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Aging as Symbolic Interaction

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Introduction

Social gerontology, which is the study of social aging, has moved into an increasingly ironic position in recent years. While the growth of empirical studies seeking to add to new knowledge to the field has grown precipitously, the conceptual and theoretical understandings necessary to interpret those findings , place them within broader contexts and meanings and provide the basis for informed, knowledgeable interventions by practitioners have not kept pace with the outpouring of data.

There is, as a result, a growing theoretical and conceptual lag in social gerontology that threatens to seriously undermine the prodigious outpouring of scholarship and science. Unless the wealth of data and findings produced by recent researchers can be anchored in more general theoretical and conceptual frameworks there is a great danger that much of the current effort in social gerontological research will simply be for naught, and that the progressive, cumulative building of knowledge will be seriously impeded by the failure of general social aging theory to keep pace with the research outpouring.

Review of recent work on social aging theory suggests the following general conclusions: 1) There have been only a very few published efforts to deal with aging theory at all during the past five years; 2) There have been only a handful of serious efforts to deal with social aging theory throughout the entire history of social gerontology; 3) Only one major, book length attempt to critique analyze and extend the predominant activity and disengagement theory approaches has been published in recent years; and 4) Several sources suggest or state directly that social gerontology is largely without unifying theory or a theoretical paradigm in any meaningful sense.

One can conclude from this that social gerontology continues to be theoretically moribund. It is the principal contention of this paper that such a state of affairs seriously limits the efforts of social practitioners seeking to ameliorate the practical problems of aging persons and populations.

This paper consists of four parts. Part I is a review of the relationship of research and theory in social gerontology. Part II outlines the case for a symbolic interactionist theory of aging. Symbolic interaction is identified and discussed as a theoretical orientation compatible with a significant portion of the research in aging done within the "activity theory" tradition, and also capable of contributing to and informing intervention. Part III explores a number of recent efforts toward

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synthesis in social gerontology and Part IV explores contributions of those efforts to a symbolic interactionist theory of aging.

Why Theory?

Clearly, social gerontology has been a largely empirical, atheoretical science for most of its history. Consequently it is to be expected that a common reaction among gerontologists to the current state of affairs is simply, who cares? There always seems to be an abundance of current research findings worthy of consideration and in recent years there have been annotated bibliographies, textbooks and literature reviews that distill those findings for various purposes. Why then, should we need theory in social gerontology?

The general answer to this question of course is that in the sciences theory facilitates the general tasks of describing, explaining and predicting, as well as the scientific objectives of reliable and valid findings. It does so primarily through a focus on consistency and parsimony. That is, any satisfactory social theory is likely to involve a consistent set of assumptions on which it is based, a consistent vocabulary of concepts that serve as key terms in a parsimonious set of consistent propositions. In a field as broad and encompassing as social aging, such theory might be general, seeking to encompass all aspects of the topic, or substantive, seeking to describe and explain only specific issues or topics (Glaser & Strauss,). As Richard Bernstein has recently argued, adequate social theory should be simultaneously empirical, logical and critical (Bernstein, 1976). That is, hypotheses derived from social theory should be consistent with real world data; assumptions, terms and propositions should be logically consistent and precise; and propositions should allow for evaluation of current practices and institutions.

The growth of research in social gerontology in the United has shown continuing concern for empirical evidence. Indeed, hundreds, and possible thousands of empirical studies have been published in journals, or presented at conferences. And the importance of this body of research for social problems, public policy and social interventions is consistently maintained and robustly criticized, although one can sometimes argue with the premises or basis of such criticisms. The principal problem in social aging theory is with the logical basis of much of the research enterprise, a view which potentially extends forward into criticisms of the relevance of many of those studies and back into the reliability and validity of findings as the basis for interventions with older people.

Social gerontologists, like researchers in many other fields, have generally found workable alternatives to attending to social theory in what C. Wright Mills labeled abstracted empiricism (Mills, 1959). By this term, Mills called attention to research that relies on increasingly sophisticated research methods and techniques but failed to call upon or utilize the rich theoretical traditions of sociology (or, one might add, the other social sciences). In the same vein, Mills also criticized another approach he called "grand theory". A decade earlier, Robert K. Merton called for the

integration of theory and empirical data in "theories of the middle range" (Merton, 1949, 39-53).

I.   Research and Theory in Social Gerontology

The main points to be made in this part of the paper are that: 1) Theory in social gerontology has been exclusively a byproduct of research, one part abstracted empiricism and another part theory of the middle range. Activities done in the name of theory have been primarily concerned with identification of testable hypotheses incorporating metaphors of the social aging process. 3) The main candidates for prominence among these metaphor-hypotheses have been activity, disengagement, age integration and continuity theories. 4) Each of these has important implications for policy and practice; 5) The objective should be to incorporate the best empirical and critical features of each within a single theoretical synthesis.

Theory As A Biproduct of Research

All of what are usually identified as the major theoretical perspectives in social aging are closely identified with specific, major research ventures. There have been only one or two efforts to generate social theory of aging independent of research investigations. Such a circumstance is, of course, not at all unusual in social science. In general, however, the character of social research interests have tended to cut off aging theory as a matter of concern from both traditional social theories in sociology or the other social sciences and from social practitioners. Among those social theorists whose principal interest are in creating a unified body of social thought one can find scant evidence of any awareness of or response to the age revolution of the 20th century or the social circumstances of old people or the aging process. Human aging plays no role, for example, in the work of such social theorists as Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, Jürgen Habermas, Hans Joas or Niklas Luhmann.

Among legislators, social workers and other social practitioners whose primary concerns are with using theory to guide and inform problem solving, the impact of aging theory has been pronounced, but restricted almost exclusively to the superficial aspects of the activity theory. The likely reasons for this are simple: The relationships between theory and action are quite different for researchers than they are for either theorists or practitioners and the researchers have largely determined theories of aging. Theory in social research has addressed two principal thrusts. On the one hand, theory provides the model for specific inquiries guiding the overview of a particular investigation, focusing and directing investigators' attention, setting assumptions and generally enveloping the practical tasks of conducting research. On the other hand, specific theories (usually substantive theories or theories of the middle ground) provide specific hypotheses – a logical context from which one "derives or deduces research questions, finds the language to state hypotheses specifically and the language by which to interpret findings and draw conclusions. By contrast the social theorist is likely to interpret the researcher's model or research design as one fragment of a much larger mosaic that

must be carefully and tightly woven together and specific hypotheses as derivative products of the theoretical enterprise.

At the same time, the social practitioner is concerned with developing or utilizing theory in two ways: 1) to define problems by analogy, that is to focus on the isomorphism of theory and common sense observations in real situations in order to minimize the problematic aspects of the latter and to lower the costs of trial and error problem-solving by deriving plausible explanations and possible solutions from the theory.

Thus, acting on theory means three quite different things to these groups: for the researcher, it means hypothesis generation or construction. For the theorist, it means incremental additions to existing logical constructions. And for the practitioners it means detailing rules and protocols for action. Only the researchers interests are well-served by current theory in social gerontology.

Textbooks and Research Inventories

One interesting approach to the absence of adequate theory in social aging is what might be termed a taxonomic approach in which diverse research findings are grouped together under various ad hoc topic headings and offered up as "social facts" without further theoretical integration or conceptual elaboration. One can raise serious questions about the epistemological basis for such an approach. How, for example, without close attention to theory can we be assured that particular words – aging, development, old age, for example – mean the same things in different research studies? Even so, it is hard to deny that the greatest bulk of current knowledge of the social aspects of human aging rests upon recisely this taxonomic basis. In noting this, we create yet another argument for the need for theory in social aging.

Several such collections bear mentioning in this regard. The classic *Handbook of Social Gerontology* (Tibbitts, 1960) and *Handbook of Aging in Western Societies* (1959) were the first such collections in the then-fledgling field of social aging. Both volumes represent their editors' amalgams of topics such as health and employment and retirement, and basic topics such as demography, families, voluntary associations and government programs. Such an approach can be seen as some sort of proxy for theoretical synthesis and has continued virtually unchanged in second, third, and later generations of such handbooks.

Riley, et. al, employed a slightly more grounded, taxonomic approach in their development of Volume 1 of the three-volume Aging and Society series: An Inventory of Research Findings but the result is still best described as pre-theoretical, or perhaps proto-theoretical.

In general, this alternative approach to genuine theory building, such as it is, and the underlying approach to research has cut social aging theory off from two important groups. First, social theory specialists in the social sciences, from Talcott Parsons, who is theoretically, the antithesis of Mead and Blumer to classic works

from Hobbes to Tocqueville and beyond have one thing in common: there is no mention of older people as a serious or important feature of society. Secondly, social practitioners in social work, public health, housing, education and numerous other practice fields interested in knowledge-based interventions are similarly cut off from the continuing output of research findings by the difficulties of summarizing and synthesizing these results. What this suggests, then, is the need for some greater or more sustained attention to building social theory of aging. Many practitioners have already done this for themselves, although this does not ease the task of incorporating new findings. Others merely assume that such syntheses must exist somewhere; they just haven't found them yet.

Looking Closer at Theory

Closer examination of the major theoretical perspectives in aging theory makes clear the extent to which this is the case. One can identify four primary theoretical perspectives in the social gerontology literature. These are generally labeled as the activity, disengagement, age integration and continuity theories. Each is not really a theory at all; rather, each is a testable hypothesis incorporating within it a key metaphor of the aging process. The oldest of these perspectives is activity theory which was first laid out by Ruth Cavan, E.W. Burgess, Robert Havighurst and Herbert Goldhammer in 1949 (Cavan, 1949). In their view, remaining active is the key to "successful aging" which is interpreted as meaning remaining socially engaged and happy.

Although many sources have noted that this "theory" has never been formalized, it would appear that there isn't actually anything there to formalize other than the single activity hypothesis noted just above and the implicit research model used by Cavan, et. al. to ground their inquiry. This activity hypothesis , however, has had enormous practical implications. Much of the policy thrust of federal and state governmental actions for the aged have been based on the notion that "an active old person is a happy old person (and that is good). Activity programs as cures for depression and despondency among older people have been common prescriptions as well.

The second aging theory is the disengagement theory that was first formulated in a book written by Elaine Cumming and William Henry (Cumming and Henry, 1959). It too is not a theory of aging, but a compound statement hypothesis that suggests that as people age they "naturally" withdraw from "society" which similarly and reciprocally withdraws (or disengages) from them and that the process is mutually satisfactory to the older person and the society. As a metaphor disengagement brings into play both interpersonal concerns for loneliness, withdrawal, and moral with social structural anomie-like concerns. The process of disengagement was said by its discoverers to be both universal and functional for the person and for the society. Presumably, its implications for social intervention are similar to those of other functionalist theories: action should be taken to facilitate disengagement and minimize the dysfunctional consequences of

prevented or prolonged disengagement. That message seems clear: Leave the disengaged alone. Theoretically, disengagement is part of the larger mosaic of sociological functionalism and purports to show that the interest of society and of the person are one.

The third theoretical approach to aging revolves around an effort to capitalize on the metaphor of the black experience and racial integration in the United States in order to understand the plight of older people. First formulated as "the minority group theory of aging" in a textbook by Milton Barrow, the central question of this theoretical approach is whether the aged should live in "age segregated" or "age-integrated" settings. One can find various hypotheses defending one or another of these points of view with empirical evidence.

The most sophisticated statement of this view has come from Irving Rosow, who uses role theory to make the case for settings in which old people are "insulated but not isolated" from larger social worlds. This interesting phrase offers the central imagery of the integration perspective and slightly restated in formal language provides its key hypotheses as well. Tied as the two other perspectives are to a criterion of life satisfaction as the preferred outcome of the aging process, the minority group theory of aging has also been the considerable intervention especially in the area of housing for the elderly and retirement communities. More recently there is evidence of renewed interest in comparing the old and other minority groups as deprived populations. However, it cannot really be suggested that aging studies have made any general contributions to minority group understandings in general.

Finally, the latest entrant into the aging theory sweepstakes has been the continuity theory in psychology. In this view the predominant metaphor for social aging is consistency and the notable absence of change over the life cycle is personality makeup – a finding that would seem to have obvious linkages to activity levels, role performance and the levels of social engagement. In contrast to some of the models of aging by Erik Erikson and others focused on age-related changes in personality and behavior, the continuity theory approach focuses on underlying stability. Its theoretical implications are genuinely unclear while its practical implications appear to be virtually identical with those of the activity approach – at least for those who have been active in their younger years. In contrast, the continuity approach would suggest also that those who are disengaged in old age probably were also withdrawn and uninvolved in their larger social lives at younger ages as well. Similarly, those aged persons living in age-segregated circumstances probably also preferred age-segregated circumstances earlier in their lives (e.g., adults-only communities or new suburbs with only young families).

It should be obvious from this review that there are enormous areas of overlap and commonality among these four ostensibly independent theoretical traditions. While activity and disengagement are often presented as rival theoretical traditions, it seems more appropriate to view them as rival hypothesis within the same, broad theoretical tradition. This may, in a very real sense, be yet another

skirmish between the interactional and the functionalist ways of doing social science and talking about the results. Further, all four hypotheses/theories involve at least an implicit linkage to dimensions of personal well-being. Since my colleague (and wife) Nancy Lohmann has shown life satisfaction, morale and adjustment as used in researchers in these diverse orientations are both conceptually and operationally synonymous, it seems likely that we are dealing here not with four theories at all but rather with four loosely related formulations in the direction of a single theoretical field that has yet to be fully articulated.

And what would be the implications of such an articulation? Most importantly, we must admit that we are dealing with something here that has shown itself to be much more powerful than either evidence or argument: We are dealing with independent, autonomous research traditions that have grown up around each of these different approaches and all of those involved have much (perhaps too much) invested in seeing only differences and ignoring similarities, identities and overlaps.

We began the decade of the 1970s with the impasse in social aging theory already stabilized: the disengagement, activity and integration hypotheses had already been stated and communities of true believers were already in place, and continuity entered the picture fairly early in the decade (Atchley, 1971). Further, no new theoretical critiques have surfaced in the past decade, although the issues involved have been refined and stated with increasing elegance. The only real change has been the addition of the continuity metaphor to the list, and as we shall see below, there is reason to assume that continuity is, in most cases, just another word for activity.

Furthermore, there is good reason to suspect that the theoretical impasse in social aging will continue as long as researchers continue to be the sole arbiters of theory in social aging, because continuation of the current state of affairs is clearly compatible with the best interests of researchers everywhere. It is my contention that, in what may appear to be an ironic twist, if theory is to develop it should be expected to arise from among age-related practitioners rather than researchers because the latter have a strong vested interest in existing paradigms and the former have a greater interest in seeing things whole. Further since such theory will inevitably have a practical bent the underlying pragmatics of symbolic interaction makes it a particularly attractive set of possibilities.

II.   Symbolic Interaction and Social Aging Theory

Symbolic interactionism has been one of the longest standing, but also one of the more controversial of American social scientific theoretical perspectives. The underlying philosophy of pragmatism was shaped originally by three philosophers: Charles Sanders Pierce, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead and the philosopher-psychologist, William James. One of the most interesting and novel contemporary interpreters of pragmatism is Richard Bernstein (Bernstein , 1971; Bernstein, 1976; Bernstein, 1981). As Bernstein shows, Jurgen Habermas, Hans Joas and other European philosophers are currently exploring this most American of philosophies.

Interactionism *per se* is largely credited to Mead, with the assistance of Charles Horton Cooley, and a variety of "Chicago School" sociologists. After decades of being in important degrees an oral tradition, in the past decade, numerous introductions to symbolic interactionism have become available (Maines, 1977; Manis, 1967; Meltzer, Petras & Reynolds, 1975; Stone & Faberman, 1981).

Herbert Blumer, a principal expositor of the social psychological work of Mead and leader of one of the major interactionist perspectives suggests that there are three distinct premises of symbolic interactionism: 1) Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings those things have for them; 2) Meaning arises as a product of social interaction; and 3) Meanings are modified and handled through interpretive processes for dealing with the signs involved (Blumer, 1969; Blumer, 1971).

The subjective emphasis on meaning, for example, has been interpreted as setting interactionism in marked contrast to Skinnerian behaviorism, Freudianism and structural-functional sociology because of the deterministic and objectivist stances of each. It is also the basis for the interactionist proclivity for field and case study methods and participant observation techniques and the on-going critique of Blumer and others of the sloppy, casual inferential processes associated with defining and "variables". Interpreted at its weakest, the meaning premise of interactionism can be seen as a caveat to social science theory to explain findings from the standpoint of the actors involved, rather than from the specious "objective" (or grandstand) position of allegedly neutral researchers. At its strongest, the meaning premise can be a rigid criterion ruling out of the realm of science most of 20th century social science. As it may contribute to social aging theory, the meaning premise suggests that much of the significance of social aging is a matter of the ways in which persons interpret the changes in themselves and their lives as they grow older.

The second of Blumer's premises is typically interpreted by interactionists as possessing two principal thrusts: First, that none of us is born as a social being; that we become social beings beginning in infancy and early childhood through processes involving interpreting gestures, acquiring language and the emergence of a self that is capable of acting toward itself and others. An important part of this process is a form of learning labeled role-taking through which we learn to construct our behavior in situations on the basis of what we expect and then interpret the expectations of others on us. In more contemporary language, this learning process is closely related to the "social construction of reality" (Berger & Luckman, 1967). Secondly, Blumer's second premise is typically interpreted to mean that all social behavior is "situated" and fully understandable only by reference to the context or situation in which it occurs.

Finally, the third of Blumer's premises is generally interpreted as referring to the critical role of symbols, of which language is the foremost instance, in human interaction. Following Cooley, communication is usually interpreted by interactionists as the basis of establishing and maintaining social order and

language analysis has been a key interactionist focus of concern (Cooley, 1983; Lindesmith, Strauss & Denzen, 1975; Strauss, 1959).

Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds in their review of the current state of symbolic interactionism have suggested that there is a continuing need for the orientation to become more involved with major economic political and social issues, including human aging (Meltzer, Petra and Reynolds, 1975). With very few exceptions, those who identify as symbolic interactionists have generally failed to incorporate a concern with human aging into any of the central concerns of the interactionist paradigm.

One important exception to this is the continuing work of Helena Lopata, who has placed her work on widowhood squarely with the interactionist tradition of role studies (Lopata, 1973; Lopata, 1979). In an important age-related example, Lopata's concept of "husband sanctification" shows clearly how the meaning of a particular social role can evolve even after the death of one of the parties to an interaction. In another important participant-observer study, Barney Glazer and Anselm Strauss tracked the different consequences for cancer patients dying in what they term "open" and "closed awareness contexts" (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). They also evolved the qualitative method of grounded theory, and developed in another participant-observation study the micro-theory of social change associated with "status passages" (Glaser & Strauss, 1971). Strauss and others are also responsible for the "negotiated order" theory of hospitals, schools, and other organizations (Day, 1977; Maines, 1978; Martin, 1975; O'Toole, 1981; Strauss, et. al., 1963).

There are signs of growing interest among others on the convergence of interactionism and social aging. A session at the 1979 meeting of the Gerontological Society, for example, featured a round-table of papers dealing with exchange theory and symbolic interactionism. In general, however, these have been exceptions rather than the rule as the study of aging has never been a highly visible topic in interactionist research circles and interactionists have never been particularly active in aging studies, except as noted above.

It is genuinely ironic that symbolic interactionism and social gerontology have grown up and apart as separate, autonomous subfields in the social sciences. One reason for this is historical. The study of social aging grew from the same fertile soil of Chicago pragmatism and sociology that produced symbolic interaction, and during roughly the same post-WWII period. The list of Chicago sociologists prominent in social gerontology is long and illustrious, including such well-known names as E.W. Burgess, Arnold Rose, and the "father" of gerontology in Tennessee, my friend the late William (Bill) Cole. One would think that given the intellectual and physical proximity of gerontology and symbolic interactionism, the isolation of the two areas would be less complete than it has, in fact, been.

One reason for such separation might be the applied, meliorist character of much work in gerontology, and the more scholarly, pure science stance of much symbolic interactionism. Although many interactionist participant-observation studies have

attracted large audiences among social practitioners, it seems to be much harder to extract practice principles from them. It seems to be much easier to do so from work in the structural-functional perspective. This alone does not explain the matter, however. One example of this is the applied work of interactionists interested in deviance to the field of juvenile corrections.

Over and beyond mere historical lineages, there are also important theoretical and conceptual parallels between symbolic interactionism and major perspectives in social gerontology. As Jaber Gubrium has noted, the "activity theory" of aging is deeply grounded in the work of George Herbert Mead and the interactionist tradition (Gubrium, 1975). While Gubrium addressed the similarities between activity theory and interactionist approaches to the concepts of social roles and the person, he might also have noted other possible connections. The heavy emphasis in each on situational analysis, for example. There is also an extensive oral component in which theory is massed more by word of mouth than written documents. Both have also generally avoided Personality-state and other stage explanations of change, and both share a common view of social institutions and behavior. Indeed, close scrutiny suggests that the terms activity and interaction are virtually interchangeable in the aging literature.

At its core, however, activity theory as it has evolved during the past three decades is only a quasi-interactional approach. In the original work by Cavan, Burgess, Havighurst and Goldhammer, the critical interactionist issue of the meaning that might be assigned to any given set of activities or might have for the older person were never taken fully into account. Further, in all the voluminous literature reporting research findings from the activity theory perspective, one is hard pressed to find much systematic effort to redress this oversight. As a result, activity theory in aging has grown up on the curious assumption that it is the mere experience of action – any action- and not how acts are interpreted by older people and their significant others which is the most fundamental concern It is possible to suggest that while activity theory is an interaction theory, it is not symbolic interactionism.

While it might be suggested that this is just the kind of knot-picking criticism one might expect from an interactionist gerontologist, it should be noted also that overlooking the dimensions of meaning in activity has had the most serious consequences for social gerontology Most importantly, it has tended to trivialize both social research and resulting social policy based on activity. In the area of social research, for example, there is an extensive tradition of role enumeration that involves literally counting social roles and drawing conclusions from the numerical results. It is as though researchers working in this mode were genuinely convinced that the quantity of roles assumed by a person was the critical dimension in social relationships; that more is better. An older person who was forced to retire from work, lost their spouse, but joined a social club, volunteer as a school crossing guard and took up a hobby would show a net gain of one role, and thus represent a case of successful aging!

What such an approach does, of course, is replace anything resembling meaningful activity with a notion of activity as diversity or quantity. The number of misinterpretations that might result from such over-simplifications are simply too numerous to deal with in a short paper. The notion that a surgeon or police officer accustomed to dealing with issues of life and death, for example, would represent a case of successful aging merely by taking up participation in a senior center, playing pool or making potholders boggles the mind. While it seems very likely that in counting roles Cavan, et. al. were merely looking for a quantitative index of activity as a measurable variable the ensuing 30-year tradition of role-counting has become an increasingly threadbare example of legitimized nonsense that well deserves the designation of the "me and my potholder" theory of aging.

It is not just researchers who have failed to take into account the meanings of activities for older people. In a very real sense the Older Americans Act and the entire resulting Administration on Aging as well as national interest groups like the National Council on Aging carry a heavy intellectual burden due to activity theory: Activity centers and recreation programs, senior centers and a welter of social programs for older people are premised on the idea that people dealing with the losses of old age require substitute activities (any activities!) and replacement roles (any roles!) in order to successfully age. From its earliest elaborations, failures to take into account the meanings of activity for the older person has tended to trivialize rather than describe and explain the social processes of getting old.

Reorientation of activity theory to take account of the meanings those activities have for the person would not only tend to make apparent the underlying relationships to symbolic interactions. It would also resolve the most serious theoretical deficiencies of this approach. With adequate attention to the issues of meaning, activity theory *is* a symbolic interactionist theory. Still, I do not want to leave the reader with the understanding that my principal interest is in reformulation of activity theory. This is not a proposal that the poor, unfortunate activity theorists be helped to escape the consequences of an inadequate theoretical paradigm formulated 30 years ago. If activity theory in aging could be revitalized by discovering the long-lost meaning premise that would be fine, but my primary interest in this example lies in other directions. I am primarily interested in the implications of social aging for symbolic interaction.

Not only is it the case that interactionism has something to offer social gerontology, it is equally clear that symbolic interactionism cannot ever be considered theoretically complete until the general theory of social aging already implicit in the interactionist view is made explicit. Let us examine this point in greater detail. There are, in general, two approaches that one might take to the study of the social aspects of human aging. The first of these is what might be termed a special topics approach. This is most common in contemporary sociology, and indeed several other social sciences, today. In this approach researchers in various disciplines use a core repertory of concepts grounded in the theoretical traditions of their disciplines to describe and explain age-relevant phenomena. This

is the case, for example, in the tradition of social role studies in both activity and disengagement theories. In this sense aging studies by interactionists might be concerned with such topics as language usage among senile old people, nursing homes as total institutions, retirements as status passages and changes in the older self and reference others (c.f., Edelman, 1974; Glaser & Strauss, 1971; Goffman, 1962; Mead, 1936).

There is also a second, more fundamental sense in which theories of aging as personal change and social process could be approached as basic, constituent topics of interactionist social theory. Human aging is one of the truly universal facts of social and personal existence. In a simple biological sense we are all born, grow (to some extent developing and declining simultaneously) and eventually die. Critically, there is no real sense of these larger realities in activity, disengagement, age integration or continuity perspectives, or in notions of "successful aging". Throughout our lives, also our social lives occur across time. Thus, to act is to age, and to age is to accumulate memories of past actions and anticipate future acts, to gain experience and to build repertories of tested responses, workable strategies and more. Yet basic questions of how this affects our activities, whether it is connected to dynamics of disengagement, or precisely how aging selves maintain continuity in the face of such dynamics are not currently part of theoretical understandings of social aging.

There is already the beginning of a theory of human social aging (or if you prefer, lifespan development) in the general understandings implicit in symbolic interactionist approaches, although it is heavily skewed toward the young end of the age spectrum. G.H. Mead outlined a process in which social relations, minds, selves and language use develop simultaneously and spontaneously and accumulate in the movement from gestures to increasing verbal acuity and a sense of self gradually develops out of the pre-existing social nexus. Further, interactionist studies of identity track these dynamics up through adolescence and young adulthood. But both aging and interactionist theory are unclear on how these dynamics play out in middle and old age. Despite a plethora of what we might find "pre-theoretical" research findings on these questions

As with nearly all topics in interactionism, this line of argument can be traced quickly back to George Herbert Mead. In this case, it is suggested that Mead's focus on the processes that culminate in persons becoming fully human through the acquisition of role Dash taking abilities represents an incomplete model of human aging. Unfortunately, interactionists have generally held back from the project of extending Mead's work beyond these initial stages into adulthood, the metal years, and old age. As a consequence, they have ignored the prospects of a genuine interactionist theory of aging.

While interactionists have been quick to point out the deficiencies and inadequacies of simplistic stage theories of human development, such as those of

Erikson or Kubler Ross, positive statements which would offer interactionist alternatives to their approaches have not been forthcoming. Instead, interactionist have generally been content to leave things where Howard S Becker found them in 1964, when in discussing *Personal Change in Old Age*, he concluded:

> The processes we have considered indicate that social structure creates the conditions for both change and stability in adult life. The structural characteristics of institutions and organizations provide the framework of the situations in which experience dictates the expediency of change. Similarly, they provide the counters with which side-bets can be made and the links between lines of activity out of which commitment grows. Together, they enable us to arrive at general explanations of personal development in adult life without requiring us to posit unvarying characteristics of the person, either elements of personality or of 'value structure' (Becker, 1964).

The processes Becker refers to are: 1) situational adjustment, "in which individuals take on the characteristics required by the situations they participate in 2) commitment "in which externally unrelated interests of the person become linked in such a way as to constrain future behavior" (Becker, 1964). In Becker's view, all people are first and foremost adults who had, hopefully, more opportunities than most to make commitments and adjust to situations. While they may have gained from the experience in a personal sense, old people are not fundamentally different from other adults in the same sense, for example, that pre-verbal children are from older children.

Aging in this view is primarily accumulating life experience in structured circumstances. However, it is important to note that this approach does not rule out the possibilities of certain universal, defining characteristics of social aging. It only castigates such universals grounded in personality or values. However, the interactionist aversion for stage models of development and other simplistic progressive schemes for life span development should not be considered sufficient grounds for abandoning any possibility of discovering universals other than those already identified in the early life process of becoming human as discussed by Mead. For to do so is to block from view the possibilities of the interactionist theory of aging referred to above.

Becker's general view is as sound today as it was when first set out in print 16 years ago. Unfortunately, the general explanations of personal development in adult life that were said to be possible at that time have yet to emerge in the interactionist literature. Meanwhile, what has emerged in general social gerontology are a welter of collections of raw data, ad hoc hypotheses, and situational explanations of every conceivable hue and stripe. Of these, such as Lopata's process of husband sanctification and Glaser and Strauss' awareness contexts among dying patients are clearly within interactionist frames of reference.

Others appear quite compatible with interactionism. For example, Frances Carp's concept of retirement as a transitional life stage has much in it to attract interactionist attention. It bears much resemblance to the more general Glaser and Strauss' status passage. Further, the recent findings of Maas and Kuypers (1974) of longitudinal continuity in the personalities and attitudes of a sample of older people studied over a 40 year period has a ready explanation in Becker: Such attitudinal consistency, to the extent he is not simply an attribute of the measurement process itself, is most probably a reflection of high levels of stability in situations and commitments made earlier in life and not to inherent psychological tendencies toward personality stability among older persons.

Some perspectives social gerontology, however, also stand clearly outside the interactionist tradition, and indeed, counter to it. In particular, the disengagement theory tradition has been the principal counter position to activity theory. The functionalism of this perspective is apparent throughout its posing of a universal, bilateral and inevitable process of withdrawal and social isolation of older persons from society and the reciprocal with drawl of society from the older person. Hey, the macro-sociological approach of age-grading developed by Matilda white Riley and her colleagues stands apart from interactionism in its abstract "age status structures" mysteriously depersonalized, and detached from the meanings of everyday life.

Ever, what has yet to emerge from social gerontology are clear statements of the processes of adjustment and commitment hinted at by Becker, which are the fundamental, indeed defining, elements of social aging in the same sense that language acquisition and role-taking define the process of childhood development. And until such universal, defining processes of social aging are identified both social gerontology and symbolic interaction theory must remain necessarily incomplete. Several plausible candidates for such general processes can be discounted immediately. Since Becker's comment and even before, it should have been clear that personality stage such as Erikson's are not adequate at a time of increasing longevity, if they ever were (Erikson, 1959). The prospect that 30 or 40 years of a person's life can be reduced to a life stage defined primarily by preparation for death is simply too simplistic.

Further, it should be clear that most of the various situational changes and institutional responses to aging individuals or not, by themselves, the sought-after defining processes of age related change: retirement, for example, is not a signature of old age but rather a change in situations that appears to bring approximately similar adjustive responses from persons of any age. It is also a unique phenomenon of modern industrial and post-industrial societies. One possibility, of course, is that there simply are no such universal social processes which define human aging. Mead may have been correct and complete in stopping his discussion of the process of becoming human after the acquisition in childhood of role-taking skills; after that, all may, indeed be individual variations of situation adjustment and changes

in commitment. If this is so, then the challenges of articulating an interactionist theory of aging have already been fully stated by Becker.

The likelihood that there are at least some minimal defining processes that characterize social aging continues to grow, however, with the accumulating biological and anthropomorphic data on aging: We know, for example, that although age grading systems appear to be universal we still have no clear account of the processes by which they occur. Similarly, the growing list of universal biological changes, that includes declining muscular strength, loss of skin turgor, and the functional capacity of most organs, declining reaction times, and a host of other changes make the possibility of concomitant social processors highly likely. The question however is where to begin looking for such universals.

One thread of inquiry that appears worth pursuing is the recently suggested differentiation of the young-old from the old-old. Gen, it would appear that social aging from the vantage point of the young old (or, the light middle aged if you prefer) involves a series of institutional and situational adjustments including the empty nest syndrome, and removal from the labor force, while for the old-old (particularly those over 80) the experiences of decline and preparation for dying assume much greater significance, along with changes in communication abilities associated with bodily changes, and changing primary group participation.

One plausible avenue for investigation would be the effects of accumulated experience over many years on the 'spontaneity' of action by older persons. Does an older person, with years of experience, habituated responses and fixed routines construct his /her behavior in the same ways that an adolescent in a similar situation for whom any particular situation might be a novel experience? The question itself poses something of a dilemma for interactionism. On the one hand, to answer yes, that all would adapt to the situation equally, appears to deny a role for experience. Yet, to answer no appears to undercut the indeterminacy of human behavior. This and other questions that can be generated offer a basis for future research investigations that will bring forth and elaborate the implicit theory of aging currently well hidden in the interactionist paradigm. While rediscovery of the meaning premise may result in work in this direction being undertaken within social gerontology, there is no reason why such work should also not be done within the rubric of symbolic interaction.

While society precedes the newly forming self logically and chronologically as Mead suggests, it may well be the case that social aging involves the elderly person superseding their society. We are all familiar, no doubt with the elderly dowager who lives alone with only her memories of a social world that is no more. But I am speaking here of a far more immediate, familiar and universal instance in which virtually everyone supersedes the family of origin and primary groups that provided their initial socialization. Establishing autonomy from one's family of origin, the empty nest syndrome, surviving the deaths of one's parents are all aspects of this reformation of one's social world. In the simplest case, the infant is dependent on others for his very survival. As we mature, social contact with others becomes

increasingly a matter of choice until finally in old age the necessity of others may be a complete luxury.

Such changes in the nature of emergency over the lifecycle, of course, our pure speculations. They tend to be supported, however, by changes in the basic necessities of social existence. Degenerative changes in hearing, vision, and the other senses for example are virtually universal and tend to impede or disrupt normal communication of the type underlying social interaction

Criticisms of Disengagement Theory

We are hard pressed to identify criticisms of existing approaches that implicitly or explicitly point in the direction of potential refinements. Rose summarized existing criticisms of disengagement in 1964 noting three major lines of criticism: 1) Questioning the process of disengagement in old age and holding it to be merely representative of *lifelong* patterns of adjustment for *some* people (emphasis in the original). 2) Challenges to the value judgment that disengagement is desirable for old people. 3) Analysis of disengagement in the context of social structure and social trends finds it a poor interpretation of the facts (Rose, 1964). More recently, this criticism of the disengagement theory has been sharpened and focused by Arlie Hochschild, who cites three principal problems with disengagement theory (Hochschild, 1975). First, the usual statement of the theory make it untestable because it literally cannot be refuted. Secondly, disengagement is said to be universal but those who are clearly not disengaging or disengage are explained, she says, by four "back door explanations or escape clauses" in the theory: The non-disengaged may be 'unsuccessful disengagers', in other words, successfully engaged which means the process is not universal. Secondly, the non-disengaged older person may be said to be "off in his or her timing" but still on the way to disengaging. Thirdly, the engaged older person may be a member of a biological or psychological elite of some sort; again, indicating that the process is not universal. Finally, if contrary evidence cannot be accommodated with one or another of these three escapes, she notes, the case may be a "variation of the form" (Hochschild, 1975).

Hochschild also notes what she terms the "omnibus variable problem" of disengagement theory. The theory, she says, boils down to one dependent variable (disengagement) and two independent variables (old age and society's stance toward disengagement) one of which (the latter) is actually a constant from the standpoint of any particular individual life. One ages in a particular society and presumably cannot elect to have one's disengagement regulated by another. In between these independent and dependent variables are many intervening variables representing the standard categories of sociology such as race class, urbanity, and others that are said by the theory only to modify the form of disengagement, which refers back to her criticisms noted above. Recent researchers, further, have converted many of these intervening variables into fully independent explanatory variables, thereby presumably, weakening or even eliminating completely the explanatory power of

the theory. Moreover, all of the resulting forms of disengagement, including these many intervening explanations, that are said by disengagement theorists to go together in fact do not.

Finally, Hochschild finds fault with the failure of disengagement theory to deal consistently or explicitly with the meaning that aging has for the individual social actor (or aged person) and the effect this has for them. This may be the most meaningful of all her criticisms for interaction theory.

Jaber Gubrium, whose participant-observation study of a nursing home fits well within interactionist research traditions, has also published an extensive critique of disengagement theory (Gubrium, 1972; Gubrium, 1975). His criticisms are in several important respects consistent with Hochschild's view. He takes pains to outline the functionalist origins and premises of disengagement theory, noting that functionalism, and disengagement in this construction, is essentially a deterministic approach to explaining behavior. Gubrium also notes problems with locating non-disengagement as "deviance" in individual persons and not in the surrounding society – thus, in effect, transforming it into a psychological rather than social phenomenon. Further, he notes, disengagement theorists are never wrong (which parallels Hochschild's point that the theory is irrefutable); they always verify the existence of actual or *potential* disengagement. This is related, Gubrium suggests to his conclusion that the theory is tautological; the form of disengagement as a formalism is found in the act of disengaging.

Gubrium (1975) also details somewhat similar problems with activity theory, which assumes, he argues, that people can somehow control the types of roles available to them and their performance of them. "They assume it is within any normal person's capacity to construct and develop an adjusted set of active aged roles" (Gubrium, 1975, 10). Also, in some unaccountable manner not made clear in the text he associates activity theory with "developmentalism" and attributes the faults of the latter to the former. Thus, in a kind of guilt by association, he says aactivity theory assumes a set of continuous, transitive stages of life emerging as part of a preformed program with occasional references to a critical stage. Thirdly, the definition of personal adjustment offered originally by Cavan and used or assumed by nearly all later researchers creates a circularity to life satisfaction and the factors contributing to it. Finally, a "fourth problem of the activity approach to aging is the empirical evidence that contradicts its major proposition . ." That is, evidence suggests that some people appear to be satisfied with their lives without the requisite levels of activity, and some other people engage in activities without being satisfied with their lives.

Conclusion

It is suggested above that activity, disengagement and continuity may not, in fact, be distinguishable theories of aging, but merely rival hypotheses. Further, it is suggested that future theoretical development of social aging theory might best be pursued through a symbolic interactionist perspective. If one were to presumes that,

in the language of variable analysis (which, it must be noted, Blumer, Glaser, Strauss, Gubrium and other interactionists all reject as suitable methodology), each "theory" offers a separate dependent variable. For some gerontologists, this means that the question of whether they are theories or hypotheses may appear to be pointless quibbling. There is an enduring perspective to social aging, however, from which this distinction becomes a critically important one. That is the investigative tradition of life satisfaction studies that has emerged from within the activity-disengagement impasse (Lohmann, 1977).

The essence of this issue was first stated by Cavan, Burgess, Havighurst and Goldhammer in the original activity theory study. Aging, they stated "is conceived primarily as a problem in the personal resolution of strains on self-conception resulting from changes in later life roles" (Gubrium, 1975, 4). The older person who successfully resolved this life challenge is, in the words of its researchers and practitioners "successfully aged," "happy," or possessed of "high morale" or "life satisfaction." (Lohmann, 1977; Lohmann, 1979).

There are at least three reasons for taking the view of contrasting hypotheses as opposed to social gerontologists continuing to suggest that these are separate, contrasting theories. All three are related to avenues of possible new theoretical development for interactionist social aging theory. First, the contrast between the two hypotheses introduces some fairly rigorous options: Empirical data should either support one and reflect the other, allow for the rejection of both or support the evolution of a new theoretical synthesis of the two. Secondly, adopting the perspective of what we will call, after Kutner "successful aging theory creates a number of more or less clear cut pathways or linkage points between the sociological study of aging and issues in other social science disciplines. If one adopts the position that sociology is a self-contained theoretical universe such links are of little interest. If, however, one adopts a unified science approach that science at least ought to strain for some measure of unified theory such linkages should not be scoffed at. Finally, adopting the perspective of successful aging theory recognizes an aspect of both activity and disengagement 'theories' which has often been ignored – the normative, critical dimension. In other words, if the extent of one's social involvement can be systematically linked to life satisfaction.

Adopting this view transforms theory beyond the parochial concern of social researchers alone and creates broad avenues for dialogue between researchers, policy scientists (if not necessarily actual policy makers). No one currently writing in social gerontology has understood and attempted to deal with this point to a greater degree than my colleague Nancy Lohmann, who in a series of publications has pointed out the convergences between the concepts of adjustment as used by the sociologists following in the tradition of Cavan, Burgess, Havighurst and Goldhammer, the concept of morale used by psychologists like Kutner and Lawton and the concept of life satisfaction. Using both linguistic analysis and factor analysis techniques and a sample drawn from older population of Knoxville, Tennessee she demonstrated convincingly that this multi-disciplinary trio of

concepts denotes a common domain of meaning, both conceptually and operationally. This focus on meaning makes this study another of the important contributions by social gerontologists to the interactionist canon, albeit within the non-interactionist methodological domain of variable analysis. It seems highly probable that similar results could be achieved in bringing in and taming terminology and instruments for measuring "mental health" and "depression" as well. For those of us interested in applied social science, the uses of life satisfaction as a normative concept in social aging theory is an important dimension in both social policy and the practices of social intervention.

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