AGES IN CONFLICT

COLUMBIA STUDIES
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A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Inequality Between Old and Young

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My largest debt is to my mother, Anne Foner. It was through reading her publications and through personal conversations that I first became interested in the subject of age inequality. Her paper with David Kertzer, applying insights from the age stratification model to age-set societies, made it clear to me that a perspective on age inequality had much to offer to the study of societies other than our own.

Not only did my mother spark my enthusiasm for the study of age inequality in nonindustrial societies, but she also helped me in many ways as I wrote this book. She read the manuscript several times, even when busy with her own writing and teaching obligations, and provided a steady stream of valuable suggestions and criticisms.

My mother helped me to complete the manuscript; the birth of my daughter held it up for several months. To the two generations, Anne and Alexis, I dedicate this book.

Introduction

This is a book about conflict and tension. It deals with strains that are generated by age inequalities in nonindustrial societies throughout the world. The key actors are old people. And the principal issue is how they come into conflict with younger adults because of their position in their society's age hierarchy.

The study thus takes as its starting point the idea that age is a basis of structured inequality or social stratification. The major premise is that age inequalities have crucial implications for old people's lives and for their social relations. The book pulls together strands from the ethnographic literature to explore the quality of relations between old and young in nonindustrial societies when there are marked inequalities between the two ages. What is the relationship between age inequalities and intergenerational conflict? In what ways are the tensions between old and young expressed? Why is it that these tensions are often latent or suppressed? And how do age inequalities and relationships between old and young change over time?

These questions enable us to get at important aspects of old age and the social relations of old people. But they are questions that have not been systematically addressed by anthropologists who study old age. Viewing the old as part of a system of age inequality is not yet a feature of gerontological anthropology. The growing number of anthropologists who

have, in recent years, investigated old age in different cultures have thus far had other concerns.[1] As in Leo Simmons' (1945) pioneering study, *The Role of the Aged in Primitive Society,* the issue that has received the most attention is the status and treatment of the old: how and why the old are afforded relatively high status and good treatment in some societies and not others (see, for example, Amoss and Harrell 1981; Cowgill and Holmes 1972; J. Goody 1976a; Maxwell and Silverman 1970; Press and McKool 1972). A number of anthropologists have also challenged the universal applicability of certain sociological and psychological theories of aging in light of ethnographic data, most notably the disengagement hypothesis (Cumming and Henry 1961), which postulates that old age inevitably involves a process of mutual withdrawal between old people and their society (for example, Clark 1973; Myerhoff and Simić 1978; Vatuk 1980). Many anthropologists have explored societal or self-conceptions of aging in various cultures (for example, Amoss and Harrell 1981; Clark and Anderson 1967; Fry 1980; Kleemeier 1961; Myerhoff 1978; Myerhoff and Simić 1978). And those who look at Western societies have often studied old-age communities through traditional participant-observation techniques to find out what it is like to live in them (see Byrne 1974; Jacobs 1974; Johnson 1971; Keith 1977, 1979).

All these topics are obviously important and much work still needs to be done on them. Indeed, this study sheds light on such familiar concerns as the conditions that lead to advantages or disadvantages in old age in different cultures and the way the elderly, as well as younger people, view old age. But something crucial is missing in the anthropological literature on old age: a systematic analysis of age inequalities in nonindustrial societies. A perspective that emphasizes age as a basis of structured inequality opens up new lines of inquiry and highlights social processes that have been given relatively little consideration in cross-cultural studies of old age. It not only points out the need to view the old in relation to younger people but also makes us aware of the possibility of strain and conflict between them.

Theoretical Orientation

Age Inequality and Anthropology

If this book is going to look at the consequences of in-
equalities between old and young, what are the models avail-
able in the anthropological literature for such an enterprise?

Despite the salience of age inequalities in the nonindus-
trial world, there has been no systematic attempt in anthro-
pology to build a model of age inequality—or, for that matter,
of age and aging (for a beginning effort to stimulate the de-
velopment of a theory of age and aging in anthropology, see
Keith and Kertzer 1984). Anthropological theorizing on social
inequality has tended to focus on the kinds of institutional-
ized inequalities found in complex societies, such as class,
caste, and racial divisions. Some anthropologists even speak
of societies as egalitarian where the division of labor is mainly
on the basis of age, sex, and personal characteristics. In the
past few years, anthropologists have broadened their focus on
inequality as they have begun to explore and develop theo-
retical approaches to explain the extent and nature of sexual
inequalities (see, for example, Friedl 1975; Ortner and White-
head 1981; Reiter 1975; Rosaldo 1980; Rosaldo and Lamphere
1974; Sanday 1981; Schlegel 1977). Age, however, has been
left behind.

"In anthropology," Gerald Berreman writes in the intro-
duction to a recent collection of essays on social inequality,
"age is far more neglected than sex as a basis for stratifica-
tion. . . . Social differentiation and grouping by age have been
of considerable interest to anthropologists working in non-
Western societies, but inequality has not been an important
feature of that interest" (1981:21). As a rule, age is simply
treated as a basis of differentiation—a criterion for assigning
people to different roles. That these roles are not just differ-
ent, but are unequally rewarded and valued, is often passed
over in general statements about age.

Now it is true that a number of French anthropologists in
the Marxist tradition have included inequalities between el-
ders and young men in their theoretical models. Although their

work provides useful insights, it cannot serve as a general guide to the analysis of age inequalities—or the specific case of inequalities between old and young.

Age per se is peripheral to the main concerns of French Marxist anthropologists. What they want to determine is whether classes in the Marxian sense exist in precapitalist societies (for example, Meillassoux 1981; Rey 1979; Terray 1972, 1975). They therefore debate whether relations between privileged elders (men who control land, cattle, goods intended for bridewealth, and young men's labor) and subordinate juniors in lineage-based societies constitute class relations.[2] Whatever their position on this issue, Marxist anthropologists have, in the course of the debate, focused attention on the way younger men are "exploited" by elders. And because these scholars are sensitive to the potential for class struggle, they raise questions about the likelihood of rebellion or concerted radical action by younger men.

But the French Marxist anthropologists are so worried about whether or not elder–junior distinctions are class divisions that they overlook many critical features of inequalities between old and young. Indeed, they only pinpoint one kind of age inequality: the situation in which elders are advantaged and youths disadvantaged. They do not include in their models cases in which the old are relatively disadvantaged and younger adults have the upper hand—a not unfamiliar situation in nonindustrial societies. Moreover, they only consider the possibility that relations between old and young are class relations in certain types of societies: lineage-based nonindustrial societies. And they are not concerned with structured inequalities between old and young women.[3]

That anthropologists have not developed a general and comprehensive approach to analyzing inequality between old and young does not mean, of course, that they do not provide rich documentation of the forms that such inequality takes in a variety of settings. Many ethnographic reports provide detailed material that is the backbone of the present work. Then, too, a number of anthropologists have looked beyond one particular society to generalize about the way certain kinds of

structural arrangements generate strains between older and
younger people. These analyses are a source in this study as
well (see especially R. LeVine 1965 on intergenerational ten-
sions in African extended families). For a general model of
age inequality, however, we must leave the confines of an-
thropology and turn to the sociological literature.

The Age Stratification Perspective: A Guide for Analysis

The approach of this study is based on the age stratifica-
tion model developed by Matilda White Riley and her asso-
ciates (1972) to provide a comparative framework for ana-
lyzing and describing age systems. The age stratification
perspective is the most comprehensive model of age systems
in the sociology of age. It shows how age is built into social
systems, pointing to the impact of structural as well as dy-
namic aspects of age systems at both the individual and so-
cietal levels. What is important here is that the age stratifica-
tion perspective emphasizes inequality as a central aspect of
age systems.[4]

As a contribution to the sociology of age, it is not sur-
prising that the age stratification model was elaborated and
illustrated with Western industrial societies in mind. This
Western emphasis is probably the main reason that anthro-
pologists of aging have largely ignored it.[5] However, the age
stratification perspective can in fact broaden our understand-
ing of age and aging in nonindustrial societies. It offers a sys-
tematic and inclusive approach to age inequality and so sug-
gests a new way to analyze and interpret cross-cultural material
on old age—a new way to look at relations between old and
young in different societies.

What is age stratification? First of all, age stratification
implies the notion of an age hierarchy. The term "stratifica-
tion" is simply a way to refer to structured social inequality.[6]
Age stratification means that individuals in a society, on the
basis of their location in a particular age stratum, have un-
equal access to valued social roles and social rewards. It does
not imply that individuals need be aware that age is a basis
of social inequality. But from the outside looking in, we can

see that because of their age some people have the opportunity, as C. Wright Mills put it, to "have more of what there is to have": more power, wealth, and prestige than others (cited in A. Foner 1975:146).

Age stratification theorists recognize that age stratification is a form of social inequality in its *own right*. In fact, they analyze the parallels and contrasts between age, sex, and class stratification, demonstrating both the uniqueness of age stratification and its kinship to other forms of stratification (see A. Foner 1975, 1979). The age stratification model proposes that *all* societies are stratified by age and thus allows an examination of age inequalities in both industrial and nonindustrial societies. It also permits comparisons between the two kinds of societies.

Just as all societies are stratified by age, so too all individuals in a society are part of the age stratification system. In terms of old age, this means considering old women as well as old men and the disadvantaged as well as privileged elders.

When age systems are seen as systems of social inequality, the old are viewed as part of the whole age system rather than in isolation. The very existence of an age hierarchy assumes that individuals in one age stratum are better or worse off in certain ways than individuals in other age strata. Members of the various age strata in a society (socially recognized divisions based on age), as age stratification theorists write, not only differ in age or life stage.[7] As I already have said, they also differ in their access to roles that are unequally rewarded by wealth, prestige, or power. It is important, then, to know how valued roles and social rewards are allocated among *all* the age strata in a society and not only among the old.

Moreover, once the perspective of age inequality is introduced, the possibility of conflict and tensions between age strata arises. Of course, we know from our own society that social inequalities—based on class, race, or sex, for instance—do not inevitably produce open conflict between the advantaged and disadvantaged. But the potential for discord is ever present (see A. Foner 1979). Thus, those at the top of

the age hierarchy may be resented by those below, while downwardly mobile individuals, who have suffered social losses with age, may resent more successful younger people and be bitter about their own declines.

In sum, an understanding that inequalities among age strata are part of the fabric of any society directs us to issues and topics that shed light on the structure and ramifications of age inequality in general and, specifically in terms of the concerns of this work, inequalities between old and young in nonindustrial societies.

Organization of This Book

This book, then, explores questions not typically addressed by anthropologists who study old age. Do inequalities between old and young lead to tensions and conflicts? Which relationships are particularly vulnerable to strain? Do the disadvantaged young or disadvantaged old develop "age-stratum consciousness" and struggle together with age peers to further their age-related interests? What factors reduce discord or enhance solidarity between old and young, thereby mitigating or preventing open age conflicts?

The chapters that follow bring together material embedded in ethnographic reports to explore these questions systematically and to elucidate the nature of age stratification in nonindustrial societies.

The analysis starts out in chapters 2, 3, and 4 with a look at the bases—and consequences—of inequality between old and young. For age inequalities have a profound impact on the lives of old as well as young people. The main theme of the three chapters is how age inequalities create strains and tensions between old and young. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the quality of relations between old and young in societies where the old are at the top of the age hierarchy. Chapter 4 discusses cases in which the elderly experience serious social losses.

When I speak of strains and tensions between old and young, I refer to suppressed or latent resentment, antagonism, frustration, and hostility. Sometimes these strains and ten-

sions lead to overt conflict or "interpersonal behavior consciously directed toward injuring a person (or group) or interfering with his attainment of goals" (R. LeVine 1961:5; compare Coser 1956). Chapters 5 and 6 consider the many ways that conflict between old and young is openly expressed in different cultures, including witchcraft accusations and suspicions. These chapters also look at the other side of the coin. Tensions and opposition between old and young do not necessarily result in open flare-ups and struggles. Nor do the disadvantaged old or young rise up in revolt to alter age systems that make their lives so difficult. Chapters 5 and 6 thus address a vital issue in any study of social inequality: the sources of accommodation between the haves and have-nots. The chapters examine the factors that reduce age-related tensions and encourage cooperation and accommodation between old and young. And they investigate the factors that forestall or mute bitter age conflicts when such tensions are marked.

In chapter 7 I turn to the subject of change. Inequalities and tensions between old and young, after all, change over time. In analyzing the structure of age inequalities and conflicts in chapters 2 through 6, the ethnographic material presented, unless otherwise noted, refers to the period when the anthropologist was in the field. This period, of course, is but one point in time. Age inequalities and tensions observed then may well have been different in earlier days and may also have subsequently undergone important alterations.

The age stratification model makes us aware that the particular age inequalities and tensions experienced by one cohort of old people are often quite different from those experienced by previous or later cohorts of the old. For members of a cohort (individuals born in the same time period) are affected by specific historical events and social changes that occur as they grow up and mature.

Drawing on studies that specifically discuss change, very often with considerable historical data, chapter 7 reviews some of the major changes of the past century that have affected the opportunities available to and the social relations between old and young in nonindustrial societies. This review suggests the

different experiences that successive cohorts have under-
gone. The chapter shows how changes in the last hundred
years or so—such as the imposition of colonial rule, the
emergence of wage labor, and the introduction of Christian-
ity—have influenced the roles old and young fill and the so-
cial rewards they receive. It analyzes the way ideas about age-
related roles and age relations have shifted and discusses
whether tensions and conflicts between old and young have
become more or less serious.

The final chapter draws together the main threads of the
analysis. In addition, it raises new questions about how
changes even earlier than those discussed in chapter 7 af-
fected the relative status of old and young before contact or
colonial rule. It also speculates about some changes that might
alter age inequalities in years to come. Last but not least,
chapter 8 examines the relations between age and other forms
of inequality.

Although there are scattered references throughout this
book to the social position of old people in the United States
today, my concern in this work is with other cultures. Why,
it might be asked, should we spend so much time investigat-
ing the effects of age inequality on the lives and social rela-
tions of old people in nonindustrial societies instead of look-
ing in our own backyard—especially when the problems of
the elderly are so pressing in contemporary America?

The study of the way age inequalities influence the old—
and their relations with the young—in different cultures is not
only fascinating in itself, it is also important. Looking at other
cultures reminds us that ways of thinking and doing things
in this society represent but one of many possible patterns.
Cross-cultural comparisons make clear that the position the
old occupy in this society—and the kinds of relations they have
with the young here—are neither inevitable nor "natural." The
analysis of age inequality in nonindustrial societies also shows
that it is an oversimplification to idealize old age in these so-
cieties. To those who think of the old in the nonindustrial
world only as wise and powerful elders who are respected and
honored, this book offers a sobering corrective. The chapters

that follow point out that privileged and influential elders often have severely strained relations with the young—and that younger people may express their resentment and hostility toward the old quite openly. Moreover, the old in nonindustrial societies frequently lose prestige and power in the family and community, and they may end up in a most unfortunate position.

A study of inequality between old and young that looks beyond American or European society is also crucial for developing general theoretical propositions about age inequality. To understand fully the nature of age stratification it is essential to consider its forms and consequences in human societies throughout the world—not just in Western industrial countries.

Some Points of Procedure

It is possible to go about a comparative or cross-cultural study in a variety of ways. In this book, I have picked a method that suits the questions and problems at hand.

To begin to explore the many possible consequences of age inequality for relations between old and young, I have relied heavily on studies that provide detailed material on age inequalities and age relations. All in all, I have drawn on material from over sixty nonindustrial societies. By nonindustrial societies I mean those where the economy is based on hunting and gathering, pastoralism, or farming, including the nonindustrial sectors of industrial societies (J. Goody 1976a:117). I consider a broad range of nonindustrial societies from various parts of the world and at different stages of technological development. I even look far back in time, making occasional forays into America's and Western Europe's preindustrial past.

The method I have used to gather ethnographic material does not rely on a random sample of cultures. Had I followed this alternative method, the present work would have been seriously weakened. A random sample of cultures would have

inevitably included too many societies for which descriptions of inequalities and relations between old and young are sketchy at best—and excluded ethnographic studies that offer detailed information on these topics. It is even possible that certain kinds of age inequalities or strains between old and young or certain ways of expressing or reducing age conflict would have been completely missed.

In any case, I am not concerned here with making statistical generalizations. The aim is not, for example, to figure out on the basis of quantitative data the number or type of societies where the old fill certain kinds of valued roles or where certain conflict-reducing factors come into play. Rather, the goal is to begin to understand the myriad and complex ways that age inequalities can influence relations between old and young. At this stage, this goal is best met by mining the rich available ethnographic material to uncover the sources of strain as well as cooperation between old and young, to learn about the conflicts as well as accommodations between them. This is not to dismiss the value of quantitative studies. Indeed, by pulling together ethnographic data to start making sense of age inequality in nonindustrial societies, the present work will, I believe, suggest propositions that can in the future be tested through quantitative methods.

In investigating the quality of intergenerational relations in the chapters that follow,[8] the focus will be on the structural sources of conflict and amity rather than on individual factors involved in particular cases. Not that individual variation is unimportant. Each person's special circumstances and idiosyncracies are the stuff out of which lives are built and relationships made. Some old people are more resourceful than others, for example. Some are irascible, others easygoing. Indeed, anthropologists of aging are increasingly sensitive to the way individuals' unique life experiences play a role in shaping their actions and ideas (for example, Myerhoff and Simić 1978).

Despite the peculiarities of each individual and each social relationship, certain structural limitations and potential tension points can be discerned in every society. In other words, given the structure of social relations in a society, there

is a range of possibilities that restricts old people's (or certain categories of old people) quest for success, whatever their personalities. And there are *potential* strains between certain old and young people, whatever their individual characters.[9] Thus, I examine how structured age inequalities put the old at an advantage or disadvantage in obtaining highly valued roles and rewards and how these inequalities provide fertile ground for strain and conflict with the young.

If I have repeatedly spoken of the young–old dichotomy, this is not because a two-strata model predominates in non-industrial societies. While Shakespeare waxed lyrical about the seven ages of man—from the mewling and puking infant to second childishness—in some societies only three or four life stages are differentiated. For example, beyond infancy a man may pass through boyhood, mature adulthood, and elderhood. The age stratification perspective takes as its starting point culturally defined life stages. The number of life stages (or age strata) distinguished and the age-related boundaries of these stages differ across cultures and, within the same culture, over time.

There is, then, cultural variation in who is, and who is not, old. The way physically mature persons who are not old are classified also differs from culture to culture. We in our society may think of such people as adolescents, youths, young adults, or mature adults, depending on their chronological age, but in other cultures the divisions are quite different. Just what these divisions are is not always reported, however. Although some ethnographic accounts tell us how people distinguish various life stages over the entire life course, more often they do not. What we do know is that certain physically mature individuals are not considered old. When I use the term "young" or "younger people" in this book, it is these people I have in mind.

Difficult as it often is to determine, it is nevertheless necessary to have an idea of what old age "is" in nonindustrial societies before going on to examine relations with younger people—since the old are the key players in this study. How old age is defined is thus the subject of chapter 1.

AGES IN CONFLICT

1
What Is
Old Age?

Growing old is inevitable. Indeed, certain biological pro-
cesses of aging seem to be a feature of human life around the
world. But although everyone grows older, the particular ways
individuals age and the meanings they attach to the life course
are not universal. And the way the life course is divided—
including the markers that delineate old age—is highly vari-
able.

Our own cultural conceptions of age and aging are just
that: our own. Because we in present-day America assume that
certain characteristics make a person "old" does not mean that
individuals in other cultures hold the same view. Far from it.
The criteria people use to decide who is, or is not, old vary
widely from place to place. Definitions of old age can also shift
from one historical period to another.

It thus seems appropriate to begin a study of old age and
age relations by making clear that old age is a cultural con-
cept and by discussing some of the ways people in other cul-
tures demarcate old age as a distinct life stage.[1]

Definitions of Old Age:
Some Problems

As outside observers, we can, of course, legitimately define old age operationally in one way or another. Such a distinction, though not made by the people being studied, may well be relevant for our understanding of their social relations. But the way people themselves view the life course and later years is crucial. It is not just that perceived life-stage divisions are usually significant markers of social roles. The way old age is defined may mold "personal plans, hopes and fears," shaping the way individuals in different cultures age and modifying the values attached to life and death (Riley 1978:49).

Yet studying cultural definitions of old age is not a simple matter, if only because ethnographers have generally not paid much attention to informants' definitions of old age. Often we are left wondering what particular ethnographers mean when they say someone is "old." Many times we cannot tell whether they refer to their own or their informants' view when they use the term "old." I myself, in previous writings on Jamaicans (Foner 1973, 1978), have been guilty of this practice. In some cases, arbitrary chronological boundaries are used and we do not know what relation these bear to the people's perceptual models.

Even when anthropologists do refer to folk conceptions of old age, it is impossible to determine to what extent the anthropologists' own cultural biases influence the way they present native models of old age. As David Schneider comments about anthropological studies of kinship: "When we read about kinship in some society foreign to our own we have only the facts which the author chooses to present to us, and we usually have no independent source of knowledge against which we can check his facts" (1968:vi).

Despite these limitations, it is worth examining those accounts in which anthropologists do present folk definitions of old age. It is useful to pull together cross-cultural material on perceptions of old age to show how biological and social factors shape cultural definitions of what old age "is" and who is old.

I start out this chapter by briefly discussing how old age is defined in our own society—both today and in the past—before turning to other cultures. Changes in physical structure and physiological functioning, social roles, and chronological age, as I will show, have marked off the boundaries of old age, albeit in different ways, through the years and across cultures.

Old Age in America

The Present

When is old? is no easy question to answer in present-day America. Ask it of a fairly large number of Americans and a variety of answers will undoubtedly be given. This is not only because several criteria define old age in our own society. The boundaries marking off old age are not clear-cut. Views of what constitutes old age may vary for different subgroups within our complex society and also shift with the situational context.

To be sure, a combination of various characteristics—chronological age, physical changes in the later years, and the role shifts of retirement from work and becoming a grandparent—seem to be involved in Americans' definitions of old age. But determining when a person actually becomes—or is—"old" is often problematic because there is no one consistent definition of old age. Social researchers use sixty-five as the chronological benchmark of old age, but if administrative eligibility for retirement, pensions, or social security is the criterion of old age, this may be variously set from ages in the seventies down to ages in the forties (Riley and A. Foner 1974). Others may see grandparenthood as a marker of old age, but grandparents in their forties are, as Kalish notes, hardly unusual (1975:3). As for Americans in their sixties and older, substantial proportions simply do not consider themselves old.

Indeed, Bernice Neugarten (1974) has suggested that Americans are beginning to think of the old in terms of two

age categories: the young-old and the old-old.[2] The young-old, approximately fifty-five to seventy-five years old, as well as the old-old, seventy-five years and older, are relatively free from the responsibilities of work and parenthood. But compared with the old-old, the young-old are relatively healthy and vigorous as well as relatively comfortable in economic terms.

The Past

One thing is clear in the United States today, however. Old age is seen as a distinct life stage with particular problems. Has this always been true in this country?

In the wake of Aries' (1962) study of childhood in French history, historians have become increasingly sensitive to the fact that the conception of what constitute meaningful life stages shifts, to use Hareven's (1978) phrase, with historical time. In terms of the age stratification perspective, the number of age strata and their age-related boundaries not only vary cross-culturally but, within Western society, historically.

Aries argued that in Western European society childhood was not viewed as a discernible period of life, with special needs and characteristics, until about the seventeenth century. In medieval times, the awareness that children were distinct from adults was absent; children belonged to adult society as soon as they could live without the constant care of their mothers or nannies (Aries 1962:128). The word "child" did not have the same meaning it has today; "people said 'child' much as we say 'lad' in everyday speech" (Aries 1962:128). Indeed, meaningful social distinctions in way of life, dress, and work or play seem to have been clearly drawn only among three age strata: infancy; adulthood; and old age.

According to many historians, our current concept of adolescence, too, is relatively new. In the United States, Joseph Kett (1977) has suggested that adolescence did not begin to assume its present meaning until the late nineteenth century, when schooling was prolonged and entry into the work force delayed. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century the word "adolescent" was generally unfamiliar. When formally

defined, it had a different meaning than it does today: Roget's *Thesaurus* in 1854 equated adolescence with "being out of one's teens," with manhood, virility, and maturity (Kett 1977:143). "If adolescence is defined as the period after puberty during which a young person is institutionally segregated from casual contacts with a broad range of adults," Kett observes, "then it can scarcely be said to have existed at all [in early nineteenth-century America]" (Kett 1977:36). In this period, boys might have left home to work as early as age eight or nine. By about fifteen, they were usually fully incorporated into the labor force.

When American historians write about old age in the past, they do not agree as to how long it has been a meaningful life stage. On the one hand, Tamara Hareven argues that in America old age has not always been recognized as a distinct and sharply differentiated life stage with specific social and psychological problems.[3] In preindustrial America, she says, adulthood flowed into old age without institutionalized disruptions (1978:205). The two major adult social roles—parenthood and work—generally stretched out over an entire lifetime without an "empty nest"[4] or compulsory retirement. This continuity over adult life has changed, however, in the last hundred years or so. The gradual ousting of older people from the labor force and the decline in their parental functions in the later years of life have led to increasing age segregation and a new awareness of old age (Hareven 1978:207).

Other historians, however, emphasize continuities between past and present—and that Americans have considered old age as a special life stage from the earliest days of this country. Although old age has not always been associated with complete retirement from work or with the absence of child-rearing functions, this does not mean it was not viewed as a distinct period of human development.

David Hackett Fischer, for one, emphatically states that there has been no "discovery" of old age in the modern world comparable to historians' "discovery" of childhood and adolescence (1978:12). Old age has long been perceived as a stage within a life continuum with chronological boundaries. Sim-

ilarly, in his study of old age in America since 1790, Andrew Achenbaum asserts that Americans have always viewed old age as a distinct phase of the life course and that the chronological boundaries of old age have remained relatively stable (1978:1–2).

Research on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England supports the contention that old age is, as Achenbaum puts it, an age-old phenomenon in America (1978:2). John Demos (1978) shows that old age has been perceived as a distinct life stage since colonial times. "The culture at large," he writes of early New England, "recognized old age as a distinct time of life." So, too, elderly people were conscious of their own aging: "They thought about it and talked about it, and in various ways they acted from a particular sense of age-appropriate needs and requirements" (1978:261).

According to various written statements and legislative decrees, old age in early New England was defined chronologically as life after sixty. One town, for example, voted to exempt older persons from certain civic duties and established "sixty years of age" as the official cut-off point (Demos 1978:249). But not all official documents were so specific, and many New Englanders, Demos suggests, probably did not know or care precisely how old they were (1978:261). In any case, age norms were loosely applied and were very flexible. More important than chronological criteria, he says, were the physical markers of old age.[5] Old age was measured by the survival—or decline—of physical capacity: "There is no doubting the depth of the association between age and physical depletion in the minds of New Englanders" (Demos 1978:262). As for retirement, men past sixty in early New England did as a rule reduce their activities in work or public service, although such withdrawal was voluntary, gradual, and partial.[6]

Uncovering how ordinary Americans defined the boundaries of old age in the past is fraught with difficulties, and historians, by necessity, must rely on fragmentary evidence. There are also practical problems in deciding who to include in the category "old." Even historians who indicate there was no precise chronological benchmark of old age in the past

usually end up using rather arbitrary chronological bounda-ries for statistical purposes.[7]

Just how arbitrary such boundaries can be is highlighted by Janet Roebuck's (1979) analysis of old-age definitions in England. Researchers who select sixty and sixty-five, she says, sometimes justify this decision by assuming that the state had logical reasons for adopting sixty and sixty-five to mark the onset of old age. The state's choice of these chronological benchmarks, however, was determined by such factors as the cost of pension programs and the demand to get older people out of the labor market, with no real consideration given to the definition of old age as such.

The study of cultural beliefs in days gone by in preliter-ate societies—where the people themselves have left no writ-ten records behind—is even more problematic than it is in Western European and American society. But anthropologists are also interested in the present. Indeed, this is usually their primary concern. And in investigating cultural perceptions in the present they have an advantage over historians. Anthro-pologists can get to know and talk with living people to begin to understand how individuals in different cultures delineate old age.

Not that all anthropologists who refer to old age tell us how this life stage is defined. And we know hardly anything about the variability of old-age definitions in nonindustrial societies—whether, in other words, some criteria are used or emphasized in certain situations and not in others. Yet there is a growing body of material detailing the distinctive char-acteristics that guide individuals in different cultures in judg-ing who is, or is not, "old." It is to these criteria that I now turn.

Old Age Across Cultures

Old age, according to anthropological accounts, is recognized as a distinct life stage in a wide variety of cultures. Some an-

thropologists claim that such a distinction is well nigh universal. In the introduction to an edited volume on aging in different cultures, Cowgill asserts that some people are considered "old" in all societies: they are so identified in the nomenclature of the people, and they are associated with specific roles (1972:4). Pamela Amoss and Stevan Harrell make a similar statement in the opening pages of a more recent collection of ethnographic accounts of old age. "Every known society," they write, "has a named social category of people who are old—chronologically, physiologically, or generationally. In every case these people have different rights, duties, privileges, and burdens from those enjoyed or suffered by their juniors" (1981:3).

What is not constant, of course, are the criteria by which people decide who is old—or the sharpness of the boundaries marking off old age. "The divisions between [age] strata," Riley and her associates note, "may be variously specified, either precisely or approximately, and in terms either of the chronological age of the members (as in census age categories) or of their stage of biological, psychological or social development" (1972:6). The following analysis does not include psychological criteria of old age (see Erikson 1963). Instead, I focus on the chronological, physical, and social-role criteria that mark off those considered old.[8]

Chronology
It is often difficult to separate empirically chronological and physical criteria delineating old age. As people grow older, certain processes of physiological deterioration are inevitable so that those in the final decades of the normal life span are likely to experience certain kinds of physical and mental disabilities (Amoss and Harrell 1981:2). As we will see, the physical changes that come with the passing years often signal the onset of old age. Indeed, the old are nearly always those who have passed the prime years of physical health and vigor. Chronological age—the rough or precise calculation of the amount of time that has elapsed since an individual's birth—can be involved in defining people as old. In fact, in their

analysis of a worldwide sample of societies from the Human Relations Area Files, Glascock and Feinman (1980) found that chronology was the second most common criterion employed in the definition of old age, although they question the reliability of the ethnographic literature on this point.[9]

In literate societies, absolute chronological age may mark the onset of old age. A frequent benchmark of old age in present-day America is the sixty-fifth birthday. In traditional Japan, a formal ceremony, held on an individual's sixty-first birthday, signaled the transition to old age. Putting on a bright kimono symbolized the new feeedom from responsibilities of middle adulthood (Plath 1972:147).

Of course, most preliterate societies do not keep close track of age. In preliterate societies, as Jack Goody notes, "there is no conceptualization of absolute age calculated by time elapsed from a fixed position such as date of birth, since the reckoning of a birthday and its annual commemoration of time past, age attained, is dependent upon the existence of a calendrical system based upon an era, i.e., a point at which time begins, at least for the purpose of time-reckoning" (1976a:125). Fortes (1984) tells us, for example, that the Tallensi were culturally blind to facts of chronological age and had no notion of specific ages for entry into, or exit from, particular roles. Many anthropologists relate their difficulties in discovering exact chronological ages of older persons in the societies they studied. Colson and Scudder lament that few Gwembe villagers knew when they were born (1981:131). To estimate older peoples' ages, Colson and Scudder found out birth order and then extrapolated from the birthdates of those few people whose births could be fixed. Such a procedure of course is subject to error, and the anthropologists say that the ages they assigned could be off by as much as five or ten years.

Individuals in nonindustrial societies may not know their exact chronological ages, but this does not mean that the passage of time goes unordered or unmeasured. Chronological age, as I use the term, need not entail a knowledge of absolute age; approximate chronological age may be calculated in a variety of ways. People may reckon age "comparatively (he was born

before me), in relation to some irregular natural event (before
the flood), or in some loose way by reference to the passage
of the seasons (he has seen eighty summers)" (J. Goody
1976a:125). Age may also be figured in relation to the occur-
rence of certain public ceremonies or other important events.
The Gusii, for instance, had a system of naming each year after
a major event in that period so they knew what year they were
born in and circumcised. Those who shared particular named
years of birth and/or circumcision recognized each other as
age-mates (R. LeVine 1980:92).

In some societies, membership in an age set provides a
way to estimate age. Of course, age sets can include individ-
uals of widely varying ages—ten to fifteen years apart, for ex-
ample. But informal distinctions within age sets can provide
a way to calculate age. The Mursi of Ethiopia know a per-
son's relative age without having to express it in years:

In fact, most people can tell instantly and accurately the relative ages,
to within less than one-year intervals, of the other members of their
local community, whether male or female. This is achieved through
the ceremonial of the age organization. What happens, briefly, is that
boys and girls go through, in local groups of age-mates, a number
of grades before entering that of adulthood. A boy begins his pas-
sage through the grades at the age of about seven, in the company
of his closest local age-mates. As he gets older he will enter age
groups of wider and wider age span, but, within these wider groups,
distinctions based on intervals of as little as one year between suc-
cessive intakes to a particular grade of boys are remembered and
are thus available to allow fine distinctions to be made, when nec-
essary, between one man and another on the basis of age. (Turton
and Ruggles 1978:592)

Relative age—seniority and juniority by birth order—is in
fact crucial for social relations in many societies. But to know
someone is older than yourself or others is not the same as
labeling him or her as old. This leads us back to the issue of
chronology and old-age definitions. What I want to empha-
size is that having lived a certain amount of time—however
it is conceptualized and whatever this span may be—is prob-

ably of some account in defining old age in many nonindustrial societies. Indeed, physical changes and role shifts that are supposed to mark off old age do not always make a person "old" if he or she is chronologically young. I should note, too, that although people in many societies do not calculate old age in terms of years, those they consider old are often chronologically young (or middle-aged) by our standards, in their forties, for instance. Interviews with the Asmat of New Guinea, to take one example, indicated that they considered persons over about forty-five as "old" (Van Arsdale 1981:118).

Physical Changes and Role Shifts

Chronological age, however it is reckoned, may, then, have something to do with definitions of old age in non-Western societies. Physical changes and shifts in social roles are generally even more important in delineating old age in these societies.

Physical Structure and Functioning. Individuals at different life stages, we know, show important differences in both physical structure and physiological functioning. Wrinkled skin and gray hair are two changes in physical appearance connected to the organic processes of aging. Many other internal physiological changes associated with aging—the decline in the number and quality of vital cells, for example—are manifested externally as well.

Research on old age in modern industrial societies has demonstrated that strength and endurance among the old are lower than among younger adults. Old people also tend to have poorer health than the young. While the aged have fewer acute illnesses, they are more subject to such chronic conditions as failing vision and hearing, rheumatism and arthritis, and heart disease and high blood pressure. When compared with younger people, older people are more likely to show deficits in sensory and perceptual skills, in complex sensorimotor coordination, in certain forms of memory, and in various aspects of intellectual functioning (Riley and A. Foner 1974:548; see Riley and A. Foner 1968).

It is true, of course, that as we learn more about biological changes in the later years in different populations we may find that declines in physiological functioning that are accepted as normal in modern Western countries are not inevitable concomitants of aging in many non-Western societies (Beall 1984). Yet whatever the cultural variations in the physical condition of people in the later years, many ethnographers note that one or another of the various physical signs of aging mark the beginning of old age in particular cultures. Indeed, in many societies physical differences distinguish two categories of old people. The old are often differentiated from the very old—those "with body feeble and the mind hazy" who are infirm and decrepit (Simmons 1945:177).[10]

The Links Between Physical and Role Changes. Since physical changes are, in reality, often closely associated with shifts in social roles, it is hard to separate empirically one from the other. I suggest that physical changes usually take on meaning as important signposts of old age precisely because they are connected with significant role changes. Thus, if a person did not change social roles when his or her hair whitened or strength began to wane, for instance, then white hair and decreasing stamina might not be significant markers of old age.

At the same time, biological factors such as decreasing muscular strength obviously set limits on the roles individuals can play in their later years. Social scientists who emphasize the importance of functional definitions of old age in nonindustrial societies make this point quite clearly. Margaret Clark, for instance, says that while chronological age is an important index of old age in our own culture, in less complex societies, old age is often defined in functional terms: "This is to say, when biological deterioration sets in, as this affects productivity, mobility, strength—in short, when the individual's capacity to contribute to the work and protection of the group to which he belongs is substantially changed" (1968:438). Physical declines, in other words, force individuals to restrict their activities and render them incapable of

performing certain roles. Keep in mind, however, that these changes in role patterns tend to be gradual, involving a tapering off of activities rather than an abrupt shift from one day to the next (see Riley 1976:208).

Among the Quechua Indians described by Allan Holmberg, two signs of old age—in addition to such indicators as the presence of grandchildren—were declining physical strength, which meant one could not carry heavy burdens up and down the mountains, and failing eyesight, which prevented traveling at night (1961:88–89). When these signs of age appeared, men and women began to reduce their workload and ceased doing heavy agricultural labor.

To the Inuit (Eskimo) of northern Canada, those who were no longer fully productive workers were considered old. Men became old when they were unable to hunt all year round—usually, by Guemple's (1980) calculations, when they were about fifty. Thus, one year a man was adult; the next, when he did not have the strength for rigorous winter hunting, he was labeled old. For women, becoming old was more gradual. Their declining physical capabilities were not so obvious since their productive work was less demanding and more varied. Generally they were classified as old when they were about sixty.

Similarly, people were thought old among the Coast Salish of Washington State and British Columbia in precontact times when they could no longer perform the full range of adult tasks appropriate to their sex and station (Amoss 1981:230). That is, men could no longer hike miles to kill game and pack it home again; and women found it hard to bend and stoop to pick berries and dig roots. Then they would shift the major part of these jobs to younger relatives.

Even when Coast Salish women could still easily produce and process food, they were considered old for certain purposes when they could no longer bear children. In other societies, too, menopause marks the onset of old age for women, for example, the Asmat (Van Arsdale 1981:118). Menopause is obviously a physiological change, but it is linked to shifts in social roles. Although women often continue child-