

The Historical Construction of the Decline of the Status of the Aged in North America

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The question of the historical decline of the status of the aged has been a central one in the social history of the aged. The question is closely linked to *modernization theory* (or better *modernization theory of the aged* as modernization theory is, of course, much broader in scope than just the question of the aged).

This paper will look at this question as it has been dealt with in the North American context. For a number of demographic and archival reasons, the 'North American context' means a comparison of the status of the aged in colonial New England with the status of the aged of the United States in general in the more modern period. The three major studies of the changing status of the aged in the United States are David Hackett Fischer's (1977) *Growing old in America*, W. Andrew Achenbaum's (1978) *Old age in the new land*, and Carol Haber's (1983) *Beyond Sixty-Five*.

The basic question which is addressed, or rather should be addressed, in the studies under examination here is *whether, when, and exactly how* has the status of the elderly declined from *traditional* to modern society? All of these works are social histories, with the emphasis on social history as social science, rather than as history as an explicitly non-scientific endeavour (Achenbaum 1978, pp. 165-168).

I will argue that none of these authors give a systematic or convincing argument for the decline in the status of the aged over time, none adequately define what that status is, and all fail to problematize the nature of their main sources.

Fischer (1977), Achenbaum (1978), and Haber (1983) each concentrate their research on different periods of American history and each finds the watershed period of change in the status of the elderly in the period in which they have concentrated their research. Fischer focuses his

research, or at least his primary research, on colonial America and the period of the early republic. Achenbaum, on the other hand, focuses his efforts on the period from 1790 to circa 1930. Finally, Haber concentrates her research on the period from the latter half of the 19th century to the First World War. Despite the different historical periods covered, each of these authors goes on to compare the period of their study with the historical period immediately preceding the period which they investigated (with the exception of Fischer for whom an earlier period would have been in England rather than North America) and with the present. Despite overlapping each others' time periods and using many of the same primary sources each of these authors comes up with very different progressions for the decline of the aged.

Fischer presents old age as a stage of life and the aged (at least most of them) as "exalted" in colonial America. He then goes on to argue that the status of the aged declined fairly dramatically after American Revolution. Fischer contends that this was the direct result of changes in general ideas about the individual and individual rights which followed from the Revolution. It was the growth of the idea of individual liberty, coming out of the American and French Revolutions which was the cause of the decline in the aged, which "was caused primarily by the interaction of English Protestant ideas with the American environment." (p. 109), i.e., the combination of a philosophy of individualism with the existence (partly as a result of the Revolution and the opening up of the west to colonization) of land which the younger generation did not need to depend on their elders for.

Achenbaum, on the other hand, finds a marked decline in the status of aged to have occurred later. According to Achenbaum this occurred in the period after c. 1860 and was, at least ultimately, due to changes in general ideas about worth of aged.

Finally, Haber finds that the decline of the aged showed no single period of rapid decline but rather showed a pattern of gradual decline from the colonial period to the recent past (i.e., c. 1940-1970), generally as a function of change in ideas about the aged spread and led by a small elite group of professionals.

The fact that they all found a decline in the status of the aged in differing time periods, despite starting with similar views of the status of the aged in modern society, points to the first problem common to all of these works. While these studies are inherently comparisons of the condition of the elderly in the past with the purported condition of the elderly at *present*, none give any original evidence that the status of the elderly is particularly low in modern America, beyond the gerontological truisms found “in the most frequently cited works in gerontology and geriatrics published since 1935 ... and upon insights derived by reading retrospective articles on the ‘state of the field’” (Achenbaum 1978, p. 177). In effect all studies presume that:

Old age in mid-twentieth-century America, is a stage of life both clearly and categorically defined. The man and woman who reach sixty-five seemingly undergo a dramatic change.... Age, more than any other criterion, sets the elderly apart from society... The active, as well as the sedentary, the healthy and the disabled are all perceived as superannuated.” (Haber 1983, p. 1).

Yet as some of these same “retrospective articles on the ‘state of the field’” point out we “know very little about the way in which age criteria actually operate alongside other criteria in determining social rank” (Neugarten & Hagestad 1976, p. 37).

While it is not explicitly stated (see following discussion of the lack of definition of *status* in these studies), the *decline* in the status of the aged is understood to be a decline in status relative to the status of some or all other age groups. However, these studies do not, as they

should do even if it is accepted that the aged today have low status, make consistent comparisons of the condition of the elderly of the past with the condition of the non-elderly of the past, as a result they do not examine whether the relation of agedness to status at present might be a spurious relationship. For example Fischer (p. 142-44), Achenbaum (p. 69), and Haber (1983, pp. 33-34) all give evidence of a rise in the *unemployment rate* (though the exact measurement of this varies) for workers over sixty-five in the late 19th and early 20th centuries¹ yet none give the comparable figures for other age groups nor do they control for other variables such as occupation (i.e., were the aged simply more likely to be employed in declining occupations?) or education (i.e., were the aged less employed as a result of being less educated?).

A *theoretical* problem which has immediate methodological consequences for all of these studies is that, as studies of the elderly, they presume that old age is a universally recognized and important social group and, more importantly, that it was such in the periods under investigation. As a result of this there is the assumption that where the aged are dealt with in the historical record their agedness, as an important status conferring characteristic (either positive or negative), will inevitably be mentioned. Therefore, for example, Achenbaum describes going through the historical record looking for overt references to old age in either the titles, tables of contents, or indexes of contemporaneous works and then examining how those works in more detail for how they deal with the aged (Achenbaum 1978, pp. 176-77). The problem is that this method of selection inevitably biases the results towards those historical references which highlight the separate status of the age and against those which do not, i.e., those references which treat the aged equal and undifferentiated members of society.

Evidence for this systematic bias can be found in the results of some more quantitative studies² of the same literature, in particular *Littell's Living Age* (the *Readers' Digest* of the 19th

century). Both Fischer (1978, p. 122) and Achenbaum (1978, p. 224) used this 19th century popular magazine directly in their research. Fischer claims to have found a pattern of disengagement and marginalization of the aged in this and similar magazines from at least 1850 on (1978, p. 122); while Achenbaum (1978, pp. 51-54) claims that the decline of the status of the aged is to be found in this type of literature from c. 1860. Range & Vinovskis (1981) on the other hand, in a content analysis of a random sample of fiction from *Littell's Living Age* for the years 1845-1882, "...found that the elderly ... were portrayed as remarkably healthy, sane, and economically independent of their children or society." (pp. 155-57) throughout the period under study.³

Another theoretical problem all three authors have is that *status* is never explicitly defined. At times the status of the aged is taken as *prestige* (i.e., do people say nice things about them) and sometimes as *power*—economic, cultural, or political (although this last aspect is given surprisingly minimal coverage). For example, Fischer (1978) can find evidence for the exalted status of the aged in an odd collection of social characteristics: the fact that, "Witchcraft was commonly associated with old age" (p. 34, presumably indicative of cultural-symbolic power); admonitions against acting younger than one's age, "Levity in words, and much more in actions, is unsuitable and a shame to them, considering their age, and stains their glory, for old men to be gay and youthful in their apparel, or if aged women dress themselves like young girls, it exposeth them to reproach and contempt." (p. 36, presumably indicative *prestige* proper); and the ability (come necessity) of aged parents to continue economically exploit their children (pp. 52-58, presumably indicative economic power). However, without an explicit formulation of the nature of and evidence for social status each of these examples can be viewed as equally good evidence either for or against high status.

Closely related to this lack of definition of *status* is the problem that none of these authors give an explicit theoretical statement concerning the relationship of the evidence presented to the theory being proposed. In particular none examine the relation between the pronouncements of past experts about what the elderly should and did do and the lived condition of the elderly. In fact, though Achenbaum tends to be an exception to this, they do not separate proscriptive from descriptive writings on the aged. Fischer explicitly rejects the major source of nonprescriptive data, i.e, the court records: “Legal records are a treacherous source for social history. They may be used to reverse any generalization about the majority. The evidence is valuable and important if it is properly used [by him almost not at all], but any attempt to reconstruct social history primarily from court records is comparable to a modern sociologist’s trying to reconstruct normal patterns of life today from a police blotter.” (p. 62). Of course, court records are not police blotters and Fischer is really arguing an extreme form of structuralism, i.e., words speak louder than actions and actions only speak when they tell us what we want to hear.

A closely related theoretical problem is that, while all claim to be interested in the link between thought and action, that is between their different written sources and the actual condition of the elderly in the past, only Achenbaum attempts an explicit linkage. Achenbaum’s examination of this link leads him to conclude that, for the period of his study, “The interplay of broad intellectual trends and pervasive structural changes in society at large between 1790 and 1914 profoundly affected prevailing notions about the elderly without having either an immediate or a dramatic impact on the aged’s demographic and socioeconomic situation, or vice versa.” (1978, p. 86). However, he would seem accept exactly such an hypothesis for more recent periods, and to base such on exactly the sorts of sources (“the most frequently cited works in gerontology and geriatrics ... published popular opinion polls, and ... insights derived by

reading retrospective articles on the ‘state of the field,’” 1978, p. 177) with which he found a “basic discontinuity between prevailing images and the actual experiences of growing old” (p. 167) in the earlier period. Haber, meanwhile, seems to accept as unproblematic the *theory* that, “the ideas of the early gerontological specialists their policies and programs serve as a useful perspective by which to evaluate attitudes toward senescence. In their development, acceptance, and implementation, such measures reflect changing beliefs about old age in nineteenth-century America.” (1983, p. 6). While Fischer generally would seem to believe that the writings of contemporaneous experts rather unproblematically mirror the lived condition of the elderly. In fact he actively rejects much evidence which is not the pronouncements, of colonial geri-experts, in particular he rejects court records.

A more strictly methodological slant to this problem is that none of these authors address the problem of whether the changes they see in the status of the elderly is really just a change in the relative statuses of the professions which they differentially utilize for the different time periods involved. It could be argued that the high status of the aged which these authors find in colonial America is better explained as a function of their almost exclusive use of ministers of religion as their main archival source for judging the status of the aged in the colonial period. While the relatively lower status found in the latter part of the 19th early 20th centuries is due to their increasing use the medical and social welfare professionals as their source of pronouncements on the condition of the aged in that period. While this shift in primary sources may represent a real shift in the relative statuses of the professions, this does not answer the question of whether their data concerning the status of the aged simply represents the different relations of ministers of religion and the newer professions to the aged rather than to any real change in the status of the aged. Fischer’s work at least hints that such is the case when he finds

that “there were a few clergymen⁴ in the first third of the [19th] century who continued to deliver ‘centennial addresses’” in the spirit of the colonial period (p. 120). If there were a true change in the generally recognized status of the aged between the two time periods then such a change should be found as much in the works of ministers as in the writings of medical and social welfare professionals.

Surprisingly for qualitative social scientists (though less surprising for historians), none of these authors make use of the strong point of all good qualitative research, that is the addition of motive and intent in social sciences. In particular rather than treating the major part of their sources, i.e., the writings of different *experts* and *professionals*, as in themselves intentional activity, they treat those sources as dead, unreflective, and mechanical descriptions rather than an aspect of the, essentially, political struggle of those professions to define the aged in line with their professional interests.

As a result of this Fischer, Achenbaum, and Haber do not address the problem of whether all of their effects are simply the spurious result of the rise and fall of the different professions in America, their struggles to categorize the aged in terms of their professional views of the world,⁵ and their differing professional relations to the aged. Fischer’s theory of the “exaltation” of the aged in colonial America is dominated by the writings of ministers of religion. It could be argued, that this “exaltation” can be better seen as a reflection of the relation of this dominant profession in the colonial era to the aged rather the relation of the aged to the rest of society. As promoters of social conservatism (in particular the continuation of a system which placed the church as the central social institution) ministers of religion inevitably argued for the higher social status for the elderly as a proxy for their own political status. As *marketers* of life after

death they inevitably found, in turn, the greatest support among those with the most proximal interest in that product.

Achenbaum's vision of the rapid decline of the aged from c. 1860 in turn is dominated by the literature of the medical profession which rapidly gained political power and social status from the Civil War and by the early 20th century had become a dominant profession (to a great extent at the expense of religious professionals). Again it could be argued that the declining status of the aged in late 19th century America can be better seen as a reflection of the shift in emphasis from the relation of the ministers of religion to the aged to the relation of the medical profession to the aged. The relation of doctors to the aged inevitably came to produce a view of aging as a disease (as they saw everything else they touched, e.g., child birth). So long as aging and the physical symptoms which accompanied it remained something which the medical profession could, essentially, do little to change (as remained the case until at least the Second World War) but which they deemed, none-the-less, to be their province, age was viewed as a condition of inevitable decay.

Haber's vision of the more gradual, steady, and at times ambiguous decline in the status of the aged reflects her addition to the medical categorization of the aged that of the growing social welfare and administrative professionals. As the professional advocates of the aged these professionals viewed of aging as a *social problem* and hence their proper territory. The ambiguity of the categorization of the elderly, whether as the worthy poor of the 19th century or the minority group of the later 20th (McIrvin Abu-Laban & Abu-Laban, 1977), of these professional advocates arises from there their dual *rôle* as protectors (therefore emphasizing disabilities) and promoters (emphasizing worthiness) of their subjects.

Finally, Fischer's, Achenbaum's, and Haber's efforts in themselves surely reflect their position, albeit as academics and historians somewhat marginalized, as such professional advocates of the aged.

In conclusion, neither Fischer, Achenbaum, nor Haber give a systematic or convincing argument for the decline in the status of the aged over time. Further their very different time frames for that decline serves to undermine the others' arguments.

Footnotes

- 1 Though what percentage were due to actual disabilities or unforced choice is not given.
- 2 I do not intend to deal with the problem of the value or utility of quantitative vs. qualitative methods except to state that I do not find the commonly accepted idea that they are somehow radically different techniques and ways of seeing the world either correct or useful.
- 3 However, despite their findings, they contend that:

Some analysts contend that literature reflects the social reality of the period either because of the author's sensitivity or the demands of the reading public. In the case of the portrayal of the elderly in *Littell's Living Age*, we do not think that the images of the elderly really mirrored the reality of their lives in mid-nineteenth-century America. Based on our analysis of other materials and reading other historical studies [i.e., Fischer and Achenbaum whom they are testing the theories of] of aging, we suspect that the *increasingly* [my emphasis] negative attitudes and behavior toward the aged were already well underway by the time of the Civil War, even though there is little reflection of this in the short stories. (Range & Vinovskis 1981, p. 156)
- 4 Though the only clergymen for this period whom he cites.
- 5 Which of course are not at odds with their material interests.

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