CHAPTER COMMENTARY

As in previous editions, the seventh edition of Sociology brings together the topics of socialization, the life course and aging into a single chapter. The seventh edition, however, now includes more material on the new sociology of childhood, and on emergent debates in ageing, death and dying.

Socialization is seen not as a stage completed by the young, but rather as an ongoing accomplishment as individuals and societies navigate the rapidly changing conditions of late modernity. Similarly, the association between increasing age and the sociology of health and illness, where it has previously been discussed, is not clear-cut, as increasing numbers of older people in the more affluent societies benefit from improved social conditions and live the latter stages of their lives in healthy and active ways. In addition, the awareness of ‘stages’ in the life course as social constructs rather than biological pre-givens has become widely accepted.

Socialization is defined as ‘the process whereby the helpless infant gradually becomes a self-aware, knowledgeable person, skilled in the ways of the culture into which he or she was born’ (page 335). Socialization links the generations together as adults introduce children to the world and are themselves transformed by this role.

The work of G. H. Mead (Classic Study 9.1) and of Jean Piaget offer different perspectives on the processes by which the child becomes aware of itself both as a separate individual and as a member of social groups. From Mead it is stressed that we become ourselves through being able to take the place of others. The I/me distinction marks the development of both self-consciousness and the social self constructed from the ability to imagine how we seem in the eyes of society, the internalized generalized other. Processes of cognition are central to Piaget’s developmental model. Between birth and the age of about 15, individuals develop through four stages, namely the sensorimotor stage, the preoperational stage, the concrete operational stage and the formal operational stage. The development of the ability to think through possible viewpoints and solutions to problems enables the individual to transcend a narrow egocentrism and interact with others in society.

Socialization is achieved through social relationships which make up the agencies of socialization. Primary socialization occurs in infancy and childhood and is an intense period of social learning. The main agency for such socialization is the family, which can, of course, take a variety of forms. Families are themselves socially located and factors such as the region, class and ethnicity of each family will affect child-rearing practices and the cultural assumptions transmitted. Children are not the passive recipients of this process, but as social agents they act to make sense of the world they are experiencing; a world which may be
shaped by multiple family relationships in reconstituted families and increasingly with other children and adults in child care settings. Schools are major agencies of socialization and are one of the forums in which peer group interactions occur. In traditional societies formalized age-grades exist, especially for young men as they move through distinct socially sanctioned stages. In modern societies these stages are less distinctly marked but are nevertheless significant as children and young people create together their understandings of and place in the social world. The growth of mass media and digital information sources provides another agency in the socialization of young people.

Particular emphasis is placed upon the process of gender socialization: how we learn gender roles, to be girls and boys, women and men. There is clear evidence that adults relate in gender-differentiating ways with even the youngest of children. Children develop gender identification by the age of 2 and are resistant to any challenge to it, such as the strategies adopted by parents committed to non-sexist child-rearing. Toys, storybooks and television all reinforce highly differentiated gender identities – although the precise dimensions these take vary between societies. Such gender differentiation in identity and role is clearly socially learned and yet seems to operate at a very fundamental and profound level. Some sociologists have turned to Freud’s conception of the unconscious as a way of establishing both the roots and the stubbornness to change of gendered identifications. Freud’s theory emphasizes the primacy of the male anatomy and symbolic power in these processes. Later theorists, drawing upon other approaches within psychoanalysis, have prioritized the relationship with the mother rather than the father. Here the processes by which children initially experience a symbiotic relationship with the mother from which they gradually separate as individuals are placed at the centre of the account. For Chodorow (a Classic Study in this chapter), the key difference in this experience is that girls separate from their mother on the basis of sameness and never have to relinquish their emotional closeness and identification with her. Boys, conversely, separate on the principle of difference – to become men they renounce both closeness and identification with the mother; they must become fundamentally not like her. This process points to the importance for women of intimacy and caring as contrasted with the male emphasis upon individuality and competition. Similar evidence is found by Carol Gilligan in her exploration of the gendered dimensions of moral outlook and self conceptions. When presented with scenarios featuring an element of moral dilemma, women sought to solve them in terms of the relationships involved and the amount of hurt caused by the situation. Men, conversely, applied more abstract moral principles such as ‘duty’ and ‘justice’.

Socialization is not a once-and-for-all achievement of the early years of life, but a continuing achievement as the individual takes up new social roles throughout the life course. A distinction is made between the life cycle – which is linked to fixed biological stages – and the life course – which allows for the social creation of life stages. Sections on ‘childhood’, ‘the teenager’, ‘young adulthood’, ‘mature adulthood’ and ‘old age’ reiterate the socially contingent and constructed nature of these categories whilst considering the particular challenges that they pose for the individual, particularly in a context where older forms of stability have eroded and we are forced constantly to make and remake our lives. For example, since the early 1990s, the new sociology of childhood has demonstrated that what we call childhood is in large measure a social construction which is not universal. The experience of childhood and its meaning for society are diverse, both in different historical periods and across geographical regions in the same time period. The new paradigm also signals a shift away from functionalist and other theories which sees children as merely ‘becoming’ skilled, knowledgeable members of society. Instead, children are considered as
active participants or ‘beings’ in their own right, who interpret and construct their own lives, cultures and relationships.

Throughout the world, societies are ageing. The ‘greying’ of societies results from the twin processes of lower birth rates and increased life expectancy. The discipline of social gerontology studies the social processes of ageing. Three factors characterize ageing: biological ageing, which affects vision, hearing, skin tone and elasticity, muscle mass and cardiovascular efficiency; psychological ageing: surrounded by myths of memory loss and intellectual decline, these factors are not significant until very late in life; social age, which ‘consists of the norms, values and roles that are culturally associated with chronological age’ (page 183). Role expectations linked with older ages are in a state of constant transformation. Retirement from employment is a major shift in social identity, but in other ways role expectations have changed.

Three sociological theories of ageing are considered. Functionalist disengagement theory stressed the functionality for society of the older generation moving aside to allow younger, by implication more vibrant and active, generations to take up senior roles in employment and political and civic life. Age stratification theory and the life-course model consider the relationship between structural factors such as employment and welfare practices upon the experience of ageing and the creation of social inequalities of age. Political economy theory focuses on the reproduction and resistance to prevailing patterns of inequality.

Older people are as socially diverse as any other age group containing people from all genders, sexualities, classes, ethnicities and so on. The category ‘older people’ can be further divided into the active, recently retired ‘third-agers’ – consumers of leisure and education opportunities and contributors to family and civic life – and to the ‘fourth-agers’, where independence and the need for personal care becomes significant. Having built up a personal or occupational pension is an important factor in the quality of life and material well-being of retired people and is a significant marker of the distinction between the comfortable and the impoverished elderly. Women typically live longer than men, and the death of a partner of many years’ standing is a more common experience for women than for men. Women and members of minority ethnic groups, particularly of the generations now retired, had far fewer opportunities than white men to build up pension funds. This contributes to poverty, dependence and social isolation.

In many countries the dependency ratio – the relationship between the number of children and retired people and the working population – is increasing. This well-established trend has caused great concern over the future provision of pensions, with suggestions of raised retirement ages in a number of countries. The automatic linking of the idea of ‘dependency’ with ‘retirement’ can be questioned: many retired people provide child care, care of other older people, support for their adult children and voluntary work which would cost huge amounts if provided by the state or the market. Ageism – discrimination against people because of their chronological age – is increasingly challenged by these newly emerging conditions, roles and relationships.

The chapter ends with a discussion of the relatively recently developed field of death, dying and bereavement. Glaser and Strauss (1965) are seen as pioneers here with their work on the experience of dying within a US cancer ward. Tony Walter is seen as a key figure, particularly in his research into the social organization of death, dying and mourning rituals. Norbert Elias showed how modern societies tend to ignore or defer talking about death, thereby generating problems for individuals and families when faced with the death of
someone close as they are ill-prepared for the emotional disturbance this causes. The ‘modern’ way of dying very often takes place in hospitals where the dying person is distanced from friends and families, making this, for many, a particularly lonely experience.

However, other sociologists have noted counter-trends such as the growth of the hospice movement, increasing prominence of debates on the issues of euthanasia, assisted suicide and the ‘right to die’, and the individualizing of funeral services for relatives, as signs that death and dying are finally moving out of their hidden location into a much more open, public discussion.

**TEACHING TOPICS**

1. **Gender and child socialization**
   This topic focuses on an early stage in the process of gender socialization. It can be used alongside any of the material in the ‘Gender socialization’ section of the chapter (pages 340-4). The section ‘Childhood’ (pages 348-50) can usefully be considered here, as it is important to remind students that socialization is an ongoing and lifelong achievement, not something ‘done to’ children in a once and for all way.

2. **The life course and retirement**
   An opportunity to consider policy responses to the greying of the population, this topic also places retirement as part of the life course the planning and preparation for which starts at much earlier stages.

3. **Ageing**
   This topic comes directly from the section of the same name. Following the text’s emphasis on cross-cultural observation, the topic explores the position of different groups of elderly people in contemporary Britain and British Columbia. It highlights that ‘the elderly’ are not a homogeneous group and that the category itself is a social construct.

**ACTIVITIES**

Activity 1: Gender and child socialization

In a study published in 1985 two nursery school teachers decided to observe carefully their own behaviour and the behaviour of other people in the nursery towards the children they worked with. The nursery was in an area which has a strong commitment to ‘anti-sexist’ education and many of the staff had a strong personal commitment to this approach. Even in this setting the problems of non-sexist child-rearing became evident. Given below is a shortened version of a table from the study in which the terms used towards children to describe their behaviour are documented:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualities or behaviour (neutral descriptions)</th>
<th>Description if girl</th>
<th>Description if boy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quiet and withdrawn, diffident with adults</td>
<td>Shy</td>
<td>Strong silent type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noisy, rushing rapidly</td>
<td>Disturbed,</td>
<td>Boisterous, lively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>----------</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>around from one activity disruptive, overactive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing emotions freely, crying particularly if upset</td>
<td>Sensitive, Wet, big softie, cry-baby</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet but obviously unhappy</td>
<td>Sulky puss, crosspatch, Angry, hurt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing others, initiating activities</td>
<td>Bossy, Born leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying to do something Stubborn, despite difficulties</td>
<td>Determined</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


1. Read the section 340-4 on gender socialization, including ‘Using Your Sociological Imagination’ Box 9.2. From this and from your own knowledge of children, how might they conform to or resist the masculinities and femininities being reproduced in this nursery?

2. The teachers in the study also described children’s physical characteristics in gender specific ways. Think of examples relating to different stages in the life course where characteristics such as ‘below average weight’, ‘above average weight’ and ‘attractive’ are described in gender-specific terms.

3. What do these differences of description tell us about the ongoing processes of gender socialization in our society?

Activity 2: The life course and retirement

Read the sections ‘The greying of human societies’ (pages 353-6), ‘Aspects of ageing’ (page 360-4) and ‘The politics of ageing’ (pages 364-7).

A. Think about your own retirement – which could be a long way in the future or something you are already enjoying.

1. How do you see yourself? Where do you hope to live? What relationships do you hope will be important to you? What groups will you be a member of? What activities will you take part in?
2. What material resources will you need to secure this lifestyle?
3. Do you think that you will be able to avoid many of the financial problems associated with older age?

Compare your answers with other members of your group.

B. The British government is very concerned about the future of retirement and the provision of pensions. The Pensions Commission was established to explore these issues and make recommendations for future policy. In November 2005 the Second Report of this group was
published – often referred to as the Turner Report. Details of the report (and summaries of it) can be found at:

There was widespread news coverage of this report. One article looked at the implications for people of different ages today:

From youth to maturity
Kate Brady, 23, from Leeds, is part of the generation who will have to work to 67, perhaps even 68, before qualifying for a pension. An audit assistant at accountants Ernst and Young, she says: ‘I don’t think I could keep up what I’m doing until I’m 67, it would kill me. I’ll definitely have to switch to a less stressful job.’

She has joined her company pension scheme, and pays in 3–4% of her salary, matched by her employer. ‘Lots of my age group are in denial over their pensions. My boyfriend is 27 and has his own design business – he just hasn’t got the money to put into a pension. Any compulsion would hit him quite hard but overall I think it’s probably a good thing’, she says.

What it means for this generation
Retirement age: Anybody now under 30 would be hit by the rise in retirement age from 65 to 67 under the Turner proposals. If they are under 20, Turner expects them to work until they are 68.

State pensions: Currently £82.05 a week for a single person. Under Turner this would rise to about 20–25% of median earnings by 2045, or more like today’s £109.45 a week means-tested credit.

Additional pensions: The current state second pension would continue but play a less important role, and be worth about 10% of median earnings on retirement. Young adults who, unlike Kate, are not in a company scheme would be encouraged to join the national pensions savings scheme. Turner says this would be worth an extra £4,400 a year, or £85 a week for average earners (£23,000 a year) who start saving at age 21. They would be expected to pay £60 a month with the employer chipping in £45 a month.

(The Guardian, 1 Dec. 2005,
Full article available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/turnerreport
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B. Imagine yourself in Kate’s position

1. What other financial commitments may you have at the age of 23?
2. Would you favour being forced to join either a company scheme or the national pensions savings scheme?
3. Would you rather save more towards your pension in your young adulthood or continue working full or part time in your late 60s and 70s?
4. How could saving for a pension affect other choices that you make as a young adult and in your middle years?
5. Do the arguments convince you that saving for retirement throughout your life is a good idea?
6. What assumptions about ageing is Kate making when she says she would need to switch to a less stressful job?

**Activity 3: Ageing and ageism**

Read the section on ‘Ageing’ starting on page 353. As populations in Western societies become older, those societies have to face new decisions about healthcare provision. It is wrong, however, to conflate becoming elderly with becoming ill. Many of the problems faced by the elderly stem not from age or illness but from ageism.

It is easy to romanticize the position of the elderly in traditional societies, and to mistakenly treat all traditional societies as if they were the same. However, as the following extract, which comes from a discussion which places ageing as one of the major dimensions of social stratification shows, the traditional/modern distinction can be useful in thinking about the position of older people:

No one could fail to notice Joseph’s standing in the community. Dealings with him (as with the elderly men in many societies) are marked by a jocular respect, a celebration of an old man’s importance and authority. ... And from time to time the young men call on his authority: Is this as far as the fence rails should extend? Is this the line along which to cut a horse’s hooves? ... He had not only the expertise but also the authority of his eighty-some years. But his composure and eloquence were not those of an old man; they expressed the completeness and distinctiveness of a culture. (Brodie, 1986, pp. 2, 4)

Joseph is an elder of the Beaver tribe of British Columbia in the north-west of Canada. As in many tribal and clan-based societies, elders are treated as an important social resource because of their fund of knowledge and long experience of living; often they act as repositories for myths, folk-wisdom, songs and stories of the society’s past. In contrast, it is argued that in industrialized societies, the social standing of older people has declined ...

The feeling of ‘being on the scrapheap’ is reflected in this comment from an elderly man born in Jamaica, speaking of his desire to return to the Caribbean: ‘I want to go by 1985 or I’ll end up in a mental home. ... I feel that the elderly black person should try to go home, you have no use as an elderly person’ ... [H]istorians and sociologists of old age have warned against rosy views of the status of older people in non-industrial societies. ... They argue that in many societies negative attitudes have surrounded elderly people ... Nonetheless, Brodie’s account (1986) of Joseph illustrates the way that in some contemporary communities and societies...some older people still occupy a vital and special place.

This contrasts with Janet Ford’s and Ruth Sinclair’s study of older women in Britain ...

From 60 onwards we shall in all probability be referred to as ‘elderly’, ‘retired’ and ‘OAPs’ by the rest of society. In the West these terms form part of the stereotype about older people, who are seen as unproductive, dependent, restricted in their lives and therefore not very interesting. We ... have successfully deprived age of authority and of interest.

1. What is different about life in modern societies which makes the knowledge of the old less valuable than in traditional societies?
2. That retirement and pensions would be linked to the chronological age of 60 seems less likely now than it did when this extract was written. How might the raising of the retirement age affect our views of when ‘old age’ starts? How might this be analysed from a political economy perspective?

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Gender and child socialization
Would it be possible or desirable to eliminate gender differences through primary socialization?
What are the advantages and disadvantages of young children being exposed to many different carers?
How are we socialized into parental roles?
How active are individuals in their own socialization?

The life course and retirement
Is it ever too young to start saving for retirement?
Given the rate of social change, how realistic is it to prepare for an event that is 50 or 60 years away?
When are the best years of your life?
Is 50 a good time to take a ‘gap year’?

Ageing
Are you ever too old to learn new things?
Does one have to be, or look, young to be beautiful?
How can social isolation among the older population be reduced?
Is it possible, or desirable, to keep a young outlook into older life?
What are the positive elements of being a grandparent?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Explain and discuss the view that gender socialization is not just about learning difference, it is also about learning inequality.
2. ‘Accounts of child development differ widely in emphasis but all suggest that early childhood experiences are significant in later life’. Discuss with reference to mead, Piaget, Freud and Chodorow.
3. When one becomes ‘old’ and what that experience means depends upon the social construction of categories. What are the consequences of this view for our understanding of ageing?
4. Whatever age one is, other factors such as class, gender and ethnicity are more significant in shaping your life than age alone. Discuss
MAKING CONNECTIONS

Gender and child socialization
There are direct links to the ‘Gender’ section of Chapter 15, which includes a discussion of gender socialization. The family as the main site of primary socialization has links to Chapter 10, which also contains a discussion of feminist views of the family. Chapter 20, ‘Education’, includes sections on gender issues and examples including Willis and Mac an Ghaill on the development of forms of masculinities. Socialization as a concept can be usefully linked to the discussion of roles and statuses in Chapter 8 which does consider some of the gendered aspects of interaction and to the discussion in that chapter of the relationship between micro-interactions and broader power structures in society. The discussion of eating disorders in Chapter 11 also provides an example of the ongoing process and impact of gender socialization.

The life course and retirement
Both personal lives and employment patterns are key factors in shaping the life course and there are thus links to Chapter 10, ‘Families and Intimate Relationships’, and Chapter 7, ‘Work and the Economy’.

Ageing
Issues of biological ageing can be linked to Chapter 11, ‘Health, Illness and Disability’ where the idea of ‘stigma’ may be particularly relevant. The global dimensions of ageing link to Chapter 14, ‘Global Inequality’.

Social constructionism is defined in Chapter 8 and discussed in Chapter 6, whilst ageing provides a good example of this process. Poverty, social exclusion and welfare are all important dimensions of older age and are discussed in Chapter 13.

SAMPLE SESSION

The life course and retirement

Aims: Increased awareness of the social conditions in which older people live. Understanding the relationship between ‘old age’ and earlier phases of the life course. Developing information seeking, groupwork and ICT skills. Practising the skills of synthesis and critical thinking.

Outcome: By the end of this session students will be able to:
1. State a range of recent policy proposals on retirement and pensions.
2. Identify the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and problems presented by these various policy options
3. Relate policy proposals to the existing situation of older people
4. Draw on a range of resources to create their own proposals and to justify them.

Preparatory tasks
2. Visit:  
and locate press releases and summaries of recent reports including the Second Report of the Pensions Commission, November 2005, also known as the Turner Report. Prepare a one-page handout summarizing in bullet point form the main recommendations currently being proposed.

3. Undertake Task A from Activity 3 above: thinking about your own hopes for retirement.

Classroom tasks
1. In groups of about four people, compare your thoughts on your own retirement and share your summary notes on current policy proposals for pensions. (15 minutes)
2. As a group, develop a set of proposals on working time, pensions, taxation, savings and welfare services which would enable you to have the retirement you hope for. Briefly outline these on an overhead transparency. (20 minutes)
3. Each group is to present their proposals to the whole class and receive feedback on how practical these policies may be.

Assessment task
Drawing upon your reading and the classroom discussions you are now being asked to refocus your thinking away from proposals which would best serve your own plans for the future and to put yourself in the position of policy-makers trying to come up with a set of policies that will work for the whole society.

You must produce four, A4 sized handouts using bullet points. The first summarizes the current financial position of the older population in Britain; the second summarizes the reasons why there is seen to be a ‘pensions crisis’ developing; the third outlines possible policy responses; the forth summarizes your preferred policy solution and the reasons why this is for you the best possible proposal.