Chapter 2 – Aging and Old Age in Modern Society: An Overview of the Literature

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Abstract

Social scientists commonly approach aging and old age as social constructs. This is because broader social contexts and historical changes to those contexts play a key role in shaping and reshaping the life course at large - individuals’ experiences of growing older over the course of their lives as marked by a sequence of major life events. To date, the relevant literature has identified two theoretically distinctive phases of social construction of aging and old age in modern times, as observed particularly in today’s economically developed parts of the world such as Western Europe and North America.

The first phase is the chronologization (or, standardization) of the life course, which arose in the context of the industrialization of the late 19th to the late 20th century. This phase facilitated individuals’ compliance with a chronologically standardized normative life course, marked by their experience of major life events, such as schooling, marriage, family-building, work and retirement, at ‘age-appropriate’ timing in a ‘normal’ sequence. In individuals’ daily lives, this phase also reinforced their compliance through ageism, age stereotypes, and even discrimination for deviance from formal and informal age norms in society. It was in this phase that ‘old age’ was widely constructed in the labor market through the development of welfare states for the aged in society. ‘Old age’ as a stage of life and ‘dependency’ as a social status were constructed primarily through institutionalizing retirement as a distinctive phase of the life course with the development and wide implementation of public-pension schemes.

Since roughly the late 1980s, an increasing number of developed countries have come to de-chronologize (or relax) the life course as constructed during the earlier stage of the modern times. Today most developed countries have engaged in reforming a wide array of social policies and labor market institutions that had long surrounded the elderly, mainly to adjust to the mounting pressure of population aging and of the ever competitive and globalizing economy. This reforming has in part resulted from, and contributed to, simultaneously, the coming of the age of austerity. In this context, many countries have introduced at least partial privatization of their pension programs and have reformed retirement policies and healthcare policies for the aged. Such reforms are believed to be associated with a rising rate of poverty among elderly populations in an increasing number of countries around the world. Today, aging and old age are experienced both positively and negatively; while seeming now to celebrate individuality over outdated ideals of a ‘standardized’ life course and ‘traditional’ age norms, contemporary society
has gradually been leaving economic risks and other challenges of later life on the shoulders of individuals.