

SOCIAL BONDS IN LATER LIFE

Aging and Interdependence



**EDITORS
WARREN A. PETERSON
AND
JILL QUADAGNO**

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Midwest Council for Social Research in Aging



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DEDICATION

To Cheryl Allyn Miller

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PREFACE

In this volume, we report some recent research on social bonds of older people, research conducted by predoctoral fellows, postdoctoral fellows, and faculty associated with the Midwest Council for Social Research on Aging, an interuniversity program devoted to research and research training in social gerontology. Here in the preface to the volume, I shall comment on the evolution of the Midwest Council and the development of some of the ideas upon which this research is based.

On one level, this research concerns fundamental problems in social science: What is the role of group life? What kinds of social bonds do people have and what are the consequences? How do (or can) people adjust or adapt to losses and other changes in social bonds or networks or support systems?

When such questions are applied to people in later life, there are additional, compounding issues. As people age, the physiological and social-structural conditions that favor, enable, or support interaction in social groups—conditions that support the person's social supports—change or wither or crumble. How do (or can) "supports for social supports" come to be retained or restructured?

That increasing numbers and proportions of older people live into advanced age assures that the social conditions of the older population will change, will be problematic, will be questioned. The dramatic and unprecedented shift in age composition that has occurred in this century leads to changes in norms and values and in the structures of institutions, neighborhoods, communities, and the larger society.

Part of the role of social science research in gerontology is to document, interpret, and evaluate such changes. Another role—potentially a very significant one—has to do with identifying the processes and potentials of "adding life to years" through the

maintenance and reconstruction of social bonds. We can advance the proposition that the essence of meaning and fulfillment in later life (the opposite of loneliness and anomie) lies in belonging and participating in family, community, peer groups, reference groups, and other forms of group life. This leads to an associated proposition: A full and abundant social life affects mental and physical health positively; when social life is lacking or unsatisfactory, mental and physical health are adversely affected. Conversely, when mental and/or physical health falter, participation in group life declines or changes.

In social gerontology, such sentiments are likely to be identified as an expression of "activity theory," as articulated in *Personal Adjustment in Old Age*, by Ruth Cavan et al. (1949). Their central finding, based on research in a small city in Illinois, was that personal adjustment is positively associated with continued activity, social interaction, and participation in institutional life.

In the early 1950s, I found myself conducting applied research on aging in Kansas City and in need of a dissertation to fulfill the requirements for a Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of Chicago. In discussing dissertation possibilities with members of the Chicago faculty, I found that Robert Havighurst had received a grant from Carnegie to do a study of middle age and aging in an American city—a solid or typical American city, one less complex than Chicago. In part because Kansas City is reasonably typical, and because there were receptive hosts (the Kansas City Association of Trusts and Foundations and Community Studies, Inc.), the Kansas City Study of Adult Life came about.

The Kansas City Study of Adult Life had a special impact on the emerging field of social gerontology. From the study, Cumming and Henry in *Growing Old* (1961) advanced the double-barreled propositions of "disengagement theory": Societies, because of functional needs, normally and naturally encourage elders to disengage; coincidentally, aging individuals receive a psychogenic message to disengage with content and resignation. From the same study and with some of the same data, Havighurst, Neugarten and associates further articulated "activity theory" and otherwise pursued issues pertaining to social interaction and social activities of older people, as reported, for example, in *Middle Age and Aging*, edited by Bernice Neugarten (1968).

A number of sociologists in the Midwest collaborated in conducting statewide surveys of the needs of the elderly in

advance of the 1961 White House Conference on Aging and with the encouragement of the Regional Office of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. In Washington during the White House Conference, plans were made for the organization that became the Midwest Council for Social Research in Aging. To enable faculty in the region to conduct research development seminars, Arnold Rose, then at the University of Minnesota, secured a small grant from the Hill Family Foundation of St. Paul, which was matched by a grant that I secured from the Kansas City Association of Trusts and Foundations. The first seminar of the Midwest Council for Social Research on Aging was conducted in St. Paul in June of 1961. We estimate that there have been about seventy seminars since that time.

In retrospect, it appears that the Midwest Council for Social Research on Aging was born in a crest of interest and concern in social gerontology: the activity-disengagement controversy on the academic front and the 1961 White House Conference on the policy front. The 1961 Conference established aging as significant on the agenda of the liberal-welfare state. About that time aging started to become legitimate on the research agenda of sociology, psychology, and other disciplines.

The Midwest Council began with faculty research development seminars. Some of the products were brought together in *Older People and Their Social World*, edited by Arnold Rose and Warren Peterson (1965). Let me mention some highlights from that volume, published twenty years ago.

"The subculture of aging," conceptualized and discussed at some length in the faculty development seminars, was articulated in the volume by Arnold Rose. It is, in our opinion, a theorem rather than a theory or hypothesis. When a segment of people is separated or segregated from others, in-group interaction will intensify, resulting in the development of a separate identity, an "aging group consciousness," a separate set of values, a "subculture of aging." In another chapter Arnold Rose gave the interactionist's critique of disengagement theory. Pihlblad and McNamara reported from a study of the elderly in small towns that social adjustment in aging is positively correlated with high levels of social participation, good health, and higher income.

In *Older People*, Edwin A. Christ reported on the social world of stamp collectors, a world in which aging members can continue to function into advanced age. If one is embedded in the stamp