

Dale Dannefer Awarded the 2009 Riley Distinguished Scholar Award

By Eva
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Our department is proud to announce that our chair, Dale Dannefer, has received the prestigious Matilda White Riley Distinguished Scholar Award for 2009 from the Section on Aging and the Life Course of the American Sociological Association (ASA). Peter Uhlenberg made the presentation, and students and friends celebrated with Dale after the business meeting.

By the time Dale joined the CWRU sociology faculty in 2004, he was an internationally recognized intellectual leader in the rapidly developing field of aging and the life course. His presentations at both GSA and ASA drew crowds and were greeted with high expectations by those looking for new insights about the fundamental nature of aging in a social context. Following up his landmark ASR article in 1984, where he called attention to the variable contexts within which lifespan development unfolds, Dale continued to challenge limiting assumptions in the field and advocated a greater focus on macro influences. The unanimous selection of Dale by the award committee recognizes his seminal contributions to critical gerontology, furthering conceptual understandings of structural influences in the unfolding of human lives.

It is indeed fitting to see Dale receive the Riley award, as he played an important role in carrying forward, modeling, and even critiquing theoretical approaches of Matilda White Riley, who had been his mentor. Dale’s conceptual work spans several issues that were significant themes in Riley’s work, ranging from age segregation to

recognition of the structural influences on the meaning and social significance of age. The latter formulation, which has been refined and contextualized in Dale’s work, has generated both national and international interest. Dale has also directed his probing conceptual lens at many other issues that intrigue him.

Dale’s reputation and influence as a life course theorist have increased over time, and he has a growing following among sociologists of aging and the life course. Indeed, numerous scholars are building on his theoretical exposition of the concept of cumulative disadvantage in their research. This formulation offers useful links to classical sociological theory in the work of Robert Merton. Dale’s formulations also allow for research designs that can put the construct to empirical test. It is heartening to see an expanding cadre of sociologists using Dale’s ideas as the conceptual underpinning for their research projects. With growing interest by sociological and gerontological scholars in health disparities, Dale’s theoretical formulations offer welcome guidance for projects that seek to unravel the complex social influences that shape and perpetuate health disparities in the U.S. and abroad.

It is important to note that Dale’s scholarly analysis transcends his most widely cited focus on cumulative disadvantage. He has consistently cautioned colleagues in the scholarly community to refrain from simplistic orientations that homogenize age or social groups. He warns us about the dangers of “essentialism” and calls for appreciating the diversity within age

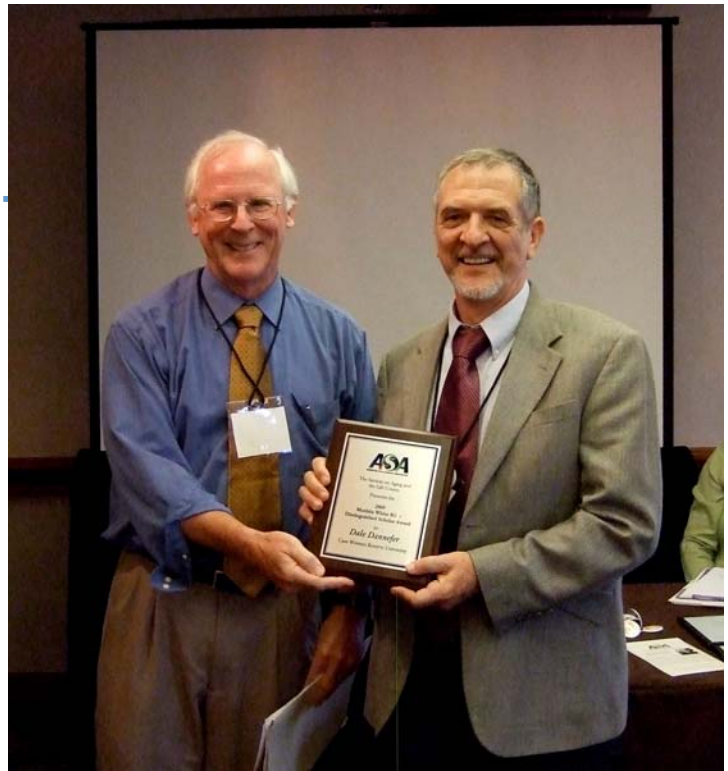
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Dale Dannefer (cont.)

cohorts and thereby developing a more textured understanding of patterns observed in research on the life course.

Dale has engaged in productive collaborations with other major life course scholars nationally and internationally and is co-editor, with Chris Phillipson, of the forthcoming *International Handbook of Gerontology*, being published by Sage. In the process of writing a chapter for this volume, I experienced firsthand the intellectual rigor Dale demands both of himself and of others. His astute critiques attest to his exemplary grasp of the field of sociology of aging and the life course and his insightful interpretation of scholarship in this field. In addition, in an era of globalization, Dale has utilized scientific advances being made internationally and also brings his intellectual contributions to international audiences. Another valuable dimension of Dale's innovative scholarship is his interest in bringing sociological insights to topics generally tackled by other disciplines, ranging from biology to psychology. His astute analysis of the social dimensions of cognitive changes throughout the life course is just one example.

Having a long-standing interest in the study of person-environment interactions, I am particularly appreciative of Dale's work in the area of nursing home reform. His recent paper in the *Journal of Aging Studies*, "The Concept of Care and the Dialectic of Critique," moves beyond traditional approaches of critical developmental and social theory to explore the role of action research in creating new opportunities for frail elders who are relegated to living in long-term care facilities. He thus combines a healthy dose of social critique with an optimistic orientation toward possibilities for collective action. Indeed, Dale's enthusiasm



Peter Uhlenberg and Dale Dannefer

for bringing his theoretical insights to social action adds unique impact to his scholarly contributions.

Our department has been particularly enriched by Dale's scholarship, as he is a committed mentor to graduate students. He encourages them to tackle complex concepts in framing their own evolving research agendas. Even as he guides their research, he supports and respects their independent thinking. We congratulate Dale on this well-deserved honor and are proud to have a leader who can serve as an intellectual role model to faculty and students in our department.

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