CHANGING THE CULTURE OF AGING: A SOCIAL CAPITAL FRAMEWORK FOR GERONTOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to provide an alternative to the "problem" approach that dominates gerontological research in many countries. In this article I propose a conceptual framework for examining the social value that older adults provide society by exploring and expanding upon social capital literature. The theoretical underpinnings of social capital are reviewed, exploring the essential components of social capital as a tool for examining the creation of social value. Gerontological frameworks that contribute to increased awareness of the positive aspects of aging are examined. These two approaches are linked using a social capital framework for studying aging, presented here as a new orientation to aging and as a step toward a change in the current culture of aging and aging research.

Key Words: social capital, productive aging, civic engagement, successful aging, theory

"Transitions in individual's lives have always demanded psychic reorganization, something which was often ritualized in traditional cultures in the shape of rites de passage. . . . In the settings of modernity, by contrast, the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflective process of connecting personal and social change."

—Giddens (1991, pp. 32-33)

Driven by concern over the impending expense associated with the retirement of the baby boom generation, policy makers and politicians around the world are

scrambling to find ways to alter the structure of public policies and social programming. There are several examples of how this concern has been revealed. Policies shifted during the last several decades from supporting mandated retirement to supporting incentives for people to stay in the work force longer. Programs that support "civic engagement" and volunteerism are increasingly prevalent and largely focus on older adults and people entering retirement (i.e. in the U.S. the Senior Corps as an extension of Americorps). The depiction of older adults as "the worthy poor" in the 1970s changed to "greedy geezers" in the 1980s (Moody, 2002). This altered stereotype has been integrated into the sweeping ideologically-based shifts in the role that government takes in the lives of the people, such as the proposed privatization of programs like Social Security (now under fire as a broad stroke in the creation of an "ownership society"). However, the growing number of people who will enter old age in the near future, seen as a challenge to policy makers, is regarded as an opportunity by many gerontologists. The opportunities lie with the expansion of meaningful roles in retirement and in the awareness of mutual benefit for society and its older citizens.

This view of gerontology's promise is also experiencing a significant shift. The emergence of gerontology as its own discipline during the post-World War II period situated the field as a "problem oriented discipline" (Torres, 2000). The institutionalization of retirement in coordination with increased physical health of older adults formed a period of life referred to as the "third age" (Weiss & Bass, 2002); this shift, some contemporary gerontologists suggest, signals a move for gerontology from a problem-oriented to a "problem-solving discipline" (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, & Sherraden, 2001). Nonetheless, the gerontological frameworks used to examine "solutions" and "opportunities" can be seen as extensions of enduring debates between disengagement theory and activity theory. Biggs, Lowenstein, & Hendricks (2003) suggest that this classic debate can be translated into more contemporary conceptual frameworks: productive aging and gero-transcendence. While productive aging supports the positive aspects of "keeping busy," much like activity theory, gero-transcendence seeks to explain the occurrence of disengagement from society by viewing the possibility of redefining the self in very old age with a new understanding of fundamental existential questions. While these frameworks make an attempt to examine positive aspects of aging, they fail to provide an alternative to the problem orientation that continues to dominate the field. The focus remains on questions of what aging individuals should do to maximize their adaptation to old age. They are focused largely on the personal experiences and roles that older adults occupy in old age, but do not holistically examine the value that older adults bring society or the social structures that shape these opportunities.

Gerontologists have the opportunity to bring awareness to both the challenges that face the older population *and* the value they provide society. Literature on the challenges facing the older population is prevalent and an extremely

important aspect of gerontological research. However, this article seeks to provide an alternative to the "problem" approach, proposing a conceptual framework for examining the social value that older adults provide society by exploring and expanding upon social capital literature. First, a review of the theoretical underpinnings of social capital is provided, exploring the essential components of social capital as a tool for examining the creation of social value. Second, an examination of gerontological frameworks that contribute to increased awareness of the positive aspects of aging is explored, noting their limitations and their strengths. Finally, these two approaches are linked using a social capital framework for studying aging, which is presented as a new orientation to aging and as a step toward a change in the culture of aging and aging research.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF "SOCIAL CAPITAL"

In general, the modern day understanding of social capital encompasses a range of concepts including community networks, civic engagement, reciprocity, and social cohesion (Portes, 1998). The theoretical underpinnings of these concepts have been shaped by historical events (e.g., the industrial revolution), public policies (e.g., public health policies, Social Security, and Medicare/Medicaid), and classic sociological works. These ideas create the foundation for deeper analysis of social capital as it is conceptualized today.

Social capital is used in contemporary society to discuss social resources within a given society, usually in coordination with human resources. However, the concept dates back to classic works by Marx (1894) and Weber (1905/2002). In these works, the creation of capital was described as the cause for social inequality—the material goods that influenced the creation of social roles and social interaction—with the value of hard work and attainment of capital being attributed to social values. The concept of capital has since been extended beyond tangible goods to include commodities with social value, such as cultural capital, intellectual capital, and symbolic capital. Social capital has become a useful concept because physical and human capital are not able to sufficiently explain how people's actions are shaped by their social context (Engeström, 2001). Human and physical capital requires a social structure within which they are realized. Social capital has been examined within several different disciplines. First used by an educational practitioner (Hanifan, 1916), it was further developed by sociologists (Seeley, Sim, & Loosley, 1956), urbanists (Jacobs, 1961), and economists (Loury, 1977) before it became a widely known term.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu was the first to systematically analyze the contemporary understanding of social capital (1980). In 1985, he provided a detailed analysis of the benefits that individuals accrue by virtue of their participation in groups and the "deliberate construction of sociability." More

specifically, he defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Portes, 1998, p. 3). He suggested that group membership was the basis for solidarity, and such social networks should be constructed through investment in the institutionalization of group relations. As Portes (1998) described, Bourdieu illustrated that social capital has essentially two elements—a social relationship that first allows individuals to have access to the resources of others and second, it determines the amount and quality of those resources. Bourdieu is unique, however, in his belief that all forms of capital can be reduced to economic terms in a capitalist society (Wacquant, 2004), and therefore, the "acquisition of social capital requires *deliberate investment* of both economic and cultural resources" (Portes, 1998, p. 4, [italics added]).

Bourdieu's description of social capital (1980) was not widely embraced until Coleman's seminal work (1988) caused the term to gain broader use and acceptance in a number of fields, sociology in particular. With the translation of Bourdieu's work into English, Coleman and Bourdieu's work together created the foundation for the contemporary understanding of the concept. Coleman (1988) described social capital as a theoretical orientation that meshes the sociological perspective (that action is governed by norms, rules, and obligations) with the economic perspective (that action occurs out of independent thought and self-interest). He suggested that rational action within a specific social context accounts for both the actions of individuals and the development of social organization. Coleman essentially defines social capital as a variety of social structures that *facilitate action*. However, he also recognizes that social hierarchies interfere with the interaction of such entities so that some individuals are more valued and therefore exclusion from certain groups—and the resulting reduction in social capital—is inevitable. He suggests that social structures can be modified for the creation and sustenance of social capital; such modifications are necessary so that people can give more than they receive—a necessary component of social capital. The creation of close personal relationships through group membership is essential. Therefore, Coleman suggests that substituting some of the more formal organizations for voluntary, spontaneous social organizations is the only way to support the creation of social capital for public good.

In summary, Bourdieu and Coleman identify certain characteristics of social capital. First, they both describe social capital as the result of people's skills being negotiated to meet societal needs so that a valuable resource is created for society as a whole. In order to create social capital, however, individuals typically have to give more than they receive, and therefore, in order to help create social capital, certain formal structures/organizations need to be in place to support the creation of formal *and* informal organizations. Coleman reminds us that social hierarchies are inevitable, and this will interfere with equal opportunity to benefit from social capital; however, formal organizations can help. Bourdieu, on the other hand,

points to the investment of other capital that will serve to level the playing field, allowing all individuals the opportunity to benefit from such resources.[1]

GERONTOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF "SOCIAL CAPITAL"

In order to understand the way social capital has been integrated into the field of gerontology, it is useful to examine the theoretical frameworks that have been responsible for shaping the intersection between the older adult and society. Specifically, those frameworks that have served to explain how older adults are valued in society must be examined in coordination with the focus of gerontological research, policy changes, demographic changes, and historical events.

Gerontology emerged as a study of the *problems* of aging (i.e., Cowdry, 1939) that ultimately categorized older adults as a kind of "social problem" (Cole, 1979). Gerontological research emerged with an applied focus, largely examining why and how old age was a "problem," focusing on practical and policy solutions to the deficits associated with aging. As a result, the "problem perspective" was part and parcel of early gerontological theories. These problem-based theories strongly influenced gerontological research and social policies for many years. By extension, the focus on the deficits and needs of older adults stigmatized aging and older adults. Unfortunately, the problem perspective continues to have a dominant influence within gerontological work, even within more positive approaches to aging research.

Recently, progress has been made in balancing the problem perspective with more positive approaches to gerontological research. However, the majority of progress toward creating positive gerontological frameworks functions as an extension of the debates between disengagement theory and activity theory, taking the form of productive aging and gero-transcendence (Biggs, Lowenstein, & Hendricks, 2003). As a result, gerontological research has been largely divided into explorations of "third age" progress or "fourth age" declines. Research that examines "productivity" is typically focused on predominately healthy and "active" older adults in the "third age," and research examining very old age typically utilizes concepts like gero-transcendence to rationalize what appears to be inevitable physical and psychological decline. Much of the research that has explored the challenges associated with aging from an individualistic standpoint has focused on the experience of aging, the roles individuals have, and the challenges people experience in navigating old age and retirement. Similar research that has explored the societal effects of the aging population has mainly

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[1] The approach to social capital taken by Bourdieu and Coleman contrasts with other analyses such as that by Nan Lin (2001), who views social capital in an individualistic light. Given gerontology's "problem approach" to research, the theoretical framework described here allows for examination of the public good aspect of social capital.

focused on the expense of the older population, usually in the form of health and long-term care issues. These areas of research continue to provide the necessary ingredients for helping older adults attain a higher quality of life, helping delay decline during the "fourth age."

Research focusing on the functional capabilities of older adults, in terms of creativity (e.g., Cohen, 2000), intelligence (e.g., Baltes, 1997; Schaie, 1994), psychological health (e.g., Baltes, 1997) and physical health (i.e., Evans- Williams, 1996) has indicated that decline is not inevitable, and that improvement or growth is possible in old age. Interest in these positive aspects of aging, encapsulated in the period often referred to as the "third age" began with examination of the delay of decline until very old age for many people (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). In conjunction with the institutionalization of retirement, the "third age" provides a period of non-work and good health. This period in late life has been developing and expanding for many years. Today, with the number of older adults currently in and expected to enter the "third age," a crisis looms. Gerontological research remains limited in its ability to explain or understand this emerging life stage.

Gerontological frameworks that explore the positive aspects of aging embody contemporary positions on activity theory according to Biggs et al. (2003), and include successful and productive aging. These frameworks provide an alternative to the focus on declines of aging, but have not effectively created a conceptual system for expressing the value that all older adults might contribute to society. Critics of successful aging argue that definitions of "success" are limited, defining only older adults who are healthy and active as successful and those who are not as "unsuccessful." An extension of this framework, productive aging, builds on role theory by supporting ways for healthy, retired older adults to continue to have valuable roles in society (Bass, Caro, & Yung-Ping, 1993). This framework explores ways that older adults can cope with the ambiguous status of retirement, a period that lacks a recognized economic or social role (Bass et al., 1993). This perspective views older adults as an important and valuable resource and assumes that many older adults are dissatisfied with the dominant model of retirement as "leisure" (Morrow-Howell et al., 2001). Even so, this model is critiqued for having a narrow definition of "productive."

With productive aging as a framework, the "civic engagement" movement in gerontology captured the attention of politicians and policy makers engaging their concerns regarding the movement of the baby boom generation into retirement and thus, unproductive activities. With numerous reports describing baby boomers as far less civically engaged than previous generations (e.g., Harvard School of Public Health, 2004), along with national initiatives to promote volunteerism, "civic engagement" has become a focal point of political discourse. National organizations like The American Society on Aging and The Gerontological Society of America have identified civic engagement as an important area of research through awards, forums, and other forms of special recognition. Even private organizations have been formed in the spirit of

"productive aging" and "civic engagement." For example, in the United States, Civic Ventures, which uses the tagline "Helping society achieve the greatest return on experience," has an initiative called Experience Corps that is focused on increasing participation of older adults in society through tutoring children. Of course, one of the more pointed examples is the U.S. White House Conference on Aging in 2005, which identified "civic engagement" as one of the top 10 issues for older adults today.

The rush to embrace civic engagement, however, has not gone without criticism. Putnam (2000), whose work brought "civic engagement" to national attention, suggested that decreased group participation is the cause of a number of social problems. Putnam successfully coupled individuality with lack of participation in each others' lives, resulting in diminished social cohesion and trust. The World Bank (1999) has argued that diminished social cohesion and trust are essential components of social capital. Putnam also coupled decreased community participation with a generation of people (baby boomers) for whom strong government programming (for example, education, the arts, and social welfare) and political unrest (for example, civil rights, women's rights, and affirmative action) were simultaneously present in their youth. This may lead one to deduce that the presence of strong government programs is actually a contributing factor to poorer community relations (i.e., increased individuality manifested through political unrest), and therefore, increasing apathy toward others. These are inaccurate messages, and have been strongly criticized (Bryson & Mowbray, 2005; Quaile & Matsubayashi, 2005).

"Civic engagement" brought attention to the value of older adults by virtue of the potential resource they can provide others. This idea was first examined in gerontology through the framework of exchange theory of aging that was introduced in the 1970s (Dowd, 1975). This theory, articulated partly as an explanation of aspects of disengagement theory, was adapted from an economics view that people interact based solely on self interests. It described disengagement as a response to power differentials; as people age, they lose power and therefore become less valuable to others. Productive aging movements, and in turn civic engagement movements, imply that older adults will have more power and therefore more value because of their ability to participate in activities that are valued by our society. Western (Protestant) societies as first described by Weber (1905/2002) value hard work, and therefore, a period of non-work in our newly constructed period of healthy, active retirement does not align with such values.

A lesser known movement within gerontology describes the value older adults provide society based on their wisdom, knowledge, and life experiences. The theory of gero-transcendence suggests that an individual changes perspectives as a stage of life, moving from a materialistic and rational view of the world that was prevalent throughout life to a more transcendent one that is accessible in old age (Tornstam, 1989). This kind of perspective is new to the western world, but has been a perspective of eastern cultures, adapted to westernized gerontology in part

to make sense of the period of decline and disengagement in late life ("fourth age"). Thomas (2004), known for his work re-examining institutionalized care, uses a medical perspective to tackle some of these ideas, suggesting that becoming an elder is the most important developmental stage of life, and elders serve the most important role in our society, connecting our generations. From another perspective, Hillman (1999), an older adult himself, described decline in old age as part of the lifelong process of moving toward the core sense of self. In general, these perspectives attempt to make sense of adaptation to the accumulating deficits associated with aging, to make sense of what it means to be an older person in society, and to expand the possibility of social value beyond "productivity." Nonetheless, they are responding to the problem perspective without providing a holistic framework for understanding how older adults are valued from a societal point of view.

In summary, the problems approach continues to influence theoretical frameworks that guide our conceptions of how older adults are valued. Even positive approaches to aging tend to be couched in a problem-solving approach that reinforces the distinction between older adults who are healthy and active, or those that have the potential to be "third age," and those who are experiencing decline and disengagement from society ("fourth age")[2]. Promoting older adults' ability to contribute to society through productivity and "civic engagement" may provide meaningful roles for some older adults, but should not be the only way older adults are deemed socially valuable.

CHANGING THE CULTURE OF AGING: A SOCIAL CAPITAL FRAMEWORK

Social capital has been described in terms of the benefits that *individuals* derive by means of participation in socially relevant categories and through interpersonal ties (Hendricks, 2003). Even the work of Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1980) suggests that the captivating aspect of social capital is its ability to provide benefits to society that ultimately provide a benefit to the individual contributing. This is also the premise that drives productive aging and civic engagement. What is proposed here is an adaptation of the framework of social capital for realizing the mutual benefits possible for society and for aging individuals.

Hendricks (2003) utilized the concept of social capital and human capital to examine the resources available to an individual in old age; from this foundation, a social capital framework of aging can move the focus from the perspective of the individual to the perspective of society. Hendricks described the resources that individuals utilize in old age as part of what he introduced as a "personal resource

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[2] This distinction extends Neugarten's original description and approach to the "young-old" and "old-old" described here in terms of functionality rather than chronological age (see Neugarten, 1996).

model," incorporating fiduciary, psychological-physiological, and social-familial resources (a combination of human and social capital), circumscribed by life course, life space, and life chances. This interweaving of the relationship between the individual and society is innovative, and very useful for understanding the resources individuals use to negotiate their lives.[3]

This model is also a useful tool for beginning to broadly explore resources available to older adults as a group as they interact with society, negotiating their social value. For example, fiduciary, psychological-physiological, and social-familial resources can be translated as forms of structural capital that provide the formal opportunities and networks within which older adults can participate, contribute, and thrive. Life space, which Hendricks suggests can be thought of as a "generative transaction zone" (Hendricks, 2003, p. 71), symbolizes the interaction between the resources of older adults and the rest of society, where the negotiation of social value is defined and created. These interactions between resources/social structures that support interaction are continually negotiated over time (life course), with environmental changes (e.g., policies, demographic shifts, political climate) constantly altering the circumstances for applying and utilizing those resources (life chances).

This model moves us toward a social capital framework for aging, bringing attention to the dynamics that are constantly changing and readjusting the ways older adults are valued. However, a social capital framework of aging also necessitates a change in the culture of aging, whereby older adults are part of a community of individuals seen as equally important to the cohesion of society as other age groups. It is the impending demographic crisis of the baby boomers that has brought aging to the forefront of national issues. Gerontologists have at least the opportunity, and perhaps the mandate, to bring awareness of the value older adults provide.

To begin defining a social capital framework for aging, I propose three tenets. First, *gerontology as a field should provide a balanced approach to studying "third age" progress and "fourth age" decline*. Currently, a problem model dominates the field, and while it is necessary and important to continue tackling the many challenges that face aging and older adults in our society, it is equally important to bring attention to the positive aspects of aging beyond providing solutions to problems. Thomas (2004) suggests that elderhood is not an extension of adulthood; rather, it is a period of development that stands on its own. By bringing attention to the unique experiences that are only encountered in old age, older adults become more valued by virtue of the fact that they are privy to a period of life that others are not. The problem perspective should be devoted to just that—tackling problems. A more positive approach to gerontological

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[3] This model was expanded in a recent publication (Hendricks & Hatch, 2005); however, the model described here provides a more useful approach for examining the interaction between older adults and society in defining their social value.

research should be devoted to understanding the positive experiences only knowable in old age.

Second, *gerontological scholarship should explore the deliberate investment in formal structures that provide cultural and economic capital to all members of society*. According to Coleman (1988), social hierarchy is inevitable because certain members of society are more valuable than others. Bourdieu (1980), on the other hand, suggests that cultural and economic capital levels the playing field and promotes the ability for all people, and marginalized groups in particular, to have access to social resources. By extension, it may also provide the ability for marginalized groups to *contribute* to social resources. Therefore, social structures provide a foundation for both the attainment of social resources and the contribution to those resources.

Third, *gerontologists should illuminate opportunities for reciprocity and recognition of older adults' unique qualities to create increased social power among older adults*. Exchange theory of aging describes the reason for disengagement from society as an outgrowth of loss of power because adults are less valued. The productive aging movement seeks to change this by providing opportunities for older adults to continue to work and be productive in old age, qualities strongly valued by western cultures. By bridging human capital (skills, knowledge, expertise) with what I will call "elder" capital (the accumulation of unique qualities and resources older adults provide) within a "generative transaction zone," older adults will garner greater power in society, and in turn attain strong social value.

Together, these characteristics articulate the ingredients for a social capital framework for studying aging, providing a foundation for examining the social value of older adults. This new ideology shifts our thinking away from a problems perspective to one that provides a more holistic framework for understanding the importance of older adults in society. These tenets provide a new direction for gerontological theories, examining aging and old age from a perspective that examines old age as a unique, socially valuable developmental stage of life.

CONCLUSION

"We can find meaning in our contribution to enterprises and institutions and causes, but recognition of our linkage to those who preceded us can help us understand how we became ourselves, and recognition of our linkage to those who follow can reassure us that our lives, however lived, have mattered to others. We have benefited from the efforts of those who preceded us and if all has gone well, we have provided and continue to provide support and direction to our successors."

Weiss & Bass (2002, pp. 14-15)

There has been a rapid and dramatic shift in the realities of aging, both in terms of size and characteristics of the older population, and the social structures and

institutions that are associated with and support older adults. Currently, the field of gerontology examines aging issues through the lens of a problem perspective, a perspective that is no longer adequate for understanding the positive aspects of reciprocal benefits between older people and society. A paradigm shift whereby the way we conceptualize the role of older adults as a more integral part of our society may be underway. Currently, the demographic "crisis" is being approached as an extension of previous research in the field of aging—older adults as a "social problem." However, this crisis can be viewed as an opportunity to change the culture of aging and begin to examine the unique value that older adults provide society.

Social capital has appeared in gerontology as a blanket term for volunteerism, participation in civil society, and "civic engagement," responding to the "problem" approach to aging without providing a fully developed new perspective with which to examine aging and old age in our society. This article proposes an adaptation of the concepts of social capital in terms of a framework for studying aging with the hope that gerontological theories that develop will reflect a more balanced approach to our understanding of old age. Rather than focusing only on problems and solutions of aging, we should be highlighting a more holistic examination of the value older adults bring to society. This article describes a social capital framework of aging based on the following tenets: (a) Gerontology as a field should provide a balanced approach to studying "third age" progress and "fourth age" decline; (b) Gerontological scholarship should explore the deliberate investment in formal structures that provide cultural and economic capital to all members of society; and (c) Gerontologists should illuminate opportunities for reciprocity and recognition of older adults' unique qualities to create increased social power among older adults. Together these ideas support a new ideology—a new culture of aging and a new culture within the field of gerontology—whereby the structural support for maximizing reciprocal benefits promote the positive aspects of aging.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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