AGE AND STRUCTURAL LAG

Society's failure to provide meaningful opportunities in work, family, and leisure

Edited by
Matilda White Riley, Robert L. Kahn, and Anne Foner

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A Wiley-Interscience Publication

John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

New York • Chichester • Brisbane • Toronto • Singapore

This publication stems from
Program on Age and Structural Change (PASC)
Sponsored by the National Institute on Aging

This text is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Age and structural lag / editors Matilda White Riley, Robert L. Kahn, Anne Foner : editorial associate Karin A. Mack.
p. cm.
"A Wiley-Interscience Publication."
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-471-01678-0 (alk. paper)
1. Social change—United States. 2. Social structure—United States. 3. Aging—Social aspects—United States. 4. Age and employment—United States. I. Riley, Matilda White. 1911–
II. Kahn, Robert Louis, 1918– . III. Foner, Anne. IV. Title: Structural lag.
HN59.2.A34 1994
303.4'0973—dc20 93-46344

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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Preface

This book is built around a single concept, *structural lag*. Each chapter explores implications of that concept in a different domain, and all reflect the authors' shared conviction of its importance, both for social theory and for practical policy.

By structural lag, we mean the tendency of social structures and norms to lag behind people's rapidly changing lives. So defined, the concept is simple enough, but its ramifications are many and complex. They take the authors—writing from their several disciplinary perspectives—far across time and space. All social structures change, of course, but they do not develop or adapt at the same rate, nor do all individuals follow the same trajectory through the life course.

These structural and individual differences and, above all, the inertial tendency of social structures to persist rather than respond to the changing needs and characteristics of individuals, create a continuing tension between people and the structures in which their lives are embedded.

STRUCTURAL LAG

The Problem

The tendency for structural changes to lag behind changes in people's lives has become a serious problem in our own time. The nature of this lag, and the challenges it presents for both policy and scholarship, can

be seen from just one example: the structural arrangements and social norms with respect to work and retirement in the contemporary United States. We have entered a historical period in which men and women live, on average, almost 20 years beyond the usual retirement age. It is also a period in which most women of working age have joined the labor force, whether or not they also have the care of children. As a result, especially for women, the long middle years of adult life are chronically overloaded with the combined activities of two-career families, child rearing, and homemaking.

In contrast to the overload of that life stage, we now have an extended period of older age that is essentially without formal structure, an entry into the time of the "roleless role." The contrast between these life stages is increasingly visible and increasingly conflict prone, especially as the economic entitlements of older people are often seen as economic burdens of the young and the middle-aged.

The legal abolition of a fixed retirement age in the United States has not solved these problems. Full-time jobs are scarce commodities and likely to remain so for a considerable time. As a nation, it is sometimes claimed, we can grow all the food we eat, and then some, with less than 5% of our labor force, and we can manufacture all we sell with less than 15% of available workers. Furthermore, older people want to lead more productive lives, but the competition for jobs is real. Moreover, to the extent that wages are seniority driven (as is conspicuously the case in academic life), it is often argued that each older person who stays on the job blocks more than one opening for younger people.

The point is not that a compulsory retirement age was an unqualified good, but that we have complex problems to solve in bringing our opportunity structures (to use Robert Merton's term) into greater congruence with what technology and medical advances have done for the way we grow up and grow old.

An Integrative Approach

This contemporary example of structural lag from the domain of work and retirement in the United States is just one of several explored in this book. The problem pervades all developed societies and threatens those not yet developed. Many other examples are still under study and could not be included here, such as a general underestimation of

the capacities of young children—even the ability of babies to teach babies; the widespread lack of opportunity structures for adolescents; the constraints on education beyond the early ages.

Toward an overall integration of all such examples, whether or not treated directly in the following chapters, we set out an emerging framework for understanding changing age structures. Taken together, the Introduction and Chapters 1, 2, and 12 describe structural lag and the potentials for correcting it.

The chapters in the body of the book direct attention to varied aspects of the lag in particular domains, which range widely across disciplines and focus on the respective interests of the authors. We have read and reread each of these chapters, guiding the planning and the successive revisions to ensure their relevance to the central theme, and to identify their cross-disciplinary interconnections. The aim is to avoid a set of disparate chapters cobbled together only by indirect references to a simple idea; rather, the aim is to develop—however imperfectly—an integrative exegesis of the idea itself. Throughout this lengthy process, we have been assisted by our editorial associate Karin Mack and by John Riley, the senior editor's longtime close collaborator.

Readers

In describing structural lag, its problems and its potentials, the book addresses a wide national and international audience: to experienced scholars and graduate students in the social and behavioral sciences; to policymakers in both public and private sectors; to members of the practicing professions; to gerontologists and others interested in human development and aging; and to sophisticated readers concerned with major issues of everyday life. For readers wanting to pursue specific points in greater depth, most chapters include extensive references.

A Cumulative Body of Knowledge

The book is part of a continuing investigation of structural change conducted by Matilda White Riley, in association with Anne Foner, John Riley, Karin Mack, and a network of participating scholars. That research effort, entitled the Program on Age and Structural Change (PASC), now in its first phase, is supported by the National Institute

on Aging (NIA), as was much of the research cited in these chapters. Earlier versions of some chapters were presented (as a component of PASC) at the 1992 meetings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Robert Kahn's research on age-related issues has been supported by the National Institute on Aging and by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, through its Research Network on Successful Aging.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book, with its emphasis on structural change, rests on a long history of multidisciplinary scholarship and administrative support. Here we can only mention its original stimulus from Russell Sage Foundation (through Gilbert Brim), the Ford Foundation (through Ollie Randall), and the Social Science Research Council. Most immediately, the book is indebted to T. Franklin Williams, whose vision as Director of the National Institute of Aging brought PASC into reality; and to his successors at NIA, Gene Cohen and Richard Hodes, who have continued to encourage and sustain the program.

The book also owes much to the foresight of numerous advisors to the Behavioral and Social Research Program at the National Institute on Aging, many of whom made recent recommendations for the future agenda based on the experience of that Program during the decade of the 1980s. These advisors include Paul Baltes, Vern Bengtson, Robert Butler, David Featherman, George Maddox, David Mechanic, George Myers, Bernice Neugarten, Warner Schaie, Ethel Shanas, James Smith, Mervyn Susser, and Sherry Willis.

In addition, encouragement and suggestion in the early stages of planning the book were supplied by Ronald Abeles, Lars Anderson, Glen Elder, Carroll Estes, Linda George, Anne-Marie Guillemard, Jerald Hage, Dennis Hogan, Katrina Johnson, David Kertzer, Margaret Marini, John Meyer, John Myles, Marcia Ory, Richard Scott, Neil Smelser, Michael Wagner, David Willis, and many others. Related background papers were prepared by Nitza Berkovitch, Karen Bradley, Dale Dannefer, and Karyn Loscocco. Preparation of the manuscript was aided in many ways by members of the staff of NIA's Behavioral and Social Research Program, in particular by Tung Nguyen and

Cammy Tieu. The exacting task of seeing the book through the publication process was undertaken by Jeannette Wilson, Program Coordinator of PASC.

To all these persons and agencies, and to the literally hundreds of other scholars in the United States and abroad who have contributed to the background of PASC in general and this book in particular, we express sincere appreciation.

MATILDA WHITE RILEY
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Contents

Introduction: The Mismatch between People and Structures

Matilda White Riley, Robert L. Kahn, and Anne Foner
in association with Karin A. Mack

The chapters in this book examine the relatively unexplored phenomenon of *structural lag,* as it affects not only older men and women but also people of all ages. In modern industrial societies, the numbers of capable and long-lived people are mounting dramatically, but the *opportunity structures* that shape their lives at all ages have remained largely static or become more constrained. In many respects, the concept of opportunity structures, introduced into scientific discourse over half a century ago by Robert Merton (cf. Merton, 1957), is essential to the thesis of this book. We argue that age criteria are so built into social structures as to restrict opportunities. Put another way, there is a mismatch (to use George Maddox's term) between people and the social structures, institutions, and norms that surround them.

In the 19th century, the situation was very different. When relatively few people survived into old age, responsibilities for work and family were virtually lifelong. Years of retirement, for those who could retire at all, were few. Today, by contrast, survival into old age

is commonplace and many years of vigorous postretirement life are the realistic expectation. We are the beneficiaries of great gains in economic productivity and public health as well as advances in science and education.

Nevertheless, the major responsibilities for work and family are still crowded into what are now the middle years of long life, while education is primarily reserved for the young, and leisure and free time are disproportionately allocated to the later years. Despite the 20th-century metamorphosis in human lives from infancy to old age, the social structures and norms that define opportunities and expectations throughout the life course carry the vestigial marks of the 19th century. Our failure to match in social structures the rapid gains in longevity, health, and style of life has had the unintended consequence of creating a poor fit between social institutions and people's capabilities and responsibilities at every age (cf. Kahn, 1981; Riley, 1988).

The challenge for the 21st century, therefore, is to discover, invent, and bring about social changes that will mitigate the 20th century's structural lag. What kinds of future structures and institutions can lessen the burdens of middle age, prepare children for the complexities of the real world, and create opportunities for productivity, independence, and self-esteem in the added years of later life?

Answers to such large questions and their derivatives are crucial for research in the behavioral sciences and other disciplines, for public policy and professional practice, and for public enlightenment. Contributors to this volume, in exploring a variety of possible answers to such questions, go to the very heart of social change itself. From diverse disciplinary perspectives, their chapters range across time and space to examine how major age-related roles in contemporary society have come about, and how they might possibly be altered to enhance the quality of human lives.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Issues of Structural Change

Details of this need for understanding structural lag were foreshadowed in an essay titled "Aging and Social Change," which was

published over a decade ago (Riley, 1982). That paper listed the following issues of structural change as being under debate at that time (p. 23):

- Whether to provide tax credits for home care of older people.
- How and in what direction to change laws governing custody of children.
- Whether and under what conditions to encourage uninterested students to leave high school early.
- Whether to spread work more evenly over the life course, by providing longer vacations, flexible work hours, incentives for mid-life switching to new careers.
- Whether to reduce the heavy transfer payments by the middle-aged and to require that both the old and the young become more nearly self-supporting.
- How to determine the appropriate age for retirement, given the increases in life expectancy.
- How to restructure the health establishment to meet the special needs of geriatric patients.
- How to design communities, housing, shopping centers, roadways to meet the human needs that are changing over the life course.

In the intervening years, however, few such age-related structural issues have been resolved. Indeed, they have become exacerbated by serious revolutions abroad and disturbances at home. The term "social change" has become painfully commonplace, but its scientific meaning and its implications for human lives—past and future—remain obscure. In research, great emphasis has been placed on aging and human development, but the related issues of the environing social structures have been neglected, or simply accepted as "given."

Today, as the contributors to the present volume seek deeper understanding of such structural issues, they draw on a guiding principle[1] set out in that 1982 essay: *There is a dynamic interplay between people*

[1] This principle, and its source in several decades of previous work, is described in Chapter 1 of this book.

growing older and society undergoing change (p. 11). This interplay involves two distinct, but interdependent, "dynamisms" (or processes):

1. People in successive cohorts[2] (or generations) grow up and grow old in different ways because the surrounding social structures are changing. That is, the process of aging from birth to death is not entirely fixed or determined by biology, but is influenced by the changing social structures and roles in which people lead their lives.
2. Alterations in the ways in which people grow up and grow old, in turn, press on the surrounding social structures to change them. That is, the roles available to people at particular ages are not fixed or immutable but are reshaped by the collective actions and attitudes of the people who are continually aging, moving through the roles, and being replaced by their successors from more recent cohorts.

To repeat: People's lives are influenced by changing social structures; and reciprocally, the changes in people's lives exert pressures on social structures for still further change.

The book in which that earlier essay appeared focused primarily on the first of these dynamisms: Its title was *Aging from Birth to Death: Sociotemporal Perspectives* (Riley, Abeles, & Teitelbaum, 1982). Subsequent research, espousing this "life-course perspective" on the process of aging in successive cohorts, has yielded massive evidence of the sustained strengths, vigor, and capacities of today's long-lived people.[3] Meantime, however, the related dynamism—changing age structures—remains largely unexplored. All too little attention has been paid to the role opportunities that have not kept pace with the advances in people's lives. The structural issues identified in that 1982 publication are still issues today.

To address these issues, this book is the first major publication of the Program on Age and Structural Change (PASC), recently initiated

[2] The life-course experiences of each cohort of people (those born at approximately the same period of time) reflect a particular period of history. (The term *birth cohort* is preferred to *age cohort*, since members of any particular cohort "age" from birth to death.)

[3] Indeed, so much current attention is devoted to analyzing the patterns of people's lives—without explicit concern with the surrounding structures—as to approximate a "life course reductionism."

at the National Institute of Aging (NIA).[4] In its immediate focus on structural lag, PASC takes a radical approach to the long tradition of analysis of social change in general. PASC is unique in emphasizing the pressures for structural change exerted by the tensions, conflicts, inequalities, and special transition experiences involved in the unending process of new people replacing their predecessors throughout the institutions of society (Foner, 1982; Foner & Kertzer, 1979; Kertzer & Schaie, 1989). It is unique in emphasizing the interplay between social structures and the universal processes of aging and cohort flow (cf. Riley, 1973). And it is unique in emphasizing the dynamic character of the "social convoy" of significant others who surround each individual throughout a long lifetime, both giving and receiving social support (Kahn, 1979). The broad challenge to PASC is to enlarge and specify this radical approach: to develop conceptual, methodological, and substantive understanding of changes in social institutions and their linkage to people's lives, and—in so doing—to explore the pros and cons of possible avenues for improving the balance between people's capacities and the opportunities available to them.

Purpose of This Work

Authors of the following chapters were given this challenge. Thus they focus varied attention on the potentials—and the obstacles—for reducing structural lag. Their chapters are replete with innovative ideas and provocative details, aimed to stimulate discussion and thought, and to suggest practical ways of enhancing the roles available to people throughout their long lives.

The contributors use multidisciplinary approaches to examine selected aspects of age-related structural changes in work, retirement, family, education, and other social roles. As possible models for the 21st century, these authors discuss alternative organizational arrangements, some of which have existed at past times, some in other countries, and some only in projected scenarios. Already in the United States, for example, roles in work, family, and school are seen to intersect, as corporations provide education for employees, or day care for employees' children and frail parents. Affecting structural

[4] As described in Chapter 1, PASC, which is directed by Matilda White Riley at NIA, involves an international communications network of scholars.