PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS OF THE AGING AND THE AGED*

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I should like to begin our examination of retirement and pre-retirement planning with a negation. There is no such thing as retirement in the real sense of total human development. Nobody really retires from life and its ongoing processes unless he is dead. Everyone is engaged in life, living and doing as long as he or she is alive. What then, are we attempting to examine when we discuss the psychological aspects of retirement? We are focusing on the cessation of a major part of adult human behavior, namely that connected with role. When one ceases to practice the activities connected with the daily earning of one's living one is "retired" in the economic sense. A retired individual is one who either voluntarily or involuntarily has given up his job and all behaviors connected with it. If this were a strictly economic decision which affected only the economic aspects of human behavior, then solving the problems connected with it would be relatively simple. Through anticipatory planning funds could be available to the retired person which would maintain an adequate living standard and retirement would represent little change in an individual's life. More specifically, you would hardly need me ma here to discuss the problems with you as they could be solved by financial advisors to your communities. But we recognize that retirement has a wider meaning and a broader effect on human behavior than its financial one. The work role for most human beings involves far more both in rewards and expected and practiced behaviors than the earning of a pay-check. As a matter of fact, for this audience, up until recently, work was not even rewarded in a monetary way. So what is involved in giving up work?

Socially, work means being active and productive in a structured setting over an extended period of the adult life span. It means doing, being involved, activating daily social relationships, it gives status (to oneself as
well as to those related to you), it means usefulness. The adult years are
the contributing years whether we be of the laity or the religious. To
give this up means to admit that one can no longer make the same contribution,
can no longer identify with the same social structure, to admit that one is
no longer useful in the same manner one has been. Retirement means a change
in life style and a resultant change in attitude toward life. And retirement
comes at a time in life when other changes, behavioral, social and physical
are affecting the individual. A retired person is not just an adult who is
unemployed or out of the labor force. A retired person is an older adult.
An older adult who generally is beginning to show some impairment in sensory
functions such as vision and hearing. These gradual losses will lead to a
diminished ability to maintain full contact with the environment and interact
and respond to the stimuli present. This can mean a reduction in ability to
get along independently, an increase in dependency. Chronic ailments are
a sine qua none of the aging population. Among persons 65 and over, 77%
have one or more chronic ailments. Persons 65 and over average 6 to 8
physician visits per year as compared to 5 between the ages of 25 & 64.
Psychologically, we find that older people show some decrease in memory for
recent events, and some difficulty in learning new information. They show a
general slowing down of mental processes as measured by psychological tests.

And so retirement from work, becomes part of the signaling system which
warns the individual that he or she is on the decline psychologically, socially,
and physically. Retirement represents in a concrete manner, the shrinkage
of an individual's world. Social relationships made and maintained in the
work setting are lost. The structuring of daily activities made and main-
tained around the work setting are lost. Social and occupational status are
now part of the past. The aging person is faced with a difficult paradox. Although he may have become less adaptable to change (due to the individual psychological changes taking place concomitant with aging) he is being called upon to adjust to an extensive alteration in his living conditions, and his place in society.

The retired person faces the dreaded losses of significance and independence. There is the loss of familiar landmarks and points of reference, which the work routine supplied. There is the loss of a sense of personal identity; an experience of being unwanted; the loss of incentive and opportunity to continue in accustomed work. To continue to function means substitutes must be found, new solutions attempted to simplify and control the situation. When faced with such identity crises at other stages of life, the normal adult or adolescent was helped to adapt and to learn any social knowledge required by the support of a group of significant others. Parents, teachers, counselors, peer groups and friends all acted in part to socialize the individual into the new roles or behaviors demanded of him. But in old age such support is more often not available. Once retired, the individual is no longer supported by his work colleagues, adult family members may be distant or unavailable, and there are no clear societal options offered as successful solutions. Whereas, in earlier years, adaptation to identity crises involved growing, doing, activating new meaningful roles, in older adulthood adaptation involves losses and decline. Our society does not accord to retirement leisure the positive value it grants to work. For many who have devoted all their lives to work there is nothing to substitute for it once it is taken away. To those who have always depended on affection and status for security and happiness, the loss of friendships, social oppor-
tunities and external enforcement of identity constitutes a stressful environment.

Seventy-five years ago, the do-nothing approach to retirement may have made some sense. Relatively few people lived past the age of 65. Today's old people have an expectation of many years of life ahead of them. And the losses of health and vigor that we see, are often associated with the inactivity which is imposed upon them. It is therefore imperative that solutions to this problem revolve around an active, useful period of life from 65 on.

Keeping busy is not enough; a hobby is not enough—to overcome the social and psychological crises a retired person faces. A person must feel that he is doing something that has a purpose, that contributes to the happiness of others; otherwise the imposed social isolation with loss of work role means further social crises. Furthermore, in order for the old person to cope adequately with the changes occurring, he must have social props.

Let me say what I think this means for you who are in the religious community. Firstly, it means you must recognize that there are millions of older people living all around you who are attempting to grapple with a serious psychological and social problem and receiving little or no help at all. They are being shunted aside by society, told they are unwanted and unneeded and that they must shift for themselves. Large numbers of them live alone, their incomes have declined and they are inactive. The employment market is bad for young people and the chances of an older person getting even part-time work are worse. Volunteering is not even made easy for older persons. The Peace Corps has been criticized for its small number of older volunteers and the training programs which selectively negate an older persons contribution. Few volunteer programs are geared to the needs of retired persons or attempt to utilize their
special capabilities to contribute to the welfare of others. Each year after the age of 65, more and more people enter institutions as the only solution to the despair brought about by old age. However, it is not age alone that puts you in an old age home, nursing home or state mental hospital. Studies show that old people living in the community do not differ significantly from those who have been institutionalized. What seems to stand between the community resident and institutionalization is social invisibility. That is, these old people are so socially isolated that they live alone, spend their time in their homes and no one ever sees them or knows they exist.

In my own research with institutionalized residents, I have found that the majority of old people waiting to enter an old age home were living alone in their rented apartments or in single rooms in residential hotels. The average person's living conditions were very similar to those of Mrs. D. who lived alone in a 1 ½ room apartment on the upper West Side of Manhattan. She was a widow with no living family, had lost all of her old friends either through death or geographical distance and had to depend on one neighbor who helped her from time to time, with shopping, housework, and miscellaneous needs. She ate all her meals alone in her apartment, relying mainly on prepared frozen meals to avoid the job of cooking and shopping. She left her apartment rarely, and when she did, always feared reentry because she though someone may have broken into her apartment. At the time I interviewed her at home, she commented that she enjoyed spending the time being interviewed because otherwise she might have spent the day as usual, in bed, seeing and talking to no one.

For the most part, the furnishings of the apartments of the people I saw waiting to enter old age homes were unadorned, old, in disrepair, reflecting the drabness and helplessness characteristic of their lives. Television sets
were prominent and in use for most of the day. Their major complaints were of loneliness and abandonment by relatives, as well as lack of financial resources.

It is evident then, that the feeling of desperation and the sense of helplessness that leads to the decision to enter an institution more likely stems from outside causes than from natural changes in abilities or from sudden illnesses or accidents. Loss of personal supports such as spouse, family, friends, money together with the lack of substitutes or alternatives for these needs available in the community, leads to the final decision to become dependent on the one available resource - an institution. A setting such as an old age or nursing home is seen as being able to provide the necessary physical care, and social interaction, and as being able to provide an end to the financial burden of day to day functioning in the community.

Larger numbers of old people are entering settings designed to remove them from the community and other age groups every year. The older a person gets the more likely he is to enter such settings. Old people are living out lives of drab, dull, meaningless pain in the community and nobody sees them and nobody helps. Families try to maintain their elderly within their bounds but get no help from the community in terms of the special problem involved in caring for and living with an older person. So many old people are abandoned by the only social attachments they have and are left to make do or forced to enter an institution when, with very little help from people who are meaningful in the old person's life, they could be maintained in the community. They are thrown out of the work world and told they can no longer make a productive contribution to society. We establish some senior centers for them to fill their leisure hours and they show us by their lack of participation, (participation rates in national studies of senior centers show that not even
10% of the community aged involve themselves in such activities) that they do not accept this as a meaningful alternative. We used to think that people got more religious as they grew older and spent their time in religious contemplation. Studies show that church attendance decreases rather than increases with age. What is needed is an organization that will recognize the visibility of the aged, that will attempt to become the social prop needed to maintain healthy community life, that will commit itself to seeing to the needs of older people. I see religious orders providing just such a system. You too are grappling now with your commitment to society and what better opportunity for commitment and contribution than to those who have been left stranded? At Teachers College now, we are involved in a Friendly Visitors program for the elderly in the community. This program consists of sending trained volunteers (all our volunteers are sisters who are doing graduate work in our department) to visit each and every willing older person residing in the community. The same two visitors are sent on each visit in order to build the friendship/intimacy relationship between visitors and the elderly person. The need for this service involves the reduction of social isolation by reconnecting the elderly to others, by indicating an awareness of their presence in the community and concern for their well-being. To claim that the elderly are socially isolated is to repeat a truism which hardly seems necessary. On the other hand its repetition has not seemed to provoke any major programmatic effort to reduce the social isolation of the aged. Perhaps, this is because the problem seems insurmountable or, conversely, perhaps because the solution seems so simple and straightforward that there is no news value in it. Whatever the reason, there have been no major programs directed at reducing social isolation of the aged in the community and the situation continues to worsen. Simply having someone to talk to, certainly as a first step can halt some of the negative concomitants of this problem for the elderly.
Sending people out into the community to visit the elderly who would be delighted to see them, to have someone to make a cup of tea for, to open their social worlds again.

Restraining and continuing education is another problem area which can involve both the lay and religious community. The establishment of open adult education classes both for the older religious who would like to consider a second career and for adult community members could provide a new dimension of continuing engagement in life for both. Again the simple and obvious solution to the deprived environment of the retired has yet to be implemented. Yet we know that despite handicaps, older people can and do learn given motivation and meaningful content. Stimulation and activity which lead to productive use of one's capacities are essential to human life. The outcome of restricted activity as well as deprivation of sensory stimulation is boredom, which over time causes deterioration. Aging in retirement is a process of withdrawal, brought upon by the progressive changes in sensory and motor capacities, diminished activity, changes in personal relations and attitudes of others and the breakup of friendships and associations through death and inactivity. Examination of any one of these factors indicates that people can intervene to reverse these changes. The need to encourage and establish continuing, productive meaningful activity is a crying one.

Let us not propose retirement, disengagement from life as we grow older. Let us commit ourselves rather to the working out of solutions to restoration of vigor, of interest in our environment, in filling out time working with people. Let us bring back our "wise old men" and let them, together with us, work to bring the elderly back into the mainstream. Probably the most important developmental phenomenon of any age relates to the manner in which a
person organizes his energy so that he can be productive and obtain satisfactions from the interests and activities he undertakes. We must begin to provide the environments in which the older segment of our population are enabled to become productive once more. You, as religious, committed to involvement can make a contribution both to yourselves and others by remaining active. We know the psychological benefits which accrue from remaining active. If nothing else they contribute to longevity.

The sister in her fifties or sixties who is beginning to reevaluate her contribution in her first career role, and its meaningfulness for society can begin to think of a second career in the field of aging - to utilize her old skills - almost all of you have been involved in service to people, - in new jobs, in new communications.

I will not raise the issue of retiring to a more contemplative life for the older sister or the use of her leisure time or even her right to leisure. I see leisure as a good as a positive and healthy part of one's life. But not as an alternative to involvement when the social problems of the aged both in and out of the religious community cry out from commitment to service.