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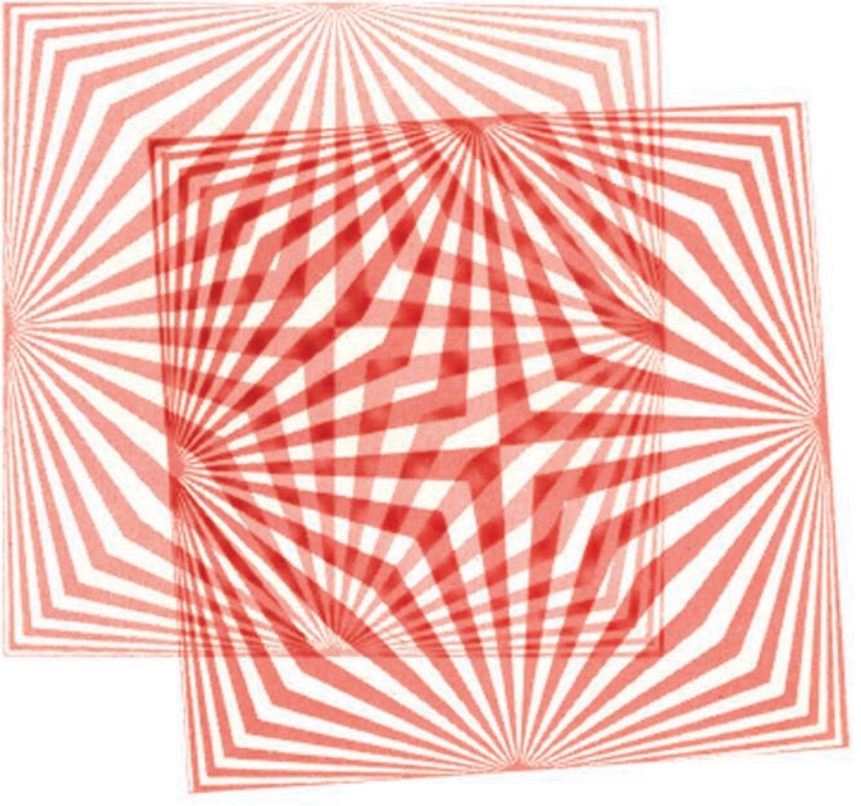
PERSPECTIVES ON AGING
AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT Series

IN THE COUNTRY OF THE OLD

EDITOR: JON HENDRICKS



ROUTLEDGE

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AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT Series

IN THE COUNTRY OF THE OLD

EDITOR: JON HENDRICKS

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preface

Aging represents a paradoxical chain of events. While individuals are often convinced their lives are like no one else's, gerontologists busy themselves making generalizations. On a personal level, there are innumerable events which serve to structure our personal situation to such an extent that it seems impossible that anyone could approximate what seems to be our unique situation. Despite this, those who study the aging process successfully apply the results of their investigations to describe or predict what happens over the lifecourse for most people. Clearly, there appears to be undeniable validity to either position. Aging is indeed an individual occurrence, structured by one's own biography. Yet our membership in a particular biological species and in identifiable social groupings insure certain parameters and constraints will delimit the arena within which personal choice will be exercised.

This volume, the second in the *Perspectives on Aging and Human Development* series, is designed to highlight the relationship between our broader cultural context and the role it plays in defining the shape of aging. Schooled as we are in the nuances of mainstream American aging patterns, it is sometimes difficult to realize that relativity is the name of the game. This is not to say that every cultural category will manifest homogeneous patterns unrelated to those characteristic of other groupings. It is only to suggest that ethnicity and culture are as important as age itself, sex, social class background or other such variables in determining subjective experience. Just as these articles have been selected to emphasize the differences which emerge from contextual factors, so too do they point out the many commonalities which cut across all manner of national or subcultural boundaries. In short, they provide a comparative measure of how individual aging is a reflection of the positions we occupy in our particular socio-cultural drama.

To set the stage, Part I presents two conceptual essays which will assist the reader in recognizing some dimensions of the relative patterns of aging. In their discussion of cultural considerations affecting the lives of us all, Maxwell and Silverman couch their thesis in terms of a shifting complex of role and status positions. Central to their considerations is the elderly's control of valued information; the greater the control, the greater the prestige. Accordingly, in those cultures undergoing rapid change, the information available from older members will tend to diminish with their participation in societal institutions following suit. The parallels between older people in industrializing cultures and

those living in societies which have already undergone the change and are built on growth patterns requiring ever newer occupational skills will not be lost to the astute reader. In the second selection, Holmes furnishes as cogent an overview of the main themes of "anthropological gerontology" as exists in the literature. In referring to socio-cultural studies in this way, Holmes is not implying a disciplinary approach. The term simply refers to work which is comparative and focuses on the holistic nature of behavior and events. Having gained some appreciation of the types of factors likely to operate in a broad range of cultural contexts, the presentation can turn to a review of selected settings in order to assess the relative nature of the aging process.

Part II offers a brief look into the way aging is evaluated in a range of cultures. It is not intended as an exhaustive survey, only as an illustrative comparison of relativity which structures the life world. Press and McKool examine the prestige generating components of the social system insofar as the elderly are concerned. Basing their conclusions on their work in a number of peasant communities in Mexico and Guatemala, the authors contend that the forces of "modernization" turn out to be inimical to a positive evaluation of old people. In isolating four role-sets they feel are beneficial to the elderly, they also note the disadvantages accompanying the heterogeneity which goes hand in hand with increasing economic, industrial and social modernization. Shifting several thousand miles into the Pacific, Maxwell examines how contact with the industrial world has undermined the traditional status of aged Samoans. As marketing and exchange arrangements come to be modelled along Western lines, older people are deprived of their central importance in the affairs of everyday life and thereby forced to relinquish their authority and control. The same factors identified as disruptive in Meso-American cultures prove the same in Polynesian society.

Portugal is a country of contrasts. Her cities rank among the most modern in Europe while the rural areas are remarkably untouched by the commercialism and industrialism of the contemporary world. In his analysis of correlative status of old people residing in these areas, Lipman portrays the components upon which prestige and status are founded. He notes at least two dimensions must be taken into account in evaluating the position of the elderly, suggesting once again that it is not age *per se,* but domination over resources which determines the position occupied by the old people of a society. Shifting our attention somewhat, the next two selections look at differences within modern cultures. With so much at stake, it might reasonably be assumed that significant attitudinal differences between young and old will emerge in any culture where the basis of honorific prestige is changing. Though Sweden has long considered itself among the modern societies of the world, the transition has occurred within the lifetimes of some of its oldest members. It is not surprising that the old and young of Sweden may see things quite differently. Skoglund reports that indeed this is the case; distinct preferences do exist, though they are mediated by sex and social class variables. As a country with a stable population distribution and

a high degree of industrialization, Sweden may well portend what lies ahead for cultures now undergoing the kinds of changes Sweden has already experienced. The final article in this section concentrates on the rural aged in Israel. As a modern culture, Israel is an anomaly, meeting the usual criterion of industrial cultures yet continuing to accord its elderly traditional deference. Berman surveys three rural environments and notes the extent to which changing economic conditions have begun to undermine the social standing of the elderly in a culture which has so far contradicted customary expectations.

Having seen the social meaning of aging in a number of cultures ranging along a "modernization" continuum, Part III turns attention to what it means to be a minority member and old in the United States. While we cannot assume a complete homogeneity within various subcultures, the experiences of the ethnic elderly must be evaluated in light of their cultural background. Yet this is also changing at a rapid pace; the immigrants of a generation ago, or the older members of ethnic groups of longer standing are not synonymous with their younger counterparts. Pierce, Clark and Kaufman look at ethnic identity across generations of Mexican and Japanese Americans. Wilson and colleagues compare Japanese and whites living in Hawaii. In both instances interesting cultural variations appear to affect the way people present themselves in their normal lives as well as their performance on specialized cognitive tests. Despite the cultural hegemony implicit in the two foregoing essays, isolated pockets of ethnicity continue to thrive even among Anglo-Americans. Lozier and Althouse report one such example found in Appalachia. Again it is evident that social standing within the community is based on earned credits and is an ever present aspect of adjustment and coping mechanisms. The remaining selection offers an illustrative look at Black aging. Jackson summarizes a number of social and health characteristics of aged Blacks and in her customary fashion calls for additional attention to exactly those areas in which Blacks have experienced the most difficulties.

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part one

THE ELDERLY IN CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES: ROLE AND STATUS

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chapter 1

INFORMATION AND ESTEEM: CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE TREATMENT OF THE AGED[1]

Robert J. Maxwell, Ph.D. and Philip Silverman, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

ANTHROPOLOGISTS have not, on the whole, shown much interest in aging. With few exceptions, ethnographic reports seem to mention the aged only in passing, if at all, and then only in the context of quite general statements. The reader is left with the impression that the population being studied is made up of males in maturity, with women and children as peripheral figures. Even the culture and personality theorists, with their interest in the various stages of the life cycle, gave little attention to the aged. This neglect is odd, in view of the fact that, as Bromley (1966, p. 13) has pointed out, "we spend about one quarter of our lives growing up and three quarters growing old."

There are several reasons for this. Old age itself is not pleasant to contemplate: the biological changes associated with aging are those we ourselves will someday undergo. Moreover, the aged occupy the terminal stage of the life cycle, so that we know where they will be twenty years from now, whereas we don't know what will happen to the children in the community. In connection with this, old people are likely to be the guardians of the old traditions and not active agents of socio-cultural change, so they are of lesser theoretical interest. Finally, there are fewer old people around outside of relatively complex and industrialized societies.

Nevertheless, some descriptive material has appeared. Arensberg and Kimball (1940), Elwin's work on the Muria Gond (1947),

[1] Thanks are due to Susan Singer of Philadelphia; to the students in the cross-cultural methodology course given at The City College of New York (Spring, 1970), particularly Dorothy Burstyn and Mary McMecham; and to Pertti J. Pelto of the Department of Anthropology, University of Connecticut; all of whom lent their assistance to the preparation of this paper.

Spencer on Samburu "gerontocracy" (1965), Clark and Anderson (1967) on aged representatives of various ethnic groups in the San Francisco Bay Area, and some more abbreviated efforts (see Cowgill 1965; Maxwell 1970; Okada 1962*a*, 1962*b*; Rowe 1961; Shelton 1969) help to shed some light on the disposition of certain societies toward their older members.

Simmons' *The Role of the Aged in Primitive Society* (1945) deserves special mention as a more ambitious comparative work than the others. This volume, which stands as the first and only large-scale cross-cultural study of aging,[2] rich as it is in illustrative material, is unfortunately of limited value, largely because of its flawed methodology. In a sample of 71 societies, he includes several that are closely related—for example, the Polar Eskimo and the Labrador Eskimo; the Dieri and the Aranda of Australia. The problem with closely related societies, of course, is that, unlike closely related individuals, you don't know whether you are dealing with one case or two. In the absence of careful sampling procedures it is easy for generalizations drawn from the data to be awry. This alone would be enough to make Simmons' conclusions suspect, but, in addition, he had coded 240 culture traits in these 71 societies by himself, without providing explicit coding rules for the reader, so that the reliability of his data cannot be known. What, for example, is "phallicism" (p. 3)?

Finally, there are some errors in the statistical operations employed (see Correlation 1, Appendix A, p. 245) which cast doubt on his other procedures.

In the twenty-five years since the appearance of Simmons' book, the theory and methodology of comparative studies have come far and it is perhaps time to begin a reexamination of the problem of the aged in cross-cultural perspective.

It will be suggested here that information of varying utility is distributed throughout the sociocultural system. In industrialized societies characterized by artifactual storage of information and rapid sociocultural change, the information controlled by older people is rapidly rendered useless to society or—to the extent that

[2] Koty (1933) attempted to cover the ethnographic literature on the treatment of the aged and the sick before such data banks as the Human Relations Area Files made comparative research a more manageable task. Although his theoretical perspective is outdated, the book contains much useful information, particularly from Russian sources.

it is useful—is stored in books, archives, computers, or other artifacts. Both of these processes, rapid social change and artifactual storage, cause the participation of the aged in the social life of the community to decrease and become less important in terms of system maintenance and survival. This, in turn, causes respect for the aged to decline.

It is true that in some less complex and technologically simple societies the aged are killed or abandoned. The above proposition implies, however, that this may not necessarily involve a loss of respect for the aged. Under harsh environmental circumstances, where the group must move about periodically in search of food or water, it is absolutely necessary for group survival that the aged be sacrificed or abandoned if, in fact, they can not keep up with the rest of the group.

It will be hypothesized, then, the societies can be arrayed along a continuum, the basis of which is the amount of useful information controlled by the aged. This informational control will be reflected in the participation of the aged in community affairs, and their participation will, in turn, determine the degree of esteem in which they are held by the other members of the community. It is expected that this informational control, and consequently social participation, will decline with industrialization and rapid sociocultural change.

THEORY

One of the more fruitful models developed for the investigation of human societies has focused on information storage and exchange and may be described under the general rubric of systems theory.

Culture as a System

If a system is a bounded organization of dynamically related components, then any culture qualifies as a system by definition. A sociocultural system is composed of units—individuals—who are organized into sub-systems such as "families," "occupations," and other kinds of institutions. If the individuals in fact participate in the same sociocultural system *(SCS),* then they are dynamically related, since what happens to some of them will affect the state of some or all of the others. To use terms developed in systems

theory, interactions between members of the same *SCS* are governed by constraint. When *A* does or says something to *B*, not *all* responses are open to *B*. If communication has occurred, what *B* does is in some way constrained by what *A* has just done.

Constraint, of course, implies a code imposed on the relationship between *A* and *B*, such that each may interpret the other's behavior more or less accurately. Speech, writing, facial expressions, gestures, semaphore, smoke signals, all have served as codes. Because of culturally patterned constraints, people are able to class some perceptions as the same or similar, and other things as different. All of the social sciences are based on this simple but extremely important fact.

*SCS*s of course have boundaries, though not necessarily geographically contiguous, across which exchanges with the environment occur. For the purposes of this paper, we may consider the environment to include natural habitat and circumjacent *SCS*s. Because these exchanges with the environment occur, an *SCS* can be described as an "open" system. All exchanges between an open system and its environments are dual. Whatever enters the *SCS* must leave it, at some time or another, whether or not its state has been transformed. This sort of dual exchange may be called a throughput, and there are three throughputs of chief concern to us here. The first is that of the units themselves. People enter an *SCS* and sooner or later leave it. They engage in two kinds of environmental exchange: that of matter and energy, and that of information. We may take these one at a time.

Individuals

One of the most important properties of the individual members of an *SCS* is progression through time, or aging.

> We find examples of populations—aggregates of individuals conforming to a common definition—in which individuals are added (born) and subtracted (die) and in which the age of the individual is a relevant and identifiable variable . . . . Population change, both in absolute numbers and in structure, can be discussed in terms of birth and survival functions relating numbers of births and deaths in specific age groups to various aspects of the system . . . . The interaction of populations can be discussed in terms of competitive, complementary, or parasitic relationships among populations of different species, whether the species consist of animals, commodities, social classes, or molecules (Boulding 1968, p. 5).

These statements are true even if relatively simple systems are considered. A simple structure like a clock, for example, even if

regularly wound, will not run forever. The parts age and wear away at different rates, and sooner or later some part or sets of parts, will break down and the system will fail unless the parts are replaced. Aging, failure, and replacement of units is as characteristic of cultures as it is of clocks.

Matter and Energy

It is assumed that one of the primary functions of tools and other forms of matter is to increase the efficiency of the *SCS* in terms of the amount of energy harnessed. The problem of energy has been discussed at length by others (see White 1949, 1959; Sahlins and Service 1960), so this section will focus on the throughput of matter.

The exchange of material with the environment is mediated by technology—the aggregate of tools and techniques directly concerned with getting a living. Technology may be relatively simple, as it is among hunters and gatherers, or extremely complex, as it is among highly industrialized *SCS*s. Technology is of critical importance in the systemic metaphor because it is an expression of the efficiency of the *SCS* in adapting to and utilizing its resources. (Mark that we are discussing efficiency of the *SCS,* not the happiness, contentment, or satisfaction of its members.)

Like many other complex systems, *SCS*s exhibit a tendency toward growth, an increase in internal complexity. The rate at which such growth occurs is associated with the complexity of the tools and activities used to exploit the environment. Generally speaking, the greater the technological inventory, the more combinations of items are possible, and the more likely it is that the *SCS* will be characterized by a high rate of technological growth.

The material input is of two types. First, artifactual input consists of tools, buildings, clothing, and other material goods derived from natural substances which are put to use extra-organismically, that is, outside the bodies of the individual members of the *SCS.* These goods are used and then discarded, either after they have served their purpose or after they have been so worn that it is easier to replace them than to restore them. Different kinds of materials pass through an *SCS* at different rates: a building is

designed to last longer than the candle on a cake. Similarly, the same kinds of artifacts pass through different societies at different rates. An alarm clock will last longer among people living in a cool, dry climate, rather than a hot, moist one. In our own *SCS*, automobiles tend to last longer in rural areas than in urban ones, and this fact is reflected in differential insurance rates. The rates at which artifacts pass through an *SCS* may be referred to as that system's material attrition rate. As an aside, it may be mentioned that the "underdeveloped" economic condition of some societies is partly a function of their high material attrition rate. Where artifactual goods are stolen or quickly destroyed by climate, we may expect that work expended in getting goods that require much productive effort would be dysfunctional. In Samoa, ripe, yellow bananas are highly prized, and banana plants abound, yet Samoans rarely have an opportunity to eat a yellow banana. The reason is that the moment anyone's bananas show signs of ripening, they are begged, confiscated, or stolen by someone else. Thus everyone must eat his bananas while they are still green. Such other "leveling mechanisms" as large feasts, forced loans, expenditure rivalries, and so on, however much they may promote social solidarity, tend to disperse wealth and inhibit its reinvestment (Nash 1966, pp. 35–36). Clearly, the production of material goods depends as much upon the cooperation of other *SCS* members as upon the motivation of the entrepreneur himself.

It is also worth mentioning that a high material attrition rate is also characteristic of industrialized societies with relatively unregulated economies, at least for certain types of artifacts. This is true to the extent that manufacturers profit from the sale of artifacts designed to fall apart on schedule. Production is predicated on the assumption that all artifactual goods will break down, and from the point of view of some of the artisans, the sooner the better. Advertising and "built-in obsolescence" are similarly attempts to maintain a high material attrition rate.

A second type of material input is victual, consisting of food gotten from the environment, consumed and converted into energy, and eliminated. As Cohen (1968, pp. 42–43) observes, the nature of victual input yields some indication of the efficiency of the *SCS*. In many simple and relatively isolated societies, the diet