

# Introduction

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This special issue of *Journal of Societal and Social Policy* on “social theory,” aging and social welfare is an important process in bringing together evocative, engaged and comparative insights as to how we understand complex aging and welfare issues through prisms of social theories. The paper collection is in four parts with focus on (1) the United Kingdom, (2) the United States, (3) China, and (4) Pakistan.

The collection begins with theme one on the UK. The timely work of Eileen Fairhurst who attempts to theorize phenomenology and the human body and relate such theoretical themes to interrogate the relationship of aging to social care experiences in England. This is supplemented by a powerful paper by Azrini Wahidin who uses the “criminological imagination” to deconstruct theoretical assumptions about crime, welfare and later life in the UK. Wahidin argues the need for theoretical multi-disciplinarity to draw theories together to shed light holistically on issues of aging, crime and welfare.

The collection moves on to theme two which is on USA. The paper by Dawn Carr is a beautiful narrative that captures the tensions in terms of policy and experience by addressing a key question: does the “third age” promote a successful alternative to other age transitions across the life-course in USA. The paper assesses the distances between ideological underpinnings and policy relating to third age exemplars drawn from social welfare. Coupled with this paper, the innovative article by Baker, Silverstein, and Putney explore two theoretical paradigms (1) structural lag and (2) the political economy of aging perspective to argue that US policy has not kept pace with the reality of the family and—as a result—those families who are most vulnerable often receive the least support.

The collection looks at third theme of China. To supplement this, as a comparative paper, Binqin Li offers both empirical and theoretical richness to her account in pointing to implications of inter-generational ties between all groups across the life-course and the implications this has for one key issue in social welfare: housing provision in China.

The collection finally focuses on Pakistan. Through this, Ahmad Raza and his colleagues attempt to ground literature from the “social construction of aging” to examine and understand social welfare developments in Pakistan. In particular, they authors take to task the theories of aging and whether they correspond to or subvert actual Muslim experiences in welfare in Pakistan.



# Ordinary Theorizing of Aging and Membership Categories

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## **Abstract**

Drawing upon a corpus of the author's research, this paper demonstrates how membership categorization devices can explicate social aging. In particular it connects Schutz's notion of anonymous typifications with membership categorization analysis. Initially, Schutz's perspective and its development within ethnomethodological/interpretivist understanding of social life is outlined. The practical use of membership categorization devices is illustrated in three domains: firstly, professional texts of architectural design for special housing for older people to show how space utilization is accounted for, secondly, an ethnography of rehabilitation of older people to show how professional theorizing of care displays a dialectic between space/place and type of care received and thirdly material from a study on becoming and being older to outline changing identities of aging. Whilst these research studies ostensibly are discrete, they are linked with a theoretical/analytical concern to demonstrate how membership categorization analysis concretizes Schutz's rather abstract notion of typification in social situations and, thereby, displays the ongoing accomplishment and orderly production of aging.

Keywords: Aging theory, housing, rehabilitation, membership categorization.

## **Introduction: Schutz, Typifications and Ethnomethodology**

According to Schutz (1964) typifications enable us to interpret the inter-subjective world we inhabit. Since we possess commonsense knowledge, we are able to identify and categorize our experience in terms of typical aspects of things, events or actions. Such typifications enable us to take for granted that we can understand each other's actions and that we can communicate with each other. As interaction takes different forms, typifications operate at different levels so that, according to the kind of relationship involved, some are more anonymous than others. A consequence of this is that the more anonymous the typificatory construct is, the less it can convey features of an individual's personality and behavior.

Although Schutz's writing on typifications has been influential, it is nevertheless rather philosophical for a focus upon interaction. One way in which the notion of typifications can be applied to a concrete situation is by employing Sacks' (1974) ideas about membership categories. He was interested in how we describe and identify persons in terms of categories and, since any one individual can be de-

scribed in a number of ways, in the way an appropriate description is chosen. These membership categories are the form which ascriptions of typicality take in language.

In deciding to choose a category or identity to describe an individual, members select a single one from a group of related categories. Such a group is organized in terms of a membership categorization device (MCD) and refer to what are taken for granted, common sense knowledge for members of a society. Thus, on mentioning the category “family,” we expect that to include the categories mother, father, son and daughter. Sacks’ notion of MCDs provides a link with interaction through the idea of category-bound activities which he sees as activities which are tied by common sense to certain membership categories. For example, if somebody has a limb set, we assume that was done by a doctor.

Whereas Schutz stops at what cultural knowledge is contained in typifications, Sacks indicates, through his use of the economy and consistency rules, the way typifications are applied in action. The economy rule refers to the way in which, despite any individual being identifiable in terms of many membership categorizations, one membership categorization is referentially adequate for the identification of any one individual (Sacks, 1974: 219). This economy rule serves as a cut-off point for typifications and restricts the way we talk about people so that it is a practical device for describing individuals. The consistency rule is a relevance rule (Sacks, 1974: 219-20).

If some population of persons is being categorized and if a category from some device’s collection has been used to categorize a first member of the population, then that category or other categories of the same collection may be used to categorize further members of the population.

A corollary of this is a ‘hearer’s maxim:’

if two or more categories are used to categorize two or more members of some population and those categories can be heard as categories from the same collection, then: hear them that way.

It is through this rule that we are able to assemble and share meaning in interaction. Together the economy and consistency rule of typifications provide the link between knowledge and action and are part of our methods for-applying typifications.

The following sections elaborate two specific uses of membership category-analysis, namely, categorizations as a form of “institutional accounting practices” (Rawls, 2002: 4) and non personalized categorization work. The former use of membership categorization analysis is examined through studies on moving into sheltered housing (Fairhurst, 2000, 2007) and an ethnography of rehabilitation of older people in a hospital in the North of England (Fairhurst, 1982, 1983, 1990). The consideration of non-personalized categorization analysis uses material from a study of becoming and being older in Greater Manchester (Fairhurst, 1999, 2003a-c,

2005). Whilst these research studies ostensibly are discrete and feature a range of research methods (textual analysis, interviews, ethnography, focus groups), they are linked with a theoretical/analytical concern to demonstrate how membership categorization analysis concretizes Schutz's rather abstract notion of typification in social situations and, thereby, displays the ongoing accomplishment and orderly production of aging

### **Membership Categorization Analysis as an Accounting Practice: Designers and Space Usage in Special Housing for Older People**

Conventionally home is a space in which material objects such as furniture, pictures, books and domestic equipment are placed and social activity takes place. For designers, space is not only something to be fashioned but also to be utilized by imposing a form/structure upon it; for the older person, which objects to take becomes problematic for both their size and number far outweigh the available space to place them. Moreover, for architects, space is logically prior to objects for until something is "done" to or with space there is no place to put objects. For older people, though, this relationship is reversed; their objects predate the space created by the architect so that objects are logically prior to space.

When designing sheltered housing, architects considered the future and predicted the needs of older people. These are contained in the design brief and rest upon a category of anonymous older person and relates not only to activities to be engaged in by older people but also to the number and types of objects to be placed in their rooms. Textual analysis of designers' discourse (Design Bulletin, 1974) demonstrated the ways in which different anonymous typifications of older people were evident in designs for special accommodation for older people (Fairhurst, 2000, 2007).

These anonymous typifications were connected to the category of "vulnerability." In the 1960s vulnerability was assumed to be an aspect of the aging body.

As they become older, elderly people also tend to get slower in their movements and to get out of breath and tired more quickly; their hearing, smell and sight are apt to become less acute. This reduced sensitivity, combined with slower reactions, physical frailty and a tendency to dizziness, may lead to serious accidents (Design Bulletin, 1974: 3).

Old age was an adversity to be overcome as physical decline predisposes older people to become vulnerable to accidents within the home and recognition, therefore, that the home is a source of danger. By attending to "comfort, convenience and safety" (Design Bulletin, 1974: 3) housing design may reduce, if not control, such danger. Attending to these three matters was by the application of anthropometric techniques. Using space, then, becomes a technical matter

That focus on the aging body and its implied physical degeneration, with its attendant restriction of social life, accounted for how designers approached their task. Hence,

Gas or electric cookers large enough to cook a full meal for three people must be provided ... The cookers must be of a design safe enough for old people to use ... sufficient space ... in a working kitchen to enable casual meals to be taken by a minimum of two persons ... is desirable but not essential (Design Bulletin, 1974: 29-30).

The text went on to identify furniture necessary for a living space, namely, a small dining table and chairs, two easy chairs ,or one settee and one easy chair, a television set, two or three small tables and items such as a bookcase.

All of this allows the teasing out of designers' picture of the life and activities of older people would have in sheltered housing. Designers predicted that, as cooker need only be big enough to cook a meal for three people, eating or entertaining was to be a restricted social activity. That designers were aware of the social dimensions of food and eating is suggested by the implied distinction between "formal" and "casual" meals. The social significance of food, however, is minimized overall for emphasis was placed upon its preparation as a potentially hazardous activity.

Designers assumed a reduced living space would be needed by older people so that they emphasized its ergonomic usage in order to make life "as easy as possible" *within* the home. By the 1990s the view of vulnerability as consequent upon activity *outside* the home shifted designers to a concern not so much with protecting old people from themselves but from others, particularly vandals. The account of the architect of the housing scheme studied makes this clear:

We are tending to construct sheltered housing schemes in inner city areas. There are, therefore, other factors that come into play. The greatest of these is probably security. We are not dealing with leafy suburbs ... We are dealing with mindless vandalism and that sort of problem and it's essential that tenants are made to feel secure. Therefore, the controlled entry system is absolutely vital.

Since designers did not have access to knowledge of unique features of potential residents, design could only be informed by abstract knowledge as evidenced in anonymous typifications. A consequence of this was that ideas about space and its utilization remained at a rather general level.

By contrast, prospective residents, when talking about how they intended to use their new space in sheltered housing, brought to bear onto their appraisals aspects of their own biographies. Designers inevitably were excluded from such knowledge. Older people's talk of domestic objects to be taken to a new home called upon such biographical details. Whereas for older people memories were

both things and elaborated in things, for designers objects were things: no more and no less.

### **Membership Categorization Analysis and Accounting Practices: Knowing the Place of Care and How and What Care Occurs**

My examination of categorizations as “institutional accounting practices” (Rawls 2002: 4) continues with material from an ethnography of rehabilitation of older people in a hospital I called Highview. Although the research focused on the multi-disciplinary rehabilitation team and older people being rehabilitated, illustrations will relate to nursing only (cf Fairhurst 1982, 1983, 1990). My specific concern in this section is to consider patient categorizations, membership categorization devices (MCDs) and their consequences for action. For these purposes, “patient” is the generic category.

Patients were assessed in terms of how easy they were to care for and as rehabilitation patients. In Highview the membership categories of that device included “rehabilitable” and “non-rehabilitable.” These were used to specify and modify the anonymous category of “patient” and helped to personalize the category patient so that individuals were made knowable and handleable. It is in this way that typifications as applied with Sack’s analytic framework of membership categorizations and MCDs offer a flexibility which is not apparent in Schutz’s work. Whilst he restricts himself to knowledge, MCD’s show how this knowledge can be used to offer guidelines for action. Linkages between place and patient categorizations were evident in both identifying the activity/the work of a particular area and their consequences for care received.

Staff in Highview had a picture of an “ideal” rehabilitation patient as somebody who was co-operative, pleasant and could understand instructions. There were a number of typifications which had a specific referent to rehabilitation but their meaning varied according to the particular occupational work in which they were grounded. Thus, the emergence of the categories “co-operative,” “incontinent” and “confused” depended on their relevance for the work routines of nurses, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and social workers but here, as noted previously, I will confine my discussion to nurses.

For nurses in Highview the category of co-operative was expressed in terms of “helping herself.” In many ways, designation as “helping herself” was the opposite side of the coin to “demanding” so that an activity could be contrasted with a category. Those patients who helped themselves could attend to their own feeding and ablutional needs and required little, if any, assistance in walking. In short, patients who helped themselves represented less work for nurses. Not requiring assistance, however, was not the sole criterion for consideration as “helping herself.” Patients, though not capable of doing something unaided, might be still be assessed as helping themselves if they were seen to acknowledge their inability to ask for help. Thus, for example, patients who began to walk to the toilet but urinated before they got there would be said to have had “an accident,” if they told

a nurse what had happened. Patients who did not make known their awareness of wetting themselves so that damp clothes were later discovered, would be seen as incontinent or “confused.” Indeed, such incidents would provide further “evidence” for the validity of the latter category (cf Garfinkel, 1967 and the documentary method).

The crucial nature of helping oneself was apparent in discussion of particular patient’s progress. “Mrs X is helping herself” was a pervasive feature of the ward rounds and was an indication of progress. Conversely, not helping oneself was an aspect of patient action which might lead to the eventual classification as “non-rehabilitable.”

“Too many” incontinent patients on a ward at any given time could result in the ward being seen as “not rehabilitation at the moment.” We can see how descriptions of a place may be derived from the type of people found there (cf Drew’s 1978 demonstration that in Belfast certain spatial areas became known as “Catholic” or “Protestant”).

Unlike incontinence which was immediately recognizable, confusion represented a more enigmatic category. There was general agreement among staff that confusion can be difficult to identify as it can be a consequence of certain clinical conditions. Nevertheless, there existed a repertoire of behavioral characteristics which staff typified as “confusion.”

Patients who were unaware of being in hospital; who did not know what it was, who lived in the “past;” talked about “going home to mother;” or, who wandered, were likely to be seen as confused. To nursing staff, confused patients represented an “unknown quantity” in that “you don’t know what to expect from one minute to the next.” Consequently, confused patients needed “watching.” Those who tended to wander would be told to “sit down” or asked where they were going. Moreover, confused patients were likely to be “aggressive.”

So far, I have shown that staff assessed patients in terms of how easy they were to care for and as rehabilitation patients. In relation to the former topic, notions of “goodness” and “difficult” were used to modify the category of patient, and, in relation to the latter, patients were typified as “cooperative,” “incontinent” and “confused.” The identification of patients as “non-rehabilitable” drew upon more than one of the typifications of co-operative, incontinent and confused.

Their bonding together to form “non-rehabilitable” is an illustration of the concept of membership categorization device for it related to the general category of patient. In order to be identified as non-rehabilitable in Highview one must be a patient there. This MCD embraced a combination of assessments routinely made of patients. Hence, non-rehabilitable patients were those who lacked physical power in limbs and/or displayed lack of cooperation and/or confusion and/or incontinence. These themes link with the prospective aspect of rehabilitation for they were discussed when assessments were made about an individuals prospects for, or progress at rehabilitation.

How then was categorizations of individuals connected to their location on particular types of wards? Categorizations of spatial areas were situated in the type



of individuals found there. At Highview a certain quota of “good” patients was necessary to a rehabilitation ward: without them the staff referred to the ward as being “not rehabilitation” (cf Drew’s demonstration, 1978, that in Belfast certain spatial area became known as “Catholic” or “Protestant”). Viewing a ward as “not being very good for rehabilitation” was via the identification of the individuals inhabiting that spatial area as, for instance, “incontinent.” The amount of work to be done on a ward varied according to the particular mix of patients at any one time. The more patients were considered to be “not yet ready for rehabilitation,” the less patients could do for themselves, the more staff had to do for them and consequently, the fewer “good” patients there could be.

Staff operated with clear ideas about certain parts of the ward being an appropriate place for certain types of patients. Decisions surrounding movement of patients invoked patient categories. Thus, “poorlies” who were either dying or needed “extra” monitoring of their condition were likely to be placed in the one-bedded cubicle near to the Sister’s office. Some incontinent patients, especially those who had displayed “helping” behavior, were moved closer to the toilet: a change of ward position was thought to give them some kind of “encouragement” to become continent.

There is a sense, then, in which environment was identified as an incentive. In this way, individuals were not just seen as patients but as patients in settings. Environment was seen as a set of specific objects to which people could be motivated or not. Transferring patients from one ward to another could be seen as having potential benefits to individuals. In particular, moves to another ward would produce different actions to those currently displayed, for instance, “helping herself.” The stimulus would be provided by a particular environment. Moving what nurses viewed as “ideal rehabilitation” patients “upstairs” as opposed to leaving them “downstairs” prompted them to assess such moves as “unfair.” Those “downstairs” were co-operative and not demanding as they could “do things for themselves.”

The placement of patients on particular parts of a ward is a matter where treatment reflected categorizations. The point is that organizational scenes or settings were cast in terms of typifications or, in other words, the type of people found there (cf Drew, 1978). This is a reflexive matter such that if the scene is known so is the person and, conversely, if the person is known so is the scene. There is, then, a feed-back between these notions of scene or place and person. Furthermore, if a patient’s ward was known so was whether s/he was treated in a remedial therapy department.

Thus, since “downstairs” of a ward was intended for rehabilitation, it was likely a patient from there attended either or both of the occupational therapy or physiotherapy departments for treatment, but, if a patient was from “upstairs,” the likelihood was of him/her not attending either department and rather receiving maintenance and care. The point is that knowledge of the place links in to knowledge about the type of persons to be found there and, consequently, with the type of treatment received.

## **Non-Personalized Membership Categorization Analysis and Changing Identities of Aging: Stage of Life Devices**

In the first two sections of the paper not only was the focus on institutional accounting practices but also on membership categories as centering on persons. In this section membership categorization analysis moves away from persons to non-personalized categories (cf Atkinson, 1973; Ninkander 2002, 2003). I will show how identities of aging are interactionally achieved in accounts of lifestyles in later: stage of life devices such as “acting your age” are displayed in membership categorization work. The data extracts here are from a focus group study of becoming and being older in Greater Manchester (Fairhurst, 1999, 2003a-c, 2005)

Materials from the study, pointed to the ways in which the category of age, as a determinant of lifestyle or of how to lead one’s life, was questioned, while state of health, financial position and “who you mix with” was assessed as of greater relevance. These matters turn upon the assessment of activities by participants. Membership categorizations offer a way of demonstrating how the category of “lifestyle is situated in focus group interaction. Again we shall see how membership categorization devices provide a link with interaction through the idea of category bound activities which are activities, tied by common sense, to certain membership categories.

In the following extract, a man and two women in their 40s are comparing the kinds of activities older people do now with what they did when these middle aged people were younger.

**T1** M: I think there’s more for that age group to do now than there was twenty to thirty years ago, when my parents retired. There’s more for people to do now. They’re encouraged to do more now.

**T2** F1: I don’t think age is as much of an issue as it used to be

**T3** M: If you’re well.

**T4** F2: Yeah. Again it goes down to having your health, and being more agile and articulate and that, but I don’t think age is an issue as much as it used to be. I mean when you think of people when we were younger, if they said somebody was 50, I thought they were ancient and that’s not just because you were children. It was because of the lifestyle in a lot of ways. You know a woman of 60 was quite an old woman and had a very old lifestyle, didn’t they? You didn’t see anybody of 60 go out to aerobics when we were kids, or going to the (swimming) baths and that, did you? Which they do now ...

**T5 F1:** I know people, you know, you see them in the street and you think. “I went to school with him. Crikey, do I look as old.” It’s when they’re old fashioned in their ways. Old fashioned and whether they’re living in a group of the same, I’m trying to say it’s who you mix with, isn’t it? I have a niece who’s thirtyish, but I would say she is 30 going on 60 because her family has always been old fashioned: old fashioned in their ways, old fashioned in their whole lifestyle.

This extract indicates an awareness of the typification of children as “inflating” the chronological age of adults and also that children’s orientations to temporal matters are different to those of adults. That acknowledgement prefaces the explication of lifestyle in terms of physical activities of aerobics and swimming. Whereas, now women of 60 do such activity, in F2’s childhood they did not. Lifestyle, though, is not just restricted to physical activities. Being “old fashioned” refers not just to physical activities but also to wider social actions such as “ways” and those “you mix with.”

That chronological age is not a sufficient matter to be connected to “old fashioned” is underscored by the description of a niece “who’s thirtyish, but I would say she is 30 going on 60.” Just as Atkinson (1973) showed how knowledge about particular activities/lifestyles is linked to specific ages, this is happening here through men and women binding cultural knowledge about lifestyles to a category, age.

All of this highlights the ways in which talk about social aging is situated in assessments of activities. Using Sack’s (1992) category bound activities has shown how “lifestyles” are elaborated in terms of activities rather than chronological age. Activities such as swimming or type of social interaction are bound to the category of “lifestyle” rather than such activities being contingent upon chronological age. In this way, evaluation of an activity links back to the category, here that of “lifestyle.” Orientations to “lifestyles” in middle and old age follow from assessing an activity rather than chronological age *per se*. Identifying an individual as “old fashioned,” then, is less a matter of “advanced” chronological age but more a consequence of weighing up activity.

This mundane reasoning about particular types of “age related” activity being associated with specific patterns of social “mixing” is elaborated much more explicitly in the next extract of men and women in their sixties, talking about moving home.

**T1 M1:** If you plan on an age basis and if you move to somewhere where it is “better for older people to be,” you finish up in age ghettos, away from younger people. I think it is seeing younger people that you need.

**T2 F1:** I would agree with you. My father in law and his wife moved to (retirement coastal town) where the whole of the north seem to have gone, en

masse, of the same age group. Now he is on his own and all around him are old people and all he needs is lifting out into a family life

**T3 M2:** And there is the reverse as well. I moved into a New Town when I was twenty and another one (baby) on the way and everyone else was the same. We all worked. The fellas (men) all worked in the same place. It was one age group, segregated from the wider society.

**T4 M3:** I look at it differently, in a way, than that because I am at the stage now where I have put our house up for sale. It isn't because of my age, but realistically I am going to be aging and we are looking around. Up to now I have painted all the outside. I have painted the gutters and all that but realistically I am not going to be able to do all that, nor will I be able to afford to pay for someone to do it. So what I'm looking for is something that is easy to maintain, knowing full well that I don't want to be stuck in a ghetto. There is a row of bungalows near us where they are all the same age and they come out and count the blades of grass every morning. I don't want to do that. I want to be in a vibrant society and in much the same role that I have now ... I have been abroad with them and there is no way I am going to Benidorm with a thousand grey geese ... Individually I can take them but en masse I can't cope.

**T5 M1:** You do it (move home) for financial or health (reasons), but just to do it because you are getting old is crazy. I can believe it when you say you can't go to a ghetto because I'm told in (another retirement coastal town) the only traffic you see around is hearses.

Baker (2002: 784) elaborates upon how membership categorization work involves building up a "list of characters." This is evident here. Thus in Turn 1 "older people living together," in Turn 2 "older people moving on retirement so that they are living together by the coast," in Turn 3 "younger people living together" and in Turn 4 "older people who can maintain their own home."

For M3, implied awareness of declining physical ability to maintain his house, rather than age *per se* had led to thinking of moving home. Others in the group oriented to age in a similar way and considered the adverse consequences of entry into an "age ghetto" after moving home because of "being old." Clearly, the term, "ghetto," is a category conventionally associated with being "cut off"/"separated" and has ramifications for interaction. Not only is it more difficult to interact with younger people but also there are implications for the type of interaction.

There is a predictability and routinization of activity: "they come out and count the blades of grass every morning." M3's declaration that "there is no way I'm going to Benidorm with a thousand grey geese" implies that just as geese, as a group, tend to be in "formation," so do older people act in predictable ways together. In addition, this typification of routinized interaction is consequent upon a group of older people being together, as opposed to, an assessment of an individual

person being old. Hence, M3's assessment of "Individually, I can take them but, en masse, I can't cope."

However, the implications of living with a homogeneous age group for social interaction are not specific to "old age." M2 refers to his own experience when, as a young man, at an earlier stage of his married life, he lived and worked in a New Town with others in a similar situation and, at that time, was "segregated from the wider society."

These connected matters of producing identities and membership categorization work are reflexively intertwined to accomplish social order and structure. In Turn 1 public policy makers, "planners" are identified as a category who may adopt "paternalistic" orientations to older people, "it's better for older people to be." The formation of "age ghettos," so that everyday contact with younger people is lost, is a consequence of such activity. That the participants in this group recognized such a world is evident in the subsequent talk. In Turn 2, not only is there agreement with this but also types of "age ghettos" are specified, "coastal re-tirement town."

This extract closes in Turn 5 with reference to a different coastal retirement town. Other types of geographically based "age ghettos" are further specified in Turn 3 where reference is made to "living in a New Town in his twenties." That these "age ghettos" are assessed in terms of quite different life stages, in Turns 2 and 5, "being older" and in Turn 3 "young families" suggests exactly how a social order involving "age based living" is familiar to participants.

## Summary

On the face of it, this paper has ranged over a number of separate studies. Nevertheless, the thread of membership categorization analysis has run through and woven them together. Despite the analytical appeal of Schutz's notion of anonymous typifications, its abstractness falls short in relation to matters of social interaction. This paper has been concerned to display how Sacks' development of membership categorization analysis allows a link to be made between cultural knowledge of typifications and concrete situations. It has been shown in different social contexts how categories are connected to activities and vice versa and situated in social interaction.

Above all, membership categorization work is a practical matter. Hence, I have demonstrated how designers of sheltered housing for older people account for their categorizations of older people in their design briefs. Similarly, nurses involved in rehabilitating older people account for how they are cared for in terms of the categories of "rehabilitable" and "non-rehabilitable." Moreover, knowledge of the category which was used to describe an individual connected to the spatial area in which caring took place. Conversely, knowledge of an older person's location in Highview "plugged into" his/her assessment as either rehabilitable or non-rehabilitable and, consequently, the kind of care received.

This paper, then, adds to the literature on membership categorization analysis as “institutional accounting practices” (Rawls, 2002: 4). Finally, in relation to identities of aging, I have examined how they were interactionally achieved in talk about “lifestyles.” Such an approach revealed how “lifestyles” were elaborated in terms of activities rather than chronological age.

Overall, the detailed interaction outlined in this paper has explicated “age in action” (Ninkander, 2002). Just as Stokoe (2006) has demonstrated that membership categorization analysis of gender practices may be a pre-cursor to altering the consequences of those practices, so has this paper suggested this in relation to aging.

Moreover, the use of non-personalized membership categorization analysis, especially stage of life devices, promises rich yields in making knowable and encouraging inter-generational relationships, an emerging feature of public policy. Once the processes involved have been made knowable, it will be possible to attend to those practices through and in which inter-generational relations are constituted.

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# The Gerontological Imagination, Crime Policy, and Older Prisoners

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## Abstract

This paper will discuss the needs of a group that more often than not has been ignored by criminologists and gerontologists: older offenders in prison. In relation to the discipline of criminology, I want to suggest that the gerontological and criminological imagination indeed are creative, resourceful, eclectic and can cross disciplinary boundaries. By drawing on the concept of the sociological imagination “which works between the personal troubles of milieu” and “the public issues of social structure” (Mills, 1959: 8): this paper will draw out the troubles and concerns of an aging prison population from a gerontological and criminological theoretical perspective. As the reader, you may be asking: why integrate the discipline of gerontology and criminology?

Keywords: Gerontology, Criminology, Crime Policy, Older Prisoners.

This article will discuss the needs of a group that more often than not has been ignored by criminologists and gerontologists: older offenders in prison. In relation to the discipline of criminology, I want to suggest that the gerontological and criminological imagination indeed are creative, resourceful, eclectic and can cross disciplinary boundaries.

By drawing on the concept of the sociological imagination “which works between the personal troubles of milieu” and “the public issues of social structure” (Mills, 1959: 8): this paper will draw out the *troubles* and *concerns* of an aging prison population from a gerontological and criminological theoretical perspective. As the reader, you may be asking: why integrate the discipline of gerontology and criminology? Gerontologists, have primarily dealt with health-care problems, retirement, housing and the psychological effects of growing old in a capitalist and patriarchal society.

Gerontology as James Birren has argued, is data rich and theory poor (cf Birren and Bengtson, 1988; DH, 2001) and Bengtson *et al.* (1997) add that the study of aging has lacked a strong theoretical core, tending to ignore until recently an understanding of aging identity, the body, cultural representations of aging which are central features of an emerging post-modern paradigm in gerontological theory.

While a significant amount of data has been generated over the years (around issues such as health and social needs in old age) there has been a

lack of theoretical discussion of the meaning and place of aging within the structure of society. In contrast, criminologists have been trying to answer the perplexing question, “what are the causes of crime?”

For many years both gerontologists and criminologists have concentrated their attention exclusively in their respective fields (Malinchak, 1980). This paper has developed out of a desire to reintroduce this area from an interdisciplinary perspective as the aging population begins to reach a crisis point.

Both disciplines bring a richness to understanding the experiences of older men and women who find themselves lost in the criminal justice system. It will be argued throughout the paper that it is only by having an integrated approach that we can begin to fully understand the complexity of aging in the criminal justice system and in turn to put their needs firmly on the penal policy agenda.

The role of theory in gerontology and its growth as a discipline coincides with the post-war years; a growth in public awareness and interest in aging issues; from “Grey Power movements” to the aging population, the crisis over pensions and the funding of the welfare state. Nevertheless, the lack of theoretical integration in British gerontology has been a cause of some anxiety over the last twenty years.

Fennell, Phillipson, and Evers (1988) suggest that much more characteristic of British research is the lack of attention to theory of any kind. This failing has been a feature of the social gerontological tradition. Biggs, Hendricks, and Lowenstein (2003: 1) argue that “theory goes beyond the collection of data and tries to uncover the “why” as well as the “what” of occurrences and relationships.” Embedded in that quote is the proposition that theory helps to call-out the interconnectedness and underlying processes of the phenomenon in question. Of course it is likely that the parameters identified for that interconnectedness will not only reflect the disciplinary starting point of the author, but the explanations offered will echo the disciplinary foci.

The paper draws upon research examining the needs and experiences of both women and men who are over 50 and in prison, from both sides of the Atlantic. I identify the key issues and current debates in criminology surrounding older people and crime and focus on the specific issues an aging population poses to the criminal justice system of England and Wales.

This study provides an introduction to the area, contextualizes the age demographics of the prison population and raises questions about the nature of imprisonment. It is by listening to the voices of older people in prison that we can begin to address their needs systematically and in turn begin “to look after them with humanity and help them lead law-abiding and useful lives in custody and after release.”<sup>1</sup>

This view from below informs policy intervention and widens the vista of the gerontological and criminological imagination by bringing to both disciplines a more critical and reflexive style, and provides more explicitly a questioning of criminology's relation to criminal justice practices and to criminological and gerontological theory. Moreover, this approach brings a "nearness, creates nuances [and] nearness makes for understanding. It is the invisibility of the prisoner, which makes it possible to maintain the ideological functions of the prison. Visibility is the Achilles heel of the functions" (Mathiesen, 1990: 163).

Much of the debate on older offenders is over how to define "old" (Phillips, 2005). The first problem arises with the definition of "elderly," "elder" or "older," which can produce information that at first appears contradictory. Official statistics on the age breakdown of offences and prison statistics (cf Home Office, 1997a,b) use anything between 21 and 59 or simply give figures for offenders aged 21 and above. Some previous researchers have defined older prisoners as those 65 years of age and older (Newman, 1984), some 60 (Kratcoski, 1990) and 55 (Goetting, 1992).

However, the majority of studies such as Phillips (1996), Wahidin (2002), Aday (2003), the American Department of Justice and units for older prisoners in the UK have used 50-55 as the threshold age to define when one becomes an older offender. This definition is supported by the fact that offenders experience what is known as "accelerated" aging, so that a typical prisoner in their 50s has the physical appearance and accompanying health problems of someone at least ten years older in the outside community. As the Health Care Manager of HMP Wymott states, "in the prison service you find people presenting health problems that are normally found in the over 65s at a much younger age."

For the purpose of this paper the term "older" or "offender in later life" or "elder" will be used interchangeably to denote a person aged fifty or over. The term "elderly" perpetuates a stereotype that the elderly population constitutes a homogeneous social group and the term culturally reproduces "ageist" stereotypes and equates the aged as weak, infirmed and vulnerable.

The term "the elderly" has deliberately been avoided in this paper because the adjective has become "misappropriated as a noun" which Fennel *et al.* (1988), argues leads to people becoming treated as "things." Hence the term "elder" will be used in recognition of the positive aspects that older age can confer (Bond *et al.*, 1993; Bytheway, 1994).

## **Locating the Field**

These data draw upon on-going research in the area of older offenders in the criminal justice system of England and Wales. The initial study<sup>2</sup> was located at several female prisons reflecting the various types of prison establishments and criminal offences found in the penal system in the UK. This paper is based on interviews with prison officers, health care managers, governors and men in later life serving a period of imprisonment (cf Wahidin, 2005b) and was based at HMP Kingston E wing, Wymott I Wing, Norwich L Wing and Frankland B Wing.

At the time of the interviews all of the eligible women and men who were on the prison roll consented to participate in the research (Wahidin, 2001, 2002, 2004). This was possible mainly because the women and the men themselves approved of the study and had accepted it as relevant to their experiences. For the above studies with prisoners participation was encouraged through the prison grapevine. The shipping of prisoners to other prisons assisted in facilitating the research process.<sup>3</sup> The sample consisted of the following categories of prisoner:

1. The first-time offender currently serving a term of imprisonment;
2. The offender who has had previous convictions but not served a prison sentence before;
3. The offender who has previously served a custodial term after conviction;
4. Prisoners serving a life sentence and who have simply grown old in prison, and
5. Long-term prisoners.

## **Older Offenders**

The study of youth and crime has been a significant focus of criminological study since its inception. Although young people have for long been associated with crime, it appears that, as is the case with social class, different age groups commit different types of crime. Yet many theories deal almost exclusively with juvenile delinquency. Hence, it has been stated that “[o]ne of the few facts agreed on in criminology is the age distribution of crime” (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983: 552).

A series of moral panics have, “demonized young people, from the teddy boys, mods and rockers of the 1960s, through to punks, skinheads, muggers, joyriders, “rat boys” (Curtis, 1999: 28), girl gangs and mobile phone snatchers of 2000 (cf e.g. Cohen, 1973; Pearson, 1983). As this paper will show, the assumption that crime is overwhelmingly a “young person’s game must be called into question.

When thinking about older people as perpetrators of crime we associate them with relatively minor offences such as shoplifting, fraud or dri-

ving under the influence of alcohol. However, there have been recent exceptions with high profile cases such as Harold Shipman, Rosemary West and the general rise in the number of men who have been convicted in later life for sex related offences, including those charged with “historical offences” (offences committed two/three decades ago). Criminology has until recently ignored later life and crime related activities, and Pain suggests that the reason for this is that old age:

“has largely been overlooked by criminologists, the debate so far being located mainly in medical and social welfare disciplines” (Pain, 1997: 18).

Moreover this silence and exclusion around elders in prison on the part of policymakers and criminologists is a reflection of the ageist society we inhabit. For example, the Governor at HMP Kingston argues that the closure of the “Elderly Unit” was led by a policy directive not to make sufficient funds available to sustain the unit.

Thus the closure was due to “not being able to do what we really wanted to do, with people of this age, and that really was the straw that broke the camel’s back. The lows were having to say we would love to do more but we can’t because of the lack of resources. At the moment there is no real political imperative to do anything about older prisoners. I did take the prison minister round. He sat on the bed of a dying prisoner. I thought that might make a difference. To be honest—it is *out of sight and out of mind*, because *nobody really wants to know*.”

There are just under 6,000 people aged 50 and above in prison, constituting almost 13 percent of the total prison population. Women in prison of all ages form only a very small proportion of the total prison population 6 percent and women over fifty represent only 5 percent of the total female prison estate (Wahidin, 2005c, data provided by the Research, Development and Statistical Department and Statistics Directorate of the Home Office).

Men in prison constitute 94 percent of the total prison population and men over 50 represent 8 percent of the male estate. In terms of actual numbers there were 170 women and 4,513 men in prison who were over the age of 50 in January 2005. To break this down further, there were 20 women over the age 60. In comparison there were 1507 men who were over the age of 60. More than one in ten male older prisoners who are over 60 belong to a minority ethnic group, which is far higher than the proportion of the general population.<sup>4</sup> The most common offences for the older female age group are not theft and handling or fraud and forgery, but violence against the person and drug offences (Wahidin, 2005a). By comparison, the most common offences for men in this group are sexual offences, violence against a person and drug offences.

From 1995 to 2003, the female over 50 population rose by 98 percent and for men by 82 percent. The overall increase over this seven-year period is 83 percent. From 1999 to 2005 the older prison population doubled from 3,000 to almost 6,000. Furthermore, the over 60 male population has more than trebled over 10 years from 442 in 1992 to 1507 in 2005. In 1992 those aged 60 and above made up 1 percent of the male population over the age of 18, compared to 3 percent in 2002, and the 80 plus male population has become the fastest growing section of the male prison estate, increasing by 375 percent between 1995—2003. In the female estate the sentenced prison population of prisoners aged 50 and over has increased by two and a half times over the last ten years (Wahidin, 2005a).

It is evident from Her Majesty's Chief Inspectorate report on prisons (2004), "*Not Old and Quiet: Older Offenders in Prison,*" and from the above statistics that indeed the older prison population is becoming one of the fastest growing groups without any comprehensive policy or strategy in place to address their needs.

The growth in the aging prison population is due to changes in sentencing; the incremental extension of the life sentence; the introduction of natural life; the fact that more and more people are being incarcerated; and the times served by people subject to mandatory sentences are getting longer. For example, from 1989 to 1999 the proportion of sentences in the UK longer than four years, increased from 37 percent to 45 percent (Fazel *et al.*, 2001: 52). The above report (2004), found that the average sentence length (excluding life-sentenced prisoners) increased by 2.3 months between 1998 and 2002 to 39.3 months for male prisoners aged 60 and over. This compares to 4.3 months increase for women prisoners aged 50 and over to 26.1 months (*ibid*: 47).

The population of women prisoners in England and Wales has features that distinguish it from that of men (Home Office 1997a,b; HMIPP, 2001; HMCIP, 2002). Between 1993 and 2001 the average female prison population rose 140 percent as against 46 percent for men, reflecting sentencing changes. In 2005 the female prison population (only those convicted and sentenced to custody) stood at 3396, a 39 percent increase since 1999, and the long-term trend is for the population to rise (HMIPP, 2001).

The largest concentration of male prisoners aged 50+ in 2003 was at HMP Kingston (this was the first Elderly Unit to be built in the UK). Subsequent to its closure in May 2005, HMP Norwich L Wing, HMP Frankland B Wing and HMP Wymott I Wing (the Elderly and Disabled Community) replaced the function of the Elderly Unit at HMP Kingston. Although HMP Holloway and HMP New Hall are both closed prisons and have the highest percentage of women in the 50+ category, they have as yet no facilities or formal policies in place to address their specific needs. As numbers are predicted to increase (as a result of bifurcation, indeterminate sentences in sentencing), this group will surely pose particular challenges to the current physical environment, healthcare facilities and regime.

Moreover, the quality of treatment in the prison setting for this cohort has fallen short of the acceptable standards outlined by the Human Rights Act of 1998 (implemented in October 2000) and the Disability Discrimination Act 2004.

Since October 2004 prisons have been subject to the Disability Discrimination Act (DAA). This means that the prison service has to take reasonable steps to ensure that prisoners with disabilities can access facilities in prison. However, there is little evidence so far of the prison service responding to this directive. It is evident from the literature and HMCIP Thematic Review (2004) that prisons in general are failing to deal with this particular group's specific needs, although there are pockets of excellence: such as HMP Norwich—L Wing, HMP Wymott I Wing and HMP Frankland B Wing (cf Wahidin 2005b).

These units or wings provide tailored programs and activities, and the environment is less brutal and more sanitized than on the normal prison location. The cacophony of prison noise is reduced, cell doors have been widened to accommodate wheel chairs, hoists are in place, nurses and occupational therapists are available to bathe those who are infirm, and experts are brought in to liaise with the prison to find effective strategies to address and manage the health, social and care needs of this age group.

The older units discussed have developed at a local level through the work of dedicated officers, governors and health teams, who have identified the health, welfare and social care needs of offenders in later life. The governor at HMP Kingston explains that the Elderly Unit at Kingston evolved purely because "Kingston had a number of older lifers/life sentence prisoners at the time the idea for an older unit was discussed. We also had some available space to do something. A number of staff said, "why don't we try and create a different environment for older prisoners away from the hustle and bustle of the main prison?" So the unit happened almost by default because there were already some older guys here."

### **"Out of Sight—Out of Mind:" The Invisible Minority**

Despite the discipline of criminology having a rich imagination, the experiences of older people and the criminal justice system have been excluded. In the 1980s it was *de rigueur* not to start any paper on the topic of women and crime without reference to the dearth of material in this field and the general neglect of gender issues. Twenty years on, the impact of feminist criminology has opened up new areas of study and the broader point is that gender approaches and theories have enriched every aspect of the discipline. Similarly, as with the inclusion of feminist discourses in criminology, the incorporation of older people in the criminal justice system will enrich the discipline so that the continual denial and discrimination of older people in prison can and will be challenged.

Without UK data on current health care expenditure, one has to turn to studies conducted in the USA to understand the future resource impli-

cations of an older prison population. Several American and UK studies have indicated that older prisoners cost, on average, three times as much as a younger prisoner (Gallagher, 1990; Fazel *et al.*, 2001). At HMP Wymott, with a population of just under 700 men, 60 percent of all bed-watches were allocated to the over 50s who comprised 15 percent of the population (Wahidin, 2005b).

In comparison, despite making up only 8 percent of the total prison population in the USA, prisoners over 50 were responsible for 19 percent of the costs paid for ambulatory surgery episodes; 17 percent of costs for non-emergency room episodes; 31 percent of costs for ancillary care episodes; 20 percent of costs for specialty care episodes; and 29 percent of costs for inpatient care episodes (Florida Corrections Commission, 2001). As long as these conditions remain in place, prison health-care costs will continue to increase dramatically. A similar pattern is emerging in the prison system in England and Wales. The factors Aday, Krabil and Wahidin (2004) found influencing the increase in expenditure are the following:

1. The rising cost of health care in society at large;
2. The increasing number of prisoners in the prison system;
3. The general aging of the prison population;
4. The higher prevalence of infectious diseases among prison populations.

As long as these trends continue, prison health-care costs will continue to increase. Like prisoners in general aging prisoners have not had proper access to health care on the outside. They often come into the prison system with numerous chronic illnesses and consume multiple medications. Jonathan Turley, director of *Project for Older Prisoners* (POPs), noted that: “the greatest single contributor to the high costs of older prisoners is medical expenditures” (Turley, 1990: 26). On average prisoners over the age of 50 suffer at least three chronic health problems, such as hypertension, diabetes and emphysema (Acoca, 1998; Turley, 1990). Prisoners, as a population, traditionally have medical and social histories that put them more at risk of illness and disease than those who haven’t been incarcerated (Marquart *et al.*, 1997). As the number of older prisoners increases, the prison system will be even more challenged to provide adequate health and social care provision.

Imprisonment for many women and men in later life answers the first part of the statement of purpose, i.e. “Her Majesty’s Prison Service serves the public by keeping in custody those committed by the courts.”<sup>5</sup> The second part of the statement of purpose is answered by providing a milieu therapy. One can argue that the failure of the latter is indicative of the failure of the prison system to acknowledge the needs of elders in preparing for release. Rather than being enabled to feel that they have a fulfilling life to lead once released, they feel, as one woman states: “for elderly women there is nothing—they have had their life. You see ... the special facilities



are for the youngsters going out so they can start to lead more useful lives. Over fifties, sixties, who *cares*, whether you lead a *useful life or not*. *You are over fifty—you have had it!*”

As the above testimonial indicate, elders in prison have concerns regarding how they become and are marginalized, within a space which claims to enable women and men across the life-course to “lead useful lives in custody and after release.” Their exclusion from the limited activities is a disabling practice, which makes them feel that they have no role to play. It enforces dependency and leads to institutionalization. An elder male prisoner succinctly states, that after 30 years of imprisonment, “I am institutionalized. I am afraid of the outside, because I have been in prison for over 30 years. The prison officers and the Governor virtually tell you what to do. They run your life. Well ... people have been running my life, *all* my life. I was brought up in a home. Ever since I was 10 years old, people have said, “you’ve got to do this.” “You’ve got to do that.” “You go to bed at this time and so it goes on.” So one becomes used to the idea of being told what to do. So suddenly, if it is withdrawn then you are like a fish out of water.”

Historically, educational training in women’s prisons has been part of the disciplinary regime based on returning offending women to their essential roles. Women are less likely than men in prison to receive education, pursue leisure activities and access training, and they are more likely to have to carry out domestic tasks.

These discourses of the “essential” woman are not only responsible for the economic dependency—inculcating domesticity inherent in penal regimes and prison education for women (Carlen, 1983)—but also negate women’s skills and aptitudes for life-long learning, thus failing to take women’s employment needs seriously. Prison for women is experienced as the inculcation of dependence, deferment and, for women in later life, invisibility.

So what happens to women in later life who are deemed by the prison and wider society to have had their life? The lack of appropriate work or training is a good example of the punishing effects that prison embodies, which is based not solely on the deprivation of liberty. For example, one elder female asks, “why do they [the prison service] give *women, women’s jobs*? Have they never thought maybe we would like to learn something else. All we have are sewing rooms and the *laundry*. I also think a lot of women in my age group would like to do something more than the knitting group and creative design. I think a lot of women would like to take up something quite different to the stereotype.”

The above testimony illustrates the inadequacy and inappropriateness of the employment and education provided in prison. The lack of appropriate facilities is indicative of the view held by prison officers that the limited educational and employment provision available in prisons should be offered to younger women who were more likely to benefit occupationally from them. Furthermore, this view reinforced the belief that

ex-prisoners in later life, once released, would have less opportunity than their younger counterparts to be employed. This inequality reinforces the discrimination in training and employment programs which is likely to face the older woman on release, as well as ignoring the vital role played by work and education in mitigating the effects of isolation, frustration and despair.

Female elders in prison find themselves placed in a nexus of prison expectations on them to nurture, control and guide the younger women. In contrast, older men are separated from younger men in prison but, as yet, there are no facilities to separate older women from younger women, and this difference appears to be based on socially constructed roles of femininity and masculinity. The separating of older men from younger men is based on discourses which assume that older men are predatory in nature and thus are more likely to corrupt younger men.

Furthermore, the age-neutral rule that operates in prison ensures that older women's specific needs are not catered for, alongside (and in apparent contradiction to) practices which discriminate on the basis of age. This is apparent in the area of education and training, broadly thought of as "rehabilitation." This raises the question of who perceives a woman in later life as too old for education and why, and what does this say about the prison's statement of purpose and the role of rehabilitation for women in later life? The gendered experiences of older women in the criminal justice system are determined by the structural, political and economic constraints that characterize the prison system.

Prison, is a place *for* punishment rather than merely *as* punishment. The cumulative pains of imprisonment already described compound the feelings of estrangement and alienation from the outside world. They are, as Bauman argues, in an "unseen place" (2000: 103). But, as the extract below shows, prison doesn't have to *do* anything "extra" to women in order to be *for* (and not just *as*) punishment—confinement and separation from their life context *per se* results in continual guilt and anxiety about the people they are responsible for. In this sense prison *as* and prison *for* punishment are one and the same thing.

This may be particularly severe for older women who have spent their lives coping with responsibilities for others and have built their self-esteem upon being competent and reliable carers and partners. For many the experiences of imprisonment lead to a sense of helplessness: "you just feel that you are bound and gagged from head to toe and there is no escaping that situation.

Prison, it's not just taking you out of society to say you've done this thing and you've got to be removed from society and be punished but the punishment just continues on. It starts from the day you are arrested and just continues on and on and on. But it's not just the punishment of being away from home. If only if it was that easy. *But it is the one hundred and one things that happen every day of the week. That is the punishment.*"

Male and female prisoners are not strictly comparable. They have different criminal profiles, both in terms of types of offences committed and previous offending history, and have different adjustment patterns to imprisonment. It is argued that a gender-specific policy based on substantive equality will improve the plight of women in prison across the life-course (NACRO, 1993, 1994).

By using this group as a pilot for finding alternatives to imprisonment, savings will be made on both a humanitarian and fiscal level. A good example of diverting or reducing custodial sentences for elders is an early release scheme orchestrated by, *The Project for Older Prisoners*, in the United States. Candidates must be over 50 years of age, have already served the average time for their offences, and have been assessed as low risk and thus unlikely to commit further crimes (Wahidin, 2005c).

Another unique requirement of this program is that the victim, or the victim's family, must agree to early release. As a result of these strict standards, no prisoner released under the Project for Older Prisoners has ever been returned to prison for committing another crime (Turley, 1992). The program helps them find employment and housing, and ensures that they receive their full entitlement to benefits. Such a scheme could beneficially be extended to England and Wales, to target initially older female prisoners due to their different criminal profile and lower recidivism rate, and, if successful, could foster a willingness within the penal system to explore alternatives to custody for older men. As Pontell (1984 cited in Carlen, 1983: 53) states:

“The criminal justice system is likely to work best when it is used least. It should not be used routinely, but exceptionally. With this major tenet as a focus for criminal justice and crime control policy, we can start to attack crime at its real source, and allow the criminal justice system to operate effectively.”

The UK, unlike America, is still operating without a comprehensive plan to respond adequately to the growing numbers of older prisoners. Today we have family courts and a large variety of special courts to handle specific problems.

Along with the medley of juridical experts from child psychiatrists to social workers, will we in the future see court reports and parole boards informed by gerontologists who can advise the proper referral service for elders caught in the criminal justice system? Will we see the development of “an Older Offenders Justice Board” similar to the Youth Offending Board? Could we then be accused of infantilizing the older offender if we advocated a court which deals specifically with older offenders? Should we change our sentencing structure to reflect probable years remaining in the offender's life?<sup>6</sup> For example, a fifteen-year sentence for a sixty-five year old is practically a life sentence, while a twenty-five year old who spends fifteen years in prison still has a thirty-year life expectancy after s/he leaves

prison. This practice condemns the older offender to spend a greater percentage of her or his remaining life in prison.

This disparity could be reduced by giving older offenders sentences which represent the same percentage of their remaining lives as those given to younger persons. For example, the average twenty-five year-old male can expect to live for 46.9 more years. If such a person were convicted of a crime which carries a twenty-year prison term, he would spend approximately 43 percent of his remaining life behind bars. A sixty-five-year-old is expected to live 14.2 more years. A twenty-year sentence would thus represent 141 percent of this defendant's remaining life, a *de facto* life sentence. By contrast, 43 percent of his life would be only 6.1 years (cf James, 1992).

In *State v. Waldrip*,<sup>7</sup> the judge reduced a sixty-seven year-old defendant's sentence for voluntary manslaughter from five years to life to five to ten years, recognizing that even the minimum term of five years could theoretically be a life sentence because of the defendant's age (ibid). It can be argued that if an older person does not have her or his sentence reduced, s/he will experience a greater punishment than a younger person sentenced for committing the same crime. Special arrangements for elderly prisoners, such as Angola Prison Hospice in America, can make prisons seem more like nursing homes. This raises the question of the necessity of keeping certain frail and infirm elderly persons behind bars, since the infirm elderly person is least likely to commit crimes in the future. The alternative would be to incorporate an early release scheme.<sup>8</sup>

It is only by exploring the possibilities that we can begin to create alternatives. At one level it can be argued that it is only through well funded alternatives to custody changes in sentencing, and a concerted effort to divert offenders from custody, that this can be achieved.

The reason for caution is that research has shown that programs that have been introduced into the women's prison have been appropriated by the prison system. Hannah-Moffat (2002) used the concept *encroachment* to describe how pre-existing organizational norms frequently encroach upon and undermine the rationale of these programs. Secondly, the reliance on alternatives to custody fails to critically address social divisions such as class, age, gender and ethnicity.

Moreover, the question that has to be asked is whether reforms create a prison system that will rehabilitate, prevent crime and be reserved for those who are deemed as truly heinous? And although the prison in various guises has survived for over 200 years and is a dominant institution in society, can we as a society find a different, and more humane strategy for responding to phenomena as socially complex and controversial as crime and punishment?

My view is prisons cannot plausibly claim to rehabilitate when their primary custodial role requires regimes which debilitate, degrade and deprive offenders in their "care" of liberty and time. In these circumstances all that can be hoped for is humane containment.

It is only by thinking about alternatives to imprisonment that we can begin an imaginative rethinking of the whole penal policy debate. The question we should ask is why should the criminological imagination be concerned with older prisoners as a separate group? Is it just due to health concerns or are there also wider issues around justice, proportionality and dangerousness that need to be addressed? Moreover, why don't these factors apply to other groups in prison? If we identify this group on the basis of age to be eligible for early release or even non-custodial sentences what does this mean in regards to "rights," "justice" and "redress"?

We know that prisons are congested, often overcrowded and more or less dangerous places to those who inhabit them and are overwhelmingly counter-productive in relation to the objectives of rehabilitation, retribution, deterrence and prevention. These goals have often sat uneasily together and, depending on the political pressures of the day, one or more of these goals has taken precedence over the others.

For example, in the UK the 1950s to the 1960s was characterized by the belief in rehabilitation. By the 1980s the Thatcher Government extolled prison as a place to punish. At the same time, ministers recognized that for less serious offenders, prisons were "expensive and ineffective" (Crow, 2001: 104). My argument here is that it is only by using the criminological imagination to understand the *troubles* and the *issues* of an aging prison population that we can begin to become less reliant on an inefficient prison system.

There is an urgent need to put rehabilitation on the prison policy agenda and investigate forms of incarceration which might provide constructive modes of punishment that will ultimately help to reintegrate offenders into social life. Such an emphasis upon rehabilitation "involves not only devising forms [of] incarceration that are more constructive and reformatory but also ensuring that incarceration is only used when no worthwhile alternative is available" (Matthews, 1987: 394).

### **Conclusion: Thinking About the Imprisonment of Elders**

In a period of a febrile state of insecurity (cf Sparks, 2003) the retreat from the rehabilitative ideal has given rise to a new punitiveness. At one time, as Foucault argued, the defining characteristic of prisons was to produce "docile" and useful bodies, the reformed/ideal subject. However, what is evident about the statecraft of punishment and the new punitiveness is that many of the punishments associated with this process no longer seek to achieve such ends (Foucault, 1977).

Thus, if the prison's only function is to warehouse, then prison in itself is a mechanism for state legitimated pain delivery. This in turn begs the question around the meaning of the prison as a "service" to the extent of whether the prison can be a "service."

In this sense there is an implication that it is a provider and deliverer of "care" for the users of the services. The word "care" in this context

provokes many questions—in particular about the needs of the users of the services.

As this paper has shown, the lack of help and rehabilitation to an ever-changing world renders elders an invisible minority, lost to the welfare contract and overlooked in the penal system. Once in prison, the vulnerabilities of age become exacerbated by the lack of adequate facilities to enable elders to lead “law abiding and useful lives in custody and after release.” If society has little place for persons in later life in general, it has even less place for the older prisoner. So what happens to the older prisoner who has nowhere to go?

This paper provides a commentary on some of the issues and challenges of an aging prison population and questions why the criminological and gerontological imagination has been curiously silent about elders in the criminal justice system. It is only by widening the vista of the criminological investigation that we can begin to understand the experiences of older prisoners and bring to light the paradoxes of imprisonment.

Second, it is by challenging the silence surrounding this particular cohort that we begin to explore the interstices of the criminological and gerontological enterprise.

Thirdly, it is by questioning the purpose and nature of imprisonment in relation to this particular group that alternatives to imprisonment can be explored. It is within the reach of the imagination of both disciplines to develop new alternatives and imaginative solutions to the incarceration of older offenders. What we do know is that the experiences of older people in prison have been marginalized in the debates around policy and how the criminal justice system responds to the changes generated by the growing number of older offenders in the criminal justice system remains yet to be seen.

For example, the way forward in terms of dealing with some, if not all, older offenders is to deal with this group outside the criminal justice system so that when we talk about alternatives to imprisonment, they really do become alternatives to criminal sanctions rather than alternatives to custody. Alternatives to imprisonment and the move to curb our reliance on this institution of social order as the social historian Colin Ward, alluding to the title of Ignazio Silone’s novel, “The Seed Beneath the Snow” (1943), contends are in general:

“always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state and its bureaucracy, capitalism and its waste, privilege and its injustices” (Ward, 1973: 11).

By beginning to play with alternatives to imprisonment, we can move away from a one size fits all model that the prison service of England and Wales employs. As the Governor at HMP Kingston states:

“The new National Offender and Management Service is driven to reduce re-offending, so older offenders *don't fit* in with the actual criteria for the national offending and managing services. So I am not entirely sure how things are going to work for the older offender. I doubt that now, the needs of older offenders will be sufficiently high on anyone's priority list.”

It is only by breaking the silence around the experiences and needs of offenders in later life that this paper has argued, why it is necessary to have an interdisciplinary understanding of this particular cohort and place the needs of this group firmly on the policy agenda. It should not be argued that women and men in later life suffer *more* than other prisoners. The real issue is that they suffer *differently* and it is by exploring this difference that we can begin to alleviate some of the pains of imprisonment.

## Notes

- 1 This statement may be seen displayed at the entrance of every prison, cf [www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk](http://www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk).
- 2 The initial study began in 1997 for my doctoral thesis: “Living Life Behind the Shadows: A Qualitative Study of Older Women in Prison,” which was funded by the University of Keele, UK. My field work took place at the following prisons: HMP Durham H Wing; HMP Styal, HMP Drake Hall and HMP Askham Grange. The research conducted in 2004-2005 involved, governors, health care personnel, prison officers, and prisoners at HMP Kingston—E wing; HMP Norwich L Wing, HMP Wymott I Wing and HMP Frankland B Wing.
- 3 “Shipped out’ is a colloquial prison term also known as “being ghosted’ and means being taken to another prison often without warning and in some cases by force. It is used as a disciplinary measure. It can also mean that the prisoner is moved because she or he has requested a transfer. The actual process of moving prisoners in this way is highly problematic for critical criminologists. This movement of prisoners (for the reasons stated above) could facilitate another meeting with the woman in a different prison whereupon she would encourage others to participate in the research. This happened on several occasions.
- 4 Prison Reform Trust (2004), *Growing Old in Prison*, London: Prison Reform Trust.
- 5 q.v.1
- 6 Cristina Pertierra (1995) presents a series of cases brought to the American Court of Appeal in which elderly offenders, under the 8th Amendment, have claimed that, given their ages and life expectancies, the sentences imposed amount to life imprisonment, and are thus disproportionate to the crimes committed. For further details see *United States v. Angiulo*, 852 F. Supp. 54, 60 (Mass. 1994); cf also *Alspaugh v. State*, 133, So. 2d 597, 588 (Fla. 2d Dist. Ct. App. 1961).
- 7 533 P.2d 1151 (Ariz. 1975).

- 8 Release on compassionate grounds in England and Wales is addressed by way of the Parole Board recommendation to the Home Secretary (and in the case of lifers through the exercise of the Royal Prerogative of Mercy). Such release may be granted on medical grounds when death is likely to occur within three months, if the prisoner is bedridden or severely incapacitated, or where further imprisonment would endanger the prisoner's life or reduce life expectancy. In 2002, France introduced a system where upon during the sentence a judge can permit the early release of the prisoner suffering from a terminal illness or whose health is incompatible with continued detention. In March 2004, 37 prisoners in the UK had applied for medical parole. Three of them who were critically ill and aged 50 and over were released (cf Steiner, 2003).



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# Redefining the Role of Older Adults in Society: Does the “Third Age” Promote a Successful Alternative to the Tripartitioned Life Course?

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## Abstract

The ubiquity of active aging research, products, and messages demonstrates that what is expected from members of society when they reach old age has changed. Industrialized nations benefited from a growth in human capital which ultimately formed the now dominant tripartitioned life course (education, work, retirement). Over time, that partitioning has become economically unsustainable due to the shifting age structure associated with population aging and increased active life expectancy during post-retirement years. Older adults have been encouraged to participate in an active lifestyle that is purported to benefit both individuals and society through age-integrated, personally meaningful and productive activities. Being productive and active in old age have become ideals of a new, potentially more valued period of old age, the third age. This analysis suggests, however, that the active aging paradigm, as articulated by third age rhetoric, promotes expectations in later life which reflect a middle-class and a middle-age bias and significantly *stratifies* people along the lines of income security and physical health rather than just chronological age and life stage. This paper explores the ideological underpinnings and the social policy implications of third age rhetoric.

Keywords: Social Policy, Aging, Third Age, Tripartitioned Life Course.

The interaction between demographic changes, the emergence of the welfare state, and the advancement of industry produced an expansive post-work period in later life in more developed countries (Matras, 1990). In such countries, the institutionalization of retirement initiated a period in old age during which individuals no longer have the role of *providing* economic contributions but rather, have the role of *receiving* economic support (Atchley, 1982). Political economists have argued that the transfer of resources in retirement has permanently disenfranchised older adults because the social structure requires them to be *dependent*.

Consequently, it has been proposed that social policies serve as more than a means for managing demographic change; they provide a mechanism for reinforcing power differentials (Estes, 1979). Although gerontologists have recognized

the value of social policies in diminishing poverty and providing health care for older adults, some have also suggested that such policies encourage “compassionate ageism” and thus essentially define the value of older adults in terms of their implied dependence (Binstock, 1983).

In a culture which strongly values hard work and productivity, the institutionalization of retirement essentially removed a valued social role in old age (Atchley, 1975). Furthermore, the social policies which created financial security in old age also created a system of structured dependency (Phillipson, 1988; Townsend, 1981; Walker, 1981, 1987) and limited older adults’ exchange value (Dowd, 1980).

Thus, on the eve of the “baby boomer wave,” politicians, advocates and scholars are questioning how the life stage of retirement can be redefined by social roles which engage the older population more effectively in society. The economic costs of population aging on one hand, and the ideals of increasing the social value of older adults on the other have been central to conceptualizing proposed changes in how this period of life can be reformed.

The tripartitioned (Kohli, 1986), or age-segregated (Riley and Riley, 1994a) life course,<sup>1</sup> is accompanied by a decreasing proportion of life that is spent in the labor force (Midwinter, 2005).<sup>2</sup> This significant alteration of the life course is related to concerns about the social status and social roles available to older people, and has perpetuated concerns about the economic sustainability of our current life course structure (Vladeck, 2005). The demographic changes and social policies which encouraged the formation of a phase of dependency in later life have in recent years signaled proportionally fewer individuals providing economic resources to our public program for retirement, and proportionally more individuals relying upon them.

The age-integrated (Riley and Riley, 1994b) life course that allows for flexibility among education, work, and leisure roles has been proposed to both reduce the loss of exchange value associated with aging and increase the financial contributions older adults make to society.

However, recent efforts to encourage this kind of life course structure interface with culturally entrenched retirement policies. Further, some scholars suggest that active aging and third age rhetoric is a potentially problematic reflection of the consumerism that characterizes the post-modern life course. Thus, the reformation of the later part of the life course is organized around our consumer-driven society, the influence of the “cultural sphere,” and differing career trajectory strategies (Katz and Marshall, 2003: 5).

In response, a large body of research is justifying and promoting older adults’ decisions to remain productive in later life without losing the integrity of retirement as an expected, anticipated, and earned transition in later life.

Challenging the structured dependency created by the formation of the welfare state (Quadagno, 1988), those concerned about the institution of retirement have sought to redefine the early part of retirement to include meaningful social roles that promote engagement in society in what has become known as the “third

age.” It has been argued, however, that the growing attention given to the potential of the early parts of old age is spurring market and lifestyle industries which create an “idealized culture of “ageless” consumers and active populations” (Katz and Marshall, 2003: 3). Remarkable demographic changes revealed an opportunity for older adults to experience a higher quality of life. However, a consumer culture has reformed later life while also encouraging older individuals to “mask” their old age status by mimicking the behaviors associated with earlier life phases (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991).

Rather than retaining the integrity of retirement and increasing older adults’ social status, it appears that old age has been redefined based on consumerist ideology and an entrenched structure of privilege, creating only another way of reinforcing a market economy and stratifying the population. Thus, we must carefully examine the implications of third age rhetoric as a factor in the redefinition of later life.

### **Is the “Third Age” the Solution?**

The concept of the third age, as recognized by western societies (cf Laslett’s 1989 depiction), emphasizes personal growth, development, and meaningful contributions to society in old age rather than just “leisure” (e.g. Weiss and Bass, 2002). It is depicted as an age-integrated life stage dedicated to a combination of education, work/productivity, and leisure, presumably increasing social value and quality of life in old age (e.g. Blane *et al.*, 2004, Blane *et al.*, 2007).

There is widespread adoption of this term and apparent acceptance of this new life phase as part of the typical life course (e.g. Baltes and Smith, 2003; Di Mauro *et al.*, 2003; Gilleard and Higgs, 2002; Kruse and Schmitt, 2006; Lang *et al.*, 2007; Legge and O’Loughlin, 2000; Leibing, 2005; Midwinter, 2005; Timmer and Aartsen, 2003; Twigg, 2007).

The attention given to the concept of the third age seems to suggest that this period is not only an expected transition in later life but also a necessary component of solving the problems associated with population aging on both the individual and societal levels. Not all societies have the luxury of exploring the opportunities and consequences associated with population aging, extended active life expectancy, or a third age (Katz *et al.*, 1983).<sup>3</sup> Those that do—“third age societies” (Townshend, 2002)—are uniquely positioned to redefine old age with increased opportunities and expectations for economic contributions.

On the surface, it appears that the emergence of a third age has the potential to increase older adults’ social value. Third age rhetoric encourages the formation of opportunities for individuals to occupy meaningful and economically valued social roles during the expanding period of healthy retirement (Weiss and Bass, 2002; Bass *et al.*, 1993). The third age is characterized as the first part of old age, a period of the life course in which individuals can expect to continue developing and changing, and have the capability to continue contributing to society (Bass, 2000). The growing emphasis on “civic engagement” and “productive aging” in the third age challenges previous expectations of old age merely as a time to adjust to

“leisure,” promoting a new kind of activity in old age (e.g. cf Katz, 2000) that addresses the problems associated with population aging and the changing age structure (e.g. Schultz *et al.*, 1991).

However, even though the third age is described as a period of pre-dependency (Baltes and Smith, 2003), post-retirement/post-child-rearing (Weiss and Bass, 2002), and pre-physical decline (Midwinter, 2006), the vast majority of related research and policies which define its parameters use a unidimensional and simplistic approach to identify individuals in this life phase, chronological age (e.g. Midwinter, 2005; Timmer and Aartsen, 2003). Furthermore, scholars use *different* chronological age boundaries one to the next in referring to this period. For example, the broadest description suggests that the third age sometimes includes middle age, 50-74 (e.g. Blane *et al.*, 2007), yet others use much more narrow parameters, 65 to 74 (e.g. James and Wink, 2006).

Comparing conceptualizations or findings across studies is thus quite difficult and as a whole the literature does not promote an integrative understanding of this life phase. In addition, some scholars have offered ideological critiques of third age research. Gilleard *et al.* (2005) have been critical of the economically framed, consumer-driven lifestyle, and emphasis on individual responsibility associated with the promotion of this concept (the later also noted by Dannefer and Uhlenberg, 1999; Minkler, 1996). Similar to the way the concept of “successful aging” has been challenged (e.g. Strawbridge *et al.*, 2002), the values associated with a third age may not be universally accepted by gerontologists or by older adults themselves.

Whether it is a “social space delineated by opportunities for continuing participation in mass consumer society” (Gilleard *et al.*, 2005: S305), a social construct (Bass, 2000), an ideology (Leibing, 2005), a social category (Gilleard *et al.*, 2005), a life phase (Weiss and Bass, 2002), an age period (James and Wink, 2006), or part of a new culture (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000), the third age is certainly a nexus of contradictions and conflicting perspectives (Gilleard and Higgs, 2005: 165). In reconciling the contradictions about this period, a careful examination of its demographic and ideological emergence is warranted. It is increasingly critical that social policies be informed by such scholarship, recognizing the diversity of the older population and the unequal availability of opportunities throughout the life course, not just in old age.

Even though the third age appears to suggest promising opportunities for reforming the nature of old age, it is unlikely to provide a panacea for ageism, economic and policy challenges of population aging, or tensions surrounding inter-generational exchange. It can, however, encourage a change in attitude that promotes a more positive view of aging and brings greater attention to increasing quality of life in later life as we negotiate the promise of the science of longevity. As more “third age societies” appear, it is necessary for gerontologists to take the lead in exploring the benefits and consequences of this new life phase.



### A New Paradigm and the Emergence of the Third Age

Several major gerontological paradigms—age stratification, life-course theory, and political economy (Baars *et al.*, 2006)—discuss the interplay between demographic change, social policies, and theoretical development in the field of gerontology (cf also Larsson, 2007). Likewise, the emergence of the third age is linked with changes in the structure of the life course based on the organization, expectations, and roles of social groups in society and in the economy. A new paradigm which encourages individuals to remain active and “productive” in later life is the foundational value associated with the third age.

The call for a restructuring of the life course itself (i.e., the delineation of the “third age” and the “fourth age”) was driven by population trends of rising dependency ratios, falling mortality rates, the compression of morbidity, and falling poverty rates among older adults (Matras, 1990) which resulted in an overall increased “active life expectancy” of older adults (Katz *et al.*, 1983). Social policies which supported the division of adulthood into work and non-work periods were critical to the formation of old age as a separate period of adulthood. Demographic changes resulted in increased time, physical capability, and financial means among the older population (Weiss and Bass, 2002). These characteristics of the older population serve as the foundation for the formation of “third age societies” and subsequently, membership in the “third age.”

Thus, the growth in years of healthy retirement (post-work and post-child-rearing) and greater overall financial independence have helped many older adults become more *capable* of contributing to society in later life. This growth in personal resources among older adults as a whole has been instrumental in providing an opportunity for older adults to remain socially and economically engaged in later life (Gilleard *et al.*, 2005). However, some scholars implicate political concerns surrounding older adults being depicted as a financial drain (Binstock, 2005) in the emergence of this active aging paradigm (and the subsequent formation of the concept of the third age) (Caro *et al.*, 1993).

Thus, it is society’s inability to support the rapidly aging population with our current life course structure that is encouraging a re-examination of structured dependency in old age (Walker, 1987). From this perspective, it appears that a change in the expectations of older adults and promotion of “age-integrated” (Riley and Riley, 1994a,b) social roles is associated more with changing economic needs of society rather than concerns associated with older adults’ social value and ability to maintain meaningful social roles (e.g. O’Reilly and Caro, 1994). This view spurred support for a growth of opportunities for older adults to remain economically engaged through action and behavior.

Thus, two competing, yet possibly complimentary perspectives underlie the current conceptualization of the third age, and have contributed to the way the third age has been depicted in social science literature. In particular, the *first* perspective portrays the third age as:

A “positive” new life phase which promotes an age-integrated life course, inter-generational exchange, and the associated benefits of increased opportunities for meaningful, valued social roles in society (e.g. Lang *et al.*, 2007; Weiss and Bass, 2002).

The *second* perspective is more critical, questioning whether this life phase truly benefits older adults by suggesting that the third age is:

A period of life defined by behaviors which reflect the work-dominated, consumer-driven view of societal responsibility through the promotion of economically valued activities and behaviors (cf e.g. Phillipson, 1998; Powell, 2006).

The interaction between these two perspectives reveals the core values and ideologies driving the third age, in particular:

- (1) the tension between individual responsibility (and choice) and social structural support;
- (2) the relevance of socially versus economically valued social roles, and
- (3) the significance of personally meaningful versus socially valued opportunities in later life.

Thus, the introduction of this integrated life phase proposes to solve economic and social “problems” associated with population aging through changes in the norms and expectations of older adults.

#### *Perspective #1: The Third Age as a New Frontier for Personal Growth*

Those who proposed that an age-integrated life course (Riley and Riley, 1994b) might sever the tie between old age and less valued “leisure” roles also sought to challenge ageist conceptions of older adults being frail and needy. Such advocates believed that, despite their capability, older adults were limited from participating fully in society due to social structural barriers based on age.

In particular, “structural lag” (Riley and Riley, 1994c) inhibited older adults from having opportunities to *choose* which kinds of activities they would like to engage in during later life. This perspective promotes *opportunities* for older adults in the third age to explore meaningful activities that were once out of reach due to limited access, and now exist because of improvements in health and financial status in retirement, departure from work and child-rearing responsibilities, and cultural acceptance of intergenerational activities (other than just within the family structure) (e.g. Weiss and Bass, 2002).

The focus on *opportunity* brings attention to the role of personal agency, though only in so far as it is related to being relinquished from social pressures or

barriers from remaining actively engaged in society during later life. Therefore, many of the books or articles that utilize this perspective typically describe the third age in terms of a period during which people experience freedom from responsibilities (e.g. Huang, 2006).

Although the “third age” is not always explicitly defined, multitudes of recently published self-help books for retirement adopt the focus on personal development and growth, and on having the chance to do things not possible during earlier life stages (e.g. Hosley, 1999; Sadler, 2001). This perspective is supported by the long-standing belief that, as noted above, people age more “successfully” when they remain active in old age.

Therefore, if older adults have the chance to actively explore meaningful social roles and the opportunity to fully engage in life (Weiss and Bass, 2002) their quality of life will be higher. Recently, scholars have examined this issue more carefully in an effort to determine if third-agers do, in fact, have a higher quality of life than other adults due to the unique opportunities provided by this life stage (Blane *et al.*, 2004; Blane *et al.*, 2007; Wiggins *et al.*, 2004).

Findings suggest, however, that only those “third-agers” who have strong pensions (and access to other resources) have a high quality of life. Such findings are not surprising if we recognize that, although older adults in “third age societies” as a group have greater access to personal resources than previous generations, there is certainly a diverse range of resources among older adults, particularly among those typically targeted as “third-agers.”

### *Perspective #2: Being a “Third-Ager” by Acting Young in Old Age*

Motivated by the depiction of older adults as a drain on society’s resources, advocates for productive engagement have been concerned about demonstrating the ways that older adults “pull their own weight” (Hendricks and Cutler, 2004). Thus, to the extent that older adults can “produce goods and services that otherwise would have to be paid for,” or, activities that can be quantified into some form of economic value (Caro *et al.*, 1993: 6), it is presumed that the group will attain a higher social value.

For example, volunteering, a commonly cited form of productive and/or active aging, is proposed to provide benefits to both individuals and to society by improving the health and wellbeing of older adults and by providing much needed services within communities (e.g. Bukov *et al.*, 2002; Burr *et al.*, 2005; Greenfield and Marks, 2004; Morrow-Howell *et al.*, 2003; Van Willigen, 2000).

This argument is particularly salient among those who suggest that the solution to both population aging and older adults’ social status lies in encouraging older adults to remain engaged in activities that help offset the *costs* of population aging (such as volunteerism, caregiving, and working for pay) without disrupting the culture of retirement. Therefore, the perfect solution appeared to be encouraging participation in productive activities that are not paid, allowing older people

to remain “retired,” and improve their own quality of lives (Wiggins *et al.*, 2004) by taking the *initiative* to engage in such activities.

This perspective emerged in the early 1980s (e.g. Butler and Gleason, 1985; Phillipson, 1982) at a time when several politicians accused “greedy geezers” as the cause for financial shortfalls in public programs (e.g. social security) (Binstock, 1983). Subsequently, older adults have been encouraged to engage in new social roles associated with consumption and work (without pay) (Morrow-Howell *et al.*, 2001; Gilleard and Higgs, 2005). Greater concern was directed toward economic gains to society as a whole rather than the value given to older adults in particular (e.g. Biggs, 2001; Leibing, 2005).

Thus, much of the research that has supported this perspective describes older adults who are aging “positively” by *not* becoming dependent. Not surprisingly, much gerontological research draws on the concept of *dependency* when characterizing the third age. In fact, dependency itself has been used as a way of partitioning old age into a “third age” and a “fourth age” (e.g. Baltes and Smith, 2003). Growing emphasis upon avoidance of disease and disability (as depicted in “successful aging” research, cf Rowe and Kahn, 1997<sup>4</sup>) and individual response-ability for remaining *independent* in old age are key values of the third age (cf e.g. Bass, 2000).

The focus on distancing old age from assumptions of dependency has in turn, introduced new themes which depict old age, especially the early years, as a period of freedom from physical and time constraints. While advocates have championed this revision of previous ageist views of older adults being incapable of remaining a vital component of society, some critics point out that active aging rhetoric accomplishes this “positive” view by encouraging older adults to act like they are middle aged. Tulle-Winton (1999: 281) goes on to suggest that such discourse “gives primacy to lifestyles, social and economic opportunities and moral responsibility” and seems to create dissonant objectives among gerontologists: either resisting the “mask” of aging or reaffirming the continued cultural repression of the declining body. Thus, older adults are placed in the awkward position of seeking to remain “ageless,” because by submitting to old age, they are no longer viewed as “successful.”

Gerontologists have criticized activity theory (Lemon *et al.*, 1972) as a way of rationalizing the American busy-ethic (e.g. Moody, 1988) for later life. The “act young” perspective reflects this work ethic (e.g. Weber, 1905) as a frame of reference for success in later life by raising expectations for what old age *should* look like; thus, old age, when “done” correctly, mimics earlier life phases. The rhetoric surrounding this perspective suggests that older adults should engage in activities that are valued by the most powerful members of society. Rather than providing opportunities for older adults to inhabit a more valued social space, changing expectations of members of the third age appears to narrowly define that social space in economic terms; those who are *physically* and *economically* capable of contributing to society in later life are the *successful* ages and, by extension, members of the third age.

Further, critics propose that the third age has merely reoriented older adults to engage in particular consumer behaviors (e.g. Gilleard and Higgs, 1998). Although this might be seen as yet another way to encourage older individuals to remain economically engaged in age-integrated roles, the consumer activities and behaviors promoted in third age societies appear to enhance existing values retained by the dominant culture. Thus, third age societies may be both creating a new kind of consumer culture in its reformation of the old age while also encouraging older individuals to “mask” their old age status by mimicking a middle-age lifestyle (Katz and Marshall, 2003).

Rather than retaining the integrity of retirement and increasing older adults’ social status, it appears that in promoting a third age culture, old age may be redefined based on privilege rather than deservedness, creating new social status categories in such societies, and encouraging a new form of stratification. Thus, we must carefully examine the implications imposed by the intersection of demography and ideology in differentiating older adults through the formation of new expectations and social roles that redefine old age.

### **From “Anti-Aging” to “Pro-Aging:” A Path for New Research and Policy in Later Life**

The recent focus on active aging is a response to demographic changes that have left many concerned about the implications of the growing number of years people have between labor force exit and the onset of physical decline. Scholars and advocates have promoted opportunities for “meaningful” social roles for older people *and* ways older adults can off-set the cost of population aging through the extension of years spent in productive roles; both of these agendas (meaningful opportunities and cost effectiveness) underlie the active aging paradigm.

However, rather than “illuminating opportunities for reciprocity and recognizing older adults’ unique qualities to create increased social power among older adults” (Carr, 2005: 90), the rhetoric surrounding the third age appears to be encouraging older adults to avoid aging altogether. Further, the focus on one’s ability to engage in a third age lifestyle is depicted as a matter of choice rather than opportunity, stratifying old age by physical health and financial security.

Consequently, the third age is expected to be a life stage in which individuals remain active and productive, and have the luxury of *choosing* how to spend their abundant time, energy, and money. As noted above, most research examining this life phase utilizes chronological age to define groups even though the third age is described as a period of pre-dependency, post-retirement/post-child-rearing, and pre-physical decline.

What is more problematic, however, is that with few exceptions (e.g. Arber and Ginn, 1995; Gilleard *et al.*, 2005; Larsson, 2007; Powell, 2005), scholars have not given enough attention to critical characteristics of the third age—those which provide individuals with the *capacity* to transition into this life phase, i.e., personal resources derived from particular socio-economic conditions, employment statuses,

educational levels, gender, marital statuses, and physical health conditions. Thus, long after it was recognized that the use of chronological age alone has a tendency to impose inaccurate assumptions about individuals based on limited parameters (Neugarten, 1974; 1996; Tinker, 1993), research and policy efforts continue stratify older adults.

Examining the transitions and key markers associated with the “third age” may be a step in the right direction. Exploring and celebrating the formation of this life stage has the potential to create a valued social space for older adults to contribute in a unique way. Unfortunately, the current approach recognizes only those older adults who have qualities valued by the dominant culture and have segregated older adults by such characteristics. This encourages the formation of a new type of ageism which suggests that individuals who do not maintain physical health and financial security (including the ability to “retire”) are “unsuccessful.”

Midwinter (2005: 17) recognized many of these issues when he suggested that we need to “redraw the demographic map with social rather than chronological contours.” Other scholars point to how postmodern societies portray the “third age” as a mechanism for bridging middle age and old age such that the “post-traditional culture” (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000) forms expectations for “the new aging:” a “buoyant and optimistic cultural imagery around which marketing and consumerism have rallied” to re-stratify people according to ethical practices of risk management and self control to avoid dependency (Katz and Marschall, 2003: 4). This critique encourages efforts to examine ways of promoting a third age that advances opportunities for active engagement and meaningful contributions of older adults to society without promoting ageist beliefs that individuals are solely responsible for their outcomes and abilities in old age.

Rather, older adults’ ability to contribute in a personally and socially meaningful way is a reflection of a given society’s commitment to creating a healthy intergenerational environment. Thus, in order to promote a third age that is more equally accessible, *gerontological scholarship should explore the deliberate investment in formal structures that bolster individual resources* (particularly health, income, and labor force options) *across the life course*.

Further, as we look for solutions to the problems imposed by population aging, social policies that are based on realistic and fair expectations are critical if the life stage that is to be accessible and beneficial to all elder individuals and to society. If gerontologists seek to free older adults from the confines of ageist stereotypes, it is necessary to do more than exemplify the extent to which older adults look and act like younger adults.

In addition, it is critical that we consider the inequality inherent in new expectations about what is possible in later life. By exploring the deliberate investment in structures that support individuals across the life course, scholars can promote a *lifestyle* that benefits older adults and society as a whole. Thus, in exploring the benefits society can reap from our increasingly healthy and financially secure older population, it is necessary to look to the formation of social policies that both provide *opportunities* for older adults to explore personally meaningful and enga-

ging social roles, but also explore factors which can enhance individuals' *chances* of experiencing a third age.

In conclusion, the third age is evidence of the active aging paradigm and exemplifies the kinds of social roles older adults are now expected to inhabit in our low fertility, low mortality demographic regime (Matras, 1990). The once tripartitioned life course has been challenged by the emergence of this life phase, but the life course has not been reformulated such that older adults have access to a more valued social position.

Due to our focus on one's *ability* rather than *opportunity* to engage actively in society during this life phase, we moved the focus of value from those of particular ages to those with particular resources. Such resources are not equally accessible to all members of society; thus, the current conceptualization of the third age has a tendency to stratify individuals during later life by physical health and income security. Rather than the third age being a reflection of individual decisions, it is a reflection of a particular type of society. As we face the economic repercussions of population aging, it is obviously a necessity that we reexamine our social roles and responsibilities if we seek to maintain an economically sustainable social structure.

Thus, social policies should seek to increase available resources for both social and economic productivity in later life by increasing our ability to cultivate such resources across the life course. In so doing, we can greatly increase individuals' opportunity to engage in valued activities during later life and subsequently increase the length and quality of the third age.

## Notes

- 1 The "tripartitioning" of the life course refers to the segregation of the life course by function: education, work, and retirement. By extension, an "age-segregation" is typically described as a life course that is segregated by function within particular chronological age boundaries. Thus, the terms here are used interchangeably.
- 2 Midwinter (2005) proposed that the "second age" is shrinking. He defines this as the shrinking proportion of individuals who are engaged in the work force, or rather, are within ages that typically align with working years (as years of education increase and retirement remains constant) while life expectancy is increasing.
- 3 Active life expectancy refers here to the remaining years one can expect to be "disability-free."
- 4 In a more recent publication, Rowe and Kahn (1998) put forth hierarchical preconditions for "successful aging:" (a) avoidance of disease and disability; (b) maintenance of high physical, and (c) active engagement in life.

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# Grandparents Raising Grandchildren in the United States: Changing Family Forms, Stagnant Social Policies

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## **Abstract**

As a consequence of increased divorce rates, the proliferation of single-parent families, and patterns of economic stagnation, parents are increasingly relying on extended family to care for children. In the past few decades, a substantial increase in the number of grandparents raising grandchildren has been observed within the United States. Grandparents who raise their grandchildren are particularly vulnerable, as are the grandchildren in their care; however, US policy currently presents many barriers, gaps, and unintended consequences for grandparent caregivers. In this paper, we use two theoretical paradigms (1) structural lag and (2) the political economy of aging perspective to argue that US policy has not kept pace with the reality of the family and, as a result, those families who are most vulnerable often receive the least support. We propose that as family forms become more diverse a redefinition of the family to one that is less bound by residence and biology, to one based more on function, will be required.

Keywords: Social policy, United States, grandparents, grandchildren, changing family forms.

Over the past 50 years, profound changes in family structures have altered the way many families organize to raise their children. Family forms have diversified as a consequence of increased divorce rates and the proliferation of single-parent families, thereby increasing the need of parents to rely on extended family support for care of their children.

At the same time, economic stagnation—as manifested by declining real wages and the wholesale reduction in jobs paying a living wage and providing benefits—as well as retrenchment in government benefits for single mothers and the working poor, have compromised the ability of parents to effectively raise their children, furthering their need to rely on extended relatives to fill the gap in child-care. Most commonly, grandparents become the principal guardians of distressed families where the middle-generation is incapable of raising their children.

Yet, in spite of the proliferation of grandparent-headed families, public policy in the United States has not kept pace with challenges posed by this non-traditional family form. In this article, we discuss how structural features of American social welfare policy have impeded an adequate response to the unique needs faced by custodial grandparents and the grandchildren they are raising.

We also examine this issue in general theoretical terms as an example of how family policies often lag behind changing social conditions, particularly when they are predicated on ideological preferences for traditional family forms that resist acknowledging the needs of families that lie outside the boundaries of those forms.

### **Grandparent Custodial Care in the United States**

In the early 1990s, researchers began to note the increasing prevalence of grandparents raising grandchildren within the African-American community, primarily as an indirect result of parental addiction to crack cocaine (Minkler and Roe, 1993; Burton, 1992). This research into the substantial increase of grandparent-headed households drew attention to the unique needs and challenges faced by grandparent caregivers and the children in their care. As of 2000, nearly 2.4 million grandparents claimed primary responsibility for a coresident grandchild. These included grandparents living in households consisting of three (or more) generations as well as those in skipped-generation households consisting only of grandparents and grandchildren (Simmons and Lawler-Dye, 2003).

When examined from the point of view of the youngest generation it is estimated that 6.5 million children in the United States currently live with at least one grandparent (Kreider, 2004), accounting for approximately 9 percent of all children nationally and more than half (56 percent) of those not living with their parents. While multigenerational coresidence is often seen as a way to support the older generation in the household, many of these living arrangements are formed and maintained for the benefit of the children within them.

Children living in grandparent-headed households—those most likely to be the beneficiaries of grandparent care—doubled over the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rising from 2.2 million in 1970 to 3.9 million in 1997 (Casper and Bryson, 1999). Where this trend was initially driven by an increase in the number of grandparent-headed households containing grandchildren and their single parents, by the early 1990s the composition of these households shifted to grandchildren in the absence of parents. While some of these households are transitory, the large majority of custodial grandparents in the US have been responsible for their grandchildren for at least one year, with nearly two in five having been responsible for over five years (Casper and Bryson, 1999).

Grandparent caregiving is not equally distributed across social class and racial groups. There is a long tradition for poor families to rely on the labor of grandparents as an adaptation to the high market cost of childcare, their higher than average rate of single parenting, and, the need for both parents to work in the case of intact families.

Rates of custodial grandparenting are particularly high in African-American families as a response to historically high rates of poverty and single-parenting (Uhlenberg and Kirby, 1998; Ruggles, 1994), as well as a cultural propensity for extended-familism that has roots in slavery and post-Reconstruction migration patterns. African-American families disrupted and dislocated by slave traders and owners adapted to their situation by constructing alternative family forms that often included a strong grandparent presence. The tradition of extended-familism was reinforced after the Civil War, as African-Americans in the southern states of the former Confederacy moved to the cities of the north in order to find work, often leaving children in the care of relatives (Jimenez, 2002).

This tradition is reflected in the proportion of African-American children being raised by grandparents. Nearly 12 percent of African-American children live in grandparent-headed households as compared to only 7 percent of Hispanic children and 4 percent of non-Hispanic white children. Nearly 1/3 of African-American children in grandparent-headed households live below the poverty line. Hispanic and non-Hispanic white children living in grandparent-headed households are also at risk of living in poverty; however, the proportion living in poverty is much lower than that of African-American children. So, not only are African-American children more likely to live in grandparent-headed households, they are also more likely to be living in poverty.

### **Grandparent Provided Care a Natural Duty and a Public Good**

Grandparents, particularly grandmothers, have long been a significant source of support for mothers rearing dependent children. Arguments have been made that this role is the product of an evolutionary selection process by which children whose grandmothers were both altruistic and lived relatively long past their reproductive years were more likely to survive than those without such grandmothers (Hawkes *et al.*, 1998).

In contemporary nations where families live in abject poverty, the very presence of maternal grandmothers still has a positive influence on nutrition and survival of grandchildren (Sear *et al.*, 2000).

In the developed world, grandparents are the natural buffers between parental inability to provide care and government assistance. Grandparent caregivers are often the last line of defense before placement of children into the foster care system. As such, the child care labor of grandparents save the public from outlaying vast sums of money that would have been devoted to public support of the vulnerable children under their charge (Hughes *et al.*, 2007). The economic value of grandparent-provided care, as calculated by Bass and Caro in 1996 and converted into current dollars, comes to between \$23.5 and \$39.3 billion annually; a figure, though not considered in the economic productivity of the nation, represents a substantial cost savings to the public coffer.

By almost every available measure, families in which children are being raised by grandparents are among the most vulnerable in the United States, over-

represented by single-mother and low income families who arrived at their status due to substance abuse, teen pregnancy, AIDS, and incarceration in the middle generation (Fuller-Thomson *et al.*, 1997; Dressel and Barnhill, 1994; Jendrek, 1994a; Minkler and Roe, 1993). Declines in the number of jobs that pay living wage and provide benefits have economically squeezed the working poor and middle-class families, such that they increasingly need to rely on extended family support. In the absence of low cost public alternatives, mothers who are employed full-time, particularly those of marginal means, are among those most likely to receive full-time child care from their parents (Vandell *et al.*, 2003).

Grandparent caregivers suffer higher than average rates of activity limitation (Minkler and Fuller-Thomson, 1999), chronic conditions (Strawbridge *et al.*, 1997), and poor subjective well-being (Minkler and Fuller-Thomson, 1999; Fuller-Thomson and Minkler, 2000). The children in their care are likely to have suffered from parental abuse, neglect, instability, and/or death and as a result may display high levels of behavioral problems (Billing *et al.*, 2002; Edwards, 2006), often compounded by high rates of poverty and inadequate housing conditions (Fuller-Thomson and Minkler, 2001, 2003; Minkler and Fuller-Thomson, 2005; Mutchler and Baker, 2004).

Although households consisting of single grandmothers raising grand-children have even higher rates of poverty than households consisting of single mothers and their children, the participation of caregiving grandparents in public assistance programs is relatively low (Brandon, 2005).

This suggests that government programs within the United States are not adequately addressing the needs of families in which children are raised by their grandparents, despite the fact that these children and their caregiving grandparents are among the most vulnerable in the nation. That families in the most need receive the fewest resources brings to mind the Matthew effect (Merton, 1968), or more specifically its corollary that those who have the least tend to also receive the least. In the following sections, we address some of the reasons for this pattern of accumulating disadvantage in grandparent-custodial families and grandparent-headed households in the United States.

### **Macro-Theoretical Perspectives**

We suggest two macro-level theoretical perspectives in social gerontology that may have utility for understanding the relatively new challenge of grandparent caregiving as it is situated within the larger context of the family and public policy in the United States. Taken together, these perspectives provide a theoretical framework with which to analyze the inadequacies of current policies with regard to grandparents raising grandchildren.

The first theoretical approach is that of “structural lag,” a central concept of the age and society paradigm (Riley and Riley, 1994). Deriving from the age and society paradigm in social gerontology, structural lag describes the interdependence of age cohorts and social structures, and particularly the asynchrony between



structural and individual change over time. Its major concept is that social structures cannot keep pace with population dynamics and changes in individual lives. That is, there is mismatch between people's capacities and needs and the surrounding societal structures that grant opportunities to express those capacities and meet those needs. Inadequate institutional response to the childcare needs of divorced, single parent, and dual earner couples is a prime example of structural lag, as is its sequelae, the grandmothers who are raising their grandchildren without the legal protections, benefits, and publicly recognized authority as parent. Policies are embedded in stable institutional and political arrangements that change slowly, and naturally fall behind the population changes that abruptly come into being based on relatively rapid economic and social shifts.

The second theoretical paradigm is the political economy of aging perspective (Estes, 2001; Phillipson, 2005). This perspective seeks to explain how the interaction of economic and political forces determines the unequal allocation of resources, and the consequent loss of power, autonomy and influence possessed by older individuals.

Variations in the treatment and status of those disadvantaged and marginalized by race, class, gender, and age—all relevant descriptors of the population of grandparents raising grandchildren—can be understood by examining public policies, economic trends, and social structural factors that constrain opportunities and choices over the life-span (Estes, 2001; Phillipson, 2005). As grandparent caregivers are overwhelmingly grandmothers, more than likely poor grandmothers, and proportionately over-represented by African-American grandmothers, it impossible to ignore the roles of race, class, and gender in the perpetuation of disadvantage within families, and its reproduction across generations.

Feminist theories of aging combine with political economy to treat differential access to key material, health, and caring resources which substantially alters the experience of aging for women and men (Arber and Ginn, 1995). For example, from a feminist perspective, family caregiving can be understood as an experience of obligation, structured by the gender-based division of domestic labor and the devaluing of unpaid work by public institutions (Stroller, 1993). Cultural expectations that grandmothers contribute to families as a matter of course with little need for institutional support, reflects a devaluation of poor women's domestic labor. Women remain the backbone of informal caring networks, but remain disadvantaged in their accumulation of work-related returns, as well as receipt of some public benefits (Heinz, 2003; Casper and Bianchi, 2002). Kin-work, for instance, does not add to labor force participation credits necessary for Social Security eligibility.

### **The American Model of Social Welfare**

Although grandchild care has become more visible in the past ten years, the issue as a public policy concern remains largely under the radar as reflected by lack of institutional recognition and support. To understand the failure of policy efforts on

behalf of grandparent caregivers, it is useful to situate the problem within the context of American values of individualism and self-reliance, and the preferred balance between public and private responsibilities. Ironically, grandparent caregivers receive fewer institutionally based supports than non-kin caregivers (Landry-Meyer, 1999), a consequence of US cultural and political norms that privilege voluntary family contributions and sharply divide private family functions from the public support sector. More generally, this divide highlights the peculiar approach of the US toward collective solutions to private troubles, and the view that government should minimize its intrusion into the private sphere of the family.

In the United States, a culture of competitive individualism has shaped Americans' attitudes toward the poor who are held responsible for their own destinies and as not having earned their right to long-term benefits (Newman, 1997; Kingson and Schulz, 1997; Cook and Barrett, 1992; Page and Shapiro, 1992). The relatively late and fragmented public response to the needs of the poor is rooted in the uniquely American approach to social welfare that includes an emphasis on private over public responsibility.

Consequently, there has been a great reluctance to intervene in the private nature of family life. Indeed, most policies in the United States are designed to serve the vulnerable at the point at which family and individual resources have been exhausted. These values were highlighted with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 (Public Law 104-193). This reform ended entitlement to welfare benefits and imposed strict requirements for receipt of benefits, including work requirements, time limits, and restrictions on the living arrangements of teen mothers.

To put the US family policy into sharp relief, one can look to the Scandinavian model of social welfare. Universal access to publicly financed low cost day care, free health care for children, and liberal parental leave benefits were instituted to reduce gender biases in the labor market, and have the unintended benefit of largely obviating the very need for grandparent caregiving. Most single mothers or grandmothers raising children can manage their lives more effectively and stay employed in the labor force because of the support provided by the state. In addition, liberal unemployment benefits and parental leave policies, and the treatment of drug and alcohol abuse as a medical (and less of a legal) problem, has reduced the need for grandparent caregiving. With this discussion as a framework, we examine policies (and lack thereof) that have directly or indirectly proven to disadvantage grandparent-headed families.

### **Policy Barriers, Gaps, and Unintended Consequences**

In this section we review several of the specific manifestations of the private/public divide in US policies toward families as they apply to the needs of grandparent caregivers. Currently, the policy environment is characterized by multiple examples of barriers to access, gaps in policy, and unintended consequences. In a nutshell, this represents the dominant paradigm in the United States designed to

protect the most vulnerable families from unexpected adverse risk; that is, *minimal benefits, provided within a fragmented system, to those highly motivated to apply for them.*

As mentioned above, grandparent caregivers have comparatively low receipt of public assistance despite high levels of poverty (Brandon, 2005). This is particularly true among caregivers raising grandchildren outside the child welfare system. Despite similarities in both type and level of need, caregivers whose children are not involved with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) are less likely to access formal services including respite care, public assistance, and legal advice (Goodman *et al.*, 2007). This suggests substantial barriers in access to public support among grandparent caregivers who are informally raising their grandchildren.

Strict eligibility requirements for public assistance may be prohibitive for many grandparent caregivers in the United States. Grandparents who are otherwise eligible to collect welfare based on their own income may be discouraged by the strict work requirements imposed by PWORA, either due to their prior exit from the labor force or because of their advancing age, poor health or functional status (Copen, 2006).

In addition, grandparents who received benefits while raising their own children may be ineligible to receive funding to raise their grandchildren if they have previously exceeded the time limits imposed by welfare reform (Smith and Beltran, 2003). Grandparents may be eligible to receive child-only payments that are exempt from these requirements; however, these benefits are much lower than family benefits (Smith and Beltran, 2003). As a consequence, the neediest families (e.g. chronically poor households) may actually be the least likely to receive benefits through this system.

Grandparents raising grandchildren have also reported much difficulty in obtaining health insurance for their grandchildren, especially those who do not have legal custody of the grandchild (Casper and Bryson, 1998; Jendrek, 1994b). Health insurance for children within the United States is obtained primarily through the employer of their primary caregiver, with the exception of children from low-income families who are often insured through a range of need-based public health insurance programs. Difficulties in obtaining adequate insurance have been widely documented within this system; however, the difficulties experienced by grandparents raising grandchildren have received little attention beyond a small circle of advocates, researchers, and academics.

Grandparents raising grandchildren who are retired (or otherwise not employed) are unlikely to have access to a reasonably priced group plan and may have to turn to an expensive private plan if the grandchild cannot be insured through a parent. Even grandparent caregivers who are employed may have difficulty obtaining benefits for a grandchild if their employer does not consider the grandchild a dependent. This situation is quite common among grandparents who are informally raising a grandchild; in fact, out of more than 50 companies surveyed by Generations United, none allowed grandparents to include grandchildren on a

health insurance plan unless a formal legal relationship had been established (Generations United, 2002).

Grandparents raising grandchildren are also at risk of living in inadequate housing conditions. Over 14 percent of grandparent caregivers live in overcrowded housing conditions, compared with just over 4 percent their peers; grandparents who rent have been identified as an especially vulnerable population as nearly 30 percent live in overcrowded conditions (Fuller-Thomson and Minkler, 2003). This level of overcrowding is not surprising considering that the entrance of the grandchild into the household can be unexpected and sudden; housing meant for one or two older adults suddenly has to fulfill the needs of a family. In recent years, many states have begun to introduce public housing specifically targeted at grandparent other relative caregivers. An example of this is Grandfamilies House in Dorchester, Massachusetts, a 26-unit housing project aimed at grandparents raising grandchildren (Gottlieb and Silverstein, 2003).

While programs such as this have been helpful in addressing the housing needs of grandparent caregivers, they are limited in scope and are only practical for those caregivers who have permanent custody of their grandchildren. As we will discuss in more detail below, many care arrangements are not this black and white constituting a major barrier to this type of housing. In fact, problems have been reported with these programs, including how to handle tenants who live in the housing project, but are no longer raising a grandchild (Gottlieb and Silverstein, 2003).

Current policies in the United States are not only restrictive in serving grandparent caregivers, they have also indirectly encouraged grandparent care-giving activities. Current policies regarding placement preferences of child welfare agencies, imprisonment for non-violent drug offenses, and welfare eligibility criteria either explicitly, or implicitly, rely on grandparents to take on a larger role in the lives of their grandchildren.

Grandparents have been identified as a preferable placement for children in the child welfare system, leading to a shift in the number of children placed in foster care as compared to the number placed in kinship care (Smith and Beltran, 2003). Clearly, this is in the best interests of most families, as well as for the foster care system. Unfortunately, although grandparent caregivers are raising children who would previously have been in the foster care system, they generally receive much lower benefits than their non-kin counterparts (Landry-Meyer, 1999). As a consequence, a large economic burden has shifted directly from the government to the family.

In addition, the incarceration rate has been steadily increasing in the United States over the past decade, particularly among women. The number of females in state or federal prison grew by nearly 20 percent between 2000 and 2006, while the number of females in local prisons grew by approximately 40 percent (Sabol *et al.*, 2007).

Much of this increase has been attributed to strict policies within the US regarding non-violent drug offenses and mandatory minimum sentencing (Bloom *et*

*al.*, 2004; Greenfeld and Snell, 1999). The majority of children with incarcerated mothers are cared for by grandparents; in fact, over half of children are in the care of their grandparents as compared to only 28 percent in the care of another parent and less than 10 percent in foster care (Mumola, 2000). In many cases, these grandparents may have prevented placement in the foster care system upon the imprisonment of the mother.

Welfare reform has also had several unintended consequences for grandparents raising grandchildren. As part of PRWORA, teen mothers are required to live an adult-supervised household in order to receive benefits (Eshbaugh, 2008; Smith and Beltran, 2003).

This reform was put in place primarily as a deterrent to teen pregnancy; however, this requirement essentially forced grandparents to take on partial or full parental responsibility for their grandchildren. While many grand-parents would have chosen this path regardless of the policies in place, this still represents a strong value statement; that is, if mothers are unable to fully provide for their children, it is the duty of grandparents to step in and fill those gaps before the government will provide supplemental support.

Welfare reform also imposed new work requirements and time limits on those receiving welfare benefits. Of interest in this discussion is the influence of the five year time-limit on benefits and welfare-to-work policies on the provision of grandparent care and the formation of multigenerational households. Unfortunately, little research has attempted to tie welfare reform to the provision of grandparent care and the formation of multi-generational households; therefore, we can only speculate as to the possible effects.

Given single mothers' heavy reliance on public assistance (Brandon, 2005) and the heavy reliance of low-income working mothers on grandparental assistance (Vandell *et al.*, 2003), it stands to reason that the work requirements of PWORA must have contributed to an increase in grandparent provided care, particularly that of full-time daycare. Similarly, it is unclear to what extent multigenerational households may have been formed to address:

- (1) work-family conflicts experienced by single mothers as a result of welfare work requirements and
- (2) loss of welfare benefits for those who either did not meet work requirements or became ineligible for benefits after five years in the system (the current time limit for receipt of cash benefits).

The formation of multigenerational households has long been a strategy used by families of low socioeconomic status to combat economic difficulties (Angel and Tienda, 1982); in fact, financial difficulties have been cited as a common reason for coresidence within three-generation families (Goodman and Silverstein, 2002).

## **The Continuum of Grandparent Care**

Why have effective grandparent caregiver policies been so difficult to develop? Whereas public policies are designed to categorically serve eligible beneficiaries, the category of grandparent caregivers often has ambiguous boundaries and is often transitional in nature. In part, difficulties in developing sensible policies to serve custodial grandparents must come to terms with the definition of the situation of these grandparents who are plagued by volatile, uncertain, and highly dynamic family conditions. Caregiving grandparents generally live in one of two household configurations:

- (1) skipped-generation households in which grandparents are raising grandchildren in the absence of the middle-generation, and
- (2) three-generation or co-parenting households in which a grandparent is raising a grandchild while co-residing with the middle-generation.

Assumptions are made about the type and level of care provided by the grandparent based primarily on residential circumstances of the grandchild's parent: Grandparents in skipped-generation households generally have the largest burden of care, while those in three-generation households are likely to be sharing parental responsibility with the parent. However, we argue that this categorization does not effectively address the complex system of parental and grandparental involvement in the provision of care.

The public often views grandparents raising grandchildren as distinct from "traditional" companionate grandparents. The role of "grandparent caregiver" conjures up images of the heroic grandmother who permanently steps into the parental role in the absence of the middle generation. To be sure, this is an accurate portrait of many grandparent caregivers. However, on closer examination, custodial grandparents reveal themselves to be part of a continuum of care that ebbs and flows with the needs and problems in the middle generation. Skipped generation households may become three-generation households and back again, and custodial grandparents may evolve into co-parents if adult children return or become more involved in child rearing, only to revert back to being in the custodial role.

There is evidence that in three-generation households, many grandparents take on a large share of parental responsibility, even claiming primary responsibility for grandchildren despite parental presence in the household (Lee *et al.*, 2005; Mutchler and Baker, 2004).

In some cases, parents may in fact be transient members of the household, while grandparents are the stable parental force within the household. In other cases, co-resident parents may be unable or unwilling to effectively contribute to parental responsibilities; examples of this may include developmental disability, teen pregnancy, drug/alcohol abuse, or incapacitation due to illness. A salient ex-

ample is the case of grandparents raising grandchildren as a result of the AIDS epidemic.

There is evidence that grandparents take on substantial responsibility for the children of HIV infected parents, including assuming custody, even while the parent is still alive (Cowgill *et al.*, 2007). Clearly, at least in the advanced stages of the disease, these grandparents are not sharing parental responsibility with co-resident parents; rather, they are simultaneously raising their grandchild and caregiving for their dying child.

Conversely, many skipped-generation households have a high level of contact with the parental generation. Nearly 2/3 of grandparents raising grandchildren in these households report at least daily contact with the parent (Baker, 2006).

Might this lead to shared parental responsibility, even in the residential absence of a parent? Data from the US Decennial Census reveals that there are a number of grandparents within skipped-generation households who do *not* claim primary responsibility for their co-resident grandchild(ren), despite a lack of other plausible caregivers within the household (Mutchler and Baker, 2004). Might the middle-generation in some of these households be parenting from a distance?

Prior research suggests that many grandparent care households may be formed in response to stagnant economic conditions—particularly in rural areas—in which the parents are not able to provide enough financial support for their dependent children. In some cases, the middle-generation may be forced to migrate to another state or region with higher employment and better educational opportunities (Kropf and Robison, 2004). In such instances, adult children will often send remittances to their parents to help out with their expenses and those of children in their care.

Finally, grandparents may also provide a substantial amount of care for grandchildren from outside the household. This is particularly common among African-American grandmothers who have been shown to report relatively high levels of parental responsibility for grandchildren regardless of co-residence (Lee *et al.*, 2005). Providing high levels of care for grandchildren from outside the household has been associated with increases in depressive symptoms (Minkler and Fuller-Thomson, 2001) and coronary heart disease (Lee *et al.*, 2003). Given these findings, it is clear that grandparents who provide high levels of care from outside the home may experience similar hardship as compared to custodial grandparent caregivers.

Complicating this issue is the fact that living arrangements within these households are quite often fluid and informally arranged. Grandparents raising grandchildren are likely to move in and out of the grandparent caregiver role throughout their life depending on the needs of adult children and grandchildren (Lee *et al.*, 2005). Due in part to this fluidity of household arrangements, grandparents raising grandchildren often do not have a formal legal relationship with their grandchild, creating challenges when navigating the complex bureaucracies that involve the schooling, health care, and income maintenance benefits for the child (Landry-Meyer, 1999).

## **Discussion**

In this article we discussed several of the structural and ideological barriers to effectively serving grandparents who are raising their grandchildren within the United States. We are unabashed in acknowledging that these often heroic grandparents, mostly grandmothers, perform a public function that deserve state support. From a conservative perspective, public support would strengthen families and potentially increase the healthy development of two generations with long-term cost benefits.

Given the current economic and political environment within the United States, the current style of advocacy is likely the most expedient route to provide needed services for grandparent caregivers. But is this method a bit like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole? Given that family structures are changing and multigenerational households are becoming more common, can we really continue with policies that do not recognize this diversity?

Definitions of “the family” that idealize past, and most likely forgone, kinship structures impede the development of policies that serve families as they are currently configured. Conceptions of the modal family as nuclear with two opposite-sex parents and dependent children is now outdated, and policies based on this model are bound to under-serve families with alternative structures. Families under stress and duress adapt by expanding beyond the nuclear family structure to involve a variety of kin and non-kin relationships.

This shifting nature of family types makes policy formation difficult, particularly in the United States given the strict eligibility requirements for many public programs. Revising stagnant social policies toward families will require a re-definition of the family to one that is less bound by residence and biology, to one based more on function. Is this possible in the short-term?

While a culture change in the US is certainly possible, it will be slow in coming. A more pragmatic strategy to produce more immediate results would be to offer policies that are isomorphic with current cultural values. Following are a set of policy recommendations for maximizing support available to grandparent caregivers that respond to these changing realities, but that are also sensitive to the American social and political context.

Since many grandparents raising grandchildren are currently working, they may experience high levels of work/family conflict. Consequently, one of the most widely reported needs of grandparent caregivers is that of respite care, a service that has relatively low cost. Government can provide incentives to employers who offer flexible work schedules and conditions to accommodate workers who have family care responsibilities. A family-leave policy that does not explicitly or implicitly penalize workers for taking time off to care for family members should be promoted, recognizing that relief for caregivers provides real benefits for the workplace by increasing worker productivity, for society by advancing equity for the working poor, and for the family by promoting the healthy development of all generations in the family.



Policies that require little programmatic interventions include providing economic relief through tax credits, or by paying caregivers directly for their services at a rate commensurate with foster care. Paying caregivers, despite claims of its inefficiency in paying family members for what they would do for free anyway, may be successful at reducing burdens faced by grandparent caregivers, reinforce their good will, and contribution to child welfare.

Countervailing trends are formidable. In most Western nations there has been a retrenchment of social welfare programs, as governments seek to reduce their commitments to the dependent population and shift more responsibility to families (Parrott *et al.*, 2000, O’Rand, 2003).

The role of government in providing for its most vulnerable citizens has tended to weaken (Estes, 2003; Phillipson, 2003). Policymakers are under increasing pressure to apply market principles in the design of social policies while placing restrictions on public welfare programs. Macro-economic restructuring and trends toward the individualization of risk (O’Rand, 2003) have permeated all social institutions, creating tensions between public and private sources of support for the vulnerable of society (Giddens, 1991).

However, there are promising signs at the grass-roots level. The issue of grandparents raising grandchildren has initiated a public dialogue among older persons, service providers interest groups, and policy researchers, leading to a range of community support programs and nascent advocacy groups. On balance, we see more hope for optimism than for pessimism with regard to advancing the social benefits that might become available to families in which grandparents are raising their grandchildren.

This issue has attracted the attention of aging service professionals, leading to the involvement of the federal Administration on Aging and several interest groups, including AARP and Generations United. Cooperation between researcher, practitioner, and advocacy communities resulted in a variety of community, state, and federal programs, most notably provisions for grandparent caregivers through the 2000 amendments to the Older Americans Act under the National Family Caregiver Support program. This program now provides funding for respite care, support groups, and other services relevant to grandparents raising grandchildren (Smith and Beltran, 2003), a direct result of the efforts of grandparent caregiver advocates.

Clearly, significant advances have been made in meeting the needs of grandparent caregivers thanks to the work of these advocates; however, much still needs to be done in developing family policies that are capable of benefiting all generations in all types of families.

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# Intergenerational Support and Retired People's Housing Decision in China

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## **Abstract**

Younger people being less supportive to their elderly has been interpreted as shifting away from the traditional intergenerational relationship in the literature of aging on East Asian countries, including China (Vos and Lee, 1993; Chee, 2000; Leung, 2004; Zeng and Wang, 2004). However, this argument is largely based on the assumption that elderly people should be respected and cared for in the traditional societies. The author of this paper studies the changes in the patterns of intergenerational support with reference to housing in China and finds that the supportive relationship in elderly people's housing decisions responds to the on-going social and economic changes. If we do not only focus on what the elderly have received, then family tie has actually been strengthened.

**Keywords:** Social policy, China, housing, intergenerational support, socio-economic changes.

A lot of attention has been given to the need for care (Li and Li, 1997; Zhang and Zhang, 2002) and community services (Wang, 1997) when people try to study housing for the elderly in China. In the last decade, China's housing market has largely been privatized and cities are experiencing major changes in many aspects: landscape, demographic and household structures, urban labor market and the welfare system. All these changes have led to fundamental changes in the life of urban people, including the elderly.

In this paper, the author focuses on retirees' housing decision in China from the perspective of intergenerational support and argues that intergenerational support has played an important part in elderly retirees' housing decision. In this way, the apparently household level decisions are actually decisions that include resources and interests of the extended families. Therefore, housing market demand related to elderly is not only directly resulted from the elderly people's home buying decisions, but also indirectly from the support of elderly to the younger generation. Given the aging population, the direct and indirect participation of elderly people in the housing market should have great influence on the housing supply, neighborhood formation and the ways different social groups interact. What is more, it sheds light on the way social welfare and social support is utilized and organized in the extended family. Therefore, it is very important to understand the housing decisions of elderly people and the factors behind it. The role of inter-

generational support may have its cultural roots, but may also closely relate to the ongoing social economic changes in Chinese cities.

In the following parts of this paper, the author first develops a framework to identify the forces behind intergenerational support in retirees' housing decisions and then uses a case study carried out in Tianjin, China, in 2007 to illustrate different types of intergenerational support that have affected elderly people's housing decisions.

## **Literature on Intergenerational Support and Housing Decision of the Elderly**

### *Intergenerational Support*

In East Asian countries, intergenerational support seems to have been institutionalized through moral teaching, such as respecting the elderly and supporting the elderly. In a sense, supporting the elderly when they become old has been labeled as one of the key values in East Asian culture. In this way, the less support for the elderly becomes a symbol of the conflict between Western and Confucius ideals and the crossroad for East Asian culture (Martin, 1990; Sung, 2000).

However, focusing on elderly people's needs for help only cannot provide a comprehensive picture. The "cultural change" theory based on less support to the elderly exaggerates the reduced role of family. What is more, the massive "cultural changes" happening in Mainland China and the rest of the East Asian countries and regions are not really comparable. Clearly in China the post Communist society is not a good representative of Confucius value system.

Another approach is to treat intergenerational support as being in multiple forms and directions (Eggebeen and Hogan, 1990; Bengtson and Roberts, 1991; Eggebeen and Wilhelm, 1995). Silverstein *et al.* (1997) used an intergenerational solidarity model to show six dimensions of intergenerational support: structure, association, affect, consensus, function, and norms. The prevailing forms and directions of support in a society are determined by the changing circumstances of the parents and children. The circumstances can be a result of demographic, economic and social changes. Intergenerational support, therefore, is a response to the changed circumstances (Biddlecom *et al.*, 2003: 186). This line of argument basically treated intergenerational support as a response of the family to the ongoing social changes. It is useful for understanding both the East Asian countries and the West.

Then a question needs to be answered: Is the reduced support for elderly in East Asian countries in reality a shift in the direction of support? In this paper, the author uses housing in China as an example to see whether this is the case.



### *Elderly People's Housing Decisions in Developed Countries*

Intra-urban migration theory summarizes the pull and push factors of housing relocation of the elderly. Wiseman and Roseman (1979) integrated gerontology theory and migration theory to create a framework for examining the decision making processes of intra-urban migration by elderly people.

They categorized the intra-urban migration of elderly into suburbanization, inner city relocation, apartmentalization, homes of kin and institutionalization. It is a combined framework that includes the aging process and choices made during a person's life course.

Other empirical research examined the willingness to move and the choice of destination. Feinstein and McFadden (1987) found that, as people become older, wealthier households are less likely to move and to downsize. Changes in family composition or retirement status can affect a household's decision to move.

Feinstein (1996) improved his models on housing mobility in response to health status changes and found that when health deteriorated, housing choices of the elderly change accordingly. Walker (2004) suggested that the elderly do not sell their houses frequently. Single households' housing sale is largely driven by health problems. Widowhood, family wealth and tax incentives all play a part in housing sales. Among married households, housing decisions are financially motivated. Erickson *et al.* (2006) analyzed the moving potentials and actual moving plans and found that people who actually consider moving make the decision based on dissatisfaction with existing housing conditions. However, when they talk about the potential causes of moving, they are more likely to refer to deteriorating health.

There were also researches on the reasons for the reluctance for the elderly people to move (Reschovsky, 1990). It can be emotional attachment to their home (Krout *et al.*, 2002), familiarity with existing life style (Biggs *et al.*, 2001) and social support (Sugihara and Evans, 2000), including preference to community characteristics (Lucksinger, 1994; Kingston *et al.*, 2001) and location to family and friends (Krout *et al.*, 2002).

Similarly, choices of destination are also related to the above mentioned features. Eckert and Murrey (1984) criticized that earlier research of elderly housing focused too much on individual choice, adaptation and functioning in a particular micro-environment. As a result, the difference between personal preference and resource constraints is blurred. They argued that preferences should be considered in conjunction with enablement. VanderHart (1995) suggested that demographic considerations may be more important than financial considerations in an elderly person's decision to move.

However, VanderHart (1998) later found that economic factors such as income and financial assets are more important to the housing decisions of elderly people than previous analyses have suggested. Andrew and Wilson (1992) suggested that there is a preference for remaining in one's own home in the current suburb, a second preference for a hostel in the current suburb and a third preference for a home in another suburb or a hostel in another suburb. They also found that

within groups, the distinction between the physical and social aspects is maintained. Streib *et al.* (2007) showed the benefit of leisure-oriented retirement communities' ability to adjust to changes in both the housing market and the needs and preferences of residents. As a result, given the financial and social pressures, these communities turn out to be relatively stable and autonomous.

Except for the impact of urban regeneration, which usually involves forced relocation, elderly housing decisions were largely treated as decisions made by the elderly themselves. Occasionally, there are linkages between elderly and their children. For example, elderly might move closer to their children or closest kin so that they can be in a friendlier environment and cared if necessary (Monk and Kaye, 1991; Burman, 1996) or the elderly may pay the down payments for their children as first time buyers (Engelhardt and Mayer, 1998).

### *Housing Decisions of the Chinese Elderly*

Discussions on the parent-children relationship and aging society have been focused on the shortage of care and the possibility of independent living.

There were also sociological researches on living arrangement between Chinese elderly and their children. Logan *et al.* (1998) found that in some ways co-residence was consistent with traditional patterns and it responded more clearly to parents' needs than to children's needs. Cooney and Shi (1999) studied the living arrangement of elderly people with data collected in 1987. They found that a majority of elderly would prefer to live with their married son and grandchildren in their old age. They would expect their sons' family to take care of them when they became older. The analysis suggests the role of urban economic changes, one child policy, household registration system and the pension reform in reinforcing the patrilineal extended family system.

Ng *et al.* (2002) examined the role of traditional value in Hong Kong and found: "Traditional Confucian filial piety may be undergoing modification, perhaps erosion, implying ongoing changes in intergenerational relations in this modernizing Asian society." Chui (2001) also attributed the marginalized position of the elderly people for both the regeneration led urban sprawl and the reduced respect of the younger generation to the elderly.

Is Mainland China also experiencing similar transition? Zeng and Wang (2004) used 2000 Census data and showed that there was a dramatic increase in independent living of the elderly comparing to the earlier data. Their explanation is that declined fertility and changed social attitudes and economic mobility all contributed to the reduced co-residence of old parents and adult children in 2000. Ikels (2004) studied the impact of housing reform on housing tenure of elderly people in cities in the Mainland China. The results suggest that housing ownership had increased significantly since the reform. These findings suggest that elderly people have become less "needy" in terms of housing arrangement. Does this mean that intergenerational relations have also changed? Then what are the changes in

terms of housing decisions of the elderly and what are the factors behind these changes?

In this paper, the author examines why and how the elderly pensioners are no longer at the receiving end of the intergenerational relationship and show that they are active givers and intergenerational support has become a major part in their housing decisions.

### **Intergenerational Housing Support and Demographic, Social and Economic Changes**

There are several changes in the Chinese society that might lead to changes in the intergenerational support through housing arrangements.

#### *The One Child Policy and Aging*

The One Child Policy has not only changed the demographic structure of the urban society and led to population aging, but also fundamentally affected the relationship between parents and children. The centre of attention of an extended family has shifted from the old to the young (Kane and Choi, 1999). The support from the elderly is not only intended to benefit the second generation, but also to the grandchildren. The result is not limited to financial benefits for the children. As Chen and Silverstein (2000) observed that offering instrumental support to children has greatly enhanced the psychological well-being of urban elderly.

#### *Changing Urban Social Welfare System*

The changing welfare system raises several challenges. The first is that under the unemployment pressure, the official retirement ages in cities are set quite young. As a result, most people stop working at the age of 60 and have many years to come after retirement. So far the pension system covers all formally retired people reaching the official retirement age.

Pensioners can get by without worrying about their source of income. The state pension is increased overtime to catch up with the inflation rate. There are reform schemes to require people to contribute for at least 15 years to the pension social insurance before they are entitled to state pension. But this will not be applied to the existing retirees.

The second is the privatization of childcare in cities and long working hours of the employed, including married women (Brinton *et al.*, 1995). The sharp rising childcare costs have driven young working parents to increasingly resort to grandparents for childcare (Chen *et al.*, 2000) or even house chores.

The yet developed healthcare system to some extent facilitates the support which will potentially exhaust the savings if someone becomes seriously ill. In exceptional circumstances, even people who are covered by public health, partial personal contribution are unavoidable to most people. Healthcare is potentially a

drain for household resources even for the relatively better off people. This has potentially two impacts:

- (1) even well covered pensioners are willing to invest their savings to earn money, and
- (2) the devotion to good health by the elderly is even stronger. This can be detected through the willingness to be engaged in physical activities, such as community sports and taking care of grandchildren.

All these factors work together make it feasible and acceptable for retirees to get actively involve in their children's life in different ways.

### **Housing Market Transition**

China had a public housing system during the Central Planning Era in which urban citizens could either acquire housing from their employer or local authorities when certain conditions were met (Logan *et al.*, 1999). The allocated houses were owned by employers or local states. Occupants had to pay rent. They would be able to occupy the houses for the rest of their life. After the occupants passed away, the houses should be returned to their employers. In many occasions, the children of the existing occupants could inherit the right to occupy (Wang and Murie, 1999).

This housing system did not end as the Central Planning Era ended. State sector employers were still required to allocate houses to their employees until the late 1990s. Starting from 1998, the state officially abandoned the practice of requiring state enterprises to allocate houses to their employees. It is true that even to this day some employers continue to do so. But housing allocation has become a way to attract qualified employees rather than state command (Smith, 2003). Also, previously allocated houses were allowed to be sold to the existing occupants at heavily discounted rate.

As a result, owner occupation has become the most important type of tenure in cities (Wang and Murie, 2000). This reform boosted the development of a mixed housing market. Most types of houses, including the newly-built and the allocated houses, can be traded. Non-privatized houses can be sold for the right to occupation only. At the same time, private rental market and second hand housing market appeared.

The transition has positive impacts on the housing of retired people. Most retired people who worked during the housing allocation period should have received some sort of housing support from their employers or the local state, not only senior employees, but also people who were in housing poverty. The allocated properties can be useful for the holders to further move up the housing ladder in the marketized housing system. Sometimes, the allocated houses are turned into pri-

vately owned houses at great discount, or rented out, or sold in order to fund for new houses (Logan *et al.*, 1999; Huang and Clark, 2002; Zhou and Logan, 2002).

The legacy of the planning system made it a reality that the elderly is better resourced than their children in the urban housing market. If they are willing to support their children, it is often possible.

### **Urban Regeneration**

The fast urban growth causes major changes in the urban landscape. Housing price in urban centre has increased dramatically overtime. The value of old residential neighborhoods to businesses increases as land price in the centre grows. As a result, old neighborhoods packed with low-income residents, are transformed either into expensive housing blocks or into commercial properties. Existing residents are mostly moved to newly built neighborhoods which are further away from the city centre or allowed to move back to the original place but pay extra money (Wu, 2002).

Housing for retired elderly people also changes accordingly. The massive urban regeneration means that whenever displacement happens, it is mostly forced (Wu, 2004). Therefore, for the elderly who happen to live in the targeted areas of regeneration, whether to move or stay is less likely to be a choice.

What the existing residents can decide is where to go after their house is demolished. They may prefer quieter environment and more open space with fresh air than to bustling urban life; or they may choose to live closer to their children. The relocation decision can be made with their children's needs and their own needs in mind.

### **Urban Economic Situations**

Many cities had suffered from serious unemployment at the end of last century and the beginning of this century when the state sector laid off workers in large scales. Most of these people were in their 40s and 50s. The prospect of their re-employment is bleak (Hung and Chiu, 2003). In the family with unemployed people, financial pressure can be high. Parents are the prime source of support. In the 2000s, it is not rare that young people including university graduates become unemployed straight after school. Before they can establish, they become dependent on their parents. They will often live with their parents, often without getting married, and count on their parents' income (Bai, 2006).

### **Cultural Changes**

The traditional culture of the man's family providing housing for the newly-weds returned after the economic reform. During the Central Planning Era, the custom almost died out because housing was not available through market transactions. These days, the bride's family demanding housing provision by future husband's

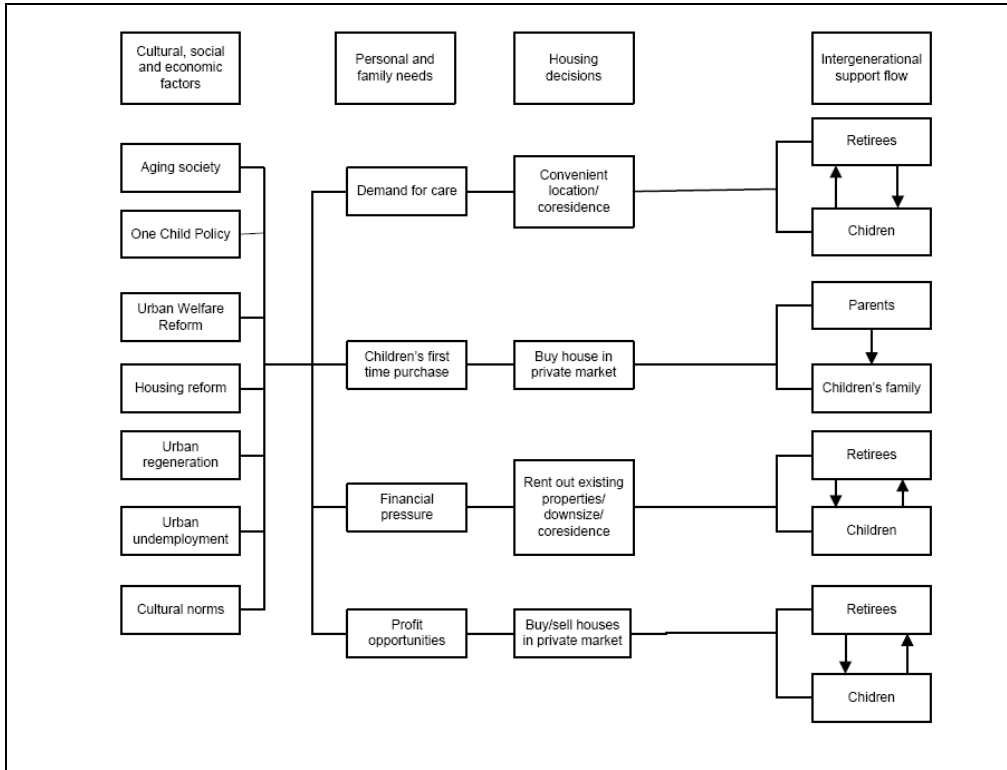
parents has become the norm. Unless the young couples can afford housing on their own, they usually depend on the men's parents. As a result, parents started saving for their son's housing when they are still working. Intergenerational transfer of property or money take place at the time of the young couple's wedding. It is not uncommon that the parents are already retired when the children get married.

### **Intergenerational Support in the Housing Market**

The implication of these changes can be cash flow, service flow or even asset flow from parents to children; or relocation plans taking the needs of the extended families into account. In this sense, the usual treatment of elderly people as the receivers of care can only be part of the whole story about intergenerational support.

Therefore, the shrinking household size and stronger willingness to live independently are far from sufficient for drawing the conclusion that family ties are less strong in the rapidly modernizing Chinese society than in the past. On the contrary, examining housing demand expressed by or through the elderly via intergenerational support provides a good angle to show the actual relationship between elderly parents and their children.

### **Figure 1: Intergenerational Support Through Housing Decisions of the Retirees**



In this paper, “intergenerational support” means that elderly people using housing arrangement to tackle housing and other difficulties faced by the family as a whole. Household strategies are used to analyze the housing choice by rural to urban migrants in the research on China (Duda and Li, 2008). It focuses on the labor division between the man and the woman in a household. Unlike household strategies, intergenerational support involves the relationship between two generations, parents and their children and is inter-households. Two or even more households are involved.

Figure 1 summarizes the relationships discussed earlier. The column under the intergenerational support flow shows the direction of support. As we can see, it can be in both directions.

### The Research Findings in Tianjin

The research took place in Tianjin, the People’s Republic of China. Tianjin is a city of 11 million registered long-term residents. At the beginning of November 2005, there were 1.31 million children aged 0-14 (12.6 percent of the total), 8.1 million people 15-64 (77.72 percent) and one million people older than 65 (9.68 percent) (Tianjin Statistics Bureau, 2006). The trend of aging is not difficult to observe. In 1953, there were 213.5 thousand (5.22 percent) people older than 60. In 2000, the

number of people over 60 increased to 1.24 million (12.73 percent). If we only look at people above 65, in 1995, 8.15 percent of the total population was above 65. It reached 8.33 percent by 2000. By 2005, it reached 9.97 percent of the total population (Zhang, 2006).

The researcher used in depth interviews with 28 households headed by pensioners over 60. The interviews were carried out during October and December 2007 with an open-end schedule. The interviewees were selected through snow-balling procedure. The interviews took place at the interviewees' home. The interviewees were guaranteed anonymity.

The respondents' housing conditions varied greatly. But in general, houses with shared facilities are no longer very common among households. Private ownership is the dominant form of tenure (cf Table 1). The average house size is 70 square meters ranging from 30 to 130 square meters. 57 percent of the respondents moved after retirement. Seven percent of the people still live in employer provided houses.

**Table 1: Housing**

	Counts	%
Housing type	31*	
Room(s) with shared facility	2	7
Living with children	2	3
One bedroom flat	6	20
Two bedroom flat	8	27
Three bedroom flat	10	33
Four bedroom flat	1	3
More than one properties	2	7
Tenure	31*	
Owner occupation	20	65
Employer owned	7	23
State owned	3	10
Private rental	1	3
Moved after retirement	28*	
Yes	16	57
No	12	43
Average size	69.8 sq.m.	

Note: \* The totals do not match the household numbers because there are cases in which parents living together with children and rented their own flat out.

Sources: Tianjin interviews (2007).

## The Tianjin Interviews Identified Several Forms of Intergenerational Support



The first is related to care arrangement. In the Tianjin sample, the care arrangement of elderly is no longer the same as earlier literature on the data collected in the 1980s suggested. Even among the old-old, the three households that are headed by elderly in their 80s, the respondents are living independently from their children. They are not willing to move in with their children, even if their own living condition may not be very desirable.

They prefer to live on their own and are happy that their children can come around to visit them regularly. They are all financially independent. Among all the interviewees, it is very rare that parents live together with their children. It is not uncommon that elderly parents get involved in the care of grandchildren or even do house chores for children's family. In order to carry out these activities, some retired parents moved or opted to relocate close to their children when they are forced to move because of regeneration.

The second is children's marriage. The ending of public housing allocation means that young people can only rely on the private market to satisfy their housing needs. In the past, young people could always join the waiting list at work. Therefore, under the public housing system, it was not uncommon for young people to live with their parents even after they got married. The anticipation was that temporary sufferings from over-crowdedness would be helpful for the young to qualify housing allocation. In many cases, the temporary arrangement was prolonged. These days, the roles of the state and employers in housing provision are marginalized. Although in general, market has become the only most important housing provider, when we try to look at housing provision for young couples from the household's perspective, market is rarely the solution for them. It is very difficult for young people with little work experience to be able to afford housing in the private market.

The feasible temporary solution in the past cannot help anymore. Children were reluctant to live with their parents when they get married (Huang, 2003). In Tianjin, the man's parents are expected to contribute in cash or in kind to help a young couple's housing. Boys whose parents cannot afford to buy housing for their children may end up not being able to get married. In the Tianjin sample, 15 out of the 28 families have contributed fully or partially to their son's housing. In several cases, it caused the parents to relocate to a smaller house or a more remote location. Girls are expected to leave home when they are married.

There is only one case that the parents live together with the children's family as a result of the son's marriage. This is only because the parents could not afford another new flat for the second son after buying a new flat for the eldest son. Luckily the parents' own flat is not too small and the two families now share the flat. An extreme case is that the son decided not to get married because the parent (a single woman) cannot afford to buy a flat for him.

The third type is generating cash flow for both the elderly and their children. This can be a result of financial need. The economic reform has led to massive unemployment in the city. However, starting from 2005, pension rate has increased by 42 percent. By the end of 2007, the average pension level reached 1200 yuan per

month (Zou, 2008). In comparison, the average income of full time employees is 2719 yuan per month.

At the same time, at the beginning of 2007, there are about 130,000 unemployed people in their 40s and 50s. Although the government offered public employment opportunities to help these people to get back to work, the income of these re-employed people is less than half of the average pension rate (Tianjin Bureau of Labor and Social Security, 2007).

What is more, in recent years, young people including university graduates can become unemployed after they complete education. In many families, younger people are dependent on their parents. Using equity to support unemployed children is a straight forward solution to many parents. In the Tianjin sample, there are two cases of parents moving in with children's family and rent out their own properties to generate monthly cash flow. The parents use the rents to subsidize their children's living costs. There are also two cases that the children's family become totally dependent on their parents.

Intergenerational support can also be in the form of speculation in the housing market to generate more property. There are cases when parents and children jointly invest in the housing market to make profits. In Tianjin, sometimes, the parents and the children share the ownership. Sometimes, mortgage is obtained in the child's name and the parents pay for the property. It is because retirees are not qualified for mortgage even if they are actually able to buy. The implicit agreement is that if the elderly pass away in the future, the children will continue to pay off the debt and keep the house for themselves.

## Conclusion

This paper examines the intergenerational support between retirees and their children in the city of Tianjin. The author argues that treating elderly people as dependents may easily lead to the conclusion that family ties are weaker than in the past. However, when we also take into account of the cash or property flows from parents to children, intergenerational support is, to some extent, strengthened. This is a result of various demographic, social and economic changes.

When the state is no longer the lifetime job and welfare provider for the public, intergenerational support plays a stronger role and began to respond to the changing earning ability of parents and children. The Tianjin study confirms that parents support their children even in their old age. The support is not limited to offering care to family members, but also about young people's marriage, generating cash flow and joint investment.

This research findings in Tianjin fits into the existing literature on intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson and Roberts, 1991). Parents and children exchange practical, financial and social support to each other. It also fits into the path of some developing countries that is experiencing reversed flow of family support: i.e. from upward flow to parents to downward flow to children (Lee *et al.*, 1994).

However, it is still difficult to tell whether the reversed supporting relationship is going to last. Several factors may change the situation:

1. The continuing aging process might gradually relieve the urban housing pressure in the long run and therefore drives down the average housing price in the city. However, the reduced housing demand should not be exaggerated because it might be countered by the urbanization process which brings in large number of young workers from rural areas
2. At the moment, the support from the elderly is very effective when welfare housing allocated during the Central Planning era still bring profits to the elderly. However, when the benefits of the past diminish over time, it will be more difficult for future retirees to cash in the benefits in the private market.

The findings of this paper provoke future research in several directions. The in-depth interviews in Tianjin only include a small number of interviewees. Therefore, the results should not be over generalized.

Research at a larger scale should be helpful in exploring the extent to which the intergenerational support has changed direction. Also, it is important to note that pensioners are not the most disadvantaged in the Chinese cities. When the people now in their 40s and 50s retire, they will be an important reference group for understanding the impact of economic transition and housing decisions of the retirees.

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# God, Culture, and Old Age: Social Constructions of Gerontological Experience in a Muslim Society

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## **Abstract**

The paper explores the social constructions of “gerontological experience” in the context of Muslim society, particularly Pakistan. Old-age occupies a socially significant mode of collective experience through which social continuity of tradition as well as practice is communicated to the posterity. It is predominantly associated with wisdom, self-poise and benevolence in the general social experience of the society. The “old” is looked upon as the cultural repositories of knowledge, experience and historical connectivity. The “gerontological experience” is deeply embedded in the social structure of the family, wherein the process of “aging” is taken as natural and social given to be revered by the young ones and joyfully lived by the “old.” The social perception of being an “oldman” as a meaningful construct in the society is derived from the unique spiritual, ontological and historical symbolism of the society and its continued traditions of such forms of social legitimization. Finally the paper concludes with a contemporary redefinition of the “gerontological experience” amidst the emerging “technological” transformation currently experienced by the society and future shape of social recontextualization of the “old-age” facing new social scenarios.

Keywords: Gerontology, Pakistan, Islam, culture, old age.

## **Perspectives on Aging**

The recent gerontological literature affords variety of perspectives on the nature of aging in human societies. Naftali Raz (2000) has investigated in detail the, “anatomical and physiological characteristics of the aging brain” and its varied consequences for the aged members of the society.

The scientific evidence sufficiently demonstrates the genetic and biological basis of aging process and its effect on memory, general behavior and social performance of the aging people in the later part of the lifespan (Prull *et al.*, 2000; Salthouse, 1991; Clark, 2002; Ben-Sira, 1991; Schaie, 1989). Their studies show that there exist strong biological and cognitive correlates to aging phenomenon in

human beings. McClearn (2000) has further suggested that, “single major genes have identified whose associated phenotypes are describable as accelerated senescence.” Psychological perspective captures another important dimension of aging agents in human societies.

This technique seeks to understand, “changes in behavior that characteristically occur after young adulthood. Behavior in this sense includes sensation, perception, learning, memory, intellect, motivation, emotion, personality, attitudes, motor movement, and social relationships” (Whitbourne, 1996; Glicksman, 2000).

Furthermore, Findlay and McLaughlin (2005) have remarked that psychological approach tries to investigate, “how older people respond via behavior, feelings and emotions to changes in their environment, a key mediating factor being the individual attributes of the older person” (cf e.g. also Ward *et al.*, 1988).

The relevance of psychological processes influencing the behavioral life of aging agents can be interpreted differently within the sub-cultural contexts as well as across human cultures. For example the images of older woman in the Western societies and elsewhere in the world vary sharply and contradict the dominant paradigms of mainstream gerontology.

The feminist critique of women by writers such as Colette Browne *et al.* (1998), Rhonda Nay (1999), and Margaret Sargent (1999) have clearly exposed the inadequacies of mainstream (in the words of Margaret Sargent, “malestream approaches to gerontology”) gerontological discourse of Western sociological thinking. Margaret Sargent (1999) has taken a critical view of this “malestream gerontology” and remarks on its effects in the following words:

“These effects include the devaluation of older women in the general social discourse and in government social policy toward women, the sexist and age related attitudes that accompany discriminatory behavior and the idea that there is something abnormal about being old that legitimizes a medical takeover of our lives and the medicalization of aging itself.”

This “objectvization” of aging people, particularly women, she claims to be the direct consequence of the “philosophy of *positivism*” (italics in original text) underlying and shaping much of the Western epistemological assumptions about the nature of natural world as well as social world. The feminist rejection of “scientist-observer” duality during the act of knowing and emphasis on the inevitable contextuality and constructivism of all human knowledge needs to be given due place in the new sociological discourse on aging, not only in West but elsewhere in the world (Sargent, 1999; Irigaray cited in Sargent, 1999; deBeauvoir cited in Frey Waxman, 1990).

The social interpretation of old age based on “binary oppositions of youth and age” needs to be dissolved and instead create, in the words of Barbara Frey Waxman (1990), more “positive associations with age and even a new space where age is no longer an element of identity: an ageless utopia.” She proposes a kind of, “reifungsroman, or fiction of ripening” to invent a new social discourse on old.

The “ageless utopia,” which Frey Waxman seeks through creating new meaningful old age social interpretations, is not going to emerge from some sort of wonder medicine or a reprogrammed gene. It is to be reinterpreted and rediscovered by a new constructivist shift both in the perceptions as well as meanings of old age in human societies. Despite mainstream social negativity about the place and space of the older people in the society, there is a growing intellectual shift towards more enlightened forms of social gerontology and redefined social imagery of the old. Hareven (1995), for example speaks about the “changing images of aging and the social construction of lifecourse.” He further asserts that “the recognition of old age as a unique stage of life in the twentieth century is part of a larger historical process involving the emergence of new stages of life and their societal recognition.” Old age is not about defacing or bony and skeletal looks, weak muscle and eroding memory; it constitutes a “new stage” in a socially lived and situated life course.

Hareven (1995) concludes after Stanely Hall that rather than, “viewing old age as a period of decline and decay” one must look upon it as, “a stage of development in which passion of youth and the efforts of a life career had reached fruition and consolidation.” One’s philosophical reasons can always swing from “death twitches my ear” to longevity and “you must die,” but it is the ultimate picture of social life, which gives meaning, significance to and shapes our attitudes and responses to how we interpret and construct a picture of old age and aging agents in a broader networks of social relationships (Overall, 2003; Atwood, 1997; Nussbaum and Coupland, 2004; Hummert and Nussbaum, 2001; Haper, 2004). Human beings may not find the mythic “Spring of Youth,” but can always learn and live through the wisdom of the age(s) (Nussbaum and Coupland, 2004).

The social construction of old age, whether by “photographic images,” “linguistic changes,” “places and spaces of uses and social interaction of aging agents with younger people of the society” or the “communication and emotions;” all are rooted in the peculiar cultural assumptions and sociological interpretations of the culture (Bytheway and Johnson, 2005; Andrews and Philips, 2005; Hepworth, 1998, 2004; Nussbaum and Coupland, 2004; Shore, 1996, Shenk, 1994).

Therefore, a strict “positivistic” and universalistic description of gerontological experience might be liable to conceptual as well as cultural limitations. This inevitably leads one to explore the experience of aging in a “multidimensional” context of disciplinary inquiries (Kontos, 2005). Kontos therefore seeks “multi-disciplinary configurations in gerontology” and outlines the theoretical framework of such a quest in the following words:

“It is now argued that the myriad personal, existential, cultural and political issues involved in aging, as well as the plural and contradictory and enigmatic meanings of aging, require the pioneering efforts of those who cross disciplinary boundaries and engage in multiple areas of knowledge production” (Kontos, 2005: 24).

The “multidimensional” understanding of gerontological experience assumes further significance due to peculiar policy implications arising out of the political economy of aging as well as ethical considerations relating to older members of the society (cf e.g. Achenbaum, 1999; Olson, 1982).

The social concerns regarding well being, care and integration of the older people are closely connected with not only socially constructed imagery of old in different cultures but are also influenced by the changing views on aging agents (Cohler *et al.*, 1996; Glicksman, 2000). The concepts such as “life course,” “life-span,” “successful aging” and “positive aging” are all indicators of emerging alternatives on social interpretations of aging agents in a new sociological perspective (Ward *et al.*, 1988; McKay and Caverly, 2004; Minichiello and Couls on, 2005). These perspectives guide the new social inquires on aging agents questioning the earlier scientific and quantitative models of aging (McKay and Caverly, 2004).

Old age constitutes a mark of “social identity” related to particular social time-space of gerontological experience (Woodward, 2003; Evans, 2003; Jenkins, 2004; Paoletti, 1998; Holliday, 2004). In addition to this, aging experience must be interpreted keeping in view the peculiar social and cultural underpinnings of diverse human societies. There are studies which indicate the growing significance of “social support,” “social networks,” “communities,” and “extended families” in maintaining a useful old age existence (Philipson *et al.*, 2000; Lang, 2004).

This also illustrates how sociological discourse on aging is shifting towards authentic and genuine concerns regarding older people particularly woman both in their private and public lives (Bernard and Val Harding, 2000). This new social discourse on aging experience is further augmented by the works of writers like, Featherstone and Wernick (1995), Fozard (2005) and Cheta (2004), who reinterpret and redefine the aging “bodies” as well as aging experience in the context of technological advancements and their increased impact on the collective lives of the older people in the modern world.

### **Culture and Social Construction of Aging in a Muslim Society**

Stark (1956), Mannheim (1956), Geertz (2000, 2005), Kempny and Burszta (1994) and Rapport and Overing (2000) have underscored the significance of culture both as a predictor and shaper of human behavior, notwithstanding its peculiar “politicized” connotations. Human beings as members of their respective societies are deeply driven by its cultural notions.

Attitudes, worldviews, interpersonal relationships, marriages and rituals, modes of exchanges and symbolism; all are reflection of the collective human experience over a long period of time and termed as culture. It lends diversity and multiplicity to human experience. It affords legitimacy and meaningfulness to human actions. It explains in significant ways the uniqueness of human experiences in different contexts.

The meaningfulness of human societies might lose much of its specific attributes, if deprived of culture. From American base ball to Balinese cock fight-

ing to Muslim annual pilgrimage to Makkah; all these social action are embedded in a unique culture rooted in historical niche (Geertz, 2005; Shariati, 1981; Iqbal, 1983).

This plurality and multiplicity demands that, one should look for justificatory rationalities of a unique cultural description within that culture, abandoning the universal quest for general explanation of social reality based on Enlightenment rationality and objectivity and instead explain and understand the former as a, “contextualized knowledge which emphasizes localized, restricted narratives and stories,” legitimizing the structure of a given culture or social reality (Chriss, 1999).

These justificatory rationalities of a culture are further substantiated by the unique metaphors and symbols of human groups in which their collective social experiences are then completely embodied (Lee and Poynton, 2000; Coupland, 2004). The social description, imagery and linguistic symbolism of aging agents across diverse human cultures constitute one such type of collective experience.

Each human culture, in some profound way is shaped by some essential referential “text”(s) (Lee and Poynton, 2000; Coupland, 2004). These texts reembody in a unique sign system—a language. The words and concepts which different languages employ tell us much about the way; members of a particular culture describe social reality for themselves. For example, the works of Descartes, Kant and Hegel evoke a unique cultural imagery before the eyes of a person, trying to interpret the intricacies of Western culture. For Japanese, Zen and its concepts may be most relevant to interpret the social world. For Hindus, sacred Vedas constitute the bedrock of their social and historical existence. For Christian and Jews, Old Testament and Bible, lay down the social prescriptions for them.

For a Muslim, it is the Quran and the Sayings of their Prophet, which interpret the social reality for them. The language of the Quran is Arabic, and permeates the cultural worlds of diverse Muslim societies from the North Africa down to Middle East, Asia and rest of the Muslim Diasporas in Europe, North America, Russia, China and Japan. According to Muslim cultural tradition, God spoke to the mankind through the words of Quran. Therefore, God and the concepts and rules which he prescribes for human beings constitute the grounds of the Muslim society any where.

For example everyday social interactions of members of the society are shaped and rooted in words such as; *Inshaallah* (God willing), *Mashaallah* (God wills whatsoever) and *Alhamidoolillah* (Praise be to God for his bounties), *Allahho Akbar* (God is great), *Laillahailallah* (There in none worthy of worship but God). Both social actions and social thoughts are driven by a profound conviction in a merciful and omniscient God. Outward behavior and implicit beliefs; all are rooted in one’s unique relationship with and awareness of that with the God. The outcomes of decisions, success and failures, prosperity and poverty are inextricably linked with his degree of conviction in God’s presence in the social reality (every day social interaction and beyond that).

This structuring of both outward social behavior and inward convictions are derived from a Quranic verse, in which God communicates to the people and states that, “*Ana nahnun aqrab min hablil wareed*” (I am nearest to you than your jugular vein). It is a presence felt in all social actions and consequently a general category of social interactions among the human beings, determining their everyday social exchanges and social attitudes in family, with peers, in business and across people of other cultures.

Ruf (1997) and Eisenhandler and Thomas (1994) have discussed and analyzed the role of religion in the construction of identity of “self” as well as aging. As asserted by Eisenhandler and Thomas (1994) due to peculiar cultural assumptions rooted in Kantian texts; the terms “God” and “spiritual” have been purged from the social science discourse. Therefore, it is no wonder that, they further state that “Journal of Gerontology and Gerontologist (the two major publications of Gerontological Society of America) from their founding up to the present decade, published only twenty three articles which focused centrally on aging and religion.”

They, therefore propose that a “human science paradigm “be pursued to integrate the meaningfulness of religion both for the individuals as well as the social categories such as aging etc. The current social science discourse need to appreciate the cultural particularities of eastern societies in general and Muslim societies in particular. For example, Shenk (1994) has explored the “aging experience” of Jewish women in “terms of biblical and Talmudic traditions of respecting the aged and honoring ones’ parents,” in the context of American Jewish families.

Palmore (1975) has reported on how older and aged Japanese are respected in their families. The aged performs very valuable services in the domestic life. The younger generation is bound by cultural tradition of *Oyakoko* (filial duty to parents) to respect and honor their parents. The respect for elderly parents is also reflected in the Japanese’s sociolinguistic discourse while describing relationships with the elderly and aged parents. Somewhat similar cultural linguistic prevails in Pakistani society while addressing an elderly or aged person. The word “*Aap*” (very difficult to translate in English) is used to describe an honorific relationship with elderly and the respectable.

Then there are words such as *Baba Jee* (means an older person as well as seasoned and wise old man who can provide guidance to the younger generation). Older women are addressed as *Amah Jee* or *Mai Jee*; a word again very difficult to render in English, but it shows extreme respect and dignity to the women and her cultural capacity to guide and advise the younger members of the society.

There are two other key social concepts, without which a reasonable picture of aging in the Muslim society can not be constructed. These are “*Dadake*” (extended social network of kinship ties from the father and grandfather side) and “*Nanake*” (extended social network of kinship ties from the mother and maternal grandmother side).

There was a time (roughly at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century and before that) when *Dadake* and *Nanake* included all the brothers and sisters on the respective sides and they lived and resided together in a village or nearby suburb, town or may be a city. This social aspect of family organization has now significantly undergone a social transformation due o to industrialization and urbanization.

Now the *dadake* and *nanake* include only the grandfather and grandmothers on both side's and their sons and daughters. They have now become a joint family, instead of a larger extended joint family. It is within the social network of *dadake* and *nanake* that social centerpiece of the elderly is defined and their aged lives are spent. The different social identities of the older persons both men and women such as retired civil servant, army officer, teacher, doctor or engineer; all are submerged in some penultimate social sense into the social roles of *Dada* (paternal grandfather) and *Nana* (maternal grandfather), *Dadi* (paternal grandmother) and *Nani* (maternal grandmother). The extended family and kinship ties play a crucial role in defining the integral social space and place for the old people in the Pakistani society.

As Lang (2004), Philipson, Bernard, Philips, and Ogg (2000) have indicated in their respective studies of aging that “extended family networks” and “social support networks of the community play an important role in shaping the lives of the aging agents. This fact is most forcefully attested in the lives of older people in the Muslim perspective, wherein much of the joint family systems are still intact and *Dada*, *bap* and *pota* (Grandfather, father and grandson) still live together to constitute a meaningful social reality based on shared values and traditions.

*Dadake* and *nanake* play a significant social role not only in defining the social identity of the younger ones but also influence the decision-making processes about marriages, businesses, politics, careers and jobs for the younger generations. *Dada/dadi* as well as *Nana/nani* share the experiences of their lifetime's successes and failures through “narratives and stories,” relying mostly on their “memory” and “narrative” skills (Leichtman *et al.*, 2003; Fivush and Haden, 2003). The spiritual guidance and worldly wisdom of the older people is reciprocated in social virtues of care, respect and reverence by the younger members of the society. In the joint and extended family networks, older people are taken care, while the younger ones are handed out the wisdom to lead an effective life in this world.

Now, let us see what Quran—the cultural “text “of the Muslim society— has to say about the elderly and aged people.

Al-Hajj [22:5] (The Pilgrimage)

22:5. O mankind! if ye have a doubt about the Resurrection, (consider) that We created you out of dust, then out of sperm, then out of a leech-like clot, then out of a morsel of flesh, partly formed and partly unformed, in order that We may manifest (our power) to you; and We cause whom We will to rest in the wombs for an appointed term, then do We bring you out as babes, then (foster you) that

ye may reach your age of full strength; and some of you are called to die, and some are sent back to the feeblest OLD AGE, so that they know nothing after having known (much), and (further), thou seest the earth barren and lifeless, but when We pour down rain on it, it is stirred (to life), it swells, and it puts forth every kind of beautiful growth (in pairs).

These verses provide what might be termed as a “natural model” of human aging. God clearly states the observable course of life and the transformations experienced by each individual during this process. These verses underscore the biological fact of creation to physiological changes during childhood, adulthood, manhood and finally the old age. It clearly refers to behavioral changes experienced by the human agents at each stage of their life. The person as a child is dependent on parents for nourishment and protection. As one grows to adulthood, one becomes stronger and more rational and autonomous in outwards social interactions.

The development in human capacities keeps growing till they matures into old age and one starts losing grip on ones’ faculties such as memory, motor actions and other related matters. All these physiological and natural transformations during the life course of a person are experienced within the social networks of extended and joint family systems. Therefore old age is taken as natural fact of human existence and perceived to be a time for the final journey towards God.

Therefore most of the time of the older persons is spent on seeking Lord’s mercy in the hereafter, asking forgiveness for sins, offering obligatory prayers, spiritual mediations and performing good deeds for the family and community in which they live and guiding and counseling the younger generation about their life paths, which they have yet to travel. For someone reared and bred in a rational social system, where Kant, Hegel and Descartes provide the guiding principles of life, it would be very difficult to imagine a social organization so deeply steeped in spiritual and metaphysical beliefs. This diversity is the consequence of varied human cultures across the world.

In another verse, God enjoins upon the Muslims to respect and love their older parents and show them utmost reverence and love. This verse provides a sociological insight which constitutes the cornerstone of Muslim social and family organization. The verse from the Quran is reproduced below.

#### Al-Isra (The Journey by Night)

17:23 For thy Sustainer has ordained that you shall worship none but Him. And do good unto [thy] parents. Should one of them, or both, attain to old age in thy care, never say "Ugh" to them or scold them, but [always] speak unto them with reverent speech. This verse along with the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad that “Respect thy elders and show compassion to the younger ones’ leaves not the social consciousness of the Muslim children as they grow and move forward in life to take up practical roles of parenthood, employees and doctors and



engineers. Muslims are socially duty bound to take care of their old age people and show them the utmost “*adab*” (reverence) in their later days.

Apart from religious duty of the younger ones to respect and show reverence to their older; the emotion of reverence also stems from the social role played by the old for the proper upbringing of the young ones. *Dada/dadi* or *nana/nani*, transmit their peculiar cultural values on life, morality, politics, leadership, financial well being, social responsibility to the larger Muslim social organization through their personal narratives and stories, which they have partly acquired from their parents and partly through the turmoil and travails of the social experiences. They would educate the younger people by sharing their knowledge on religion, history, culture and literature.

Some of the favorite stories told by the older persons are; the story of the migration of the prophet Muhammad from Makkah to Medina, the story of the prophet Moses and Pharaoh of Egypt, the story of the King David and his son Solomon, the story of the night journey of the prophet Muhammad to Heavens, the political story of how British took over the Mughal empire in India and how Muslim fought for their freedom, the story of Salahuddin and his victory in the Crusades, the story of Adam and Eve and how they were moved out of Garden of Eden, the story of Abel and Cain and their duel. There are other stories which train the minds of the young ones in matters of spirituality and morality, drawn heavily from the *Mathnavi* of Mevelna Jalal-uddin Rumi and *Gulistan* of Sheikh Saadi of Persia.

Then there are stories about the spiritual and miraculous roles of the Muslim Sufis across the Muslim societies. Then their career stories and other emotional and juvenile sojourns, successes and failures in life. Then there are stories about wars and different kinds of animal stories, which again shape up the cultural and attitudinal world of the younger ones. Then there are stories touching on the emotional and sensual side of life, such as *Heer-Ranjah*, *Sassi-Punnoo*, *Lyla-Majnoon* and *Sohni-Mahiwal* (roughly local variants of Romeo and Juliet, but significantly different in cultural sensibilities).

The social care and respect accorded to the aging people in the Muslim social organization is deeply rooted in the religious faith and is found across the Muslim social organization globally, despite various regional and geographical differences in the constitutions of the Muslims states and societies. The state policy on aging people in Brunei Darussalam is closely interlinked with the faith system of the society (Cleary and Ali Maricar, 2000). Elsewhere, in Malaysia, older Muslim population is taken care and given due respect due to Muslim belief system (Chang and Sor Tho, 2000).

Lang (2004), McKay and Caverly (2004), and Philipson, Bernard, Philips, and Ogg (2000) have elaborated upon the role of “kinship ties in later life,” “relationships between grandparents and grandchildren” and role of communities as “social support for the older people in the Western context. In the Muslim social organization of family in Pakistan, extended family kinship ties play a very

important role on structuring the functions of older persons in the society. The social relationships of the older and younger people are driven by mutually obligatory social reciprocity enjoined by the teachings of Quran and the Prophet of Islam (cf e.g. Shariti, 1981).

The whole social organization is shaped by the God-consciousness and deeper spiritual and religious duties to respect the elderly and older persons and show compassion and love to the younger ones. Older persons can be spiritual guides (*murshids*, in local language) as well as teachers (*ustad*, in local idiom) to the younger generations within the joint and extended families and beyond that, to live peaceful and successful lives within the laid ethical frameworks of the Muslim social organization.

Currently, role transitions are being experienced by the older persons in big cities like Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi, due to peculiar economic and technological changes of family social organization, and “old homes” have sprung up in certain localities, but the predominant social legitimacy of the older persons still remain deeply rooted within the extended and joint family social organization and they lead a well integrated and meaningful last life phase with their sons, daughters and grandsons and grandchildren.

### **Reflections on Aging; Some Concluding Remarks**

There was an old Zen master who lived and meditated along with his many disciples in a far off monastery in Japan. After usual meditations and mantra recitations in the morning, he would then work in the garden of the monastery side by side his students. One day his students while working in the garden counseled with each other and decided that our master has gone old and suffer physical hardship while laboring in the garden.

All of them agree that to relieve him of his suffering and pain, his garden implements be hid somewhere in the monastery and thus save him of unnecessary labor along with the students. They did this. Next morning, after usual spiritual meditations, when master looked for his garden implements, he found them missing from his meditation chambers. He was aghast on his stolen garden implements and went out into the monastery garden beholding his disciples work all day there. His students in the meantime were very happy that they have relieved their erstwhile master of great physical labor and pain. The master did not speak with any one and kept quite the whole day, roaming hither and thither in the garden.

After sunset when all the work was over and everybody assembled in the main hall of the monastery to take the evening supper. The food was served by the relevant students to everyone present in the hall, including the master. Everyone started eating except the master. Some of his students approached him and asked, “Why aren’t you eating master” to which his replied, “No work, no food.” The students felt sorry for what they did and put back his garden implements in his meditation chambers during midnight. Next day the master was happily working

along with the disciples in the monastery garden. Everyone was very happy on this sight (Paul Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, 1982).

The punch line of this Zen story is: older persons have a significant role to play in the life and the people around them. They carry within their self's profound knowledge and lifetime of experiences. Being old does not imply ineffectiveness or uselessness and old-age itself constitute a force of relevance and meaningfulness in the general social structure of the society. Are contemporary societies reasonably responding to this social meaningfulness of the older persons in their scheme of things?

Two social factors are greatly impacting the lives of the older person in different fashions. These are a) technological innovations and b), erosion of meaningful set of values. Technological innovations have significantly transformed the pre-industrial social systems, particularly in Western Europe, North America and elsewhere in the world causing them to respond to the ever increasing complexities of urban life and hence the social questioning of sustainability of a growing older segment of the population (cf e.g. Espenshade and Braun, 1983).

The search for the economic justification of sustaining an older population has caused these societies to medicalize the meaningful part of the society (cf e.g. Jackson, 2001) and thus deprive them of their valuable insight and knowledge. The social policy parameters in the West and elsewhere need to be redefined in the light of existential usefulness of older persons in the society.

The new gerontological discourse can learn a lot from the deep historical wisdoms of different cultures across the globe. Any global social policy as well as theory formulation on aging must consider the inherent cultural diversity and the set of values underlying each one of them. That even holds within the social matrix of a single society.

Nonetheless, the diverse set of values must be brought into the core sociological discourse as well as policy documents of social institutions and social research in general. Particularly sociological insights must unravel the mystery of diverse values set underlying the role descriptions for older persons in different cultures.

The debate on aging agents need to responds to the humanistic implications as well as social meaningfulness of older persons in the general social structure of the society. The older persons are more than social objects for cosmetological relevance for consumerism and marketing mentality of the beauty corporations. They carry within their older bodies' rich repositories of knowledge, experience and wisdom upon which the edifice of a safe and secure global society can be built.

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