

Old age - Economic problems
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Sent to Prof. Arthur Ross
Institute of Industrial
Relations
U. of Calif.
Berkeley, California

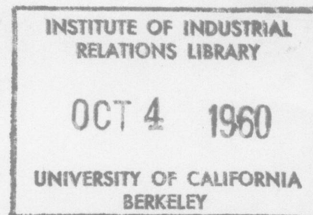
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RELATIONSHIP OF AN AGING POPULATION TO
EMPLOYMENT AND OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE

by
Harold L. Sheppard
Research Director
U. S. Senate Subcommittee on
Problems of the Aged and Aging*

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss some selected aspects of the aging phenomenon and their relevance to those social problems of interest to industrial and occupational sociologists. I cannot let this occasion go by without referring to the fact that neither the 1960 meetings of the Society for the Study of Social Problems nor those of the American Sociological Association were planned in such a way as to include separate sessions on social gerontology -- a somewhat surprising fact since the subject -- both as a scientific topic and as a social issue -- has elsewhere been more than slightly prominent. The recent International Congress of Gerontology, held in San Francisco earlier this month; the past two years' activities of state and local organizations in preparation for the January, 1961, White House Conference on Aging; the emergence of the field of geriatrics in the world of medicine; the active interest on the part of individual psychologists and sociologists, -- not to mention the development of keen political interest -- etc., all make me wonder.

But this is not a paper on the sociology of sociology.

As part of the background to the main topic of this paper, let me state briefly a few observations:

1. The development of the aging as a problem is a direct concomitant of a modernizing, industrializing society. It is not a coincidence that advanced industrial societies, relative to traditional underdeveloped ones, have greater proportions of their populations over the age of 62 and

2. That, despite these greater proportions, they at the same time use a smaller proportion of their older members in the active labor force.¹ The reasons should be obvious, perhaps almost by definition: they have to do with the increased (and increasing) longevity resulting from modernizing factors associated with industrialism (medicine, sanitation, improved living conditions, etc.), and with the virtually intrinsic nature of technological change, that is, the reduction in manpower hours necessary for given levels of output. Putting it crudely, more people are living to be 65 and over, absolutely and proportionately as compared to other forms of societies, and beyond the age where they are actually needed in the labor force, at least under our present patterns of distributing the occupational roles of our society's members.

Even within our own society, the relation between industrialism and the age-occupational distribution of men is shown, by the fact that in 1959 the proportion of the aged male segment of the labor force engaged in agriculture was about $2\frac{1}{2}$ times the proportion of males of all ages in agricultural occupations.

3. As the 1960 Report of the Senate Subcommittee on Problems of the Aged and Aging emphasizes, the implications of these and other social trends have not yet been sufficiently recognized in decision-making and planning on the levels of the individual, society, and government.

Industrial and occupational sociologists might ponder the following, for example:

a. By 1975, even without any further progress in medical science and techniques, there will be about 22 million Americans aged 65 and over. This compares with 16 million as of 1960.

b. Increasingly, more of the aged population will consist of women, most of them without any employment experience.

c. In this connection, more than one-fifth of all the aged by 1980 can be expected to be females aged 75 and over, with definitely limited physical and mental abilities as far as employment potentials are concerned.

d. Furthermore, from the standpoint of having wage and salary earners as potential sources of financial and other support, there will be increasing numbers of aged persons whose children and other "younger" relatives will themselves be of retirement age, and thus with limited financial means and with problems of their own. To be concrete, as of 1960, there are now 34 persons aged 80 and over for every 100 persons aged 60 to 64. The projections indicate that by the year 2000, there will be not 34, but 67, persons aged 80 and over for every 100 persons aged 60 to 64. Let me put this another way: older Americans -- either retired or on the eve of retirement -- will be increasingly faced with the problem of preparing for, and adjusting to, not only their years of retirement (which paradoxically are increasing along with increases in the worklife^{2/}), but they are also faced, at a growing rate, with the prospect of responsibility for even older relatives -- given the dominant emphasis in our society on individual and family responsibility.

e. At first glance, the radical decline in labor force participating among aged men, from a rate of 70 percent in 1890 to 34 percent in 1959 (both full- and part-time), might be explained solely in terms of the increasing numbers of the "definitely" older population, say, those at least 70 years of age. But if this demographic trend were the complete answer, one of the implications would be that the labor force participation rate in the 65 to 69 age group remains substantially the same, over time. But even this is not true: the rate of decline in this "not so old" aged category apparently has been greater than for the 70-and-over group. As an example, in 1954, 57 percent of the men 65-69 years old were in the labor force, but five years later, in 1959, the percentage dropped to 47 percent, a rate of decline amounting to nearly 18 percent.

Given these and other developments, there are a number of questions and dilemmas flowing from them:

For example, what will be their impact on patterns of consumption? How will these trends themselves affect the nature and magnitude of occupations and industries that conceivably might be required to "service" such an aged population, growing in size? To what extent can we really continue unchanged our current patterns of responsibility for the elderly? How will an increasing preoccupation with the future -- including old age and retirement -- affect occupational selection and recruitment?

More pointedly, can we expect the under-65 generations of today to accept the same relationship to the labor force, the same economic and social status which characterize the aged of the 1960's? At this juncture, the concepts of "rising expectations" and "relative deprivation" are pertinent to any plausible speculation about degree of acceptance of this or that status on the part of the aged of future decades. With higher educational achievements, heightened health consciousness (which includes the belief that longevity can be increased and life in the later years made more physically pleasant), and the effective internalization of the democratic ideology of equality, I doubt strongly that the aged in the year 2000 will placidly tolerate the consequences of the stereotypes and attitudes toward the aged that they themselves entertain today as younger persons.

We might also add the political dimension: these same features separating the aged of today from those of the future, coupled with an increasing political participation (as measured by registration and voting behavior), can be expected to accentuate their political strength on the local and national levels.

I have stressed as two fundamental conditions those of industrialism and increased longevity as underlying the problems, and limiting any effort to solve the problems. Arthur and Jane Rosa^{3/} have pointed to other factors of a less basic character or to factors which merely elaborate on the above two conditions: a) decline in self-employment, b) dominance of large firms, c) changes in family structure, d) declining and expanding industries, e) pension programs, etc.

The Rosses also refer to "educational obsolescence." This is a factor of great significance in an industrialized society with a rapidly changing technology: even if we abolished compulsory retirement and reduced various incentives for voluntary retirement, we would still be faced with the question of the skill-levels required by the new industries and for the new occupations developing as a result of technological change versus the qualifications of the individual aged jobholder, or jobseeker. As Wilbert Moore has put it, "the industrial economy places a peculiar emphasis on youth while the aged are subject to special hazards of obsolescence of skills."

Furthermore, the "back-to-work" movement idea ignores, or chooses to play down, the limited physical capacity and willingness of the aged worker or retiree to remain in or return to the world of work. In their study of The Economic Status of the Aged, Peter Steiner and Robert Dorfman found that nearly 80 percent of older men in a national sample of Social Security beneficiaries said they were not well enough to work. Only 5 percent said they were interested in working.

The same study showed that continued work after the age of 65 is directly related to type of occupation. Furthermore, the highest percentages of those not in the labor force, but expressing most frequently a willingness and ability to work were in those occupations having only small proportions of aged men in the first place:

Professional and technical: 15% of retirees from this group well and interested in working, but only 6% of aged men in this occupational group.

Services: 11% of retirees from this group well and interested in working, but only 5% of aged men are in this occupational group.

Managers and proprietors: 11%, versus 8%.

Other suggested solutions or palliatives have included "tapering-off" of retirement; over-all reduction of the work-week; or other forms distributing the necessary number of man-hours over a larger number of persons; etc.

But all of these efforts will be limited in their success by several considerations, for example:

1. What is the actual and potential extent of over-all maximal employment opportunities? Just how many jobs are there to go around, in other words?
2. What is the susceptibility of each occupation to experimentations such as "tapering off", "sabbaticals", reduced hours, etc?
3. Even under optimal conditions of "full employment," what proportion of the aged population is able and willing to work?

In summary, the employment and occupational picture vis-a-vis the aged population is a result of progress in the medical sciences and living conditions, and of the increase in the numbers and proportions of the aged not needed in the production side of the economy.

However, it is important to bring out the fact that these demographic and employment trends have resulted essentially in a change in merely the composition of the total "nonproductive" or "dependent" population (which also includes children and others) -- not in its size relative to the productive members of the society -- and that there has also developed an increasing ability of these "producers" and of the general economy and technology to support such nonworkers. As Dean John McConnell, of Cornell University has expressed it,

"...the economy can without doubt support an increasing number of retired older people in adequate fashion. Today with a gross National Product of 480 billion, all nonwage payments to old people equal approximately \$12 billion, or 2.6 percent. In 1975 G.N.P. will equal \$760 billion, an increase of 65 percent, while the

population over 65 will increase only 45 percent. The economy even now could well afford better living standards for nonworking old people. We will be in a better position to support higher standards in 1975. The real question is not whether we can afford it -- but, among all the other charges against the Gross National Product, is the economic well-being of old people a high priority item?"^{6/}

The basic definition, therefore, of the problem of the aged in our society is not the need to put them back to work -- although I do not wish to be interpreted as being totally against any efforts, including "employment", to make life more meaningful in the later years -- but rather the place such persons have in our total hierarchy of personal and social values, the extent to which the national community as a whole is willing to devote a larger proportion of its wealth and resources to this new and growing group of "nonproducers," a choice that runs contrary to other values related to an ideology that stresses rewards only for productive, diligent effort.

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REFERENCES

- * On leave, Wayne State University. These remarks are based largely on the work of the author in preparation of the Subcommittee's 1960 Report, entitled "The Aged and Aging in the United States: A National Problem."
- ¹ Cf. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, The Aging of Populations and Its Economic and Social Implications, 1956; and Wilbert E. Moore, Industrial Relations and the Social Order, 1951, ch. XXI.
- ² Seymour L. Wolfbein, "The Length of Working Life," Fourth International Congress of Gerontology, Merano, Italy, July, 1957.
- ³ "Employment Problems of Older Workers," in Studies in Unemployment, prepared for the Special Committee on Unemployment Problems, U. S. Senate, 1960, pp 97-120.
- ⁴ Op. cit., p. 520.
- ⁵ University of California Press, 1957., ch. IV.
- ⁶ AAAS Symposium on Aging, Chicago, December, 1959.