Interpretive Social Science and Research on Aging

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Introduction

Some 40 years ago, most social scientists were preoccupied with how to make the social sciences scientific, which usually meant how to make them like the natural sciences. The major concerns were then, as now, how to perceive order in the chaotic social world; how to ask questions in ways that are researchable; how to build theories that can be supported by observations. Most investigators called themselves logical positivists or rational empiricists, for the concern was also how to create "objective" measures; how to explain and eventually predict— even more, eventually to control—human behavior; how to discover the "laws" of social behavior, of social structures, and of societies.

Most social scientists nodded to the notion that interdisciplinary approaches were important, but only a few did more than nod, for most researchers were then, as now, unprepared to undertake multidisciplinary, let alone interdisciplinary, approaches. The primary consideration was to build our disciplines in ways that would make them more distinctive and more rigorous.

The prevailing view was that there is a real world of social institutions and patterns of social interaction that can be objectively known, and that the various social-science disciplines were capturing various parts of that reality. To use an awkward metaphor: There was one true elephant, even though some investigators studied the trunk, others the leg, and still others, like the macro-sociologists, the overall configuration of the animal. The task was to focus one's lenses "correctly" in order to perceive one's own part of the "truth" and to leave it to someone else who someday would come along and put it all together in a grand scheme that would capture the essential nature of the beast.
Interpretive Social Science

Today, a different philosophy of science has emerged; and most students of social behavior—though surely not all—are moving toward the stance of what has been called the interpretive social sciences (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979). To attempt an oversimplified statement of this position and at the risk of repeating that which may have become common knowledge, interpretive social science begins with the acknowledgement that the social sciences have never developed agreement with regard to methods or explanations in the way that has been characteristic of the natural sciences where, at successive points in time, one paradigm has prevailed and has then been replaced by another (Kuhn, 1962 1970).

More important, from this perspective, is that the models of the natural sciences are not the appropriate ones for social scientists to emulate. This is not because social sciences are new and have not yet had time to develop powerful paradigms: nor because the social sciences, like the natural sciences, undergo major changes in paradigms. The difference is more fundamental. The study of the human world can never be context-free: the observer can never stand outside his subject matter but must always share the context of cultures, languages, and symbols that constitute that world. In this view, the observer stands within the same circles of human meaning as do the objects of his study, and there is no outside, detached standpoint from which to gather observations. Even the anthropologists and historians who study different or earlier societies can be only partially detached. They remain not only part of the human world but culture-bound in their interpretations. Social scientists are all caught in a hermeneutic circle: Ultimately, a good explanation is one that makes sense of the behavior we see, but what makes sense is itself based on the kinds of sense we can make. In different worlds, there is no “objective” nor absolute verification procedure to fall back on. We can only continue to offer interpretations.

In this framework, there are no immutable laws; no reductionist models that are securely based in logical self-evidence; no “received” truths; and surely no value-free social science. Change is fundamental; change is dialectical; meanings are multiple and inexhaustible. The aim is understanding, within the limits of our cultural and historical present. The goal is not to discover universals, not to make predictions that will hold good over time, and certainly not to control; but, instead, to explicate contexts and thereby to achieve new insights and new understandings.

This view creates a more open world for social scientists. Although ambiguity and indeterminacy are inherent aspects of interpretations, the number and diversity of our means of comprehension become thereby increased. Techniques from a variety of disciplines become available. Investigators can become more comfortable with the fact that there is no commonality in the social sciences, for when our definitions and our methods are themselves products of consciousness, it can follow that we have very different views of what constitutes our subject matter and how it is to be examined. We become less defensive over the accusation that social scientists cannot find commonality either in the idea of social nor in the idea of science. We can acknowledge that the social sciences are anarchistic, and that attempts to discover laws or universals tell us perhaps more about their authors than about the world.

This does not mean, however, that anything goes. We do develop criteria of evidence, we do use criteria of logical inference and deduction, and we do strive for consensus and for communicability. We attempt to build theories of the middle range, even if theories are themselves interpretations; theories in which our constructs gain meaning by being systematically related to other constructs and are connected with our observations. We can attempt to represent the world that can be known to us, if not the “true” world. And if, because the known world is constantly changing and being reconfigured, we cannot make predictions except in very limited ways, we can attempt to explain what we observe.

Research Questions and Methodology

The tenets of interpretive social science lead directly to the relationship between research questions and methodological questions. Although this relationship is fundamental to all disciplines, it is in the limelight among sociologists these days, to judge from the heated interchanges now appearing in the sociological journals. This is because sociologists have been giving a certain priority to precise measurements and to quantitative methods, to the seeming neglect of more substantive issues. There is little disagreement that it is the formulation of the research question that must come first and the selection of method that must come second. But in adopting the stance of interpretive social sciences, we are more forcefully reminded that however refined our quantitative methods, they can only add precision to those selected phenomena (or variables) that lend themselves to those methods. Not, by any means, their refinement and clarity of relationships are unimportant; but they leave us as limited as before with regard to the “thick” descriptions (Geertz, 1972) that would add breadth and depth to our interpretations. This is only to say that newly elaborated techniques of regression and multivariate analyses and path analysis or cross-sequential designs or Jessenian designs are important steps in defining the relations between the particular variables in question, but they give the investigator no purchase on the innumerable other factors and other contexts that would add to understanding.

We are forcefully reminded also that our quantitative methods cannot help us escape the hermeneutic circle in which we are entrapped. They do not provide “objectivity” in the sense that they reflect the “real” world. Indeed, there is an opposite danger—that the focus on methods may lead us ever more to a reductionist approach, for there is the beguiling notion that the more clarity we can
obtain about the relations between some three or five or six factors, the more we should limit our attention to those and leave the rest of the confusion to someone else.

These reminders are related to the concerns that many sociologists are now voicing. To quote Casse, who warned in his presidential address to the American Sociological Association:

"Concern with precision in measurement before theoretical clarification of what is worth measuring and what is not... is a roadblock to progress in sociological analysis... What I am concerned with is not the uses but rather the abuses of these instruments of research. (1975, p. 692)"

And in arguing for the value of qualitative as well as quantitative methods, Casse went on to say:

"Sociology is not advanced enough solely to rely on precisely measured variables. (p. 693)... our discipline will be judged in the last analysis on the basis of the substantive enlightenment which it is able to supply about the social structures in which we are embedded... If we neglect that major task... we shall degenerate into... specialized researchers who will learn more and more about less and less. (1975, p. 698)"

**Research on Aging**

How does all this apply to research on aging? It might be said first that if ever there was an area of inquiry that should be approached from the perspective of interpretive social sciences, this is one. It is apparent even to the most casual observer that aging has multiple biological, psychological, and sociological components; that neither the behavior of older people nor the status of older people can be understood otherwise; and that the primary need is for explication of contexts and for multiplicity of methods. It should also be apparent that attention to change over time is fundamental in all disciplinary approaches to the study of aging, whether it be change in the individual or historical change in social, economic, and political institutions.

For the sociologist, in particular, the societal context is of paramount significance (a point that will be elaborated below), for it is not only that older people are different from each other, but that the very processes of aging are different in different societies, in different subgroups, at different points in history; so that aging is social destiny as well as biological destiny. In the field of gerontology, this point has been made clearly enough. It has been demonstrated over and over again that there is no single pattern of aging (we have only to consider the different trajectories of change in women and men); and there are no immutable laws, except at the most general level—namely, that in the normal course of events, men and women are born, grow up, and die; and then now, in industrialized societies, most people grow old before they die.

**Sociological Focus in Aging Research**

Bearing in mind that sociologists have come relatively late to the field of aging, trailing far behind anthropologists and psychologists, what, then, are the substantive questions that sociologists are addressing? In a recent review article, sociological research on aging was described as having been addressed primarily to four general issues (Maddox, 1979):

1. Chronological age as an explanatory variable (where the repeated finding is that age is a very weak variable).
2. The modernization of society as it affects the status and welfare of older people (and where, because the factors are complex, the relationship is not simply that modernization leads to lower status of the aged).
3. Adaptation in later life (and where, to oversimplify it, successful adaptation in late life has been found to be the rule rather than the exception).
4. The changing age structure of the population (where, so far as social implications are concerned, attention has been given primarily to the heterogeneity of successive cohorts).

It can be said, then (although the following distinction should not be overdrawn), that the first three of the four major issues relate to older people as an age group and accordingly that sociologists have been concentrating at the level of inquiry where subgroups of persons are the units of observation. At another level, where the society is the unit of observation (the fourth issue listed above), very little research has been carried out. Furthermore, when relating these two levels of inquiry, attention has gone almost entirely in one direction and to the question: How do social and societal changes influence the lives of older men and older women? Seldom have there been studies in the other direction, where the question is: How does the presence of increasing numbers of older people affect the society?

**Gaps in Sociological Research**

**Social aging.** It is worth speculating further about the major questions that sociologists have been ignoring. For instance, in focusing on persons, the question might well be: How is social or sociological aging to be defined? Is it to utilize the model of an age-stratified society and to define aging as the passage from one to another set of social roles and, thus, from one to another age stratum (Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972)? What additional analytical frameworks need to be formulated?

How does this question of the nature of social aging relate to one occasionally encountered in the writings of demographers: Presuming that the human species has a given biological potential with regard to maximum life span (a presumption that emerges from comparative studies of animal species), what is the nature and extent of the social constraints and social enhancements that influence that bio-
logical potential? How do they interact with gender, as, for instance, in accounting for the added longevity of women in some but not all societies?

The nature of social aging, whether for one or both sexes, has seldom been discussed by sociologists, in contrast to the wide-ranging debates among biologists over the definitions and the competing theories of biological aging.

If the nature of social aging is an appropriate question, then it would dictate to sociologists pay attention not only to the behavior or status or integration of men and women who are old but to the social processes of aging and, in turn, to appropriate methods for studying change. Next questions would then become more meaningful: What forms of social interaction, at micro- or macrosocial levels, and what social-institutional arrangements hasten or delay social aging? How do these vary, say, for men and for women?

**Conflicts in studies of change.** We might pursue one step further the question of how to study change and, in this instance, to consider the expression of contexts as one of the goals of interpretive social science. There has been considerable attention given to age, cohort, and time of measurement as indices for measuring change and how these interact statistically in accounting for observed differences between age groups, or age-sex groups, with regard to one or another type of behavior. Here, the method of cross-sequential analysis has often outweighed the significance of the substantive problem; and too often the inquiry has stopped where it might well have begun. In demonstrating, for example, that a cohort difference outweighs an age difference in adult performance on a particular psychometric test of intelligence—or that it is the calendar year in which a particular political or social attitude has been measured that outweighs age or cohort—the indices at age, cohort, and period remain "empty" as explanatory variables. That is, we do not know what it is that has occurred with the passage of lifetime that is being reflected in our index, age; nor what historical or economic or social events have actually affected the persons we study and that are represented by our index, cohort, or in our index, calendar year. This is not to deny that the age—cohort—period approach is itself a step in the explication of contexts; nor that rich or "thick" data sets are hard to come by. But it is, rather, to say that we might sometimes do well to study a small rather than a large sample of persons, to make use of a broader range of variables in creating qualitative as well as quantitative data, and thereby to seek enlightenment not only about the meaning of those three indices but about other factors that are operating.

It is the rare instance when, in explicating what is meant by cohort and intercohort patterns, an investigator like Elder (1974) can select a major event like the Great Depression of the 1930s, identify families who did or did not suffer a significant loss of income, and then study the psychological and social changes that occurred over time in girls and boys in both types of families. This is a design that forwards interpretation and understanding and one that would be of particular value in studying change in older women and men.

**Studies of the life course.** To take a different example: This time, of how multiple contexts and multiple methods would forward interpretation, and this time, a substantive question that sociologists are already examining: namely, differences in the life course across historical time.

A distinction should first be made: Psychologists usually speak of life-span development, while sociologists usually speak of the life-course. The life-span orientation and the life-course perspective differ in their key intellectual concerns. While the former gives a good deal of attention to the "inner" life, the latter emphasizes turning points when the "social persons" undergoes change. A life-course approach concentrates on age-sex-related role transitions that are socially created, socially recognized, and socially shared. The age system of a society creates predictable role transitions, turning points that provide roadmaps for individuals and that outline life pathways.

A review of the sociological research on the life course (Hagestad & Neugarten, in press) indicates that patterns of role transitions across historical time have been explored mainly through intercohort comparisons. Individual life sequences have seldom been the object of study, but instead the focus has been on birth cohorts and on central tendencies. That is, we do not know how many of the individuals who were, say, at the median age on one transition are among those at the median age on the next. Because life pathways cannot be charted from most such studies, much of the research that sociologists have defined as life-course analysis does not analyze lives but presents the statistical histories of cohorts. (There are notable exceptions, such as the studies by Logan [1981] and by Abeles, Stein, & Wise [1983]). Furthermore, most studies have been focused on the timing, sequencing, or spacing of transitions in young adult women or men, with little attention given to late-life transitions and, as a result, with little attention given to the long-term consequences of early transitions.

It is recognized that the kinds of data sets suitable for such analyses are seldom to be found, so that sociologists are often unable to do what they would like. Still, some studies of the life course might seem a good start, to find the kinds of small, if not all, large, data sets would be more suitable in this respect.

Most important, for our present purposes, is the fact that in most of the studies of intercohort differences, the investigator has not attempted to explain the patterns observed. It is acknowledged that the collective biography of a birth cohort is shaped by societal change—by historic, economic, and political events as well as by the size and other characteristics of cohorts themselves—yet these factors have seldom been analyzed, for to do so requires not only an explication of the historical context but an understanding of how historical events are translated into changes in life patterns. Similarly, if we are to explicate contexts, we might look to anthropological studies of cultural values and cultural meanings of age and to social—psychological studies of age norms as all these change over time for women and for men.

**Multiple methods.** We might also make use of a broader array of methods. For one, autobiographical accounts that would help us understand the personal meanings attached to life transitions. To elaborate this point: Those of us who have gathered life histories and who have talked at length with the persons we are
observing are usually impressed with the ways in which the individual seeks to make a life story out of a life history; to give new meanings to past events; to weave together the many threads of a life into a single tapestry. They describe past intentions and plans and why, when those plans succeeded or failed, they did or did not make some next transition. One important source of enrichment in studying the life course, then, is to examine the individual's own goal-setting.

It is true that individuals see their lives through their own lenses. But so, also, do observers wear their own lenses as they select their research questions and their methods. This point is one of the tenets of interpretive social science.

The use of the personal narrative need not remain off-limits to sociologists who study the life course. Neither is it true that to use personal narratives is to be unsystematic (Bertaux, 1981). There are standards for judgment. A life story must be "followable" and self-explanatory (Ricoeur, 1977); it must be judged in terms of its internal consistency and how well it accounts for the various events of the life course; it must make sense in ways that others can accept, which is to say it must be understandable in terms of socially shared meanings.

These are the same standards by which we judge the observations obtained by other methods. An interpretation that emerges from any set of observations must make sense to other observers. And only when an explanation makes sense to enough persons who share a common set of meanings does it become a good explanation.

But it is not easy for many sociologists to use personal narratives. We have been shaped not only by the culture of our society but also by the culture of our discipline, which has socialized us to be wary of what we call the "subjective." We often forget that "the subjective" lies in the observer as well as in the observed.

To use life histories would be at least one step in making use of multiple methods and multiple interpretations in understanding the life course. We might even venture further in broadening our methods of inquiry: In addition to the life history, to use the projective technique, the depth interview, and the analysis of symbols. All these can be utilized by sociologists to produce group data that can add new dimensions to our understanding.

**Neglect of the Societal Level in Sociological Research on Aging**

These examples of how an interpretive approach might alter both the questions and the methods pursued by sociologists have been drawn from that first level of inquiry mentioned earlier—from the study of persons. I turn now to the second level of analysis and to the collectivity we call "society."

In all parts of the world, societies are undergoing change that is perhaps as fundamental as any in human history, change that comes with the increase in longevity and the increasing proportions of older persons in the population. These demographic trends have proceeded rapidly since the turn of the century in the industrialized nations; and it is projected—hurting catastrophic famines or wars—that the numbers of older people will increase as rapidly in the developing countries over the next 20 years as they increased in developed countries over the past 50 years. The lives of all persons at all ages will be altered as will patterns of social interaction and the structure of all our social institutions.

By and large, sociologists have as yet ignored the implications of the aging society. Only a few have begun to think about the research that needs to be carried out, the ways in which our views of society and our social theories need to be reassessed. Like everyone else, we are talking about the demographic imperative, but we are seldom studying it.

There are some exceptions, of course. There are those sociologists engaged in planning health and social services and in consulting with those government policymakers who are preoccupied with questions of labor-force participation and public and private pension systems. But, besides the demographers, who are there not more sociologists giving attention to the effects on the society and on the ways our social institutions are changing because of the changing age structure of the population?

A few examples will perhaps make the point more clearly: We have studies ad infinitum of the two-generation family of parents and children and now a few studies of grandparents and children; but where are the studies of social interaction in the four- and five-generation family that is becoming the modal family structure? We have looked at older persons in educational institutions: Who they are and what courses of study they elect, but we have seldom considered the influence of older students on our educational institutions themselves (e.g., on educational curricula, the distribution of resources, the growth of informal educational agencies, the attitudes of teachers). We have studies of the political activity of older people but few studies of how our political structures are themselves being altered. What is the effect of the aging society on corporate structures? On city and regional planning? On our laws and our legal institutions?

It is puzzling, given the subject matter of sociology, that we have given so little attention to questions like these. We have been thinking a great deal about the effects of technology on the society but not about the effects of longevity.

There are also questions of another type, for sociologists might soon be called upon by policymakers to help deal with the social changes that are already occurring because of the new age-sex distribution. How shall we help define equity among age-sex groups? How define an age-integrated society? How utilize the experience and abilities of older women and older men? How understand the values of long life?

**Conclusion**

If ever the sociologists were needed, it is now. If ever the time to reexamine our models of social change and to abandon the search for immutable laws of social behavior, it is now. And finally, to adopt the stance of interpretive social sciences, if ever we are to pursue the goal of understanding how people grow old and how societies grow old, then it is now.