Foreword

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This collection is designed to bring a cross-cultural perspective to the study of social gerontology. As such it may help to distinguish between aspects of old age that are fairly general and perhaps not easily changed and those that are shaped by the particular conditions of a given social and cultural system and presumably more readily manipulated. A number of comments are in order in discussing these observations.

First, it seems important to underscore the point made by Kenneth Weiss that contemporary demographic events should by now have demolished what seemed heretofore universally true—that the aged are only a small percentage of the population. This basic change in the relationship between the old and the rest of the population brings with it some profound consequences for one of the salient issues this volume addresses, that of the balance between the contributions of older persons and what different social groups are willing to expend to maintain them.

Second, although popular attention has focused on the “aging crisis” in the industrialized West, the massive increase in the numbers of the aged is a worldwide phenomenon. Because the developing nations have been experiencing a dramatic drop in mortality (from 20 per thousand in 1960 to 14 per thousand in 1975) while the developed countries have been holding steady at their more favorable rate of 9 per thousand, and because most of the lives saved in the developing countries have been those of infants and young children, the population profile in the Third World is still heavily weighted at the youthful end of the scale. However, while the in-

crease in the proportion of the old among those countries does not look so impressive as in the industrialized world, the increase in actual numbers of old people will be greater in the developing world. In fact, the countries whose economies are least able to bear additional burdens—whose traditional social arrangements are experiencing the most rapid change—are precisely those that will very shortly have to bear the double burden of many more dependent elders as well as many more dependent young children (Beattie 1978; Myers 1977; Hauser 1976). In Africa, Latin America, and Asia, the number of people over 60 will more than double before the year 2000, putting a severe strain on existing social arrangements for meeting their needs. At the same time, as the papers in this volume and other sources note (e.g. Cowgill & Holmes 1972), social change is undermining the traditional opportunities and arrangements for old people in these areas to contribute to their own support.

In the West, particularly in the United States, this change in the age structure is leading to a redistribution of social, health, and financial resources. Traditionally, young children were the beneficiaries of the labors of adults, with the relatively small number of surviving aged supported by resources they had accumulated during their own or their families' years of productivity. A limited number of the aged were dependent upon society at large, particularly when resources were insufficient. The recent growth of this older group and the aging of the aged in relation to other segments of the population have begun to result in demands for more and more resources. This has come to affect lifelong distribution of income and to challenge our traditional system of education for the young, work for adults until age 65, and leisure for the aged.

It is well recognized that the aged are a population at heightened risk. With increasing age, people tend to have more physical, economic, and social problems, and are more likely to manifest specific types of disorders, e.g. the dementing illnesses (Kramer et al. 1973; Kay 1977). The risk that people will need long-term institutional care, in those cultures that provide it, also increases rapidly with age. It is thus important to note that the number of people

aged 80 and over is growing, and that in North America from 1970 to 2000 this age group is predicted to increase by 96 percent (Beat-tie 1978: 6). Large as this percentage increase appears, it is small compared to the projected increases of 112 percent in Africa, 215 percent in Latin America, 176 percent in East Asia, and 134 percent in South Asia.

There has been a widespread popular American belief in a golden age of preliterate societies (Tobin 1978). The difficulties in which the old today find themselves are often attributed to the emergence of an industrial society that has devalued human in favor of technological contributions. It is presumed that in more labor-intensive cultures old people play more significant roles, that older people are always better valued in stable, preliterate or primitive societies, and that only in "westernized" or modernized cultures are they poorly treated.

The contributions to this volume challenge the accuracy of such simplistic ideas. Indeed, two other themes emerge from this instead: first, that the social rank of the old is determined by the balance between the cost of maintaining them and the contribution they are perceived as making; second, that family and kinship networks play an important role in protecting the old in all societies. Folk wisdom has always maintained that the most important investment a person can make for a secure old age is raising a family. Care and love lavished on children and grandchildren are almost always repaid, if not out of affection, then out of a sense of duty or fear of what the community will say. There are, however, limits to what families will do; in the case of the very demanding older persons (i.e. those with extraordinary needs), even family support systems may be overstressed, and there is a socially accepted transfer of responsibility from the family. These themes bring an important if troublesome message, both for our own society and for the developing world.

Under the manifest cost/benefit approach adopted by the editors, it would seem that many nonproductive elderly are the recipients of a society's largess. The challenge thus becomes, How can a society best create for the aged a role in which they can make a con-

tribution that balances their cost? It would seem simple enough to resolve this dilemma by maintaining older persons in the labor force. But in the face of the problem of supporting more older people, society is caught in a dilemma. The pressure to remove older persons from the labor force is continuous and defended as necessary for the generation of new ideas, vitality, and leadership, as well as for the employment of the young and the channeling of their energies. There seems to be a pattern in union negotiations to press for a reduction in the retirement age and for a shortening of the work life. Associated with this theme is the belief that aging leads necessarily to physical and mental deterioration and that the aged are therefore poorer workers and not employable. The denial of access to employment and the resulting atrophy through disuse of many older persons' physical and cognitive capacities provides some reinforcement for this self-fulfilling hypothesis. As a consequence, we create policies that support retirement, thus helping society maintain the economic dignity of the individual while denying the same individual a relevant social role in the productive sector (except as a consumer).

When young adults and the middle-aged generate a sufficient surplus of resources, then the old may be subsidized. But if resources diminish in relation to needs, problems may emerge, including direct political conflict between the dependent and productive sectors or between separate groups of dependent people. Conflict between dependent groups for limited resources leads to attempts to acquire greater political power, as shown by the recent emergence of such groups as the Gray Panthers and the increases in the membership of organizations such as the American Association of Retired Persons, the National Retired Teachers Association, and the National Council of Senior Citizens, which now count members in the millions (Maddox 1978).

How are the anthropological perspectives in this collection likely to contribute to our making intelligent policy decisions? First, they may lead us to reassess the economic value of the old for the greater society. Given their greater marginal propensity to consume, the elderly may be viewed in Keynesian terms as a vehicle to stimu-

late the economy through creating increased demand for consumer goods. Unfortunately, this expedient tends to be interpreted as charity, whereas subsidy to industry is defined as a valuable investment in the economy. The labeling is crucial: support of the aged should be recognized as healthy for the economy and a return on the earlier work investment by the old. Second, anthropological perspectives may help us look beyond these purely economic considerations to the more complicated matter of how to assess the benefits to society of knowing one's heritage and better appreciation of the human life cycle through familiarity with one's grandparents (Mumford 1968). The stabilizing effect of several generations living in closer proximity is another yet-to-be-evaluated factor that merits attention. Indeed, such subjective variables may be as important to assessing the contribution of old people as are the more readily enumerable economic factors.

Certainly a desirable alternative would be to allow our elderly to follow the example of the most successful elders described in the articles in this collection—the old !Kung San who “own” resources, the Chinese matchmakers, the contemporary Coast Salish ritual leaders, the Kirghiz herd managers, and even the matriarchal macaques. They are all contributing valuable services and thus earning their respected social place. In our society maximizing the social utility and value of the old might include involving them in programs of retraining and education to avoid obsolescence; developing alternative social roles for them through a range of voluntary efforts and part-time employment; and identifying alternative ways to finance retirement, for example economic alternatives and supplements to Social Security that would provide a proportional “investment” in the economy as opposed to an eventual publicized depletion of general-fund revenue, which will be required to subsidize underfunded federal programs.

To improve the quality of life in old age, older persons must have a better self-image, must perceive that they have a range of options and that how they exercise those options will make a difference to the wider society. The concept of second, or perhaps multiple, careers might also be advanced. Individuals would no longer be

placed in the “up or out” situation, but could move to alternative career options like the aged Brahman who is counseled to devote himself to spiritual fulfillment—a course thought to benefit not only him but his relatives as well. The entitlement to education for a new career could be accumulated as a social credit for years of work or social service, and support for the older student could be seen as a return for services rendered. The possibility of obligating older persons to provide services to the community could yield social benefits at least as valuable as military conscription for the young. An honorable discharge after a period of services to a community would entitle a person to a variety of educational and occupational benefits that could help reestablish him or her in a new program or at least increase the subsequent entitlement for a pension.

Turning to the role of the family in successful aging, the options seem more straightforward. The place of the family in supporting the old is an area where cultural consensus remains strong. The articles in this collection explore how family dynamics foster concern for aged parents and grandparents in a variety of cultural settings. Despite social and economic pressures that challenge the more traditional patterns of household composition and community structure, in the United States the preservation of family cohesiveness remains a strongly held belief. It would seem reasonable, therefore, that policymakers support the family’s role in maintaining older people in the community. A policy that included support for families and a network of community-based services could probably do much to prevent, or at least postpone, institutionalization of some older people, and might reduce much of the stress coincident with helping dependent older relatives.

The developing countries, until recently overwhelmed by the burden of so many young children in need of food, education, and health care, have come to recognize that they are facing an unprecedented number of older people in need of services. As pointed out above, although the numbers will be large, the percentages will remain lower than in the West (for some time) because of the continuing high birth rate. Third World policymakers, concerned about

this problem, have asked for a worldwide conference on aging to be held in 1982, the year following the third White House Conference on Aging planned for the United States.

The problems facing the developing countries, where all but three of the peoples described in this book live, are illustrated by what the authors tell us about the adaptation of older persons to the changes brought by modernization. Wherever medical care and food supplies are generally available, sources of wealth and influence are changing and the elderly are often unable to compete successfully for new avenues of affluence and power. Furthermore, children and grandchildren who traditionally support many older persons are being lured away to new jobs distant from the old village or camp. These are examples of changes that led Cowgill and Holmes (1972) to argue that modernization lowered the rank of the old.

Modernization not only is undermining many of the traditional supports of older people but is inexorably increasing the numbers of older people through improved medical services prolonging the lives of the old and middle-aged—not to mention children who will in their turn eventually be old. If the industrialized West is feeling the pressure of the old on limited resources, how much more may the developing countries, whose resources are already woefully inadequate, feel them? Though the problems of aging in the developing world are formidable, there are at least two factors that could make their situation more promising than that in the underdeveloped countries. First, most of the developing nations have not yet formulated or committed themselves to policies, and may still learn from the mistakes of the industrialized world. Second, and paradoxically, the poverty of the developing nations may force most of them to avoid the more expensive (and less desirable) institutional solutions that have proved so troublesome in the West. These nations may begin with the kind of arrangements that policy-makers in United States are only now beginning to examine seriously, such as funding of supplementary care for the old through support of the family. Also, the very population pressures that are such a nightmare to Third World planners may affect the longer-

term solutions to care for the old because with the high birth rate and much higher survival rate it is likely that the next several cohorts of old people will have surviving children and grandchildren. The Western experience has shown that filial piety, far from being a casualty of modernization, is perhaps one of the most tenacious of cultural values. Given the continued problems of unemployment in the developing countries, children and grandchildren may be happy to receive a modest government stipend for caring for older family members; then they could help with such care not only out of a sense of duty, but also out of economic necessity. McKain (1972: 156–57) has suggested that although respect for old age persists in the Soviet Union as a cultural value, the elderly are welcome in their children's homes because they make real economic contributions through their small pensions and the housekeeping and baby-sitting services they can provide.

The problem of “replacing” social roles for older people is monumental in the face of the great cultural and social diversity represented by the nations and peoples lumped together as “developing.” Again, however, it looks as if at least some of the Third World countries are attempting to preserve traditional family relationships in the face of economic and political change. Whether they will be able to achieve a synthesis of economic modernization and traditional values is difficult to assess, but I would conjecture that they are most likely to succeed in their attempts to rally around the ideals of family cohesiveness. Certainly this has emerged in the longer term, even when governmental policy has attempted to minimize the integrity of the family.

It now seems clear that a national as well as an international program of social innovation is needed to address a number of issues stemming from the changes in world age demography. To continue to treat the problems of the old purely in terms of increased provision of services such as income, housing, nutrition, and the like is to risk serious economic difficulties some decades hence—unless we can guarantee a healthy economy capable of sustaining, in a welfare situation, twice or more times the present number of older

people at a higher level of care. Even then, the emotional costs to the individual of being the recipient of society's munificence (i.e. being on the dole) may be too high. Being a drain on one's family without contributing to it may also be hard for many to accept.

The data from other cultures suggest that maximum participation of the elderly is the preferred route for policy. Research into illness prevention, maintenance of function, improved distribution of one's own resources throughout the life span, and different educational environments and elements is a necessary first step. The challenge of longevity should be to maximize a person's potential for contributing to himself and to society throughout life.

Other Ways of Growing Old