of the cumulative advantage/disadvantage perspective in studies of science, its initial articulation with structural–functionalism, and its expanding importance for gerontology. It discusses its intellectual relevance for several other established theoretical paradigms in sociology, psychology, and economics. On the basis of issues deriving from these perspectives and from the accumulating body of work on cumulative advantage and disadvantage, I identify several promising directions for further research in gerontology.

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