Ageing and Society, **19**, 1999, 133–135. Printed in the United Kingdom

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Sociological research on age: legacy and challenge: a comment

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As the 'aging and society' paradigm examines structure in its own right, it should have an immediate appeal to sociologists. On the one hand it can be seen as a schematic for gerontology or research on human development and, on the other, as a theory or paradigm in its own right. I see the various parts and phases of the paradigm as a learning process, where stopping somewhere half-way is risky: one has to go the whole hog before really prospering from its logic.

To focus on individuals and social change together requires analyses that, in the words of Hardy and Waite (1997), can assess the nature and temporal patterns of individual behaviour, while simultaneously attending to the manner in which this behaviour is enclosed in different organisational structures that are themselves changing, whether synchronically or asynchronically.

The Rileys have always reminded us of the dangers of neglecting structure, or of treating it as a mere contextual characteristic in people's lives, particularly in the form of life course reductionism. In addition, however, the temporal aspects of structures are important. There is a risk in using solely the various social situations of different cohorts as the basis of analysis. Mere comparison with an older cohort causes the 'surrounding structure' to appear too static. The explanation or understanding of a phenomenon consequently stops half-way. We must also remember that the cohort concept, as well as chronological age, serves as a proxy measure for attitudes and behaviours that actually carry the effect and provide theoretically meaningful interpretation.

In their article, the Rileys give examples which illustrate the process called cohort norm formation in the 'aging and society' paradigm. This demonstrates that many individuals collectively can change the entire 'meaning' of social structures. As lives change, new norms develop and become widely accepted and 'institutionalised' in structural transformations. We do not only have to sit and wait for this

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X99007357 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to happen in a particular society. Through cross-cultural studies, the consecutive phases of such a process may be studied simultaneously, for example among comparable sub-groups.

Matilda White Riley has criticised Rowe and Kahn (1997) for not including social structural opportunities in their new model of successful ageing (Riley 1998). In their response, Kahn and Rowe mention two obstacles to this. The first is the artificial boundedness of traditional disciplines; but how can this be an obstacle to theorising? The second is the expense and difficulty of mounting studies based on such a model. This is a more realistic objection. However, I think a certain resignation can be discerned in the answer.

Of course, it is a complicated endeavour to study the link between individual lives and social change. And critics willingly enumerate various obstacles – and leave it at that, giving the impression that such research is too difficult. It requires skills and money so 'Let's engage in more simple matters'. However, even the simplest bivariate correlation can be heavily criticised. To foresee problems should not be the endpoint. The determining question we must address is: is it feasible or not? And so in conclusion, we arrive at the question of the ambition of gerontological research: is it better only to continue with simplistic research designs or should we attempt to deploy more complicated designs – with potentially more interesting results? In other disciplines, it is common for senior researchers to collaborate on large-scale projects in trying to develop their fields.

One further objection might be whether we have developed the methodological tools to address challenges of this sort. First, with respect to data, we need co-ordinated information on individuals, organisations and social contexts. The Rileys, in their article, give us several examples which demonstrate the realistic prospects of obtaining this. Secondly, with respect to measurement, the possibility of errors correlated over time should be investigated. With random measurement error and constant error variance, change across time can be attributed to true change. However, if errors are correlated over time, both true scores and errors must be modelled dynamically (Hardy and Waite 1997). Perhaps these methodological difficulties explain why researchers mostly present cross-sectional data whilst often, at the same time, calling for more longitudinal studies in order to obtain a deeper understanding of a particular problem. The irony is that their cross-sectional data are often taken from studies with a longitudinal design. Thus, the answer is to utilise better the longitudinal studies that are actually at hand. It is astonishing what little use is made of the longitudinal data that is obtained from longitudinal studies.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X99007357 Published online by Cambridge University Press

One final remark: we must distinguish between studies of ageing as a social process extending over the life course, and studies that focus on the social conditions of the life of elderly people or, more simply, between ageing and age-related issues. The Rileys write that people's lives can only be fully understood as they influence and are influenced by surrounding structures. How does the 'aging and society' paradigm (*i.e.* the study of lives) fit into Neugarten's 1996 statement about the end of gerontology? Will the field eventually split in half and lose the ageing part?

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X99007357 Published online by Cambridge University Press