Later Life

The Social Psychology of Aging

Edited by

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Contents

Acknowledgments

1

Dominant and Emerging Paradigms in the Social Psychology of Aging

VICTOR W. MARSHALL

First chapters are usually written last, and this chapter is no exception. In these "last words" I attempt to place the chapters that follow in contexts, to describe and justify the purpose of the collection. I have the advantage over my collaborators in this volume because their chapters are in my hands as I write. I shall attempt to impose a "logic" on the contents and organization of the book that may well have been opaque to the authors, some of whom may be quite surprised at the contextualization of their chapters. From the beginning, my goal was to represent theoretical developments in the social psychology of aging, but the book came to be progressively more focused as the various authors agreed to participate in it. The book's "reconstituted logic" will be of greater interest to the reader than its evolving logic. To an extent I have perhaps drawn some of the authors into being co-conspirators in the service of my own theoretical project. They may not fully agree with that project or with my critiques of much of the theory in the social psychology of aging, which I characterize as the antithesis of what is found in these pages. Nonetheless, assured of their good will if not their complete agreement, I will describe what I take to be the unifying foci of this book.

Authors were selected on the basis of a very personal judgment (though one informed by the reception of their work by the scientific community) that their work showed, or showed the promise of, innovative theory development in the social psychology or microsociology of aging. They were asked to develop chapters representing their most recent theoretical work, with an explicit request that they be bold, innovative, and free in theorizing. The overall goal is to stimulate the development of theoretical ideas in a field where these are scarce. Many of the authors see the greatest promise for theoretical development in reintroducing some important strands of theory from the past, or in

showing how some "classical" theory has contemporary relevance for the social psychology of aging.

In a recent review, Maddox and Campbell (1985, p. 4) argue that "the social scientific study of aging needs, but currently lacks, widely shared paradigms that would provide common conceptualization of issues, standard measurements, and clearly defined research agendas for the systematic testing of hypotheses derived from theory." Rosow (1985, p. 62) has expressed agreement with an earlier view expressed by Clausen (1972) that there is no basis for a general theory of the life course and that we should attempt to develop theory at the middle range. John (1984, p. 92) goes further and argues, "To the extent that one can characterize theoretical developments in social gerontology, the trend has been away from a search for a special as well as an universal theory of aging. It is wise to abandon these endeavors since any effort along these lines will remain fruitless as long as material and ideal conditions vary from country to country and over time."

The social psychology of aging has been long on data and short on ideas. In less than a half century of intense activity, it has made remarkable progress in measurement but less progress at the level of meaning. Much time and energy has been thrown away on trifling issues and it is still not clear that our understanding of aging and later life has reached a level of sophistication over that which has been with us through the ages, well prior to any disciplined attempt by social scientists to develop systematic, theoretical knowledge. The field has from its origins had a "social problems" focus to the detriment of systematic theorizing. Theory is not doing well in the social psychology or sociology of aging.

Nonetheless, this is a book of and about theory in social gerontology, particularly in the social psychology of aging. The authors represented here are not in agreement as to fine points of theory and no doubt would disagree vigorously on theory-building strategies. However, they do share a commitment to theory as well as a sense of uneasiness about the current state of theory. In addition to their belief in the value of theory, it may safely be said that they agree with the following goals of this book:

(1) The theoretical contributions represented in the book recognize that aging individuals are embedded in social structural contexts that have their own historical and social imperatives and dynamics.
(2) The book constitutes, implicitly and explicitly, a critique of prevailing atheoretical and/or structural-functionalist approaches that now predominate in social gerontology.

(3) The book will introduce, or reintroduce, the basic elements of an "interpretive" perspective, based in Weberian sociology, symbolic interactionist sociology, and phenomenological psychology and social psychology.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will address these three goals and briefly suggest the ways in which the various chapters contribute to them.

AGING AND LATER LIFE IN CONTEXT

Attempting to understand the relationship between the individual and society has been one of the major themes in the sociological enterprise, yet perhaps no sociologist has stated this goal better than C. Wright Mills. In his classic, *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (1959, p. 3) wrote as follows:

> The facts of contemporary history are also facts about the success and the failure of individual men and women. When a society is industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Mills (1959, p. 4) notes that, in their everyday-life worlds, people rarely connect their individual lives with the societal context, their "personal troubles" with "public issues." This is because they lack "the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world." This quality of mind, Mills asserts, is precisely the key element in the sociological imagination.

Any review of the sociology of aging must, by these criteria, find it sorely lacking in such imagination. There has been little focus on the societal contexts of aging due to a strong social psychological cast to the field. Simultaneously, the emphasis on the individual has ignored context in several ways. The older individual has all too often been seen in isolation. So, when a recent textbook defines the sociology of aging as "the scientific study of the interaction of older people in society" (Harris & Cole, 1980, p. 12), the definition may be viewed as too narrowly social psychological and too focused on later life.

The strong emphasis in the sociology of aging on the adjustment of the individual to the society has served to decontextualize the aging experience by taking societal arrangements as comparatively nonproblematic. In an early and influential development, Ernest W. Burgess submitted a memo to the Committee on Social Adjustment of the Social Sciences Research Council, calling attention to the absence of information about the behavior and adjustment of the aged. Burgess also acknowledged that society could be characterized as maladjusted to the individual or to its older population, rather than the reverse (Calhoun, 1978, p. 105). However, the bulk of his own work and that of such colleagues as Cavan (1949) at Chicago stressed the adaptation or adjustment of the individual to the society. Whether measured by degree of social integration or more psychological variables such as morale or life satisfaction, the adjustment of the aging individual became the dependent variable of choice for hundreds of investigations over the ensuing decades. No equivalent measure or conceptualization of the "adjustment" of the society to the individual ever gained prominence in the research armamentarium of gerontology. Even disengagement theory, which did attempt to provide a theory linking the individual and societal levels of analysis, in practice stimulated research focused on individual aging people and their adjustment to the society. Social change or the social dynamics surrounding disengagement rarely have been addressed in this theoretical tradition.

The emphasis on individual adjustment pervaded the field of social gerontology until the early 1980s and is still a major theme in the social psychology of aging (for a review and critique, see Marshall, 1981; Marshall & Tindale, 1978-1979).

Context has also been ignored because of the predominance of the social survey and of multivariate analysis in the sociology of aging (and in sociology in general). Sociological descriptions focused on variables and the relationships between variables, rather than on whole people in real-life situations. People were, in a sense, first decomposed into variables and then lost, as the relationships between variables were explored instead of the relationships between people. Field studies employing participant observation or other approaches to describe people in situations have been rare in the sociology of aging.

The failure to place aging and the aged in context adequately has also suffered from the ahistorical cast of theory. The largest theoretical debate in the social psychology of aging, that between activity theory and disengagement theory (see, for example, Cumming & Henry, 1961;

Maddox, 1965, 1966; Palmore, 1968; and the review of this debate in Orbach, 1974), totally ignores the historical context in which either disengagement or continuing high levels of activity in later life might be maintained. There has been a remarkable lack of vision in the goal of explanation. Thus, in seeking for the correlates of morale or life satisfaction, investigators have measured such factors as health status, economic status, and social participation. These three sets of variables explain the greatest variance in life satisfaction. However, only rarely have these variables been taken as dependent. Each could be considered as implicated in long causal chains, and when efforts would be made to explain them, the explanation would most likely lead the investigator to a consideration of social structure and broader aspects of social context. More relevant to this volume, it is the linkage between the proximate causal variables such as those found to be highly predictive of life satisfaction and structural variables that has been neglected.

Even at the microsociological level of an analysis, there has been little interest in viewing the social situation of the aging individual in structural terms. A basic distinction can be made between the acting individual and the social structuring of his or her social world. The central thrust of most of the chapters in this volume emphasizes a view of the individual as "acting," which is to say, participating actively in fashioning a life course. The image of human nature put forth here is of a creature capable of exercising choice. However, choice can be exercised only if alternatives are available, and this immediately raises questions about social struture.

THE LIMITATIONS OF
STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM

The second major goal of this book is to posit a critique of prevailing atheoretical and/or structural-functionalist approaches that now predominate in social gerontology. The two most influential North American theoretical approaches in social gerontology are both structural-functionalist in their theoretical grounding. These are "age stratification theory," propounded by Matilda White Riley and associates (Foner, 1972, 1974, 1984; Foner & Kertzer, 1978; Riley, 1971, 1976, 1978, 1985; Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972), and the modernization thesis, which has been articulated principally by Donald Cowgill (1974; Cowgill & Holmes, 1972) and by Erdman Palmore and associates (Palmore & Manton, 1974; Palmore & Whittington, 1971) but which was anticipated

by Burgess (1960) and even by Durkheim in *The Division of Labor* (1964/1893). A third major theoretical approach, prominent in the work of Burgess but also expressed in the work of Irving Rosow on social integration and social roles of the aged (Rosow, 1974, 1976, 1985), is equally influenced by structural-functionalism. This may be called the "role theory" perspective on aging, but it has many variants (e.g., Blau, 1981; Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965).

Structural-functionalism (hereafter referred to simply as "functionalism") is something of a dirty word in some contemporary social psychology circles, and this is unfortunate in that the term refers to a major theoretical perspective, itself internally differentiated, that has contributed greatly to social science knowledge.

As Merton (1957) has pointed out, "function" is a term with many meanings both in popular and scientific discourse. Functionalist analysis has been criticized as being teleological, in attempting to explain a phenomenon in relation to the ends to which it is directed. As a simple example, the social institution of retirement might be explained by its function of removing older people from the labor force so as to reduce the possibility of conflict between young and old age groups (as in Cowgill, 1974). However, functional analysis is not in principle teleological and, shorn of teleology and carefully applied, becomes one form of causal analysis (Davis, 1959; Levy, 1967).

In this stripped-down version, functional analysis is completely formal or abstract, being simply a way of mapping causal relationships (as, for example, in stating the equation describing a regression line). However, to be theoretically interesting at all, we must reserve the term "functionalism" to refer to a set of theoretical approaches that look upon society as a system with certain needs whose fulfillment is required if the system is to be maintained or is to survive.

As philosopher Carl Hempel (1965, pp. 304-305) explains:

> The kind of phenomenon that a functional analysis is invoked to explain is typically some recurrent activity or some behavior pattern in an individual or a group, such as a physiological mechanism, a neurotic trait, a culture pattern or a social institution. And the principal objective of the analysis is to exhibit the contribution which the behavior pattern makes to the preservation or the development of the individual or the group in which it occurs. Thus, functional analysis seeks to understand a behavior pattern or a sociocultural institution by determining the role it plays in keeping the given system in proper working order or maintaining it as a going concern.

However, maintenance of a system is extended by some, through analogies to biological organisms, to assume that systems naturally tend toward equilibrium. No support is found for that position in these pages, even though it is found in such a major theoretical perspective in the sociology of aging as the "age stratification" perspective. Similarly, the assumption that society has certain basic needs or requisites, important in the sociological functionalism of Parsons (1951, chap. 2) and Levy (1952, chap. 4) and in the anthropological functionalism of Malinowski (1939), has influenced the disengagement theory of aging and the modernization theory, in both of which the social institution of retirement would be seen as meeting a social system need to process role incumbents out of status positions in order to make room for new entrants. Such a functional requisite assumption can be accepted only with considerable qualification. Societal survival, the criterion against which requisite functional need is defined, is itself difficult to define (Aberle et al., 1950; Levy, 1952, p. 137).

The functionalist emphasis on the contribution that any societal element makes to the functioning of the whole society, coupled with a Durkheimian priority being given to the whole over the parts, informs much of the social psychology of aging that deals with age-related loss of social integration. Rosow and Burgess both appear to judge the integration of the individual into the society primarily in terms of activities relevant to societal survival. Hence, loss of economic function and important familial (parenting and conjugal) roles are the critical aspects of age-related status loss leading to what Burgess (1960) describes as the "role-less role" of the aged, and what Rosow characterizes as tenuous, informal, or "non-role" role types (Rosow, 1985).

From a nonfunctionalist perspective, however, exclusion of the aged from functions deemed by some to be critical for the survival of the society is not taken as ruling out other means of social integration. The issue might seem trivial except that social integration has been such a dominant concern in the sociology and social psychology of aging. Social relationships are based on more than societal survival functions. Unruh (1983) has recently explored alternative bases for social integration through participation in "social worlds." Many old and young people find meaningful social integration in a life with others in society through participating in social worlds such as "stamp collecting" or "ballroom dancing." From a societal survival perspective, participation in such social worlds appears trivial, yet just such participation often forms genuine and meaningful bases of meaning and social identity across the life course.

A central problem with functionalist analysis is the tendency to see any social unit or behavior pattern solely in terms of its functions for the survival of the larger whole (be this a society or a group or collectivity at a more bounded level of analysis). Much of individual or social life, it may be argued, is afunctional. It does not contribute to the maintenance of any social system, nor does it particularly threaten that existence (that is, it is not dysfunctional either). If we focus on functional aspects of behavior or of social structure, we may miss a great deal of social life.

In summary, by encouraging the investigator to think systematically about the relationships of social units and behavioral patterns to each other and to larger systems of social interaction, functionalism has been a valuable theoretical perspective. On the negative side, structural-functionalism is limited by difficulties in defining what shall be taken to be a social system and by what criteria the "needs" of this system are to be met if the system is to survive. The implicit and often explicit assumption that social mechanisms act in some "natural" way to foster survival (or, in weaker versions of functionalism, to preserve or restore equilibrium) cannot be justified a priori and is an unfortunate holdover from the organic analogy so important in the formulation of this perspective (Radcliffe-Brown, 1935). Some social systems do have built-in mechanisms to restore equilibrium or to foster system survival. However, these do not act by some systems logic of their own and their existence and functioning must be treated as matters requiring investigation.

Perhaps more trenchant than these criticisms, though certainly flowing from them, is the critique of functionalism as overly deterministic. Paradoxically, this critique is most centrally launched against Parsons's version of structural-functionalism, which, in turn, incorporates his "voluntaristic theory of action" (Parsons, 1937/1949). Parsons attempted to build a theory of the social system on functionalist premises that incorporated a notion of an "acting," choosing person. However, to provide the stability of the social system that his functionalism implied, he gave great priority to socialization and the internalization of values, which constrained choice greatly. Social system requirements were served by social institutions composed of role behavior. The motivations for correct role behavior were incorporated into individuals as "need-dispositions." As Giddens (1976, p. 16) puts it:

> In his earlier writings at least, Parsons specifically sought to incorporate a "voluntaristic" frame within his approach. But Parsons . . . went on to identify voluntarism with the "internalization of values" in personality