

INTRODUCTORY **SOCIOLOGY**



Edited By:
Olakunle Abiona OGUNBAMERU

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SOCIOLOGY OF THE AGED

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Chapter Objectives

After completing this chapter, readers should be able to:

- define the concept of aged,
- define Gerontology and Social Gerontology,
- examine the focus of Social Gerontology,
- discuss the relationship between Social Gerontology and other Social Science disciplines,
- examine ageing as a social construction,
- discuss the factors that determine the status of the aged, and
- undergo a theoretical explanation of ageing.

Chapter Outline

- Introduction
- The aged
- The focus of social gerontology
- Focus of social science disciplines in the study of social gerontology
- Ageing as a social construction
- Determinants of the status of the aged in different cultures
- Theories on ageing
- Summary
- Chapter exercises
- References

Introduction

Who are the aged? How are the aged determined? What are the dynamics of interaction among the aged? How do the aged relate to other members of the society? These and more will be answered in this Chapter. Essentially, the provision of answers to these posed questions entail an exploration of sociology of the aged. As sociology is fundamentally geared towards the comprehension of intricacies of human interrelationship, sociology of aged therefore deals with grasping of complexities pertaining to human relationship among the aged.

The Aged

Since the dawn of time, humans have held on to life, seeking whatever viable means to prolong it. Scientists are however yet to find an elixir that will reverse the process of ageing. If only a magic wand could be waved to remain young and agile till the end of time, what could have been! Breen (1970), observed that special food, peculiar relationships, special water, and surgery were once thought of as the cure for ageing. Now, the understanding of the concept of ageing has advanced greatly beyond this.

Think back on movies you have watched. A great proportion of them would have featured older actors. Did they play the lead role? It is almost certain that they did not. This serves as a portrayal of some tenets associated with the ageing. In a large proportion of societies, youthfulness is celebrated over ageing. Ageing is associated with grouchiness and weariness. In all cultures, there are usually stereotypes associated with the aged. According to Levy, Slade, Kunkel, and Kasl (2002), most people assent to age stereotypes easily. The aged may say that they are filled to the brim with self-esteem acquired in a life well lived, they are not however free of differential conceptions of them.

Old age in most cultures is not marched to with pride. It might be celebrated, but there are certain parts of it that people regard with shame. Most people are terrified of having wrinkled skin, grey hair, et cetera and attempts are usually made to cover up the process of ageing. This is as a consequence of the peculiar culture's conception of ageing. Sociologists do not deny that biological change is not synonymous with ageing, they rather seek to shed light on the cultural construction and interpretation of biological change as "decline" (Hepworth, 2003).

Sociology of the aged is closely related to fields of *gerontology* and *social gerontology*. Gerontology is the empirical and systematic study of the aged and the difficulties of the aged. The word was coined from the Greek words *geron* meaning 'old man' and *-logia*, connoting the 'study of'. On the other hand, social gerontology represents a multidisciplinary subfield specialising in the study of older adults. Social gerontologists are essentially interested in enlightening, researching as well as fighting for the cause of the elderly ones.

The Focus of Social Gerontology

Social Gerontologists are primarily interested in the study of the social forces influencing the lives of the aged, how they are seen in the society, the extent to which certain norms compel the actions of the aged, and so on. According to Cox (2005), there are some changes in which people perceived to be aged must adjust to. Social gerontologists are interested in these changes as they assist in the comprehension of the lifestyle of the aged. All these changes lead to a loss of self-confidence. These are as follow:

1. Alteration of attitude (negative in most instances) towards the aged by other members of the society
2. The end of the parenting role
3. The loss of employment role and acceptance of the role of a retiree (entailing the loss of salary, power, privilege and status related to the former positions)
4. A huge reorientation of one's life, after retirement

5. A novel definition of self, free of parenting and career duties
6. A search for unique identity and value in life
7. Poor health and constrained mobility
8. Requirement of distinct living provisions
9. The passing of a spouse
10. The recognition of one's looming death.

Focus of Social Science Disciplines in the Study of Social Gerontology

- Economists have identified unique resources and needs of the aged. Generally, the aged live on low income, with low basic expenses, apart from the medical ones that are likely to climb higher as the age increases. The aged have little to no opportunity to increase their income, and face struggles to keep an optimum living standards in a society plagued with inflation.
- Sociologists are concerned with the changing role and the socialisation process that follows the role change. The process of adjustment to alterations in roles, status, prestige and power has always been of interest to sociologists. Sociologists are equally concerned with how the role conceptions came to be.
- The psychologists are concerned with the mind. When it comes to the aged, they are interested in what goes on in their psyche, how they wrap their mind around a shift in orientation towards life, the level of dissonance experienced, and so on.
- The criminologists deal with deviance. When it comes to the aged, they are interested in certain deviant acts engaged in by the aged. The aged tend to feel detached from the society and may not think that certain norms are applicable to them.
- The political scientists are interested in how the aged might tend to maintain political apathy, as they feel detached from the larger society.

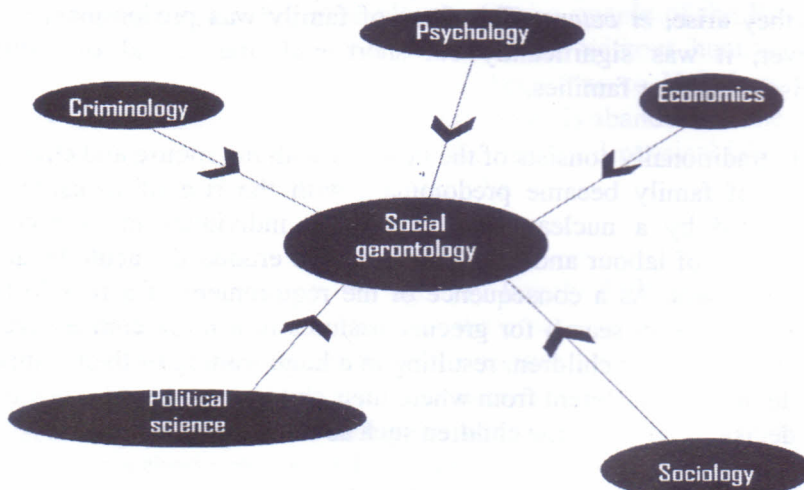


Figure 23.1: Interconnectedness between some social science disciplines and social gerontology

Ageing as a Social Construction

In examining ageing as a social construction, it will be clearer to paint pictures for optimum comprehension. As such, a difference can be drawn between two societies: Tiwi and Abkhasians. Hart and Pilling (1979), carried out a field work on the Tiwi people who are found on an island in Australia. There is a particular custom among the Tiwi people, as it pertains old women. Women perceived to be too old to cater for their well-being are covered up. Before doing this, there is consensus amongst the clansmen, so as to avoid a vendetta. With an agreement in place, a hole is dug with the aged woman placed in it and literally covered up till only her head is visible. She is then left for an entire day or more, after which the kinsmen return and find her dead. To them, she was too weak to dig herself out from the hole. In contrast, the Abkhasians of Georgia treat their elderly with utmost reverence. They constantly seek guidance from them. The elderly are not taken to nursing homes. Even at the age of 80, they still work for close to four hours in a day. They relentlessly contribute to the society's welfare and are not viewed as a liability to anyone. An exploration of these two cases show that ageing is purely a social construction. The society determines who is considered as an elderly as well as how they should be treated.

Determinants of the Status of the Aged in Different Cultures

With multitudes of studies carried out on the status of the aged in varying societies, certain factors have been arrived at as the determinants of their status (Cox, 2005):

1. Family structure

In tracing the differences in the status of the aged in terms of family structure, two types of family will be pointed out: extended and nuclear. In the extended form of family, the husband lives with his spouse, children as well as other kin members, consisting of grandparents, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, cousins, *et cetera*. In a society dominated by an extended family system, collectivism is encouraged over individualism. The happiness of the individual comes second to the greater good of the larger family. The aged have acute power and status here. They determine the spouse to be married by their children, settle disputes when they arise, *et cetera*. This form of family was predominant in an agrarian society. However, it was significantly cut short with the arrival of industrialisation, signalling the rise of nuclear families.

A nuclear family traditionally consists of the husband with his spouse and children. As said, the nuclear form of family became predominant with the rise of industrialisation. In a society predominated by a nuclear form of family, individualism is encouraged over collectivism. Division of labour and specialisation have eroded the acute bond that existed among societal members. As a consequence of the requirement of a mobile labour force, families were broken up, in search for greener pastures in a more competitive world. The aged could not live with their children, resulting in a huge waning of their status and power. They often reside in towns different from where their children are based. They often have no real sway over decisions taken by the children such as selection of a spouse.

The variance amid extended and nuclear families in respect to the status of the aged finds best expression in Israel. Wehl (1970), noted that the aged amongst the orient migrants were accorded a higher status than the aged immigrants from Western societies. The orients place

a greater emphasis on an extended form of family whereas Western societies are dominated by nuclear families.

2. Religion

According to Raji, Muhammed, Raji, Joseph and Raji (2017), people's desire to believe in divinity is insatiable. The traditional African religion, dominated by polytheism, the worship of more than one god places emphasis on the respect of elders. As a matter of fact, certain cultures maintain that words can make or mar an individual. This is not to say that monotheism, the belief in only one Supreme Being, does not place great emphasis on the respect of elders; it however has less impact in Western societies. The pressure from industrialisation leads to lesser emphasis being placed on the religious institution. Whereas the aged would be cherished to have significant contributions to make, as dictated by religious tenets, they are disregarded with the rise of industrialisation and are seen to be slow and docile having no real contribution to make.

3. Knowledge Base

The aged were once seen as the keepers of knowledge. They were held in reverence back in the primitive societies. They had words of wisdom to contribute in terms of old ways of life, ancestral origins, as well as providing solutions to societal problems. However, with the rise of industrialisation, they were no longer viewed as reservoirs of knowledge. The young, agile, student is preferred over the greying, experienced individual whose experience is seen to be archaic. In addition, the writing system as well as technology have replaced the aged as a reservoir of knowledge. A society's history is now written down and modern technology ensures that it can be kept intact.

4. Harshness of the Environment

As a consequence of the harshness of the environment and the surmounting extent of physical labour required to adapt to the environment, the status and general contribution of the aged have dwindled down. For example, the Sirono people of the Bolivian rain forest believe that the aged are a burdensome lot, who eat without hunting for game, take numerous spouses but incapable of procreation. According to Holmberg (1978), when a person becomes too old to keep up with the band, he/she is abandoned. The aged may find it difficult and sometimes impossible to adjust to the increased physical labour required in the society, such as amongst the Tiwi people of Australia.

5. Rapidity of Social Change

The rapidity of social change affects the aged by largely deflating their status within the society's culture (Cowgill & Holmes, 1972). In the process of change, the skills of the aged become outmoded. Their ways of carrying out activities become the old ways. In essence, people do not want to learn, so it becomes obsolete. This happens in the face of rapid and continuous technological innovation taking the world by storm. According to Watson and Robert (1977), a hypothesis can be arrived, 'the more information the aged control in the society, the greater their involvement in community affairs and thus effectively heightens their status'. In some rural parts of Nigeria, this is commonplace. The aged can be found huddled together with children often at the community centre at evening, where stories of the old are told and knowledge of different spheres of life are passed down. However, with

the occurrence of industrialisation and modernisation, this is effectively dwindling as the younger generations, often living apart from the aged, now rely on fiduciary systems such as the school.

Theories on Ageing

A theoretical analysis of ageing seeks to comprehend how ageing is determined, the roles performed in the human society as well as the complex of relationships engaged in.

Functionalist Paradigm

A basic premise of the functionalism is that all parts of the society work towards the achievement of a greater good, in terms of maintaining societal equilibrium. The aged are certainly part of the society. Therefore, there is an interest in analysing their purported roles in maintaining societal equilibrium. Within the functionalist paradigm, there are various theories that have sought to address the aged in the society. They include Disengagement Theory and Activity Theory.

1. **Disengagement theory:** This theory is largely attributed to the works of Cummings and Henry (1961). It is premised on the idea that the aged disengage from the society as they grow older. A withdrawal from relationships in the society is viewed as an expected part of growing old. This is based on some notions that everybody expects to pass away one day. In addition to this, humans fall prey to mental decline as ageing progresses. Hence, a withdrawal from the larger society is seen to be normal. With withdrawal in the works, the aged do not feel pressure to conform to societal norms. This therefore results in a huge amount of freedom. This theory was quite dominant for a while but received criticisms with time. The critics focused on the fact that it is not all aged individuals that disengage from the society.
2. **Activity theory:** This theory represents attempts to build upon the premises of the disengagement theory. It is commonly traced to the work of Havighurst, Neugarten and Tobin (1968). This theory is shaped by the idea that the aged withdraw from some established relationships in the society and goes further by adding that the aged find other activities to replace the relationships they have disengaged from. In essence, an aged retired man finds another activity to replace his old work. The more the aged are involved in activities, the happier they are, according to this theory. This theory has however been criticised on the basis of a universal unequal access to activities and societal opportunities. Also, it is not everyone that derives joy in taking part in activities or being involved with others. However, Lemon, Bengston and Petersen (1972) proposed that the aged would rather engage in informal acts such as maintaining certain hobbies in order to derive satisfaction in life.

Conflict Paradigm

Whereas the functionalist paradigm stresses order and stability, the conflict paradigm champions disorder, dissension and contradiction. The society is seen to be characteristically unstable, with a powerful minority exploiting a powerless majority. In line with this, social groups compete with one another for power. Applying this to the aged connotes that they struggle with some other groups (such as the younger generation) for the retention of scarce resources. Under the conflict paradigm, Modernisation Theory and Age Stratification Theory can be found.

1. **Modernisation theory:** Cogwill and Holmes (1972), proposed that a chief cause of the aged losing their power is modernisation. As the society increasingly becomes susceptible to the whisperings of industrialisation, the aged lose their status and become liable to social marginalisation. Prior to modernisation, binding norms and values command the younger generation to cater for the aged. However, with increasing modernisation, leading to a large expunging of the extended family system, the aged lose their status as individualism comes in place of collectivism. The care of the aged is no longer seen as a compulsory duty but a voluntary one, lacking any significant societal backlash. In essence, the aged are seen as a burden in this view. Modernisation has made this so. This theory has been criticised on the basis that it is not all modernised societies that witness the ostracising of the aged, such as China.
2. **Age stratification theory:** Riley, Johnson and Foner (1972), proposed that stratification can be found in the society on the basis of age. This is largely based on the concept of ageism: an unequal access to societal resources on the bases of age. This however goes beyond societal resources to the realm of conformity to social norms. There are some aspects of societal norms which demands a more stringent conformity from the aged than other members of the society. For example, there is an age discrimination in terms of expression of sexuality. It is more or less considered deviant for the aged to appear in what might be considered sexually alluring. This goes in line with the saying that people ought to act their age. In essence, there are culturally developed notions about what is expected of various age strata.

Symbolic Interactionist Paradigm

This is premised on the notion that humans are rational creatures who are able to construct and modify reality through the process of interaction. As opposed to the functionalist and conflict paradigms that are macro-oriented, symbolic interactionism is micro-oriented in nature. It focuses on the precise day-to-day interactions occurring among members of the society as opposed to the examination of large scale structures. Instead, the processes of interaction that make up the system are the focus here. Under the symbolic interactionist paradigm, Gerotranscendence Theory and Subculture of Ageing Theory can be found.

1. **Gerotranscendence theory:** According to Tornstam (2005), as people get older, they tend to let go of previously held views concerning life. Ageing, according to Tornstam (2005), results in the individual attaining inner peace. In the process of interaction with other societal members, the aged becomes less self-centred. In essence, Tornstam (2005) proposed that as people age, they become more accommodating and less critical in terms of morality. They try to avoid conflict as much as possible, seeking to attain serenity. Tornstam (2005), did not however opine that all the aged will achieve this level of serenity, he recognised that some of the aged are irritable and restless. The theory has been criticised by the functionalist and conflict camp for avoiding large scale issues.
2. **Subculture of ageing theory:** This theory can be traced to the work of Rose (1962). The theory has its focus on the joint community fashioned by the aged as a consequence of an exclusion from the larger society. They come together to engage in dynamic forms of interaction, creating new meanings. Essentially, a subculture comes to life, encompassing the ways of life common to the aged. They eat, drink, interact and sleep,

in a pattern distinct from the larger society. The theory has also been criticised by the functionalist and conflict paradigm for avoiding large scale issues.

Symbolic interactionism has generally been criticised by Skidmore (1975) for failing to elucidate the reason individuals act in certain ways in some scenarios. The paradigm is as well seen to be weak for not having a scientific credibility.

Summary

This Chapter has examined who the aged are, the field of gerontology and social gerontology, the relationship between gerontology and other social science disciplines, ageing as a social construction, factors that determine the status of the aged and the theoretical explanations of ageing. As summarily depicted in Figure 23.2, Social Gerontology is concerned with the study of the social forces that influence the lives of the aged. Hence, in the process of this, theories have been formulated, which explain how the aged are conceived (social construction). The factors that determine the status of the aged are relevant as they represent causal variables.

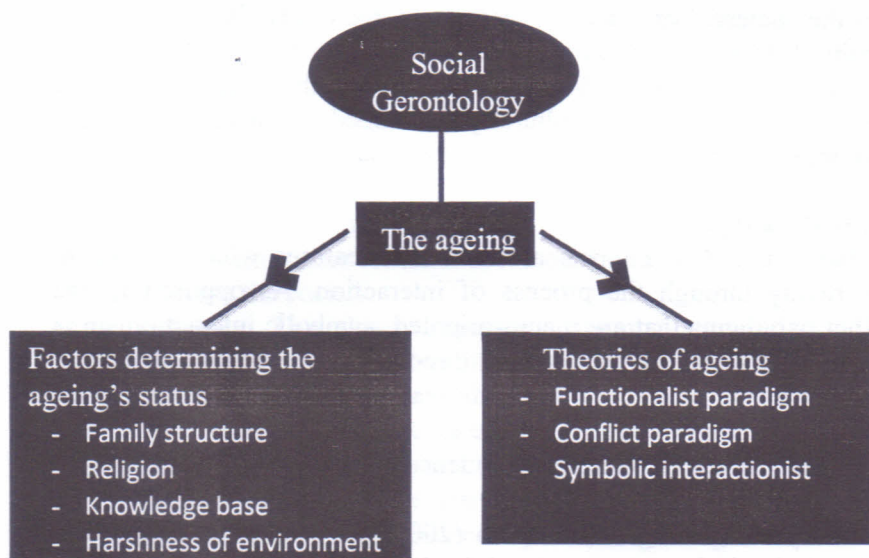


Figure 23.2: Summary of Social Gerontology

Chapter Exercises

1. What do you understand by ageing as a social construction?
2. Examine the relationship between Social Gerontology and other Social Science Disciplines.
3. Explain the factors that determine the status of the aged in the Nigerian society.
4. Which of the popular paradigms in sociology do you think is most appropriate for explaining the concept of ageing in the Nigerian society?

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