

Health, Science & Technology

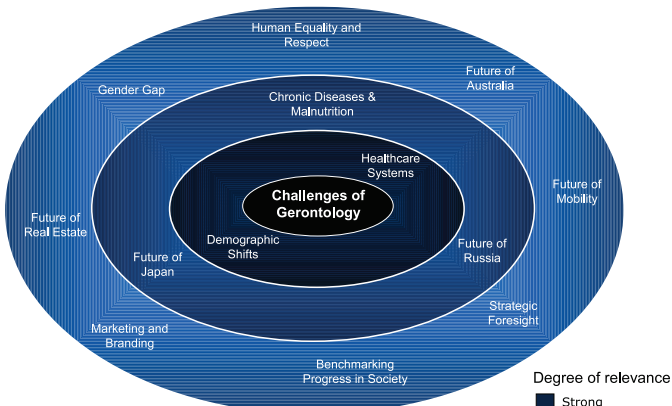
Challenges of Gerontology

A. Description of the issue

Over the next two decades, ageing populations in the developed world – and beyond – will increase substantially. By 2030, 19% of Americans, 23% of Europeans and 31% of Japanese will be older than 65, the traditional retirement age. Some experts also predict the average human lifespan in developed countries may reach 100 by 2060; others say it will peak at 85 by 2100.

The economics and demographics of an ageing population are tantalizing. Chronic diseases associated with ageing, such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and the consequences of physical inactivity, account for 75% of healthcare costs each year in developed countries.¹

Understanding the facts behind these varying predictions is critical to business and political leaders who base today's decisions on retirement programmes and strategies. Biogerontologists have already produced a large bibliography of descriptive data that sets some general principles of ageing. Although their research has not yet uncovered any universal indicators of ageing, the findings could lead to the development of practical and effective anti-ageing strategies and products. From geopolitics to business to healthcare, the implications of longevity will certainly be far-reaching.



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B. Dimensions

- **Gerontology:** What predictions have been made regarding global population growth? What are the societal implications of an “older” citizenry? Will changing demographics affect the global balance of power?
- **Geriatric diseases:** What are the consequences of geriatric diseases – when is a longer life a better life?
- **Urbanization and gerontology:** The environmental context of ageing, and issues related to place and location in particular, has resurfaced as a major theme. What infrastructure is needed to preserve an independent, normal lifestyle despite physical and mental impairments related to ageing?
- **Family and community support:** The continued high involvement of families in caregiving is well documented. However, as the age structure of society and the family change, so do the availability and capacity of healthcare.
- **Prediction of demographic trends:** Why do experts differ so widely in their projections? Are there any genetically defined limits to the human lifespan?
- **Ageing in the developing world:** Changes in the population’s age structure are particularly marked in the developing world; the greatest increases in both total numbers and proportions of older people will occur in Asia and Africa.
- **Implications for business:** What do current trends tell us, and why must businesses be prepared? What opportunities are on the horizon and who will benefit?

¹ National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, USA