Edmund Vincent Cowdry and the Making of Gerontology as a Multidisciplinary Scientific Field in the United States

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Abstract. The Canadian–American biologist Edmund Vincent Cowdry played an important role in the birth and development of the science of aging, gerontology. In particular, he contributed to the growth of gerontology as a multidisciplinary scientific field in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s. With the support of the Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation, he organized the first scientific conference on aging at Woods Hole, Massachusetts, where scientists from various fields gathered to discuss aging as a scientific research topic. He also edited Problems of Ageing (1939), the first handbook on the current state of aging research, to which specialists from diverse disciplines contributed. The authors of this book eventually formed the Gerontological Society in 1945 as a multidisciplinary scientific organization, and some of its members, under Cowdry’s leadership, formed the International Association of Gerontology in 1950. This article historically traces this development by focusing on Cowdry’s ideas and activities. I argue that the social and economic turmoil during the Great Depression along with Cowdry’s training and experience as a biologist – cytologist in particular – and as a textbook editor became an important basis of his efforts to construct gerontology in this direction.

Keywords: aging, cytologist, Edmund Vincent Cowdry, gerontology, multidisciplinary scientific field, Problems of Ageing, textbook editor, the Gerontological Society, the Great Depression

The Canadian–American cytologist Edmund Vincent Cowdry (1888–1975) made a significant contribution to the development of gerontology, the science aging. While many intellectuals had discussed and studied aging for a long time, it became a subject of a more concerted and organized approach by professional scientists during the first half of the twentieth century, and Cowdry played a leading role in this
development in the United States and other countries.\textsuperscript{1} He organized, with the support of the Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation, the first scientific conference on aging in 1937 at Woods Hole, Massachusetts. The scientists who gathered there contributed to the publication of *Problems of Ageing: Biological and Medical Aspects* (1939) which contained a comprehensive survey of current scholarship on the problem in various disciplines. As the editor of this volume, Cowdry encouraged the contributors to join the “Club for Research on Ageing,” an informal discussion group consisting of approximately twenty scientists. In 1945, core members of this Club established the Gerontological Society, Inc. which changed its name to the Gerontological Society of America (GSA) in 1981. He also played a major role in organizing the International Association of Gerontology and served as its second president.

As historian W. Andrew Achenbaum and sociologist Stephen Katz have pointed out, these pioneering works by Cowdry contributed to the rise of gerontology in America as a multidisciplinary scientific field pursued by many eminent scientists with distinct academic training and norms.\textsuperscript{2} The Gerontological Society opened its membership to scholars in various fields, including biology, clinical medicine, psychology, and the social sciences. *The Journal of Gerontology*, the first official journal of the Society, also accepted research articles from diverse disciplines. The National Institute on Aging is another body that supports both biomedical and social scientific approach to senescence.

In this article, I trace the birth and development of multidisciplinarity of American gerontology by focusing on Cowdry’s thoughts and activities. Admittedly, multidisciplinarity is a controversial notion which is often used interchangeably with “interdisciplinarity” or “transdisciplinarity.”\textsuperscript{3} The scholars who constructed gerontology argued that the science of aging should be a field of multiple disciplines, which maintained close cooperative relationships with one another, just as the atomic bomb project during World War II was a closely integrated effort of physicists, engineers, and military personnel.\textsuperscript{4} Yet later scholars have thought that such a close integration and cooperation has not been feasible in gerontology, although many have thought that it is

\textsuperscript{1} See Achenbaum, 1995, pp. 52–89; Katz, 1996, pp. 93–103; Landecker, 2007; Freeman, 1984; Birren, 1979, pp. 75–76; Lansing, 1975.


\textsuperscript{3} For a sociological analysis of multi/inter/trans-disciplinarity, see Klein, 1990, pp. 55–73.

\textsuperscript{4} Korenchevsky, 1952, p. 376; Shock to Fremont-Smith, undated, Box 42, Folder 8, EVC.