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Volume 11

Issue 1 *Social Gerontology: The Linkage of Sociological  
Knowledge and Practice*

Article 5

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January 1993

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Otto Pollack

*Social Science Research Council*

Glen Heathers

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## Recommended Citation

Pollack, Otto and Heathers, Glen (1993) "Social Adjustment in Old Age: A Research Planning Report," *Sociological Practice*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/socprac/vol11/iss1/5>

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# Social Adjustment in Old Age: A Research Planning Report\*

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*Otto Pollak, Social Science Research Council  
with the assistance of Glen Heathers*

## ABSTRACT

*This article is a reprint of a planning report prepared by the Social Science Research Council in 1948. It represents one of the first earliest reports on the implications of the changing demographic structure of society in the United States.\**

## Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed a increasing social concern with the problems of later maturity and old age. This trend has found its expression among the ranks of the general public as well as among scientist and seems to have resulted from a combination of determinants.

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\*Abstracted by the Editors from "Social Adjustment and Old Age: A Research Planning Report," New York, Social Science Research Council, 1948. Reprinted by permission.

## Present Status and Problems of Research of Old Age

Although demographic developments and a variety of cultural determinants are thus focusing social concern on the aged as a population group, only the sciences of biology and medicine have contributed a great deal of effort toward coping with the problems of aging. A new branch of medical specialization, geriatrics, is being developed and Cowdry's monumental work on the biological and medical aspects of aging, Thewis' treatise on the medical care of the aged, and Kaplan's volume on the mental diseases of old age to the degree of scientific attention which personnel in these fields are giving to the problems of aging.<sup>1</sup> Similarly the contents of the new *Journal of Gerontology* seem to indicate that biology and medicine have advanced further in old age research than the social sciences. It is true that medicine has not been able so far to deal as effectively with the diseases of old age as with the diseases of childhood and youth, but some definite gains have been made and deserve recognition. The average life expectation of males 40 years of age in the United States, for example, has increased from 27.74 years in 1900-1902 to 30.27 in 1942, and that of females of the same age has increased from 29.28 to 33.86 years. The gains over longer periods are even more appreciable, e.g., the average life expectation of 40-year-old-males in Sweden during the period 1816-40 was 23.66 years, and in the period 1931-35, 32.50 years. Recent results in attempts to correct the chemical upsets which the aging process seems to produce in the body, the success of hormone therapy in the treatment of glandular deficiencies, and advances in the field of nutritional research seem to permit further hope for improvement.

Compared with these strides in biological and medical research on old age, the amount of progress in social science research on the subject is relatively insignificant. Except for statistical analyses of older population groups by demographers and special research by economists on the problem of social security, the exploration and analysis of the social aspects of aging have been largely neglected until recently. Social science research has paid little attention to such questions as how older people of different ages participate in our society, what their major problems are, and what solutions they require.

The greater advance of the medical sciences than of the social sciences in research on problems of aging is understandable, however. The fight against death has always been the legitimate concern of the former and logically has led their representatives to investigate the medical and biological aspects of aging. But among social scientists the motivation for studying

the social impact of aging upon the older individual and upon society is comparatively new, since it has resulted mainly from the relatively recent demographic and cultural developments outlined above. It was logical, therefore, that they should have been inclined to treat age as a variable in the analysis of social phenomena rather than as a social phenomenon worthy of examination as such. However, where public concern has focused on a special age group, for instance, adolescence, social scientists have responded by revising their approaches and intensifying their efforts, and seem about to do so with respect to old age.

Certain changes in scientific thinking have prepared the way for this development. First of all, there has been a great increase in the emphasis placed by social scientists on the study of personality and interpersonal relations. Socio-psychological problems of aging evidently fall in this area. Secondly, there has been an increasing tendency to employ the developmental or case study method in the study of the entire life span of the individual. When the development approach is employed in this way, later maturity and old age are seen simply as additional periods of life to which the individual attempts to adjust. Research on problems of aging is certain to benefit both in volume and significance from this orientation of scientific thinking in terms of the total life span.

Thus public pressure as well as internal reorientation in all probability will stimulate considerable social science research on problems of aging. Envisaging this trend, the Committee on Social Adjustment of the Social Science Research Council in 1941 selected adjustment of old age as a field which required active attention. Because of wartime diversions of personnel, however, it was not until 1943 that a subcommittee on social adjustment in old age was formed and undertook as part of its program the preparation of a memorandum designed to be of aid in planning and conduct of future research in this field. The present bulletin is a product of this project.<sup>2</sup> Its central purpose is to provide suggestions concerning research problems which merit immediate attention, and techniques which promise results in the investigation of these problems. No attempt is made to present, as a part of this bulletin, a review or appraisal of research conducted to date because little has been done that was not mainly exploratory in nature. However, references to significant researches already published will be made in context wherever their findings are relevant.

Since the social problems of aging are the joint concern of sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists, and economists, and effort has been made to develop a formulation inclusive enough to embrace the question and research methods involved in the approach of any social scientist to

these problems. Such a formulation seemed to stem most easily from a central emphasis on the adjustment pattern in its relation to the changes in needs, capacities, predispositions, and opportunities for satisfactory living which accompany old age. The problems created by these found to be the foci of interest on which the research efforts of all students of old age seem to converge.

Patterns of adjustment in their broadest range can be conveniently covered by the term social adjustment which in its common sense meaning refers to all efforts of human beings to find more satisfactory ways of getting along with one another.<sup>3</sup> In this sense it includes the efforts of an individual to satisfy his personal needs as well as to live up to the expectations of others, on the one hand, and the efforts of groups to provide better opportunities for need satisfaction on a mass basis, on the other. On this ground the research interest of psychologists in individual adjustment as the process of need satisfaction by a person's own effort and the research interest of cultural anthropologist, sociologists, economists, and political scientists in societal adjustment as the process of providing opportunities for need satisfaction through institutional arrangement and rearrangement can meet in a manner permitting mutual supplementation and integration.

### **Practical Considerations**

In a memorandum designed to assist social science research in all pertinent fields of social aging, still another problem must be considered: What is the lowest chronological age limit which should be used in order to insure attention in research to all significant aspects of social aging in a given culture? As has been pointed out, the increasing interest of social scientists in the problems of old age is the result of a growing awareness of the demographic aspects of old age in our culture and of the prevailing social concern with the problems of aging. Delimitation of the problem area should take account of these two conditions. From this view it is proposed tentatively to set 60 years of age as the lower limit of future research interest. This limit is intentionally set lower than the most conspicuous chronological definition of old age in our society, which is 65. The latter is the age of eligibility for social security benefits, a frequent age for retirement from employment, and the standard age at which privately arranged annuity income payments begin. It must not be forgotten, however, that social security legislation was gained in opposition to one of the most basic tenets of our social philosophy, i.e., that individual independence and freedom from

governmental regulation are desirable social goals. This legislation therefore represented a compromise which could not take account of all economic manifestations of age typing in our culture. Furthermore, the trend of retirement ages is toward earlier retirement as indicated by the shift from the 70 to the 65 year age limit in some fields. In other fields of societal activity hardly anything is known regarding modal expressions of age typing, and it consequently seems desirable to locate to lower limit of the area of interest at an earlier rather than a later age in order to assure a greater probability of coverage of the relevant phenomena.

However, in certain areas old age research will have to start at ages below 60. In the study of family relations, for instance, the impact of the climacteric upon the sex life and upon the emotional life of the marriage partners will require the inclusion of women in their late 40s and early 50s in the population group of research interest. In the field of industrial employment, the worker over 40 is frequently considered as the exponent of old age and will therefore have to be treated as such by students of economic adjustment in old age. Other major exceptions to the 60 year rule may appear necessary.

Thus, as a matter of expediency in research it is proposed to consider persons aged 60 and over as generally of interest to the student of old age, with the reservation that the actual chronological delimitation of the particular population group to be studied will depend on the specific problem under investigation as well as upon future research findings regarding functional aspects of aging.

### **A Proposed Frame of Reference**

As already indicated, coordination and integration of the research efforts of representatives of different disciplines hold great promise for a better understanding of the problems of aging than has been achieved so far. The relevant research which is needed includes demographic studies which classify the older population with respect to such factors as age, sex, marital status, residence, occupation, and income; psychological studies of the changes in needs and capacities which accompany old age and of the ways in which the individual responds to these changes; and sociological and economical studies of the changes in the social opportunities and social rewards which result from aging in our culture. The need for all these kinds of research and for their integration has been recognized in the past and there have been some attempts at coordination; but these have usually taken

the form of symposia in which the individual contributors made their reports in the language of their own disciplines and within the delineation of their own departmental interests. The knowledge gained in one field therefore tended to remain unrelated and sometimes unrelatable to that gained in other fields.

In order to advance beyond this stage of uncoordinated research it will be helpful to establish a common frame of reference to which individual social scientists may relate their findings regarding the problems of aging and thus make contributions to knowledge which are complementary rather than independent of one another. The establishment of such a common frame of reference implies the achievement of agreement on two points: (1) the selection of the phenomena to be studied, and (2) the concepts which should be used in their investigation.

### **Selection of Phenomena**

With regard to the selection of phenomena to be investigated we must keep in mind that the increasing interest in various aspects of aging is based largely on the widespread recognition that old age is a problem period, characterized by frustration, which represents special problems of adjustment. It is the solution of these adjustment problems to which social scientists are expected to point the way. In our pragmatic culture with its stress on the happiness of the individual as a social goal, combined with the frequency of social situations in which not all needs can be met, problems of adjustment stand in the center of general interest.

It is therefore proposed that social science research regarding the problems of aging should concentrate on the phenomena of change which aging implies, on the problems of adjustment which these phenomena of change present, and on the types of adjustive behavior which may lead to their solution.

### **Basic Concepts**

In accordance with this selection of phenomena of primary importance in research on old age, exposition of the conceptual tools of value in this research falls into three major parts: (1) concepts pertaining to areas in which significant changes occur with old age, (2) application of these concepts to the problems of adjustment which these age changes present, and (3) concepts pertaining to types of adjustment.

The student of human behavior has to consider the individual or the group of individuals in whom he is interested in relation to the total as well as to the various parts of their society and culture. The following concepts already in use in the various disciplines of social science furnish a promising approach to the study of the problems involved: age-sex categories, social roles, status, institutions, and subcultures.

## NOTES

1. E. V. Cowdry, ed., *Problems of Ageing: Biological and Medical Aspects*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins Company, 1942); Malford W. Thewlis, *The Care of the Aged*, 4th ed. (St. Louis: C. V. Mosby Co., 1942); Oscar J. Kaplan, ed., *Mental Disorders in Later Life* (Stanford University: Stanford University Press, 1945).
2. See the Foreword.
3. Donald Young, "Memorandum on Suggestions for Research in the Field of Social Adjustment," *American Journal of Sociology* 46 (May 1941): 873.