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Ferraro Earns GSA’s 2021 Robert W. Kleemeier Award

The Gerontological Society of America (GSA) — the nation’s largest interdisciplinary organization devoted to the field of aging — has chosen Kenneth F. Ferraro, PhD, FGSA, FAGHE, of Purdue University as the 2021 recipient of the Robert W. Kleemeier Award.

This distinguished honor is given annually to a GSA member in recognition for outstanding research in the field of gerontology. It was established in 1965 in memory of Robert W. Kleemeier, PhD, a former president of the Society whose contributions to the quality of life through research in aging were exemplary.

The award presentation will take place at GSA’s 2021 Annual Scientific Meeting, which will be held from November 10 to 13 in Phoenix, Arizona. This conference is organized to foster interdisciplinary collaboration among researchers, educators, and practitioners who specialize in the study of the aging process.

At Purdue University, Ferraro is distinguished professor of sociology and director of the Center on Aging and the Life Course. His research focuses on health inequality over the life course. With support from the National Institute on Aging, his current projects examine racial-ethnic disparities in physical and cognitive health and the long-term consequences of early adversity on adult health.

He has analyzed longitudinal data spanning decades to: demonstrate the accuracy and prognostic validity of health reports by Black adults; elucidate how the racial gap in health emerges early and endures over the adult life course; and identify mediators that enable Black and Hispanic Americans to avoid preventable health risks. His research also has shown that being raised in chronic poverty and a “risky family” each accelerate the risk of chronic inflammation, multiple diseases, and functional disability in later life. His recent research has uncovered mediators of the relationships between early misfortune and health, including social support, wealth, and personal control, which are critical to the development of effective interventions.

With interests in how stratification processes unfold over the life course, he developed cumulative inequality theory for the study of human development, aging, and health. He is now further developing the theory and directing empirical research projects to test elements of it. His 2018 book, The Gerontological Imagination: An Integrative Paradigm of Aging (Oxford University Press), specifies six axioms for the scientific study of aging. The gerontological imagination reveals the intellectual common ground among scholars from varied disciplines. In addition, it enables people (not just gerontology scholars) to understand links between biological, behavioral, and social factors that influence human aging.

Ferraro is the author of more than 125 refereed journal articles, 20 chapters, and two monographs. He also has edited multiple editions of anthologies in gerontology, including two editions of the Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences.

He is a GSA fellow, which represents the highest category of membership within the Society, and previously served as chair of GSA’s Behavioral and Social Sciences (BSS) Section and as editor-in-chief for GSA’s Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences from 2006 to 2009. He has received several other GSA distinctions, including the Theoretical Developments in Social Gerontology Award in 2007 and 2014, the BSS Section’s Distinguished Mentorship in Gerontology Award in 2011, and the BSS Section’s Richard Kalish Innovative Publication Award in 2013 and 2018.

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The Gerontological Society of America (GSA) is the nation's oldest and largest interdisciplinary organization devoted to research, education, and practice in the field of aging. The principal mission of the Society — and its 5,500+ members — is to advance the study of aging and disseminate information among scientists, decision makers, and the general public. GSA's structure also includes a policy institute, the National Academy on an Aging Society, and an educational branch, the Academy for Gerontology in Higher Education.