Chapter 43
Studying Age Across Borders

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Life Travels

When I was approached about writing this piece, there was talk of a "senior in the field." My first reaction was, "A senior? *Me*?" There are two bases for my puzzlement. The first is an experience many of us share: problems with accepting and internalizing such labels as "old, elderly, senior." A few years ago, I was in a long security line at an airport. People were tense, worried about missing their flights. A security officer was trying to speed up things and loudly announced, "The shoes coming through on the belt belong to the elderly woman." I looked around, but saw no older woman! I would like to believe that today I would respond differently. But reality is that it takes a while to live with such labels. We are not ready to become *geronts*, presumably the objects of gerontology. I return to that topic below.

A quite different side to my reaction was that I do not see myself as a senior in the field. I do not feel like a giant on whose shoulders others can stand, to paraphrase Robert Merton a bit. One key reason for this feeling is that I have been fortunate enough to know true giants, trailblazers in the study of age and aging. Some of them are no longer among us, but their work is very much alive. The list shows how fortunate I have been: Paul Baltes, Leonard Cain, Henning Friis, Bill Henry, Peter Laslett, Powell Lawton, Ursula Lehr, George Maddox, Bernice Neugarten, Michel Philibert, Matilda Riley, Leopold Rosenmayr, Irv Rosow, Warner Schaie, Ethel Shanas, Gordon Streib, and Hans Thomae. As the reader will notice, the list includes primarily psychologists, some sociologists, a philosopher (Philibert) and a historian/journalist (Laslett).

Among the people I mentioned, I worked most closely with Bernice Neugarten. She hired me in 1972 when she was head of the University of Chicago's Committee on Human Development. After studying sociology at the University of Oslo and the University of Minnesota, this was my first regular academic job.

As a student in Norway, I was interested in social change, but I also discovered George Herbert Mead! In the Twin Cities, I had several professors with a strong "symbolic interaction" perspective, among them Arnold Rose. As part of my doctoral work at the University of Minnesota, I did a minor in philosophy. Courses on pragmatism helped further my understanding of Mead and his circle. Thus, I got extensive discussion of *meaning*, its social production and reproduction. Since my minor was in the philosophy of science, I also became acquainted with two powerful scholars, May Brodbeck and Herbert Feigl. Both had spent a good deal of time pondering the issue of *levels* and units of analysis in science.

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My graduate courses did not teach me much about age and aging. After arriving at the University of Chicago, I had a pretty steep learning curve and was very pleased when a chapter on Age and the Life Course, coauthored with Bernice, appeared in the 1976 edition of *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences.* There was a lot to cover because so much had happened from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. A major, comparative study of aging in three industrial societies appeared in 1968. The international group of authors, led by Ethel Shanas, stated quite clearly that social *integration versus segregation* was the key issue facing the sociology of aging. Between 1968 and 1972, Matilda Riley and her colleagues published landmark volumes on *Aging and Society,* summarizing existing knowledge and presenting a model of age stratification. Age was here linked to social differentiation and the division of labor. The 1970s also marked the start of Glen Elder's groundbreaking work on the life course. By 1980, it was clearly time for ASA to have a section on aging. But it took until the late 1990s to add the life course to the name!

One scholar who, in my view, has not been given enough attention within sociological discussions of age is Leonard Cain. His 1964 chapter on life course and social structure in the *Handbook of Modern Sociology* was a pioneering overview of issues which have continued to challenge students of life course and age stratification. Already in 1959 he wrote a state-of-the-art article on the sociology of aging, covering work from several countries. Here, he made the somewhat prophetic statement that "ameliorative gerontology" might overpower theoretical sociology!

What was Bernice's disciplinary anchor? Throughout her professional life, she belonged to APA as well as ASA. Her research topics spanned from personality to age norms to policies for aging societies. For her doctoral work at the University of Chicago, her adviser was Lloyd Warner, famous for his work on inequality, but also a student of age classes and age sets. My impression was, however, that although she had worked closely with a scholar focused on social systems, Bernice anchored much of her thinking in individuals and their personal experiences. Towards the end of her career, she would often comment on presentations by asking, "Where is *the person* here?" There were times when I wanted to pose a corresponding question: "Where is *the society* here?"

In the villa that houses Human Development, there were many intense scholarly discussions. Nearly always, someone would suggest that we try to move up a notch in the level of abstraction: "What is the bigger question here?" A thoughtful, widely traveled colleague, anthropologist Robert Le Vine, always placed the meanings of age in a broad comparative context. As Ralph Linton did in the 1940s, Bob also reminded us that men and women have different life scripts. He also stressed the degree of individualism/collectivism in different societies. So did another anthropologist who came to visit from the University of Illinois: David Plath. He used Japan as his main basis of comparison and in the process gave us new insights on lives in our own society. His beautifully written book *Long Engagements* deserves to be a classic. Another person who came to visit, offering important *diachronic* comparisons, was historian Tamara Hareven, who later spent considerable time in Japan. She highlighted the need to consider time dimensions on three levels: individual, family, and history. Glen Elder spent time in Human Development when he was trying to finish "the book," juggling lots of information about individual development, family, and historical context. *Children of the Great Depression* appeared in 1974. To me, the greatest contribution of that classic volume will always be its powerful illustrations of how levels matter and must be taken into account. Within the context of a national economic crisis, the financial stability or instability of *families* made the difference in determining future lives of children and youth. The lesson is that the meso-level of family functions as a "lens" between history and individual lives. Consequently, cohort contrasts entail intracohort differentiation. In some cases, the lens intensifies effects of historical circumstances; in other cases, it deflates and minimizes historical impact.

Ever since I first heard Glen talk about his book, I have wondered about *personal meaning* and historical change. If people are "carriers" of marked cohort effects which show up when we follow them across time, are they themselves aware of it? Is it part of their life story? I kept going back to Karl Mannheim's essay on generations, in which he argued that true generational units have

generational awareness – a sense of their "location" that they have in common. But then there was a conversation, many years ago, with life course researcher Karl Ulrich Mayer, who has provided striking examples of how history left footprints in the lives of German cohorts. He also has authored articles on how states structure life course patterns, showing policy shifts change lives. When I raised the awareness issue with him, Uli responded, "Gunhild, that is for psychologists to ponder; *we* are sociologists!"

Differences between psychological and sociological eyes; micro- versus macro views also marked ongoing discussions in my next place of work, the Department of Individual and Family Studies at Pennsylvania State University. I joined the interdisciplinary faculty in the late 1970s. Again, I was privileged to be around scholars who helped define the field of aging research: Paul Baltes, John Nesselroade and K. Warner Schaie, a significant triumvirate in laying conceptual and methodological foundations for the study of adulthood from a life span perspective. Paul was head of the department. He later became the director of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. We shared the experience of being "bi-continental," which has both positive and negative aspects. While belonging in two places represents a strength, it also raises issues of marginality. I believe we both experienced being seen as quite European when in the United States and quite American when in Europe. For me personally, it has always been difficult to understand and accept that many of my American colleagues do not seem to be familiar with relevant and important European research, even though it is readily available in English.

As is well-known, Warner Schaie was among the first to seriously address the age-period-cohort conundrum in the study of development. It might be the lenses of a sociologist again, but I detected a shift in his thinking over the years. As a psychologist, he initially seemed to think of cohort effects as bothersome "noise" messing up our understanding of "pure development," especially in the cognitive domain. Over the years, he admitted that the noise might actually be the most interesting thing to focus on!

After nearly a decade at Penn state, I moved back to the Chicago area, taking a position in a program founded by Bernice: Human Development and Social Policy at Northwestern University. At that time, I became truly bicontinental, dividing my year between Northwestern and the Institute for Social Research in Oslo. For a sociologist, a focus on connections between structural conditions and lives offered exciting possibilities, but most of my colleagues were psychologists. My main conversation partner was Fay Cook, who was deeply engaged in issues related to aging, posing research questions about political debates and policy issues. She later served as president of the Gerontological Society of America.

My life was profoundly changed by a cancer diagnosis in 1993. The illness put me totally "out of commission" for a year and a half, an experience I have described as *falling out of time*. Because long-term effects of treatment and a systemic infection greatly reduced my work capacity for nearly a decade, I decided to take early retirement in 2004. Since then, new medical intervention increased my energy and optimism, allowing me to go back to research and writing, as well as some teaching. I have collaborated with colleagues in the United States and a number of other countries. There have also been some intense, interesting meetings organized by the United Nations. The biggest marker for my "second chance" was an invitation to deliver a keynote address for the UN International Year of Older Persons. I was asked to reflect on the theme of the year: *Towards a Society for All Ages*. Work on the speech rekindled my interest in issues of age segregation. I was reminded of how I read the 1968 book by Shanas and her coauthors with excitement and optimism. Thinking about it 30 years later made me discouraged, but collaboration with Peter Uhlenberg has helped me move further in my thinking about age segregation and integration in some papers we have written together. Very few sociologists have actually addressed these issues. There was a major work by Irv Rosow, published in 1967, which did not get the attention it deserved. Was he too gerontological for the sociologists and too sociological for the gerontologists? Why do we have so few contemporary scholars who use aging as a domain for raising core sociological questions? Has the study of

aging helped make sociology wiser? Or is "ameliorative gerontology" still a risk, as Cain saw it 50 years ago? I must admit that when I read GSA journals, there is very little that tickles my sociological imagination!

In a speech delivered in early 1994, Bernice said, "I am greatly tempted to predict that the field of gerontology is going to disappear over the next couple of decades." Why did she make this prediction? And why does it seem that it was false? She argued that we have come to realize that aging is a lifelong process and lives are indivisible. Furthermore, as she put it, "need without age must override age without need" in policies and programs. Quite different age groups, she argued, have similar needs. Recently, this latter argument has been voiced by several of us, for instance in pointing to communalities between our youngest and our oldest.

A realistic view of current political debates and social planning could easily make us pessimistic. Across countries, there seems to be a hegemonic paradigm for discussing old age, one emphasizing dependency, needs, and burden. Recently, I had a strong impression of ruling paradigms when I participated in a working conference funded by the EU. Although my subgroup had been asked to discuss old people as care providers, it was nearly impossible to get people in the group to think of examples of old people providing care, to consider care other than physical care, or to admit that care provision is not always a source of stress. I came away with a strong discomfort about how research position, clout, and funding may require buying into – and thereby reproducing – a construction of aging that we know to be fundamentally flawed. I keep coming back to French sociologist Pierre Bordieu's reminder: We must never forget that we are engaged in a battle over common sense!

Now I am back to the point where I started, the *geronts*. As I get older, I am increasingly struck by how much "othering" is going on, even in scholarly discussions. It is both comical and sad to see a group of gerontologists, all well over 60, *talk about them* – the old. We talk as if we concur with Mary Pipher, who calls old age "a different country," a place where *we* do not reside. Would we make more progress if we said *we* and *us?*

I have tried to briefly sketch how thinking about age has been a part of my academic life across phases of my adulthood, starting as a mother in her 30s, through my middle years, to my current life as an older person and a grandmother of two rapidly developing grandchildren (who really want me to finish this piece so that I can join them on a long hike and even some bouldering!). Over those years, I have had extremely rich opportunities for learning. What is my hope for the future? That the study of age and aging can cross borders – across national research communities, across levels of human contexts, and across life phases.

For members of my own generation of sociologists, I wish a rich dialogue about our own aging, our own understanding of networks across age boundaries, in different cultures and in contrasting policy contexts.