

Changing meanings of age

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Like gender, race, and ethnicity, age is an important dimension of social structure and a basis for social inequalities. The high mortality rate, decreased life expectancy, higher birth rates, and a huge number of young people which accompanied industrialisation have placed Pakistan in the midst of a demographic revolution which will impact each individual and every societal institution.

Ageing processes are important from a cultural perspective because of the changing social meanings attached to stages in the lifecycle, both across societies and within a society as its population profile shifts. Social definitions have implications for the assumption of social roles, age inequalities, and social policies. The importance of these issues has given rise to a relatively new field of social science: gerontology, the study of aging. Gerontologists are concerned with the physical process of ageing as well as with how age is culturally defined. Their research has contributed to an understanding of the biological and psychological aspects of the ageing process and has explored the causes and consequences of age stratification. It has given rise to variety of theories of aging and has produced new conceptions of age group distinctions. One such distinction, precipitated by the rapid growth of persons aged sixty-five and over and their social diversity, is the division of older people into the "young old" and "oldest old". For convenience, the young old are defined as relatively healthy, active, and reasonably well-off financially, while the oldest old - individuals aged 85 and over - represent a growing segment of our population and have a distinctive set of human problems.

Our Pakistani society is changing in many ways that relate to age. Perceptions of the periods of life are being altered, as well as role transitions, social competencies, and the ages that mark their boundaries. New inconsistencies with regard to age-appropriate behaviours are appearing in informal age norms as well as in the norms codified in the law. Some of these changes are occurring because of increasing longevity; others are occurring because of the rising educational demands of a technological society, alterations in family structure, changes in the economy and in the composition of the labour force, and changes in formal systems of the health and social services.

Lifetime, in our society, is divided into socially relevant units, and biological time is translated into social time. The social systems that emerge are based in a general way on functional age; that is as the individual's competencies are nurtured and

utilised in the interests of the society. Social age distinctions are created and systemised, and responsibilities and rights are differentially distributed according to social age. Even the simplest of societies define three periods of life: childhood, adulthood, and old age. In more complex societies, the periods of life become more numerous as they reflect other forms of social change. Different patterns of age distinctions are created in different areas of life such as in education, the family, and the work force. Chronological age becomes and exceptional index of social age.

Historians have defined the ways in which life periods became increasingly demarcated in the Western societies over the past few hundred years. In the 16th and 17th centuries, with the appearance of industrialisation, a middle class, and formally organised schools, childhood became a clearly discernable period of life, identified by special needs and particular characteristics. Adolescence took on its present meaning in the late 19th century and became a widespread concept in the 20th, as the period of formal education lengthened and the transition to adulthood was increasingly delayed. A stage called youth was delineated only a few decades ago, as growing number of young people, after having college and before marrying or making their occupational options, opted for exploring life roles.

It was only a few decades ago that middle age became identified, largely as the reflection of the historically changing rhythm of the events in the family cycle. With the modern trend of fewer children per family (only in urban areas of Pakistan), and with births spaced closer together, the time when children grow up and leave the parental home was described as the major marker of middle age. In turn the old age came to be regarded as the time following retirement, and it was usually perceived as distinct and separable period marked by declining physical and intellectual vigour, chronic illness, social disengagement, and often by isolation and desolation. Life periods became closely associated with chronological age, even though age lines were seldom sharply drawn.

The old distinctions between life periods are blurring in today's society. The clearest evidence is the appearance of the "young-old". It is a new historical phenomenon that a very large group of retirees and their spouses are healthy and vigorous, relatively well-off financially, well integrated into the lives of their families and communities, and politically active. The term "young old" has become part of every day parlance and it needs little elaboration here other than to point out that the concept was originally based, not on chronological age, but on health and

social characteristics. Thus, a young old person may be fifty-five or eighty-five. The term represents the social reality that the line between middle age and old age is no longer clear. What was once considered old age is now recognised to be pertinent only to that minority of persons who are the "oldest-old", that particularly vulnerable group in need of special care.

When, then, does the old age begin now? The societal view has been that it starts at 65, when most people retire from the labour force. Not in Pakistan, but in the United States today most of the people retire before that age. The majority begins to take their social security benefits at age 62 or 63 and of those between ages 55 to 64 fewer than three of every four men are present in the labour force. At the same time, with continued good health some persons are staying at work full-time or part time until their eighties. So age 65 and the event of retirement are no more clear markers between middle age and old age.

In some respect the line between the childhood and adulthood is also fading away. It is common thesis now that childhood is disappearing. Styles of dress, forms of language, games, and preferred TV programmes - all are becoming the same for both children and adults. Children have more knowledge of once-taboo topics such as sex, drugs, alcoholism, suicide, and nuclear war. We have also become familiar with the many descriptions of today's adults as the "me" generation: narcissistic, self-interested, and self-indulgent. There are fewer lasting marriages, fewer lasting commitments to work, more uncontrolled expressions, more frequent expressions of powerlessness - in short more childlike behaviour among adults.

Given such complications, shall we say that individuals are paying less or more attention to age as a prod or a brake upon their behaviour? That age consciousness is increasing or decreasing? Whether or not historical change is occurring, it is fair to say that one's own age remains highly salient to the individual all the way from early childhood through advanced old age. A person uses age as a guide in accommodating to the behaviour of others, in giving meaning to the life course, and in contemplating the time that is past and time that is left ahead.

All of this gives us an outline of the multiple levels of social and psychological realities that are based on social age, and, in modern societies, on calendar age as the marker of social age. The complexities are no fewer for the individuals than they are for the society at large.

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