

Old age - Psychological aspects

Address on

"Attitudes Toward Old Age in Different Cultures"

To be given by

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The tremendous objective problems of old age in our society (demographic, biological etc.) tend to overshadow another, no less basic of its aspects: the attitude of the group towards old age, which is mirrored in the attitude of the aged themselves towards old age. And yet these group attitudes decide at least as much over the fate of the aged as do their relative numbers or their degree of arteriosclerosis.

These attitudes are neither "natural" nor universal nor permanent. The statement, for instance, that "old people are ugly" constitutes (like the statement "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" and similar proverbs) far more a projective test of our attitudes towards old age than a description of actual conditions. Sexual conquests accomplished by the old in cultures lacking this particular value system of ours, and sometimes even in our own culture, seem to suggest that there is nothing intrinsically "ugly" about the old.

Ethnography provides us with a unique collection of data illustrating the wide range of possible attitudes towards old age, that go from godlike veneration of the old to a literal "underdog" treatment. Attitudes towards old age are probably basically "ambivalent" everywhere. Still practically either the positive or the negative attitude will eventually prevail. It is with this latter situation that we will deal in the following.

The best known ethnographic fact concerning old age is the habit of certain primitive tribes in all parts of the world of either abandoning or even killing their old. Paroxysms of moral indignation on the part of civilized groups are unwarranted when we remember that, for instance, only a few years ago the Nazi

government of Germany - unfortunately a country as civilized as any other Western nation - had on a supposedly rational basis "mercykilled" 275,000 senile and incurable Germans.

It would be erroneous to assume that abandoning or killing the aged in a primitive society is necessarily the reflection of the lack of respect or sympathy for the aged. It might be; but more often this is not the case. Many of these tribes do not despise old age. They love and respect their old, but their nomadic existence, the rigors of extreme climates, and correspondingly poor food resources, induce them to sometimes abandon and even kill unproductive members of the group, the very old as well as the very young. This is, for instance, the case with Australians and Eskimos among whom oldsters and babies are respected and loved.

In quite a few tribes where the old are well treated, but objectively a heavy burden to others and themselves, the old themselves ask to be killed (e. g. among the Siberian Chukchee or Koryak, South American Botckudus or Caribs, and ancient Germans). They do it partly to be spared the sufferings of old age, but above all on the basis of a widespread and in this case rather beneficial ideology implying that those, who die a violent death and not the dishonorable "strohted" in bed, go to a better world beyond. This same faith is, by the way, still inspiring Mohammedan warriors in battle. In a similar way some of the crippled children in Germany were conditioned to ask for their own destruction.

When tribes not only kill but eat their oldsters like the South American Tapaya, or the ancient Irish, the reasons seem more often of a magic than of a culinary order.

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Although in many cases killing or neglect of the old seems explainable in terms of extreme climate, poverty, or nomadism, no clear cut correlation or causal connection can be established between the two series of facts. There are quite a few non-nomads who kill or neglect, and despise the old. Among neighboring tribes, living in the same climate, on the same technological level, the one will respect and nurse the old, the other despise or kill. Very primitive people, that is: people living on a very low technological level like the Andamans or Austrolians, seem in general to treat their old well; better than many more advanced tribes. Among people where emphasis is more on muscular, than on intellectual or moral accomplishments like the Yakut, the Buin Melanesians, or the modern North Americans, the old are usually not much appreciated. Still cultures venerating the warrior like the Iroquois or African Masai managed to combine this attitude with great respect for old age. Everywhere we find in the attitudes towards old age, whether good or bad, a rather arbitrary element, unexplainable so far by so called objective factors.

Although we can for lack of time give here no details on the fact that attitudes towards old age are by no means identical as to both sexes, and that old males might be venerated while old females are neglected or vice versa, we would like at least to draw attention to the phenomenon.

Attitudes towards old age are submitted to historical, not evolutionary, change. In Greece old age seems to have been more respected in the beginning than at the time of highest development. In China old age seems not always to have enjoyed the tremendous respect it did during the last 2000 years. In Japan it apparently underwent an eclipse in the 12th century. In the U. S. it has lost respect and sympathy during the last 50 years, but will, we hope, regain it on more rational grounds.

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L. W. Simmons has, in his excellent book "The Role of the Aged in Primitive Society" (New Haven 1945) made an interesting survey of the factors on which survival and prestige of the old in primitive society are mostly based. Many of them are of a supernatural character. The old being rare in primitive society, their mere survival proves that they have "mana" (magic force), and many of them become magicians. This, or the fact that their ghosts might take revenge, makes for proper respect of their person. Tabooing of certain foods for the young assures the old automatically of a certain amount of the quarry or harvest. The perspective of a better world where they will go after death eases the discomfort of their declining years.

In primitive conditions many light occupations like babysitter, mid-wife, beautician etc. are left to the old and allow them to retain their usefulness. In societies without books or movies they seem particularly popular as "recreational directors", storytellers etc.

As conditions tend to remain stable in primitive societies over long periods, and traditions are handed down ~~down~~ orally, the accrued experience of the old is of the greatest value and they often occupy the role of the esteemed counselor or actual leader.

Whatever property might exist in primitive societies, the old have had the best chances to accumulate it. Their property rights serve as an important instrument to retain power and respect.

Authority of, and good care for the aged is also strongly influenced by such factors as stable residence in smaller communities, and close knit family groups.

We must regretfully state that almost all these props of old age in primitive society are gone in modern North American (or for that matter Western) society. Gone is the rarity value of old age. Gone are the supernaturalistic factors. In sociological lingo, the attitude towards the aged has changed "from a sacred to a secular." The light occupations have mostly shifted into the hands of young specialists. In an age of rapidly changing technology, experience is in many fields no longer the value it used to be. My knowledge of horses will not enhance my value to my flying grandchildren etc. The modern American does not enjoy stable residence and tends more and more to live in big cities. The family is disintegrating even without such conflagrations as depressions, wars, or inflations that tend to bring particular hardships to the old. Most old people have no longer a chance to acquire enough property for creating themselves a respected position. How powerful on the other hand the property factor still is can be seen from the fact that we, a culture basically despising old age, are nevertheless governed by a group of old men (often faking youth) whose power rests primarily on property. The old have retained another asset in our society: the vote.

Under given circumstances it is not surprising that the general attitude towards old age in the U. S. is contradictory and lukewarm at best, often negative and scornful.

I think this can be demonstrated in spite of the fact that almost no direct research has been done in this direction. Our argumentation will consequently by necessity look somewhat chequered. I. L. Nascher, the inventor of the term "geriatrics" and personally certainly a great friend of the aged, reflects this attitude rather crudely in the preface to his treatise (Philadelphia 1914, p. V.):

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"The cause of this neglect (of senile diseases) must be sought in the general mental attitude towards the aged. The spirit of veneration of ancestors and the aged, such as exists in China, does not exist among us. The sentimental interest in the aged is confined to the immediate family of the individual and there the interest is often less sentimental than dutiful. We realize that for all practical purpose the lives of the aged are useless, that they are often a burden to themselves, their family, and the community at large. Their appearance is generally unesthetic, their actions objectionable, their very existence often an incubus to those who in a spirit of humanity or duty take upon themselves the care of the aged. Those who would deny that this is the usual attitude towards the aged need but compare the treatment of the uncared child with the treatment of the uncared old man, the asylums for children with the asylums for the aged, the treatment in the home where children and their grandparents entail burdens upon the family."

In psychological tests two thirds of our oldsters feel unwanted or superfluous, though they pretend to be happy. It is not accidental that the suicide rate for white North Americans - high in general when compared to other countries - is more than twice as high above the age of 55 than it is up to 55. (20.1 in 100,000 population instead of 9.7)

No less than 54% of North Americans reached in a certain poll did not want to ever retire, 25% when over 65%, and only 20% before 65.

Although this poll certainly expresses tendencies in certain strata of American society, and is therefore, and in the absence of any other relevant material, quoted here, it cannot claim general validity. The sample was probably too small, and too much restricted to one social or local group. The mere fact that insurance firms in this country spend very large sums for advertising "retirement at 55" must inspire caution as to the above mentioned poll. We cannot claim any more general validity for the results of a questionnaire we submitted to 40 persons in order to check the results. Yet in one respect we seem to have found a clue as to the contradictions of the Fried poll. From

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20 academic people we received about the same percentages as Fried as to "never retirers," above 65, and below 65 retirers. The average age desired for retirement was 64.5. The situation was entirely different in the other half of our sample, at purpose taken among "common people" and composed of janitors, barbers, employees etc. There was one (not too clearly formulating) never retires; the average age desired for retirement was 57.2, and 90% of those asked wanted to retire before 65. This little episode is a timely reminder as to the complexity of our problem. Unlike in primitive societies, we will on account of the class structure, perhaps eventually deal with several distinct attitudes towards old age in one single culture.

In spite of these corrections it remains true that numerous Americans do not want to retire, because they are ashamed and afraid of being old. American oldsters also seem often to express these feelings in a gaudy way of dressing, the widespread habit of dying their hair, or other cosmetic practices, and the public exhibition of juvenile mannerisms, although occasionally such habits might be the result of genuine exuberance.

Some of the cosmetic habits of American oldsters are enforced by the pernicious superstition of many American businessmen that people above forty are no longer employable. This habit, very appropriately called "forty-phobia", was already common in the U. S. around 1900. In spite of the fact that most modern jobs do no longer ask for muscular strength which might be failing in the old; in spite of the pioneer work of enlightened businessmen like Henry Simler; in spite of the excellent experiences with reemployment of the old during the last war, this attitude seems still to continue.

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Already in 1896, a poll revealed negative attitudes in 80% of American children towards the old. In 1905 the most famous American physician of his time, kind Dr. William Osler stated "whimsically" in a farewell address the uncloseness of men above 40, and the desirability of gassing them at 61. (He was then 46 years old).

In classic antiquity the following anecdote was regarded as rather significant: an old Athenian erred through the theater, looking in vain for a seat; nobody moved. All of a sudden a group of men rose. They were a Spartan delegation. Sparta was the only Greek city state to honor the old. In spite of her exaltation of the warrior, Sparta was ruled by a council of old men.

I feel that the non rising of our children for the old in busses etc. is equally significant. It symbolizes our lack of respect for the old, condoned apparently by many of them. They not only often participate in the brat idolatry of modern American society, but seem afraid to enforce the rising of children for other reasons. This would, for instance, imply public admission of the fact that they are old, a status for which apparently they have hardly more respect or sympathy than the rest of the group.

I am convinced that a detail analysis of modern American literature which in most cases ignores the old consistently in the picture of reality it tries to give, would confirm our hypothesis. So would a semantic analysis of the different emotional contents of "old" versus "alt" or "vieux".

Our present North American attitude seems to be a combination of specific American traits like the emphasis on youth and the fetishism of the now, and the expression of a general trend in Western culture which, due to the absence

of the brakes of tradition, we always tend to express in a somewhat extreme fashion.

The increase in life expectancy has deprived the old of their rarity value, the values of old age have suffered an inflation, and signs of a cult of the young have appeared everywhere in Western society. Yet there is nothing automatic about this situation. In France where the flood of the aged has reached already the levels that are prognosticated for the U. S. A. only for about 1980, and where the general condition of the old is certainly far from being ideal, old age is still respected by the group. It is therefore not hidden or feared by the old themselves in the ways it is done here.

While in the above quoted U. S. poll only 20% wanted to retire before age 65, 74% expressed this wish in a corresponding French survey. Only 1% of the interviewed Frenchmen embraced the ideal of 54% North Americans of the Fried poll never to retire. The average age given as desirable for retirement in France is 58, in the U. S. (among those who want to retire - many do not want to retire at all), 64.3. While the suicide rate in the U. S. increases from 9.7 in 100,000 population in those under 55, to 20.1 in those above 55, in France it actually decreases from 7.8 in 100,000 before 55 to 6.6 after age 55.

The above mentioned French poll (Girard-Daric) also asked people to define age groups.

The French defined as a

Jeune homme a parson age 17-23.4

Homme jeune 24.6-31.9

Homme encore jeune 35.5-45.4

Homme entre deux ages 45.4-55.0

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Homme d'un certain age 56.1-63.7

Homme age 65.8 plus

We asked corresponding questions in our poll and obtained the following results. (There were no significant differences in the two social groups of our sample):

Youth 12.1-19.0

Young man 19.2-33.9

Middle aged man 38.0-57.2

Old man 63.4 plus

A significant difference between the French and the American classifications lies in the fact that the French call a man young up to 45.4; North Americans of my sample do so only up to 33.9. While formally "old age" starts in both countries at about the same time (65.8 vs. 63.4 plus), it actually starts in the U. S. about six years earlier, as middle age ends at 57.2! In the light of, for instance, employment statistics this linguistic gap seems to be no accident.

While the one or the other of these figures might be controversial, in their totality they seem convincing enough as to make it superfluous to go into details of French behavior. Respectful attitudes of children towards the aged in public are taken for granted in France as well as in the rest of Europe.

These attitudes towards old age are maintained in France, in spite of the fact the great readiness of the French to retire puts a heavy economic burden on their aged society.

Attitudes towards old age in other western countries like Great Britain and Germany seem to be located somewhere between the French and the U. S. pole.

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While sympathy for the old is expressed in the U. S. mainly by doctors, there seems to be a large lay interest in Great Britain.

On account of specific attitudes toward old age, the old are not necessarily the stratum that suffers most in each crisis. They did so in the German inflation of 1923. But in the big depression 1929-33 those to suffer most, morally and economically, were the older teenagers. I have no economic data as to the 1945 post war. But if moral sufferings parallel economic ones, the hardest hit group seems again to have been the young, not the old.

Western society started out with a sympathetic attitude towards the aged. Christian orientation which was derived from the Hebrew Old Testament, prevailed over the Greek hatred of old age ("The Gods let die young those they love") and the Teutonic traditions of killing the old. The Catholic church, modeled after the Roman State, became and has remained a gerontocracy up to this very day.

Sona Rosa Burstein has recently claimed that the witch trials of the 16th and 17th century, bringing about the extermination primarily of impoecunious old women, were an outburst of the latent hatred for the old, illustrating at the same time the hatred of the old for society. Be this as it may, an entirely different trend was exhibited in the 18th century when elderly women rose through their "salons" to positions of great social, political and intellectual prominence. The era of industrialization in the 19th century seems to have ushered in a new period of slow progressive devaluation of old age.

Our present day attitude towards old age is contradictory, and contains one of several self destructive trends in our society. We do not respect the old, but we provide for them, when they are poor, and are led by them when they are wealthy. As we are bound to have a higher and higher percentage of oldsters anyhow, if we remain civilized, we might just as well act according to the French

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proverb "Si on n'a pas ce qu'on n'aime, il faut bien aimer ce qu'on a" (If you don't have what you love, you better love what you have). We should transgress the primitive stage where attitudes seem to be based on emotions. We should replace our prejudices concerning the old by actual knowledge of their abilities and disabilities, and create conditions where, in making the old respected and useful again, we deliver the young from the nightmarish future of an unwanted old age.