

Honor They Father and Mother: Old Age in a New America, 1945-1965.

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I received a Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) Grant-in-Aid to complete the research for the second and fourth chapters of my dissertation entitled, “Honor They Father and Mother: Old Age in a New America, 1945-1965.” The first chapter, “From Pastoral Care to Health Care: Defining and Solving the Problem of Old Age,” looks at how social scientists in the late 1950s conceptualized the problem of old age. The second chapter, “Federal Dollars and Senior Citizens,” examines how politicians, such as Nelson A. Rockefeller (NAR), attempted to alleviate the hardships of old age through policy. The documents I found in the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) Archives and the Nelson A. Rockefeller Papers will provide much of the content for these two parts of my thesis.

My dissertation explores the ethical debates triggered by the demographic transition that extended the average American lifespan from forty-eight to seventy-eight years of age in the 20th century. Accompanying the rise of old age, in itself a remarkable achievement of public health innovations, were new challenges and questions. How should old age be defined? Who would care for the nation’s elders? What should older Americans give back to their families and what should they expect from their government? Where will the infirm elderly live? Where will they die? My project returns to the first moment when religious institutions, foundations, and the

federal government took on these questions and sought lasting solutions to this mounting problem.

More specifically my dissertation investigates how “old age” came to be defined as a social problem worthy of federal attention in the 1950s, and how that federal attention in turn advanced a highly medical definition of care. The SSRC archives helped me trace their earliest research into the problem of aging, as well as how that research influenced both state and federal policy.

A Brief History

From the middle of the 1930s to the middle of the 1950s, the definition and problems of old age were in flux. Scientists questioned whether old age was reversible, while urban and rural Americans pondered whether that was something to strive for or avoid. The identity crisis that plagued this ever-elongating stage of life forced Americans to think about the elderly as a distinct social group and aging as a social problem. While the burgeoning fields of economics and medicine defined the problem of old age in concrete terms of poverty and disease; religious leaders, labor organizers and philosophers believed the elderly required more than mere financial or physical security. These thinkers argued that the spiritual health of the aged mattered, and that such well-being was fully contingent on maintaining a respected position within society at large. “Old age,” wrote Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “is an age of anguish. The only answer to the age of anguish is a sense of significant being.”¹

At the behest of the Federal Security Administration (the agency tasked with implementing the Social Security Act), a key group of old-age activists met in Washington, D.C. on August 13, 1950, for the first National Conference on Aging. While few conference attendees agreed on a definition of old age, all were convinced that it had become a serious national

problem. Shifting demographics had heralded a new stage of American life plagued by unemployment, disease, loneliness, poverty, uselessness, and rejection. From 1900 to 1930, the life expectancy of the average American jumped from 49.2 to 59.2. By 1950, it had risen to 68.1, with every study predicting that the number would keep increasing. The goal of the conference for the eight-hundred and sixteen non-profit professionals and volunteers in attendance, was to pool resources to foster multiple solutions to the complex and various problems afflicting a growing elderly population. In 1950, religious leaders working to ameliorate the pain of isolation that elderly people experience, envisioned a partnership with doctors, who called for more research into end-of-life diseases.

Eleven years later, at the 1961 White House Conference on Aging, the definition, the problem, and the solution to old age had crystallized. Gone were the multifaceted definitions of old age and its attendant problems. In place of the non-profit professionals, who had organized the previous conference, over twenty-five hundred individuals from private industries, state governments, and federal agencies populated a conference almost solely devoted to establishing health care for the elderly. Expansive conversations on the ethics of intergenerational obligations were replaced by freshly minted lobbying organizations, set up to advocate for a new kind of American – the senior citizen. By the close of the conference, a coalition defined the problem of old age as poverty caused by health failure and advocated for a single solution – the creation of Medicare.

A confluence of factors led discrete actors to first narrow, and then ‘medicalize’ their definition of care. For one, society came to trust the booming biomedical industry. The utilization of penicillin, skin grafts, and blood transfusions during World War II “enhanced public belief that scientific research offered an endless frontier on which a happier, healthier life

could be built.”² For this reason, funds dedicated to eldercare were often put into medical research and hospital growth. In the twenty years covered by this dissertation, the budget for the National Institute for Health grew from 3 million to over 1.4 billion dollars, with chronic and end-of-life diseases being a primary focus of research.

The rise of special interest lobbies also helped provide a model for elder activists, who in the 1950s banded together to form such groups as the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and the National Council on Aging (NCOA), organizations which relied on timely political wins to shore up participation and funds. This occurred in tandem with the consolidation of industries with a significant financial investment in the elderly, such as pharmaceutical companies and nursing home providers. Finally, the federal government itself helped contribute to the Medicare consensus. The Truman administration zeroed in on the elderly as a group that could serve as a catalyst toward universal healthcare. Subsequent Democratic administrations followed suit, pushing for Medicare by swaying unions, non-profit groups, and private businesses.

Composed of five chapters, ‘Honor They Father and Mother ... ’ begins with an analysis of how doctors, demographers, religious leaders, and foundation heads conceptualized the aging body in the late 1940s, and concludes with an assessment of the senior-citizen Medicare coalition that came out of the first White House Conference on Aging in 1961. The transitional chapters trace the divide between conflicting models of eldercare, the rise of vested private interests, and the feedback loop between federal policies and normative descriptions of the elderly and their needs.

Findings

The SSRC files contained a series of documents from The Committee on Social Adjustment (CSA) that pertained to aging. In 1943, The CSA focused its attention and funds on the question of “old people.” Their argument went as follows: Since the creation of Social Security, old age had become “recognized as a national responsibility,” and yet there had been few if any “systematic studies” on older people outside of their need for economic assistance.³ In short, older people had been studied as a category of the worthy poor, but not as a comprehensive minority group. The Committee decided to put together a subcommittee on adjustment in later maturity and design a research conference on the topic.

The Conference was held in Chicago on June 24th and 25th of 1944. It opened with a “Definition of Old Age,” by Ruth Shonle Cavan, another University of Chicago trained sociologist. Cavan urged her listeners to rethink old age in terms of someone’s “age-role” within a community. She commented, “The age-role that a person plays is determined in large part by the group of which he is a member. The group, whether a factory organization, union, school board, or neighborhood, defines old age not in terms of years alone, but in terms of capacities, mannerisms, interests, and appearance.” Cavan agreed with social workers at the time that an individual’s age-role also existed as a subjective state and she requested that scholars ask, “How do people define old age for themselves? Under what conditions do they feel old?” In 1944 there was still some hope that a better non-chronological definition of old age could be achieved and therefore studied. The rest of the conference focused on creating methods to actually study what proper adjustment to old age looked like.⁴

In 1948, the SSRC finally published a record of its early forays into maladjusted elders in *Social Adjustment in Old Age: A Research Planning Report*. The text opens with a defense of the

project that places the problems of old age in line with the afflictions of other minority groups – such as African Americans, adolescents, or criminals – and then goes on to relay the particular predicament of demographic realignment. This new social crisis, the report asserts, would benefit from a social scientific approach based on accurate descriptions rather than aspirations.

For this reason, the report abandons Cavan’s proposal of studying age-roles. In its stead, SSRC scholars recommended accepting the definition of old age imposed by the Social Security Act. The reality of age typing had to override the dream of its disappearance. Otto Pollak, the report’s editor, writes, “Hardly ever before has a culture permitted such a degree of chronologically exact age typing for all people. In our present-day culture ... with its birth registration and frequent use of birth certificates, mathematical awareness of chronological age has led to a situation where age typing is based not so much on manifestations as on expectations of changes with age.”⁵ Although possibly detrimental, age typing was the current social reality, and researchers had to assume its existence. The report does not mention whether or not academics would contribute to age typing by solidifying its presence with such studies.

With a chronological definition of old age in hand, the report goes on to describe the problems that elders face. “Problems of old age arise therefore chiefly in two ways:

- 1) as the result of declining physical or mental capacities which make it difficult or impossible to satisfy one’s needs in ways previously employed, and
- 2) the individual reaches the chronological age which places him in the old age group as defined by society.”⁶

The first part of this equation focuses on loss that occurs naturally due to the biological process of aging. The second part refers to the pressures imposed by or correlated with societal attitudes.

The SSRC launched a pilot study of the “Socio-Psychological Problems of Aging.” This project, the first of its kind to have “older people identify the problems of aging in a free-interviewing situation,” concluded that the elderly want, in the following order of importance: financial security, physical health and comfort, living arrangements (ideally in their own homes), affection, activity, and religion.⁷

Financial and physical health, affection, and activity – four out of a list of six – could all be tackled, to some degree, by keeping elders intellectually and professionally engaged. By 1949, SSRC experts believed that the problem of social adjustment in old age could be alleviated through a federal re-education campaign that would reach every sector of society. They hoped that the government would set policies that would mandate particular behavior from individuals, communal groups, and industries.

While the SSRC files have helped me explain how sociologists designed a strategy for federal intervention into the problems of old age, the NAR Papers, which I am currently still analyzing, will help me determine how politicians began to see the elderly as a viable voting bloc. NAR established both the New York Office on Aging and a Senior Citizens Day in the early 1960s. His papers also point to the many ways New York State became a model for federal institutions.

Conclusion

“Honor They Father and Mother: Old Age in a New America, 1945-1965” seeks to enrich public and private discourse on eldercare by reviving the relevant debates that took place between the close of World War II and the passage of Medicare. Fundamental questions such as what does proper care look like, what really are the hardships of old age, and who should be responsible for the nation’s elders, dominated policy conversations in the 1950s, and have since

been largely ignored. My dissertation features these discussions to question how the contemporary eldercare system developed, and it offers alternative conceptions of the problems and solutions to one of the major demographic upheavals of the 20th and 21st centuries. The collections at the RAC have been instrumental in assisting with this project.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Older Person and the Family in the Perspective of Jewish Tradition," In *Aging with a Future: A Selection of Papers Defining Goals and Responsibilities for the Current Decade. White House Conference on Aging 1961*, Reports and Guidelines, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Special Staff on Aging, 1961, p. 42.

² Victoria Angela Harden, *Inventing the NIH: Federal Biomedical Research Policy, 1887-1937*. Baltimore, Maryland.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, p. 181.

³ "The Study of Adjustment in Old Age," 1944, p. 1, Folder 6139, Box 499, Series 1, Subseries 82, Committee on Social Adjustment, Accession 2, Social Science Research Council Archives (SSRC).

⁴ Ruth Cavan in "The Study of Adjustment in Old Age," 1944, Folder 6139, Box 499, Series 1, Subseries 82, Committee on Social Adjustment, Accession 2, SSRC.

⁵ Otto Pollak, *Social Adjustment in Old Age: A Research Planning Report 59* New York: SSRC, 1948.

⁶ Otto Pollak, *Social Adjustment in Old Age: A Research Planning Report 59* New York: SSRC, 1948.

⁷ Otto Pollak, *Social Adjustment in Old Age: A Research Planning Report 59* New York: SSRC, 1948.