

THE AGING IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

TALCOTT PARSONS*

INTRODUCTION

American society is by no means so new that it has not yet experienced the problem of adjustment to the full cycle of the relations among the generations.¹ There is, however, a sense in which the problem of the status of the oldest age groups has been coming to be increasingly salient in recent times. For one thing, the long history of expansion has—in conjunction with a system of values which has stressed activism—been one in which an accent on youth has been natural. Not only have we expanded territorially and industrially, but we have had a rapidly increasing population, both by natural increase and by immigration. Therefore, relatively speaking, through most of our history we have had an abnormally low proportion of older people in the population.

Several processes of change have combined to alter this emphasis. The most obvious is the demographic change which has resulted in a large increase in the proportion of older persons in the population. For example, the proportion over 65 will have risen from 4.1 per cent in 1900 to about double that—namely, 8.2 per cent in 1950—and the trend is still upward. Not only has the proportion of older people greatly increased, but their average state of health has greatly improved. The increase in the proportion of the old is all the more important because of the baby boom of the last twenty years. Hence the fact that we have a population which bulges at both ends of the life cycle while, for the time being, it is relatively thin in the middle years.

A second major set of changes concerns certain aspects of the structure of the society on levels affecting most directly the positions of individuals. The two most fundamental foci in this respect are the household and occupational work. The tendency in both respects has been towards progressively increasing differentiation, though the two cases are very different.

In the case of the household, the central trend has been that of the isolation of the nuclear family. More and more, the typical household has come to consist in a married couple and their own children. In particular, two categories of

* A.B. 1924, Amherst College; studied at London School of Economics, 1924-25; Ph.D. 1927, Heidelberg University. Professor of Sociology, Harvard University. Chairman, Department of Social Relations, Harvard University, 1946-56. Author, *THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL ACTION* (2d ed. 1949); *THE SOCIAL SYSTEM, ESSAYS IN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY* (rev. ed. 1958); *STRUCTURE AND PROCESS IN MODERN SOCIETIES* (1960); co-author, [with Robert F. Bales & Edward A. Shils] *WORKING PAPERS IN THE THEORY OF ACTION* (1953); [with Robert F. Bales] *FAMILY SOCIALIZATION AND INTERACTION PROCESS* (1955); [with Neil J. Smelser] *ECONOMY AND SOCIETY* (1956); editor, [with Edward A. Shils] *TOWARD A GENERAL THEORY OF ACTION* (1951); [with Edward A. Shils, Kaspar D. Naegle & Jesse R. Pitts] *THEORIES OF SOCIETY* (1961); translator, MAX WEBER, *THE PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM* (1956), and *THE THEORY OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION* (1st Am. ed. 1947).

¹ Cf. Talmon, *Aging in Israel—A Planned Society*, 67 *AM. J. SOCIOLOGY* 284 (1961), for an interesting discussion of the impact of this problem on the Kibbutzim in Israel.

nonrelatives have declined substantially in recent years as members of households: domestic servants and lodgers. But the significant decline for present purposes is that of resident relatives who are not members of the family of procreation of the proprietary couple, notably the parents or siblings of one or the other spouse. This in particular means that the three-generation household in which the surviving grandparents lived with one of their married children has become increasingly rare. The obverse of this development is the striking proportion of households which are not family households, but composed of what the Census calls "primary individuals," perhaps in twos and threes, but many living alone. In the 1960 Census such households comprised sixteen per cent of the total.

Some of these persons are the unmarried or never married at all stages of the life cycle. The proportion of the population of marriageable age married and living with their spouses is, however, the highest it has ever been. Hence the increases in this category must be accounted for mainly by widowed and divorced persons, but chiefly the former, living either alone or with another older person or persons of the same sex.

There seems to be considerable evidence that this residential isolation is on the whole desired on both sides. For younger, *i.e.*, middle-aged married couples, there seems to be a strong set of motivations to maintain their "privacy" in the sense of not taking in permanently anyone other than their own children. For the parental generation, and even more for unmarried or widowed or divorced siblings, there is a strong valuation of "independence." The negative side of this is the fear of "being a burden" to others, but there also is the positive side of freedom to lead a life free of unaccustomed supervisions.

This valuation of privacy and independence is undoubtedly in part a consequence of the circumstances in which persons have first established their independence from their own parents, with marriage and the setting up of an independent household as the most striking step at this level. Since in the transition to full adulthood this independence meant so much, it seems incongruous to turn the tables and either suggest or accept "dependency" at the next level up in the generation structure. We would be inclined to hold that only in a society with a broadly institutionalized three-generation household structure could the acceptance from either side of the parental generation as a "normal" member of the household be readily and easily felt to be "the right thing."

It is difficult to evaluate the implications of this isolation. There is an initial tendency to deplore it and to sympathize with the loneliness of the old folks. There seems, however, to be a good deal of evidence that there is another side of the coin. Given easy transportation and the telephone, there need not be too severe a lack of contact with others (both relatives and friends); and often the older people do in fact enjoy independence, coming and going as they wish, and above all, the feeling of independence through not being the objects of care. Furthermore, the

average level of health is such that only a minority requires continuing care, though the position of this minority is often difficult.

The second area of differentiation, that with respect to occupation, is more complex. In pre-industrial circumstances, where the kinship-organized household and the producing organization have tended to be identical, there was, broadly, no problem of retirement, though the question of the timing of the transfer of proprietorship and of authority within organizations has often been acute. In our own society many artisans, farmers, small tradesmen, and professional practitioners are still in this traditional situation. They can "taper off" their participation in occupational-type activities to an almost endlessly varying degree and kind of pattern. In the "industrial" situation, on the other hand, there is a tendency to parallel the decisiveness of the distinction between being employed by an organization or not, with a very specific policy of retirement. Thus a former employee—at whatever level—no longer functions in the organization. Over a considerable range, of course, this has been an either-or matter. Up to the moment of retirement the individual has carried a "full load" of organizational responsibility, whereas after that moment his connection was totally severed except for pension plans and the like.

There is a certain irony in the fact that the establishment of this retirement pattern—most generally at age 65—occurred just on the eve of the demographic change by virtue of which not only the proportion of the population over 65 but also their average levels of health and general competence increased.

With the extension of general organizational retirement policy to governmental responsibility for the welfare of the aged through social security, another dilemma was bound to arise. Since there is, in our society, such a strong tradition that benefits which have not been "earned" should be minimized, the doctrine prevailed that those who by "hook or crook" managed to earn money after retirement should be ineligible for the public benefits provided. This, of course, put the older person in the position of accepting paid employment, when and if it was available after normal retirement ages, at the sacrifice of the social security benefits which were so widely heralded as solving the subsistence problems of the elderly.

There has recently been considerable questioning of the policy of compulsory retirement at a specified age, regardless of state of health or capacity in other respects, and there has also been a certain amount of actual modification of this policy. However, the continued growth of large-scale organization means that increasing proportions of the groups reaching the requisite ages come under the rigid retirement policy, and it seems unlikely that this policy will be modified quickly enough to make a major difference in the near future.

I

AMERICAN VALUES AND THE PROBLEMS OF AGE

We have noted above that one focus of the problem of age is the activist cast of American social values: very much an orientation which stresses mastery over the

environment, including the conditions of life of individuals. For the society, this value system implies a conception of progressive improvement in the conditions of life, without any specific terminal goal.

For the individual, the stress is on achievement not only of success and its personal rewards, but of a useful contribution to the good society and its cultural base. Moreover, the values of such a society put a heavy accent on individual responsibility for these contributions, but, of course, also a strong emphasis on the importance of factors of opportunity. It is, for example, above all as a factor of opportunity for valued achievement that our stress on economic productivity is to be understood.

From even this very sketchy outline of the value system it is clear that the elderly population presents a very difficult problem. On the one hand, the clear implication is that a person should continue to contribute to the height of his capacity so long as he is able. Dying in full harness is a particularly congenial image—that of a man who never let up a bit but kept on striving as energetically as ever until “cut off” through no possible responsibility of his own. It should be clear that in this connection the problem of just what are the capacities of the old, how far they must be defined in terms of a “decline” from those of high maturity, is of crucial importance.

The other side is the problem of opportunity, looked at in terms of the resources available to society. The basic rationale of the compulsory retirement policy seems to be, in the first instance, to “make way for younger and hence presumptively more capable people” so that not only will we have effective workers in our occupational world, but the inevitably scarce resources will be most fully utilized.

This simple dichotomy organized about the ideas of capacity and opportunity fails to take account of two important complications. One is the question of the meaning for American society of the limited life-span of the individual: not only of the fact of death in general (this applies to infants and those cut off in the prime of life), but increasingly because of sheer demographic changes, to the inevitability of dying in old age after completion of a normal cycle of life. Do either of two relatively simple versions of the American attitude suffice here, namely the ideal of going on without change until arbitrarily cut off and the practice of being socially declared, through retirement, to be no longer useful because of incapacity for further achievement?

Another important part of the problem is the rather complex set of American attitudes toward rest, recreation and, indeed, consumption generally. Especially the last has been the subject of much discussion in connection with the “affluent society” theme. It would seem that if the significance of interest in high consumption standards were as unambiguously hedonistic as it is often alleged to be, this would apply to the older ages in the form of a general welcoming of a status which terminates the necessity to work. Indeed, there would be a movement for *earlier* retirement on the simple ground that society could now afford to relieve its older

citizens from the obligation to work. There is some of this, but surely the matter is more complicated.

More generally, there certainly is a notable increase in concern with a variety of recreational interests. But these are very generally spread through the life cycle and not concentrated at the higher ages. Moreover it is not unimportant to note that many recreational activities are of a rather "serious" character, requiring a good deal of effort and sophistication (such as reading of a serious type, interest in modern art and in classical music and the like, and travel which includes informed attention to historic and cultural monuments). Rather generally Americans seem to like strenuous forms of recreation and wish to limit their periods of rest in the sense of minimization of exertion.²

The weight of evidence seems to point to the predominance of activistic values in American society. Such a conclusion also draws support from the existence of a widely shared view that only the young are capable of the higher levels of enjoyment, among which, of course, sexual gratification is apt to figure particularly prominently. This too seems to be defined in a context of "prowess" to a considerable extent.

Taking due account of these considerations, there still seems to be an important amount of ambivalence, both about the proper role of the aged and in attitudes toward death. One indication of this is the tendency to bifurcation in one group of older people studied at the New England Age Center.³ One sub-group clearly wanted, and many attained, what essentially were second careers after retirement, in many respects as similar as possible to the old. Another group, however, were on the whole greatly relieved to be free of their earlier obligations and did not want to assume new tasks of the same type, though what they did was by no means necessarily inactive. Certainly this latter group fits with the conception of "disengagement" which has been stressed by Cumming and Henry.⁴

It has often been suggested that in American society there is a very strong tendency to deny the reality of death. The evidence referred to in this connection includes especially the attenuation of the older observances of mourning, and the generally optimistic and "comforting" notes sounded in the advertisements of morticians and cemeteries—Forest Lawn in Los Angeles enjoying perhaps disproportionate prominence in this connection.

We would like to suggest an alternative interpretation. It has come to be a well-known generalization that in cases of conflict there is, under certain conditions, a tendency towards "apathy." What this amounts to is a withdrawing from the situation in order to avoid facing an insoluble dilemma. Barber has called at-

² An interesting demographic point is that apparently the earlier tendency to set up colonies of retired people in places like California and Florida is being checked. The overwhelming proportion of people over 65 continues to live in the communities in which they have previously lived; indeed they are the least migratory of the age groups. California now has less than the national average of people in that age group.

³ Cf. NATALIE CABOT, *YOU CAN'T COUNT ON DYING* (1961).

⁴ ELAINE CUMMING & WILLIAM-E. HENRY, *GROWING OLD* (1961).

tention to this pattern in several connections, but perhaps the best-known case is that of the "indifference reaction" on the part of voters under cross-pressures in political campaigns.⁵ The suggestion, then, is that there is conflict in the whole area of attitudes toward old age and death, both with respect to the specification of values and with respect to motivational ambivalence on the part of individuals, older as well as younger.

One major reason why the hypothesis of simple denial is inadequate, both with respect to death and to the impact of its approach, is the element of "rationality" in our value system. The term is put in quotation marks because the concept is never simple and without problematical elements. But this is a society which places a very high value on technological control and on the empirical knowledge on which advanced technology must be based. This most obvious component of rationality is in turn connected with a general pressure to be clear about the "facts of life," and surely the limited span of the individual human life is one of the most conspicuous of these. We may well be hesitant to commit ourselves to very specific philosophical or theological interpretations of these facts, but to say that we simply ignore their existence is surely not correct.

II

SOME PROCESSES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

On the background of these considerations, we would now like to develop a line of analysis of what seems to us to be an important—if not the major—trend of cultural and structural development in response to the features of the situation just outlined. This has to do with a general process of change, of which differentiation, inclusion, and upgrading may be called the principal features. It is well known that differentiation is a process which figures prominently in the development of social systems as it does of organisms, and also that it is likely, under favorable circumstances, to occur in response to situations of conflict and change, though it is by no means the only possible outcome of such processes.

A classical example of differentiation in social structures is the process by which the household that was simultaneously an economic enterprise (*e.g.*, the family farm or artisan workshop) has become differentiated into a family household which no longer performs productive functions, and an employing organization from which members of families make their living, but which is not a unit of residence and the other normal aspects of family life. With appropriate modifications, it may be held that a somewhat similar process of differentiation has been going on with respect to the life cycle.

Of course, its main biological outline is given independently of all cultural and social factors. The most obvious case of social differentiation is with respect to formal education. In preliterate societies—and in the nonliterate lower groups in

⁵ Cf. BERNARD R. BERELSON, PAUL F. LAZARSFELD & WILLIAM N. MCPHEE, *VOTING—A STUDY OF OPINION FORMATION IN A PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN* (1954).

other societies—the tendency has been to bring the oncoming generation into adult functions nearly as early as the maturation of their capacities would allow, with sexual functions and marriage being perhaps the most widely variant field. Children attending school are, however, to that extent segregated from the rest of society. So long as formal education lasts for only a few years, this may be said to make rather little difference, but with its extension upward in the age range, formal education becomes progressively more important. Even secondary education keeps persons out of the labor force to a considerable degree, and, of course, college and postgraduate education does so much more conspicuously. A society like our own has a very large category of students who are quite capable of “work” in the ordinary sense of regular employment but are kept out of the labor force for further education.⁶

Another interesting trend of differentiation of the life cycle in our society concerns the family circle. A starting point may be considered the lessening of the pressure of the more highly educated to postpone marriage and even childbearing until after the completion of formal education. The married student has become a familiar type. However that may be, with relatively early marriage women are tending to concentrate the period of childbearing more highly than before. Though compared to the 1930's the average number of children per fertile marriage has risen, they are concentrated in a shorter span so that, in 1957, the average American mother was bearing her *last* child at the age of twenty-six.⁷

This concentration of the childbearing and care period is then associated with the striking increase of the number of married women who are gainfully employed. The proportions rise sharply in the age groups who have passed the period of responsibility for pre-school or primary school children. This of course is conditioned by the fact that longer periods are available at both ends: finishing with child care earlier, and enjoying greater longevity with better health. Furthermore, there is good evidence that the proportion of employed women who work primarily for extra income is declining in favor of an increasing proportion who want something interesting and worth-while to do.

The problem, then, is whether it is reasonable to expect a further process of differentiation of the life cycle so that the last period—or more than one such period—acquires a positive functional significance, both for the individual and for the society. If this is the case, the predominant role-pattern to emerge should be neither a simple prolongation of that of the middle years to the last possible moment, nor one of relegation to useless dependency and simply “waiting to die.”

Besides differentiation, another important component of the process of social change under consideration is what may be called inclusion—the process by which once a new pattern or structure has become established within a segment of the popu-

⁶ This group, along with the size of the preschool cohort of children and the retired group are the constituents of what demographers call the “dependency ratio,” namely, those who must be “supported by the group actively in labor force at a given time.”

⁷ PAUL GLICK, *AMERICAN FAMILIES* (1957).

lation, progressively widening circles may be brought into the system of which it is a part. Thus, historically, democratic government did not become established all at once for total population. The franchise, originally available only to very select groups such as the English Barons in the time of King John, gradually came to be extended until in the Western world universal adult suffrage has become the rule.

In societies where the functions which we regard as occupational were normally performed within kinship units, and hence the normal kinship unit comprised three or more generations, the oldest age group was clearly included in the main operating structures. The isolation of the nuclear family and the development of occupational organizations with policies of retirement have resulted in an unprecedented exclusion of the elders from these main operative structures. The problem, then, is by what process a new re-inclusion can be expected to take place. That there is strong pressure in that direction is scarcely to be doubted.

This, however, can be best discussed when we have said something about the third aspect of the process, the one which has been called upgrading. By this is meant the establishment of norms regulating conduct which, relative to the starting point, imply higher orders of achievement and hence of competence and responsibility in their implementation. The upgrading of educational levels is one of the best examples. For increasing proportions of the population, increasingly high levels of educational attainment are coming to be normative, both in the sense of going farther in the educational process and in that of higher attainment at any given level. Thus, there has been a steady increase in the proportion of the American age cohort going to college, and a still more striking increase in postgraduate professional education.

III

CAPACITIES AND THE LIFE CYCLE

We would like to suggest that this process has a rather special bearing on the problem of the matching of societal functions to stages in the life cycle. It has already become abundantly clear that the less "primitive" the society, the less prominent are the functions which can best be performed at very early ages—beyond sheer childhood, of course. Though the old dichotomy of brains against brawn must be taken with a grain of salt, one major feature of the trend is to value the skills which require intellectual training increasingly higher than those involving physical prowess as such, particularly sheer "brute strength" and endurance. Similar in some respects is the kind of mature judgment which is particularly important to functions involving executive and fiduciary responsibility.

The problem is apparently not simple. The realistic functional importance of capacities which do not mature is certainly one important factor. It is to some degree cross-cut by the tendency of older people—once in positions of status and influence—to hold on and to block access to younger groups who would in fact be perfectly capable of performing adequately, if not better than their elders. However, one

of the principal characteristics of modern society has been rapid and continuing expansion, and a charge of drastically blocking opportunity for the young in favor of the vested interests of the old does not seem to be generally justified. Few would advocate legislation which would exclude all persons over forty or possibly forty-five from positions requiring high technical competence or high responsibility or both.⁸

There are certainly some types of culturally rather than physically high achievement which can be attained at their highest levels by quite young people—say in their twenties.

Mathematics, physical science, and music seem to be conspicuous examples. Even in these fields, however, there does not seem to be much evidence of a general decline of powers for all creative persons after a very early peak, and surely it would be difficult to maintain that such decline applied to all valued capacities.

There is, however, the very important question of what is generally known about peaks and declines. The safest answer is that this presents a complex question, and that it is probable that ideological bias has operated in favor of the stereotype of relatively early peaks. Clearly, even the middle aged person who keeps in "good condition" cannot compete with his juniors in many of the most strenuous sports, such as short distance racing or football. Even where no obvious physical prowess is involved, there is the question of capacity to tolerate "strains" which are usually of a psychological character but may be none the less severe. Cases in point would be the necessity of carrying along many complex interests simultaneously, negotiating with many people, and hence meeting severe and complex time schedules.

It seems unlikely that the reality of decline is to be doubted. At the same time, the concepts of peak and decline need to be differentiated. Not only will individuals be expected to differ considerably, but in populations the different components will be differently timed along the life cycle. It seems broadly true that the first capacities to decline are those for unusual physical prowess along lines of strength, agility, and capacity for unusual exertion.

Very tentatively, we should like to suggest a broad scheme of capacities which may be expected on general theoretical grounds to reach their peaks later and to be less subject to decline as a function of the physiological changes of aging—except for the extremes of old age which themselves are difficult to define. The suggestion is that the technically specialized functions can most readily be performed on high levels at the earlier ages. This seems to be in accord with the cases of mathematics and music. Perhaps such early "declines" as occur are not so much declines of capacity as they are completions of configurations of achievement, analogous to the cultural configuration on which Kroeber has laid stress.⁹

Next in line we would place functions of an executive or decision-making

⁸Indeed, it is interesting that the theme, "the older generation has made a mess of the world which only youth can clean up" is considerably less prominent precisely among young people now than it was for the generation just following World War I.

⁹A. L. KROEBER, *CONFIGURATIONS OF CULTURE GROWTH* (1944).

character. In the social sense, these are the functions of "men of action" par excellence and (though with many variations) tend to be carried out above all by people in the middle years. As distinct from mechanical training and competence, experience seems to play a larger part. A major aspect is the wider range of considerations and interests which must be taken into account, and the subtler balancing and weighing that must be undertaken. There is then a further shading into what we should call fiduciary functions. The broad distinction is between responsibility for the interests and hence the effectiveness of a particular organization, and for fitting such interests into a wider and higher-order context. An important prototype of fiduciary function in our society is the role of trusteeship in our many organizations, perhaps, above all, the private nonprofit category. The trustee is expected to have the interests of the organization very much at heart, but generally bridges these interests with others in the same community. The usual trustee is not a full time functionary of the organization, while the executive is.

We conceive fiduciary responsibilities as having primarily integrative functions at the social level. There is still a higher level which has to do with trusteeship, not so much over social as over cultural interests. Here the major point of articulation is in values with their link with moral standards. More generally, it is guardianship of cultural traditions, not necessarily in the sense of traditionalism but rather of concern for the longest-run considerations of the society and of its culture.

There are important cases of fiduciary and cultural responsibility which has been lodged particularly in older people. Conspicuous examples include judges and religious functionaries.

The above broad classification is highly schematic, and is cross-cut in a variety of ways. It does, however, describe a thread which runs through the organization of society. It is, furthermore, a scale of upgrading in the sense that the functions outlined stand in a scale of progressively increasing strategic importance in the control and stability of society—the outline follows what we have been calling the "hierarchy of control."¹⁰ Moreover, it is a scale along which it can be expected that, as a society "matures," a progressively greater emphasis will fall on the higher rather than the lower levels. Thus a "frontier society" will tend to be above all "technically" oriented; a more mature one "organizationally" (with the executive something of the "culture hero"), and a still more mature one will be concerned with inter-organizational integration to a greater extent.¹¹

How then does this scale relate to the problem of age? Our broadest suggestion—we hope it does not smack too much of naïve harmonism—is that a society which has

¹⁰ Cf. Parsons, *Pattern Variables Revisited*, 25 AM. SOCIOLOGICAL REV. 467 (1960).

¹¹ Again, it should be emphasized that this scaling is a *relative* matter. This is true as between structural types of society, e.g., industrial and pre-industrial in the Western world, but also within such a type. Thus, we have experienced an immense technical upgrading, which in turn implies an upgrading of the functions of organizational responsibility for executives in the organizations within which such technical functions are performed. For example, the task of an academic administrator when his institution was a liberal arts college was very different from that of a president or dean in a great modern university.

been increasing in its "production" of older people has at the same time been creating an increasing demand for their contributions. We would indeed be very far from attempting to tie this down to specifics of age, to say nothing of the vastly complicated matters of social status in other respects. An immense amount of research needs to be done on these problems. What we do want to suggest is that there is a very broad correspondence between the scale which we have outlined and the age grade, and hence that with the increasing salience of the later-to-emerge and in some sense higher functions in the society, there is an increasingly important place for older persons. What then of their "capacities"?

There is a central paradox in current ideological and social science thinking—the two shading imperceptibly into each other—which is basically unresolved and applies even more acutely to the age problem than it does to others. This may be called the paradox of "subjectivity." There has been a very general trend toward the alleviation of the severity of general controls over the action of the individual. The problem arises from the fact that there are two ambiguously related, possible directions for response to the newer freedoms. One is towards the freer opportunity for the expression of what are in some sense "personal" desires and needs. The other is for the concentration on *internalized* normative obligations. As in other aspects of this discussion, the relation between the two is highly complex—hence the word ambiguous. Thus with the extension of systems of upgraded control, the process of "inclusion" involves not only population elements which were previously excluded, but also, within the personality of the individual, "emancipation" of components which were previously excluded—*e.g.*, by "repression."

The problem may be clarified with reference to the concept of "disengagement" which is the central conception in the important study of aging by Cumming and Henry. There is a multiple reference point in the idea of relative freedom from the involvements and obligations of earlier stages of the life cycle. The question is how far disengagement is in the direction of "hedonistic" indulgences which are interpreted as repudiations of responsibility, and how far, on the other hand, it involves the "sloughing off" of certain responsibilities in favor of others which may be interpreted to be higher in the hierarchical order outlined above.¹²

There is a good case for the view that the latter is considerably more important than common sense would have it. First, as we have already indicated, there is solid theoretical ground for the view that some of the less strikingly activist functions are of high strategic significance in an activistically oriented society. Secondly, there seems to be evidence that these functions have been increasing in relative importance. Finally, there is evidence that the talents of many of the higher-status older people

¹² There is a suggestive finding which, apparently, is common to Cumming and Henry, and the New England Age Center studies. This is that aged people are preoccupied with the fear of death far less than are their youngsters. They seem to be above all concerned with the welfare of the individual people and the "causes" of interests with which they have been identified. This may be interpreted as at least the emergence of a strong fiduciary complex. It is clearly not "self-interest" in the classical hedonistic sense.

are being utilized more extensively than before, partly through postponement of retirement, but even more through employment in advisory and fiduciary capacities after retirement. The problem of how far and how fast these tendencies are spreading downward through the population is an important one on which we do not have adequate evidence.

There is, as has been suggested, an important connection between the general process of social change and that of normative upgrading. The institutionalization of new levels of normative generalization and control most generally requires higher levels of responsibility on the part of the population. There is furthermore, we have suggested, a relation between these levels and the stages of the life cycle. Are there psychological factors which back up the thesis of this positive relation?

This question seems to have been hardly touched upon by psychologists working in the field of personality. A good deal has been made of the internalization of normative culture in the personality and of the fact that, with all the well known elements of conflict, some order of integration of actual motivation with normative expectations is a condition of anything like "fulfillment" of the desires and hopes of the individual. A question arises, however, as to whether in the period usually thought of as that of socialization, the individual is endowed with a sum of "normative commitments" in such a way that the normal life cycle is one of gradual "expenditure" of this "capital" so that in later years it is pretty well eroded. This would be a kind of "zero-sum" conception of capacity for moral action, very much in line with the common conception that Western society has been "living on its moral capital" with a progressive decline of standards as compared with the "good old days."

Frankly, we are not aware of any data which substantiate the position of inherent "erosion" in either case, and in the societal one there is very good evidence against it.¹³ It is not possible to develop the argument here, but the general upgrading process which has been going on in Western society is not understandable on the hypothesis of progressive "moral decline." This latter conception must be relegated to the category of ideology.¹⁴

If a society is able at least to conserve its "moral capital" (if not, through wise management, even to increase it), why should this not be possible for the individual? It is submitted that it is in fact so, and that many persons—though of course by no means all—actually grow in moral stature as they grow older. Certainly the hypothesis of differentiation as applied to the life cycle is consistent with this possibility. Essentially this is to say the broad pattern of sloughing off responsibilities and expectations which have been important in earlier phases, in no way implies that

¹³ Cf. in particular, WINSTON WHITE, *BEYOND CONFORMITY* (1961).

¹⁴ Its most important proponents are those whom White calls "moralists," who are primarily concerned with exhorting to ever higher moral effort and emphasizing the individual's moral responsibility. In their acute feeling that our moral standards are not high enough, for which, of course, there is an excellent case, they tend to contend that they are not only, in the light of the need, relatively low, but that they are *absolutely* low and declining. It is this last imputation, not the first, which we question.

there is a net loss of capacity—any more than the total system which is comprised by family and employing organization is, in the illustration used above, less effective than the family enterprise. Certainly, males perform less of the physically strenuous functions, symbolized by athletic prowess and physical “toughness,” as they grow older. Similarly, women by biological determination are precluded from continuing to bear children after the menopause, but this does not mean they have “fulfilled their function” and must simply cease to be important.

We should then consider the conception of disengagement to include this further step in differentiation. It is not necessarily only a process of “freeing from” but also of “freeing for.” The details are highly uncertain. We are really not outlining an interpretation of known facts about aging in American society, but rather sketching the possibilities which are clearly opened out by the known facts of social trends.

CONCLUSION

We have touched above only very sketchily on the relation of attitudes toward death to the problem of aging. In conclusion, one or two further points may be brought out. The specific limitations of the human life span constitute, of course, primary facts of life. The general prolongation of life has been a matter of averages, not of increasing the maximum span, thus in a sense making the problem of the *meaning* of the limitation more salient. Precisely because it has proved possible by human ingenuity to more than double the average length of life in about a century, the fact that Methuselah remains as mythical as ever is a stark reminder of human limitations. Of course, the fact that this century has seen more mass destruction of human life than any previous one contributes to the salience of the problem—though it seems highly improbable that in terms of proportion to world population the twentieth century has been unusually destructive.

The most important definition of the “aged” or even the “elderly” is, we think, that age group for whose members the current period is prospectively the *last* of their lives. It is life lived under the shadow of death and hence very much oriented to the prospect of termination. It can confidently be said that in so far as human beings are “rational” in almost any sense, the main concern in such a situation will be to get the most important things done “while there is yet time.” The basic question is what are the most important things. Here we run into the familiar dichotomy between the “self-interest” of the individual and his involvement in higher-order collective, normative, and cultural interests and obligations. In the first context the classical expression is “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow . . .” On the other side of the coin is concern for those responsibilities which can be reasonably said to be one’s own, and hence for the continuing and further welfare not only of loved persons but also of complete strangers, in connection with a wide variety of causes. In this connection the relative lack of “fear” of personal death is a striking finding.

Another aspect of the "apathy" toward death to which attention was called is the lack of stress one way or the other on the problems of an "after life." This fits the pattern of a practical, pragmatic society where there is widespread suspicion of speculation. However, our society is not oblivious to dangers and threats, and hence fatuously optimistic. Indeed it can be argued that our whole religious heritage, like many others, is structured about the problem of the meaning of death. Given the activistic and this-worldly orientation which has become increasingly central, the tension is raised rather than lowered. Consequently, one would expect apathy in this sense to increase rather than diminish.

Much has been said about the importance of the success complex in our modern society. Its primary frame of reference has been that of status attained in the "mature" years of life. It appears reasonable to assume that there is a continuing pressure to extend the basis of evaluation in the direction of the individual's total life span and record. Hence it seems to follow that in a society like ours, individual persons will continually be seeking for ways to "round out" their records in this increasingly self-consciously defined terminal period of their lives. It would be surprising if there were no corresponding societal demand for "services" by which the aged could not only gratify their own personal needs, but make a generally valued contribution in the process. This, after all, is the basic principle of a society based on the "division of labor."