

Top Performance beyond Retirement Age

He was the Doyen of German Gerontology: On the Death of Paul B. Baltes

Recently Paul B. Baltes invited the best scientists in the field of aging research (“Altersforschung”) to a former monastery overlooking Naples. The list of participants indicates the enormous breadth of thought about old age that characterized the longtime Director of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. Art historians, psychologists, demographers, brain researchers, and scientists of law belong to “MaxnetAging,” the international network of researchers that Baltes founded as his post-retirement work.

Chairing this network was a way for him to pursue his mission to change societal perceptions about old age. It enabled him to continue to do this beyond the legally-enforced retirement age of 65, an age limit which he opposed because of its discriminatory nature. The Max Planck Society gladly facilitated the continuation of his work after his 65th birthday because, like many other older top scientists, as a leader in the field of developmental psychology he would otherwise have left [Germany] for the United States.

The scientific legacy of Baltes, who was born in Saarlouis in 1939 and studied psychology in nearby Saarbrücken as well as in the United States, includes some of the most influential theories and research on the reality of life in old age. Understanding the dynamic between the accumulation of life experience and decline of physical and mental functioning that characterizes aging was his focus. The Berlin Aging Study exemplifies the impressive breadth of his research. In sum, one could say that his work was an empirical demonstration of the ancient Greek saying that one needs to do more with increasing years - not less.

Baltes’ achievements, however, extend beyond empirical psychology: With the concept of “bio-cultural co-constructivism” (see the FAZ of August 26, 2003), he launched a large-scale initiative to remove the artificial boundaries between the humanities and natural sciences as these disciplines look at human life. He argued forcefully that both biological determinism and the idea of infinite human freedom from nature are oversimplifications.

His personal views about aging changed over time. For many years, he fought against the deficit model which considers aging to be a process of decline. Instead he emphasized the potential for active and productive aging. However recently he began to criticise those scholars who, fascinated by reports of rapid increases in life expectancy, suggest that biomedicine will provide ways to make old age desirable. He regarded such optimism as naive utopianism. His support of the right for self-determined euthanasia before the German National Ethics Council reflected this position. This summer, in a small discussion group, he bluntly summarized his viewpoint as follows: “There are only few domains in which older individuals can outperform the young.”

The news that Paul B. Baltes died in Berlin on Tuesday afternoon at the age of 67 after a period of severe illness devastated the 40 scientists looking forward to a meeting with the doyen in Naples. In the meeting room, the refectory of the former monastery, few could imagine developmental psychology and gerontology without this great scientist and thinker.