

Critical Issues in Neuropsychology

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# Aging and Neuropsychological Assessment

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Asenath La Rue

# Aging and Neuropsychological Assessment

# CRITICAL ISSUES IN NEUROPSYCHOLOGY

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# Aging and Neuropsychological Assessment

Asenath La Rue

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# Foreword

It is a privilege to be asked to write the foreword for so excellent a book, so timely and so much needed by the field. Not only is it most unusual these days to have a single-authored volume on so broad a topic, but Dr. La Rue has done a superb job of providing both a scholarly treatise and a practical handbook.

With a burgeoning elderly population and the corresponding increase in geriatric psychopathology, the needs of mental health services are exceeding by far the supply of appropriate providers. In an effort to meet this need, psychiatry, medicine, neurology, pharmacology, psychology, nursing, and social work have all made the provision of training in geriatrics and gerontology a high priority—but I fear we are losing the race. For example, multidisciplinary teams that assess, diagnose, and treat mental health disorders in elderly patients are incomplete without clinical psychologists and neuropsychologists, and yet there is barely a handful of clinical psychologists trained in dealing with geriatric patients. We can count on our fingers the additional ones graduated each year. In hospitals, clinics, and private practices across the country, otherwise skilled psychologists are unprepared to respond to the special mental health needs of the elderly. A few CME programs are helping to address this need, but they are clearly not enough.

Books are even rarer. To illustrate, we need only look at two major books in the field. The first, Muriel Lezak's *Neuropsychological Assessment* (1983) is an outstanding clinical handbook but oriented primarily to a younger patient population; in the third edition (now in press), there may well be more emphasis on assessing the elderly. The second book, *Geriatric Neuropsychology*, edited by Marilyn Albert and Mark Moss (1988), has excellent chapters, literature reviews, and discussions of the predominant issues in the field, but does not focus on assessment or the evaluation of findings. Dr. La Rue has combined these approaches, providing a solid clinical handbook about

testing and evaluating the performance of elderly patients, as well as thoroughly researched background chapters.

*Aging and Neuropsychological Assessment* will benefit a broad audience. It is a “must” for psychologists without special training in neuropsychology or aging. They will find in it information to assist them in assessing their elderly patients—and so will neuropsychologists and clinical psychologists being trained in gerontology. Geriatric psychiatrists, geriatricians, and neurologists, too, will profit from the extensive and knowledgeable review of the changes occurring with normal aging. The complex subjects of cognition in normal aging, its changes with psychopathology, and the attempts to define both with the aid of neuropsychological assessment are dealt with most lucidly. The case examples illustrate some of the difficulties we face when assessing the elderly patient, as well as the caution and wisdom we need to exercise when making a diagnosis.

Dr. La Rue and I have worked together for more than a decade; when we first met, she was in child development, and I worked very hard to convince her to change her focus to the other end of the age spectrum. It is, therefore, especially gratifying for me to see this book, which I believe will be recognized as a major contribution to her “new” area of interest. She has done an outstanding job, and we will all benefit from it.

Lissy F. Jarvik

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# Preface

This book provides an introduction to the neuropsychological aspects of aging and to some of the prominent neuropsychiatric disorders of later life. It is a clinically oriented text, written for psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals who have interests in working with older clients but who lack expertise in gerontology and geriatrics.

The first aim of the book is to increase the reader's knowledge about changes in brain and behavior that occur in later life. The second is to provide a guide to the psychological assessment of older patients. Specific tests and techniques are described, recommendations are made for interpretation, and case examples are provided to demonstrate the application of different techniques. The two aims are interrelated, since the technical process of assessment must be directed by an understanding of older people and the problems they are likely to encounter.

Neuropsychological evaluation is emphasized because brain changes play a prominent role in the psychological disabilities of later life. The great benefit—and challenge—of a neuropsychological approach, however, is that it encourages an integrated explanation of behavior, combining hypotheses about altered brain function with an understanding of an individual's personality, current stressors, and social relationships.

The first part of the book, Chapters 1 through 5, examines normal aging. The great majority of older adults do not have neurological or psychiatric disorders, but many have milder cognitive or behavioral problems that may be related to altered brain function. Learning about these normal changes is interesting in its own right and also provides a background for understanding pathological change. Chapter 1 provides an overview of aging processes and characteristics of contemporary old people. Chapters 2 and 3 explore normal brain changes and cognitive developments, and Chapter 4 describes



clinical neuropsychological measures for older adults. Chapter 5 gives guidelines for interpreting neuropsychological results and presents examples of assessment findings in normal older individuals.

The second part, Chapters 6 through 12, discusses common neuropsychiatric conditions of later life. No attempt has been made to cover the full range of illnesses that can lead to cognitive or emotional problems. Rather, the focus is on a few of the most prevalent conditions in which neuropsychological assessment can make a valuable contribution to diagnosis or patient management. Chapter 6 reviews the clinical syndromes of delirium and dementia. Chapters 7 through 9 examine Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, and vascular dementia, respectively, and Chapter 10 presents case examples of individuals with dementing disorders. Chapter 11 is devoted to depression in old age. Here, too, accurate detection is important, since depressive symptoms are often overlooked, or taken for granted, in older patients. Cognitive sequelae of depression are identified, and recommendations are made for distinguishing dementia and depression. Chapter 12 presents case examples that illustrate the range of neuropsychological findings that can be seen in depressive conditions.

Although a text such as this cannot do justice to the treatment of mental disorders in old age, overviews of relevant therapies have been included, and references are provided for more detailed readings on specific interventions. Also, in the discussion of case examples, an attempt has been made to illustrate how test findings can be applied in selecting treatments and evaluating their usefulness.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have given me encouragement and assistance in preparing this book. Lissy Jarvik provided support when I first became interested in aging and has continued to do so for years; her knowledge of and dedication to the field have been an unparalleled source of inspiration for me and many others. Anna Waldbaum made countless trips to the library on my behalf and has been a constant reminder of the positive side of aging. Art Montana's enthusiasm for the project and his technical knowledge have been greatly appreciated. Sandy Westerman's careful editing made the text more readable and organized than it would otherwise have been, and Lynne Newton helped with the typing and editing of the long list of references. Thanks to the many excellent students with whom I have had the pleasure of working over the years; their questions provided the impetus for this book and helped to shape its content. Thanks to Eliot Werner, Executive Editor, whose long association on many projects at Plenum Publishing provided me with continued support and sound advice. Thanks also to Judith DeCamp, Senior Production Editor at Plenum, for her diligence and great care throughout the book's production cycle. Final thanks go to Nolina, whose companionship made the long hours pass more quickly.

Asenath La Rue

*Los Angeles*

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