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A Sociology of Aging

by Bruce M. Zelkovitz and Karen L. Field

Formally founded in the early nineteenth century, sociology is a comparative newcomer among the sciences. But despite its youth, it is fast becoming a valuable tool for exploring complex issues surrounding old age. Combining their own insights with those from related fields like anthropology and history, sociologists are posing new questions about the later stages of the human life cycle and coming up with some provocative answers. The purpose of this paper is to explain how a sociologist goes about the analysis of a subject like "aging," to sketch the current direction of research and some of its ethical dimensions, and to explore a few of its implications for social reform in America.

In attempting to understand some particular facet of human behavior such as love and marriage, parenting, crime and addiction, war and peace, or, in this case, aging, sociologists start from the premise that all human behavior takes place within a specific sociocultural setting, apart from which it cannot be understood. That setting is conceptualized as consisting of **economic forces,** the ways in which necessary, valued goods are produced and distributed; **political forces,** the ways in which power and decision-making are structured; and **ideational forces,** the concepts, beliefs and imagery by which people give meaning to their experience. In what is called the "political economy" approach, economic forces are taken to be the most basic and influential of the three. At first blush this may seem like a cliche, but a moment's reflection will show how, in everyday life, we often make quite contrary assumptions, attributing causes to panhuman **species factors** ("it's natural for human beings to 'go downhill' as they get older") or to purely **individual factors** ("you can stay fit well into old age if you just put your mind to it") rather than to **sociological factors.** Instead of blaming "human nature" or individual laziness for late-life decline, a sociologist would want to determine if, on the basis of available data, certain configurations of economic, political and ideational forces seem more conducive to healthy aging than others, and if so, why.

Consider the following real-life example. Many today decry the low regard in which modern America seems to hold its elderly. Recognizing that this problem is too widespread to be considered a mere foible, sociologists reject the assumption that a tendency to devalue the elderly is innate in the human species. Looking through the literature on other cultures, they identify cultures that accord high status to their elderly, then try to identify which features seem to account for the difference. One pivotal economic factor appears to be the presence or absence of writing technology. In preliterate societies where no method exists for recording the past, the elderly are often prized for their long memories. Marjorie Shostak has lived among Africa's !Kung San people and says of the older !Kung woman:

> . . . Age should still bring her respect, especially as she is looked to for the stories of the past, whether mythic or historical . . . She knows the histories and scandals of people living and dead and the folktales kept alive by word of mouth from one generation to the next.[1]

Where writing is unknown, young people have nowhere to turn but to their elders for knowledge of how crises were handled in the past, for tribal origin-tales, even for their own personal family histories, and older people derive honor from this crucial function. In literate societies, however, books, microfiche and other technologies replace human memory, and elders' stories are apt to be dismissed with an impatient "Oh, Gramps! We've heard all that before." An economic force—writing technology—thus helps account for a difference in ideational culture.

In reality, of course, no single factor like literacy can account for all the many forms that human aging has assumed across time and space. We know, for example, that some literate societies still hold the aged in higher esteem than is common in modern America. Stuart Ewen in *Captains of Consciousness*[2] shows that early attitudes in our own nation were far

more favorable to the elderly than they are today. In accounting for the change, Ewen pinpoints another economic factor: the shift from a relatively egalitarian farm-based economy powered by animals and human hands to a class-riven industrial capitalist system motored by machines. Ewen shows that powerful economic and political interests deliberately promoted a new view of the elderly as "old-fashioned fuddy-duddies" whose accumulated skills were obsolete, in order to win public acceptance of the new, mechanized technologies. Says Ewen, "Age, once a sign of accumulated productive know-how, had become a detriment; compulsory retirement signified the transformation of labor from craftsmanship to unskilled machine-tending." In their quest to transfer to themselves the respect that had once been accorded to elders, elites enlisted advertising and the mass media to construct and popularize this new, negative image of aging as part of American ideational culture.

Was this "wrong" of them? In coming to grips with ethical judgments, sociologists point out that in a class society like the United States, in contrast to the classless !Kung, what is "good" for one class may not be "good" for another. Certainly, many elderly have suffered from this instance of what Russell Jacoby calls "social amnesia"—the forgetting of a historical period during which political and economic institutions were rife with struggle, so that current social arrangements come to seem inevitable and eternal.[3] Other sociologists have, however, pointed out that for the ownership class—those who own and control industrial wealth and resources—the change was quite "functional," in that it excluded the exercise of judgmental wisdom by older workers, segregated those who had experienced the "false promises" of the early industrial order, and by such segregation left the status field open to its new claimants, the ownership class itself. From this point of view, the decline in status of the elderly was a systemic imperative as new knowledge, new workplace relations, and sheer physical endurance became requisites of the new economy. And, at least in some ways, another group benefited from the change—youth, suddenly enshrined by the mass media as desirable, "golden."

On the macrocosmic level, sociologists continue to probe these same kinds of questions: Why are our elderly devalued? Do other societies treat their elderly better than we do, and why? Is there something in the human condition that compels us to treat the elderly the way we do? On the microcosmic level, sociologists are looking at the distribution of health care resources, the effects of long-term care, concerns about and adjustment to retirement, the defining of and response to Alzheimer's disease and other forms of senility, contrasts in lifestyle between the "old-old" and the "young-old," and gender and ethnic differences in experiencing old age.

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All of these questions have ethical dimensions. Because they are scientists and not philosophers, sociologists generally try to report their findings in as objective a manner as possible so that those who are in advocacy positions—practitioners, politicians, voters—can base their own moral decisions and actions on unbiased data. Sociologists also urge people to think about the ways in which even their own most cherished and seemingly "sacred" ethical principles are themselves shaped and conditioned by specific sociological constraints. To acknowledge this does not mean a descent into mindless ethical relativism—only the humble recognition that we are all, in ways we may never fully apprehend, prisoners of a particular historical and geographical setting. Filial piety may be an ethical "constant," but its form of expression varies from culture to culture, epoch to epoch; how many modern Americans would demand that a grown child guilty of disrespect commit ritual suicide to expunge the fault, as might reasonably have been expected in feudal Japan? Like other aspects of ideational culture, the values and norms we take for granted are themselves shaped by the productive apparatus employed by a social system and the manner of control exerted over it. And in a class society like ours, each class tends to develop and promote its own **ideology,** or set of assumptions about the world, which interject themselves into societal debates on the "rightness" and "wrongness" of behavior. For example, is it "patriotic" or "un-American" to include our elders in a nationalized system of health insurance? The 1988 presidential candidates, broadly representing two different class constituencies, offered two distinct ideological responses.

Beyond these shared premises, sociologists differ markedly in their feelings about the extent to which they, as social scientists, should become directly involved in policy formulation and direct care delivery. Some feel that their quest for scientific objectivity requires them to stay aloof from partisan debates. Others, like Alfred McClung Lee in *Sociology for Whom?* and *Sociology for People,* call for an engaged sociology committed to using its findings to forge a more humane society.[4]

Social scientists like ourselves, who basically share Lee's position, tend to see modern America as embroiled in a battle among different class-based ideologies of old age, so complex that some are even divided within themselves. Today's ownership class, for instance, vacillates between the timeworn view of the old as "useless" and an ideology of success that constructs old age as a time of unbounded opportunity. The rich and powerful attribute different meanings to themselves as they age than they attribute to the working-class old. Since they control the mass media, they can disseminate the notion that all retirees are, like themselves, well-off and idle, and that Social Security therefore is no longer necessary. From their perspective, the homeless elderly, those who cannot afford decent health care, and others experiencing hardship must have been "improvident," have "failed to move with the times," or, at best, be the victims of a vague, ahistorical "bad luck," and must content themselves with private charity or a hotly contested scramble for "scarce" resources. Working-class elderly and their families, on the other hand, tend to see their plight in very different terms—except where they have been influenced by the powerful ideational forces owned and controlled by elites such as newspapers, TV networks and the like.

Since the ideational meanings attached to "aging" in America differ so markedly from class to class, it may never be easy to forge a national consensus on what kinds of reforms are needed in order to improve the status

of our aged. But the difficulty of the task should not keep us from entertaining possibilities for change. After all, public policy in American life has always been "contested terrain,"[5] with reform in other areas—such as child welfare and the status of women—being likewise fiercely debated among representatives of different class interests.

Our reading of the social science literature on aging leads us to posit three key areas where efforts at reform should be concentrated. These are (1) **stress reduction,** a general lessening of the tensions associated with aging, on the grounds that these can be shown to be correlated with stigmatized attributes of aging like memory loss; (2) **choice expansion,** enhancement of the control people have over their own life-situation as they age, on the grounds that loss of control has been shown to lead to alienation and depression in young and old alike; and (3) **integration,** continuing involvement of the elderly with persons of other age groups, on the grounds that there is no such thing as "separate but equal," whether the separated entities are demarcated by race, ethnicity, religion, gender or age. Space limitations prevent us from discussing the various studies which have led us to identify these three areas as pivotal, but perhaps one example will illustrate. With respect to stress, current research by Robert Sapolsky at Stanford University indicates that during high-stress situations, human adrenal glands release glucocorticoids, substances which help the body mobilize for "fight or flight" over the short haul, but which—if continuously released over a long period— appear to kill cells in the brain, including those involved in encoding memory.[6] Evidence is accruing that a stressful living situation can actually accelerate stigmatized correlates of aging like memory loss. Sapolsky's work with baboons in the Serengeti reveals that primates who enjoy high rank within their troops seem to experience less stress, and hence fewer of the debilitating signs of aging, than their lower-status troop members. This suggests at least two possibilities with relevance for aging in America: (i) a low-stress lifestyle may be a key factor in promoting a mentally alert old age; (ii) the physiological effects of aging may differ as markedly with class standing as does ideology.

The question then arises: suppose one wishes to promote the three key changes outlined above? Does social science literature imply that we must "turn back the clock" to a time when there was no writing, or reinstate the conditions of colonial America, when 80% of our population made their livings on family farms? Fortunately, since such endeavors would be at best quixotic and probably doomed to failure, the answer is no. Cross-cultural inspection reveals at least one highly developed nation, Sweden, which—while sharing our economic orientation of industrial capitalism—has managed to introduce reforms which touch upon all three areas, and the results with respect to the status of the aged have been quite impressive.

In 1984, we had the chance to do research in Sweden, a society which has built upon a similar economic, political and ideational configuration to that of the United States, but with a different goal: to show that the way we look at the elderly can be improved and to acknowledge rather than conceal the ideological struggles defining aging, seeking political compromises to resolve them in a way that benefits all social classes.

A nation of 8.3 million people in Northern Europe, Sweden shares with the U.S. a nineteenth-century switch to industrial capitalism with a concomitant rise in the overall standard of living. But unlike the U.S., Sweden had, from its earliest phase of industrialization, a homogeneous, well-educated working class. In 1938, workers put pressure on the "captains of industry" to adopt measures that would ensure a stable native birth rate and, with it, a well-disciplined national labor market, instead of relying upon slavery, the exploitation of factory workers, or sweated immigrant labor. The resulting agreement, the Pact of Saltsjobaden, paved the way for economic changes having an impact on all three factors enumerated above. The fact that the five major Swedish political parties are more explicitly class-affiliated than are American parties has meant that, in the years since Saltsjobaden, workers have been able to "contest" more openly with employers for gains in the formal political arena, and these gains have cemented the so-called "welfare state."

With respect to **stress reduction,** that state has implemented an all-extensive "safety net" of measures guaranteeing food, housing, and health care for all citizens and placed an unprecedented amount of funding in the coffers of public pensions that John Myles links directly to the militancy of Swedish workers.[7] Where private industry has failed to provide adequate pensions, government steps in to ensure a decent living standard plus a minimum amount of monthly discretionary income. Thus, no older Swede need worry about choosing between rent and heart medicine. In addition, the comparatively low rate of crime in Sweden, maintained partly by the same generous safety net and partly by an enlightened yet firm and consistent corrections system, means that unlike their American counterparts, few Swedish elders ever fear to walk to the store or a break-in by neighborhood vandals.

With respect to **choice expansion,** the Swedish Social Democrat party has passed some path-breaking legislation giving ordinary people the opportunity to say "yes" or "no" on the implementation of newly available technology. For example, the 1976 Co-determination at Work Act allows employees a voice in deciding which new machines will be introduced in their workplaces. Workers will probably never choose to "turn back the clock" to an earlier era, but neither will they find new, incompatible technologies thrust upon them by management against their wills. Also, the Social Services Act of 1982 sets out five guiding principles which are to be implemented for the elderly by all governmental bodies from the National Board of Health and Welfare to local municipalities and county councils. Among the principles are two that explicitly mandate freedom of choice for the aged: the principle of "self-determination," meaning that personal integrity is respected and that elders have the right to determine their own lives, make their own decisions, and enjoy personal security; and the principle of "influence and participation," meaning that individuals— including the elderly—should be able to influence not only their own environment but society as a whole.

With respect to **integration,** Sweden has made available to its elderly a variety of living arrangements, including: (1) one's own house or flat, assisted by generous amounts of "home help" including state-subsidized housekeepers, home nurses and snow removers; (2) pensioner's flat or a flat in a pensioner's building; (3) room in an old-age residential home; (4) room in a geriatric hospital; (5) flat in a service house; or (6) flat, including service flats, in a clustered complex. In response to the preferences of aged Swedes themselves, government policy in recent years has moved away from "closed" or institutional care in favor of "open"

or more autonomous, homelike living arrangements. Today about 90% of Swedes 65 or older live in rented flats or in a one-family home, where democratization and integration are sought through a combination of home help and day centers in facilities for the elderly, independent or in such settings as libraries where a variety of age-groups can interact naturally. Even where "closed care" is the rule, as in geriatric hospitals, a strong ethic of "entitlement" exists. For example, at one geriatric hospital in Boras, we observed two advanced Alzheimer's patients in a large, sunny room tastefully appointed with homelike furnishings and greenery, whose geriatric aide apologized for "crowding" the two patients into one room, explaining that even though these persons were virtually comatose, they still "deserved" the same private space any other citizen would want. Besides making a wide range of living arrangements available, Sweden also provides a diverse set of integrative mechanisms such as elders' activity centers built in combination with children's daycare facilities. Even more innovative are new living units like one in Linkoping which combines flats, recreational arenas and dining areas for elderly people, young handicapped adults and "mainstream" families of various ages, so that interaction between the three groups can happen regularly and easily. Such living units help operationalize another tenet of the Social Services Act, the principle of "properly managed activation," implying "meaningful tasks carried out in close partnership with other people in a normal stimulating environment."

Though such things are difficult to quantify, we concluded, after conducting extensive interviewing and participant-observation in three Swedish cities, that meanings and images associated with aging are significantly more positive in Sweden than in the United States, and that changes like those described above deserve much of the credit for the difference. There is no compelling reason why we in America cannot learn from those changes and implement similar ones here at home. This is not to suggest that the Swedish model can be imported without making allowance for cultural and historical differences between the two societies. For example, many of the reforms we have described were won in context of a Swedish labor movement that has been far more united and militant than its American counterpart. Also, as a neutral nation Sweden has not financed the same expensive military establishment that we in the U.S. have maintained since the end of World War II, and so has been able to devote a larger percentage of its healthy GNP to domestic programs. But despite these differences we feel that much can be learned from the Swedish experience. If nothing else, we see that industrial capitalism can foster a social and ideational climate that is quite positive towards the elderly—provided that grafted onto its economic structures is a strong welfare state with a vibrant, class-identified polity.

Meanings and images associated with aging are significantly more positive in Sweden than in the United States.

How likely are such reforms to succeed in the United States? In our view, the answer depends on how effectively the majority of Americans whose roots are in the working class can unite to restructure America in a way that promotes stress reduction, choice expansion, and integration to counter the present elite ideology of competitive individualism, manipulation, and segregation of the aged. Kingsley Davis, a sociologist whose writings often embody elite ideology, wrote in the *New York Times* that leisure for the elderly is deplorable because it reduces our nation's productivity.[8] Leaving aside the questionable accuracy of his portrayal of our aged as "living in a paradise of . . . recreation," it is certainly worth noting that, although Sweden provides a far more secure and amply subsidized retirement to its citizens, its rate of economic productivity is well *above* the United States'. We predict that when facts like these become better known, the American working class will be less receptive to voices that call for "givebacks" of hard-won benefits in the name of "limits" and "priorities." Whether they will go further and demand new reforms to benefit the elderly as Swedish labor has done, only time will tell. But if they do, we hope they will find inspiration for the struggle in sociology's message that our world of meanings is not preordained, but is built upon a humanly constructed base of economic and political institutions that are subject to change and revision. As C. Wright Mills[9] put it, "the limits of 'human nature' are frighteningly broad," and it is up to all of us, researcher, practitioner, and layperson alike, to make sure those limits are not artificially constrained by class or age.

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