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SOCIOLOGY

Types of Adjustment to Aging

An area of research interest in the social and psychological factors in old age has gradually made its place among the social sciences in the last 20 years. The new preoccupation with the later years of life grew partly because of the increased proportion of older people in the population which has made the needs of the retired and the elderly a "social problem", and partly because outcomes of personality develop which have been studied rather intensively for childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood are of significant research interest, forming a sort of final proof of what has gone into the making of personality during all the earlier years of life. The emphasis of the research has been both individual and social. There has been inquiry into how individuals make an adjustment to this new period of life and how social forces and the social climate may affect "self images" of older people.

Certain conditions peculiar to older people make these later years distinct from the other stages of life. In addition to the increased probability of failing physical powers, illness and impending death, the changes experienced by the aged often include: 1. retirement from full-time employment by men and relinquishment of household management by women; 2. withdrawal from active community and organizational leadership; 3. breaking up of marriage through the death of one's mate; 4. loss of an independent household; 5. loss of interest in distant goals and plans; 6. acceptance of dependence upon others for support or advice and management of funds, if economically independent; 7. inclusion of the old person in the household of a younger member of the family, in a nursing

home or in an institutional home; 8. acceptance of a subordinate position to adult offspring or to social workers, (for instance, if on an Old Age Assistance grant); 9. taking up of membership in groups made up largely of old people; 10. acceptance of planning in terms of immediate goals; 11. transference of interest in one's own career to interest in the career of one's children and grandchildren (Cavan *et al*, 1949: 6-7).

These new conditions force the older person to relinquish the social relationships and roles he had in adulthood and accept changed social relationships and roles typical of later life. Although there is great variation in the social relationships and the roles which older people play in the United States, they nearly all share one basic role, which is that of the elder. Elders are considered to have quite a different position from adults. "Society tends to treat them either frankly as children who need to be protected, or as a class from whom very little adult achievement can be expected. Old people recognize this view of themselves as not quite adult and include it in their self-conceptions. Some attempt to escape the role of the elder by clinging to middle-age, others exploit this non-adult role by claiming privileges and attention. The status associated with the role of the elder in this country is not only lower than that of the adult, but is less than that of the child. To a great extent this is a result of the emphasis placed on youth and employment in our culture. To be no longer young is to have lessened status, to cease to be employed is to be no longer an adult" (Shanas, 1956: 96).

Because of the lower status and lack of recognized function of the older groups in our society, older people are beginning to exhibit some of the traits of a minority group. As a group, they are set apart because of their physical appearance. They are clearly discriminated against in employment and social relationships. ". . . the average oldster is not welcomed in younger groups. Sometimes his conservatism proves irritating, or his failing hearing or eyesight slows down the group movement. Frequently the middle aged have such deep-rooted fears about growing old that the presence of the aged in their social groups is disturbing to them. The result is that a group of their own is often the only place where the aging man and woman can find full social expression and acceptance" (Woods, 1953: 1-2).

Older people possess the characteristic of many minority groups of having a low level of income. Many of the aged live far below the minimum level of the American standard of living. Budget studies in 1951 (Steiner, 1954) of elderly couples and unrelated males and females made by the Social Security Administration and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Table 1) show that a substantial proportion fell below the maintenance level. "The maintenance level . . . supplies for aged persons all those bare necessities of simple living customary among persons used to low incomes. There are few comforts, except . . . as energy, resourcefulness, and good management make pleasant and comfortable living possible out of bare necessities. The budget does not allow for saving . . . It does not provide for emergencies of any kind or for major illness . . . The budgets represent not an optimum level, but rather one below which aged persons could hardly be said to have a minimum of security" (Armstrong, 1943).

Because of the radical social changes in society during the youth and adulthood of our present older population, the elderly may be thought of as having almost a different cultural background from the rest of the population, something which sets them apart as a cultural minority. There is even some tendency to discriminate against them in housing. Older people have organized into a minority political pressure group to gain benefits for their own age group.

TABLE 1—Percentage of Aged with Total Receipts Below Budget Levels, 1951.

Consuming Unit	"Emergency" Level	PER CENT BELOW	
		Cash Equivalent Maintenance	Total Maintenance
Couples	27-31	39-44	45-50
Unrelated Males	33-36	47-50	52-58
Unrelated Females	50-54	65-69	71-75

Source: Steiner (1954).

What is expected of older people and how they are regarded in our society is in a process of change. Havighurst and Albrecht made two public opinion studies, one in 1949 and again in 1951, using 847 adults of all ages in the first survey and 518 in the second to find what activities of older people were approved and disapproved of by other adults. The inconclusive findings show what diverse attitudes

people have toward the roles they expect older people to play. Some like to see them taper off in their activities, while others stress the virtue of keeping occupied at a job until the last illness (1953, pp. 31-48).

It is generally held that the traditional respect for the aged is at a low ebb only in our industrial civilization. Ginsberg (1951) believes that this negative attitude has existed in almost every period of human history and is present also in our own civilization. It is obviously present in some primitive societies such as the Labrador Eskimos and the African Hottentots, who expect their old and feeble members to wander off and to die quietly, or who may abandon them with a small amount of food to die of starvation. But the same attitude, deeply covered over, Ginsberg believes, is present even in such a society as the traditional Chinese, which ostensibly venerated old age and gave old people high prestige. He finds evidence of deep antagonism between old and young in the folk literature of China, and believes that the overt homage paid to older people is enforced by custom, fear, and religion, and that there is deep covert hostility toward old people.

Ginsberg (1951) believes that the American society has much of this same negative feeling toward the elderly. In the elderly it confirms and increases desperation and bitterness, and contributes to their progressive deterioration; in the general public it strengthens the belief, despite words spoken to the contrary, that the elderly are a social burden and will continue to be so.

Riesman (1954) suggests a tentative typology for the various ways in which people meet the crisis of old age. He proposes three kinds of reactions to aging which he calls 1. the "autonomous," 2. the "adjusted", and 3. the "anomic." A small minority of the aging, he says, "bear within themselves psychological sources of self-renewal" which make them relatively independent of the penalties imposed on the aged by the culture. Such people are creative and productive despite all kinds of physical handicaps and negative cultural conditions. In cases of such men as Bertrand Russell, Arturo Toscanini, and Sigmund Freud, their "productive orientation" showed no decline in their late years. Such men "are not necessarily balanced or well-adjusted; they may have terrible tempers, neurotic moods;

they may be shut out from whole areas of existence; they may get along well with very few people." But they have a passionate interest or preoccupation which keeps their spirits alive and this may matter much "more than the roundedness of interests we are today inclined to encourage" older people to adopt for good judgment. Such autonomous reactions to aging are rare; these men are immortal because of their ability to renew themselves. "Men of this sort exhibit in a dramatic way the specifically human power to grow and develop on a superphysiological level."

The second type of reaction to aging, probably the reaction of the majority of people, is the "adjusted" reaction. The adjusted have no such creative resources within themselves as do the autonomous but they have strong supports from the culture in the form or work, power, and position. "In America the executive or professional man is not supposed to allow himself to age, but by what appears almost sheer will he must keep himself 'well preserved' as if in creosote." For the most part, he lacks inner aliveness of the autonomous sort; the will and energy he shows in his work are among the world-conquering assets of the Western man. But the will which burns in him, "though often admirable, cannot be said to be truly his; it is compulsive, he has no control over it; it controls him". Most of the suggestions for improving the adjustment of the elderly of this type are to find them new supports which they can take hold of with the same undiscerning ferocity as they once threw into work and its institutional context. Such *ersatz* preservatives may assure a smooth transition but they do not allow any inner transformation that would permit self-renewal and creative maturity which we find in the autonomous. Taking away the cultural props from the adjusted person so that he is confronted for the first time with nothingness and dependent on what inner resources he can muster to the challenge, might save him—or destroy him. It is plain that for the adjusted group it matters decisively "what institutions they hitch or are hitched to", and whether the conditions of society remain stable and protective.

A third group, the "anomic", which is protected neither by inner spiritual resources, as are the autonomous, nor by external cultural supports, as are the adjusted, simply decay when physical vitality is

lost and the culture discards them. It becomes evident upon the retirement of some men that the job kept the man together more than the man held the job. Or the husband, though he did not greatly love his wife, may not be able to survive her death. "Such people live like cards, propped up by other cards." At first, the anomic may look like the adjusted but his decay sets in earlier. "They are not the lawyers and engineers and business men with the springy step, but the prematurely weary and resigned." Actually, the autonomous and the anomic reactions to aging are more alike, "in that the individuals concerned make little use of the standard cultural preservatives—the former because they transcend and reshape them, the latter because they cannot attain them or maintain them." They have not succeeded "in boarding an institutional escalator that will define for them what it is to have a career" (Riesman, 1954).

In Riesman's typology there are strong suggestions that the years preceding old age contain the clues to personality integration or disintegration in later life. Buhler (1935) and others have found that in Western society people go through a regular sequence of five stages in their life course. The first is the exploratory stage of youth (beginning at an average age of 17), in which the individual tentatively tries out various life courses. The second is the selective stage of maturity (beginning at an average age of 28), in which the individual definitely decides upon specific life goals and channelizes his activities accordingly into a particular career. The third is the testing stage of early middle age (beginning at an average age of 43); it is a period in which the individual examines his career to determine the extent to which he has achieved his life goals and the degree to which he has obtained the gratifications he hoped to gain from his life course. The fourth stage is that of indulgence in later middle age (beginning at an average age of 48); the individual concentrates on achieving the maximum gratification from what remains of vigorous life. The fifth is the completion stage of old age (beginning at an average age of 64; in it the individual looks back on his life, lives on past accomplishment, and begins to finish off his life course.

The third or testing stage in which the individual compares his level of achievement with his level of aspiration is of crucial

importance in understanding the adjustment which will follow. In studying adjustment to aging it has become increasingly clear that one deals with a problem on a continuum. What has been referred to as later life, old age, and aging starts at different age levels for different people. Some occupations and professions have a terminal point of 65, when retirement begins, some at 70 and others even later. Whatever the terminal point may be, each individual has experienced earlier in his own life and own mind a definite turning point when he began to think of himself as getting on. It is during this turning point that he feels the full impact of his own appraisal of himself, his work, his achievements and his goals. This turning point may be at the age of 40 or earlier, depending on the pressure that is exerted by the social setting. In some occupations in which the emphasis is upon hiring people between the ages of 25 and 35 and replacing those who retire with people under 35 there is a climate developing that makes the problem of adjustment to aging occur long before the age of 65. The individual is surrounded by younger people; he faces the pressure of competition and he is made to feel older before his time. It is commonly known that athletes and others whose occupations require the full vigor of youth become aware of the turning point even before they reach 30. Some are affected by a history of early deaths in the family and consequently regard the age level between 45 and 55 as likely to be terminal. Still others are fully aware that the peak of achievement in the natural sciences and other creative areas occurs long before the age of 40 and therefore they go through the crisis of the turning point rather early in life.

The turning point is felt most keenly where competition is great, specialization is keen, and recruitment of new talent is constantly going on among the younger age group. Adjustment to aging depends on how the individual meets this turning point, how the person's self-image is affected by the experience and how pervasive is the anxiety engendered by the process of aging. Empirical research may validate some of these propositions and may indicate to what extent premature obsolescence of skills and talents affects later life.

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