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SOCIAL AGEING IN CHANGING SOCIETY:
AN INTRODUCTION TO A RESEARCH PROJECT

The University of Tampere has recently launched a major research project entitled "Social ageing in changing society". The purpose of this project is to study social ageing as a theoretical issue, and to carry out an empirical study on the phenomenon of social ageing in the context of Finnish society. The project shall be financed by the Academy of Finland, whose latest research programme specifies sociological research on ageing as one of its current priority areas. Over the next three and a half years, the Academy will support the project by a total sum of approx. FIM one million. There are two researchers working on the project: Professor Seppo Randell, who is Head of the Department of Sociology and Social Psychology at the University of Tampere, and myself.

In this paper my purpose is to describe the theoretical and social background of the project as well as our plans for practical implementation. At this stage we cannot of course present any concrete results.

1. Ageing in Finnish society

Over the past few decades there has been a marked growth of the elderly population in Finland. In 1950, the total number of Finns aged 65 or over was around 266,000. Thirty years later, in 1980, the figure was 577,000. During the same period the

though there still are pensioners in Finland who live in real poverty, the general standard of living of elderly people has clearly risen. At the same time, an increasing range of social services have been made available to more and more elderly people. This, together with the changes in the family system, has caused an increase in the number of old people living at home rather than in institutions.

Finally, the cultural setting of ageing and old age has also changed. In their childhood, the aged and ageing people of today became socialized to a completely different society. Since then, urbanization, secularization, the erosion of traditional class cultures, and the inflow of foreign cultural influences have created a whole new cultural landscape. These developments have further accentuated the differences between generations and age groups, especially in today's culture where youthfulness, active participation, and ambition seem to be among the most highly regarded values.

The structural changes described in the foregoing clearly point to the importance of studying old age and the process of social ageing from a social-scientific point of view. All the problems involved cannot be adequately tackled by the traditional approaches of public health and social policy. Our concern is not only with the elderly as a significant and growing part of the population, the social position of the elderly, their living conditions and life situation; we are also concerned with the role and influence of the elderly in society and the process of social ageing in general, a process which affects not only the group of aged or aging people, but all of us.

2. Starting-points and research problems

Every sociological study has its own, more or less explicitly stated starting-points or "ideological" frame of reference. The starting-point in our research project is largely the same as that adopted by the American social anthropologists Amoss and Harrell, who present three main hypotheses in their studies on

cultural variation. First, they argue that, like other human beings, old people are not passive actors within a system determined by external influences, but they actively shape and create their own conditions of existence within the confines drawn by such factors that are beyond their control. Second, the circumstances to which old people must adapt impose restrictions upon their adaptation; these circumstances include biological and psychic factors related to ageing, the population structure of society, environmental and economic factors, and also the objectives, strategies and power of other population groups.

Third, Amoss and Harrel assume that there exist certain universal goals which are common to all old people: physical and emotional security, respect on the part of other members of the community, and a feeling that they play a useful role both in the life of their possible family and in that of society at large [Amoss, Harrell, 1981].

These three hypotheses form the basis of the image of old people which underlies the present project and against which we intend to compare our results. The idea is to approach aging and aged people as members of society, as an important part of society, even though their relationship to society may have changed in many different ways.

Against this background, we can summarize the main concerns of our research project in the following questions:

1. What is social ageing? How can the concept of social ageing be applied to empirical research?
2. What are the factors that shape and determine social ageing? How is it "produced" in the interplay of the individual, his environment, and society?
3. How have the changes in society, both past and present, affected social ageing, the relationships between different age groups and generations, and the position of aged people in society's status hierarchy?
4. How does social ageing manifest itself at the individual level? How adequate are the descriptions and explanations proposed by social gerontological theories of social ageing?
5. What kind of social experience does ageing and old age represent to aging people in different communities and in different social situations?

3. Social ageing

The theoretical starting-point of our study lies in the concept of social ageing. There are several definitions of the term, most of which refer to the interaction between society and the individual and to the changes that take place in this interaction with increasing age. Hervonen and Pohjolainen, for example, write that

broadly understood, social ageing refers to all changes, whether at the micro or macro level, that occur in the interaction between the individual and society with increasing age. [Hervonen, Pohjolainen, 1983, p. 36].

At the macro level, social ageing usually refers to the consequences of the ageing of the population in communities and in society at large. At the micro or individual level, the focus is on changes in individuals' attitudes, behaviour, social position, social interaction among the aged, roles and life-styles [Hervonen, Pohjolainen, 1983, p. 36].

There are also narrower definitions which single out specific changes in the interaction of the individual and society. Jyrkilä, for instance, defines social ageing as a process where the individual disengages from social interaction; this definition is essentially based on so-called disengagement theory [Jyrkilä, 1963; on disengagement theory, see Cumming, Henry, 1961].

Both of these definitions are in fact rather problematic. The former is too broad to serve as a theoretical guideline in practical research; the latter is too narrow and actually resembles a hypothetical statement. As many critics of the disengagement theory have pointed out [e.g. Hervonen, Pohjolainen, 1983, Hendricks and Hendricks, 1977 and Bengtson, 1986, pp. 307-315], ageing does not necessarily lead to the kind of disengagement process implied by this theory. Researchers have also come up with completely opposite results. Therefore, rather than accepting the view that social ageing involves, by definition, disengagement, it is logical to ask in what situation or under

what conditions does ageing mean disengagement? Is it related to a certain stage in the process of ageing?

We have adopted a different starting-point. Old age is regarded as a certain stage in the individual's life span which, apart from involving various biological and psychological aspects, is socially determined and structured. From this perspective, we may apply Giddens's ideas [1984, p. 188] and define old age as a societal position, i.e. as a societal identity which, as Giddens writes, involves a number of rights and duties which may be highly ambiguous. Giddens emphasizes that this identity is essentially a classification which is based upon a given societal criterion or several societal criteria, such as occupation or family relations. Therefore, in the analysis of social ageing, the aim must be to find out which criteria determine old age at any given time; and also to find out what those rights and duties of being old consist in.

On this basis we can also define ageing in its social sense. Social ageing is in this project defined as a complex entity consisting of processes in and through which the individual moves into the social position of an old person, that is, becomes identified as an old person, possibly realizes this, and consequently identifies himself as well. In other words, there is a real possibility of conflicting identifications by outsiders and by the aged individual himself.

It is important not to confuse our understanding of old age as a social position with role or roles. We agree with Giddens [1984, p. 185-191] and hold that roles emerge and change in action and interaction, where they are also continuously maintained and reproduced. When moving into the social position of an aged person, the individual may of course lose a previous role and take on a new one, but the important point, at the individual level, is how this movement into the new position affects the practices in which the individual or individuals may even be "forced" into roles to which they adapt more or less reluctantly. Individuals may also offer active resistance to roles imposed upon them from the outside; in this sense social ageing is not necessarily only passive adaptation to the surrounding circumstances.

At the individual level social ageing, as we have defined it here, can also be understood as a socialization process in which the individual adopts this old societal identity in his own distinctive way, or in a way that is characteristic of a certain group of people. The individual shapes the values and orientations that guide his behaviour and action but is not merely a passive object of socialization. Socialization to old age may be submissive desocialization, but it may also be active and innovative resocialization.

4. Research design and materials

To achieve the goals that have been set for the project, a wide range of material will have to be collected and organized.

In the analysis of the development of Finnish society we shall primarily utilize official statistics, other documents and earlier research. At this level we also intend to describe the changes that have taken place in various interaction systems, such as the family and living, as well as the development of different pension schemes.

Changes do not necessarily manifest themselves in the same way in different communities, nor is their impact the same upon the position of different aged and ageing individuals living in different communities. Likewise, the various norms that are related to ageing and the institutional frameworks of ageing tend to manifest themselves in different ways in different communities. This applies both to interaction between individuals and to interaction between different age groups, as well as to the forms that this interaction assumes. Different communities provide different cultural environments for ageing and old age. Therefore, we have selected four different types of communities for our study: Tampere, which is a large industrial town in southern Finland; Iisalmi, a fairly small town in central Finland; Parikkala, a rural municipality in eastern Finland; and Iiivaalkoski, an outlying rural commune in northern Finland.

Social ageing is mediated by a number of processes, part of which are related to the institutional changes that come with increasing age (such as retirement), and part of which manifest themselves in other changes in the life situation, in activities and in the individual's consciousness about his position in the community's age-status system. One of our central concerns is with how these changes are experienced: what kind of social experience does ageing and being old represent to aged people. To answer these questions, an extensive interview study shall be carried out with a sample of 1000 people, in addition to which there will also be a large number of interviews on particular themes. Our purpose is to combine the data collected by traditional quantitative and qualitative methods.

Another important aim of the project is to study the attitudes of public authorities and social workers to old people, their images of old people, and also the practices of social care of the elderly.

There are several levels or dimensions on which comparisons shall be made. The first is the community level, where the aim is to identify possible similarities and differences between the communities studied. At the second level we deal with individuals and the possible connections between ageing and gender, a question which at least in Finnish research has often been neglected. Also, comparisons will be made at the level of social groups or social classes, as well as between age groups: social ageing is understood as a process that advances with increasing age. Finally, comparisons are made at the level of life events that are bound up with age and that change the individual's life situation, such as being left a widower.

The purpose of our project is therefore to study social ageing in Finland in the 1980s from a cross-sectional perspective. However, social ageing is understood as an historical phenomenon and research object, which means that one central aim is to uncover and describe the historical aspects of the processes now under way.

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SPÓŁECZNE STARZENIE SIĘ W ZMIENNYM SPOŁECZEŃSTWIE:
WPROWADZENIE DO PROJEKTU BADAWCZEGO

W Uniwersytecie w Tampere podejmuje się badania poświęcone starzeniu się. Obok celów poznawczych pragnie się uzyskać praktyczne wyniki. Artykuł przedstawia teoretyczne i społeczne przesłanki projektu badań. W Finlandii obserwuje się wzrost ludzi sta-

rej generacji do 12% całej populacji. Rodzi to istotny problem społeczny - rosnącą klientelę usług w zakresie zdrowia i emerytur, a także, w płaszczyźnie indywidualnej, problem adaptacji do życia w starości.

W projekcie badawczym poszukuje się perspektywy socjologicznej, m. in. relacji między starością a innymi przeobrażeniami społeczeństwa fińskiego. Autor odwołuje się do amerykańskich antropologów Amoss i Harvella, według których ludzie starzy nie są pozytywnymi podmiotami działającymi, lecz dążą do właściwej im pozycji w bliższym i dalszym otoczeniu.

Rozważa się treść pojęcia społeczna starość przyjmując, że starszy wiek stanowi określoną fazę w życiu jednostki społecznie ustrukturyzowaną. Jest to zatem określona pozycja socjetalna z prawami i obowiązkami. Społeczne starzenie stanowi całość złożoną z procesu przejścia do pozycji starej osoby i do identyfikacji z nią. Socjalizacja do starości może być aktywna i twórcza.

W badaniach będą wykorzystane różnorodne metody i procedury. Jako materiał posłużą statystyki i dokumenty oraz wyniki dotychczasowych badań (zwłaszcza nt. przeobrażeń rodziny i warunków życia). Szczególną wagę przywiązuje się do różnic regionalnych.

W centrum uwagi badaczy znajduje się sposób w jaki starzy ludzie doświadczają swoją sytuację. Przewiduje się przeprowadzenie wywiadów kwestionariuszowych z próbą 1000 osób oraz serię wywiadów wolnych zarówno z ludźmi starymi, jak też o ludziach starych.