In coming decades, the United States will see a major demographic shift as the largest birth cohort in our history approaches its older years; by the year 2030, it has been projected that approximately one-third of the population will be aged 65 or older. Yet the national debate on how we plan to accommodate our aging society is in considerable turmoil. This symposium offers the insights of several leaders in the fields of social work and aging regarding the profound economic, political, and moral implications of the projected changes in society. While medical and technological advances promise greater independence and higher quality of life for some, there is a disturbing trend of economic inequality for future elders. It is expected that the “baby boom” generation will not only bring about major policy changes, but will redefine aging and the search for meaning in what Charles Fahey has termed the “third age.” It is certain that the societal values we hold and our commitment to the well-being of our older population today will have a profound impact on what the future holds for old and young alike.

Key Words: Future of aging, Values, Third age, Baby boomers

Editor's Note: This symposium is the result of a series of papers originally presented at the conference, “The Many Faces of Aging: Challenges for the Future,” which was hosted by the Fordham University Graduate School of Social Services, under the auspices of the Ravazzin Center for Social Work Research in Aging, New York, NY, March 30-31, 1995.

Introduction: The Many Faces of Aging: Challenges for the Future

Irene A. Gutheil, DSW

On March 31, 1995, Fordham University’s Graduate School of Social Service hosted “The Many Faces of Aging: Challenges for the Future,” a symposium bringing together New York City area leaders in the fields of social work and aging to consider the challenges of an aging society and the social work role in meeting these challenges. The purpose of the conference was to advance the dialogue about our aging society, focusing on tomorrow’s older population.

John Cornman and Eric Kingson’s background discussion on the aging of the baby boom cohorts was mailed to all participants in advance, establishing a common starting point. Barbara Silverstone, Robert Hudson, and Msgr. Charles Fahey each delivered papers on the day of the conference. The four articles constitute this symposium.

Synopses of the Articles

Jack Cornman and Eric Kingson begin by addressing the national debate based on the aging of the baby boom cohorts combined with growing political and economic change. They caution against framing the debate too narrowly on economic questions and overlooking the larger questions of public values and social goals. Through their discussion of trends and related issues, they help illuminate the factors that interact with the aging of the population. Cornman and Kingson go on to stress the importance of the terminology used in a national dialogue, noting that the terms used should capture the complexity of the processes discussed. Finally, they pose a number of questions critical to a national conversation on aging.

Barbara Silverstone’s article provides a psychosocial profile of tomorrow’s older people. She bases her predictions on knowledge about the older people of today, the younger people of today (who will...
become tomorrow’s older people), and the ways both groups have adapted over time. Her picture of the older people of tomorrow integrates several important facets, capturing the diversity of the population and the challenges it will face. Ending with implications for social work, Silverstone emphasizes that the demands on the profession will increase in the future, as our clients redefine aging and the aging process.

In his presentation, Robert Hudson discusses four significant ways the face of aging politics has changed over the past thirty years. He stresses the need to look beyond gains made in public expenditures on aging to see how uneven the distribution of these gains has actually been. Additionally, he underscores the critical link between the way an issue is defined and its outcome. Noting that both conservatives and liberals are shifting their positions, Hudson points out that we are on the verge of change, but how this will play out remains unclear.

Charles Fahey reflects on the aging of America and its implications for social work education. He begins by stressing the demographic imperative and the importance of the third age as a paradigm for social analysis. Fahey calls for greater reflection on the meaning of the third age, noting that gains in understanding the aging process, disease, service delivery, and technology have not been equaled in the quest for meaning and significance. In his discussion of implications for social work, Fahey addresses the knowledge base critical to social work education and the new arenas open to social workers in the field of aging.

All four articles underscore the point that we face a time of crisis, a potential turning point in society’s response to the aging population. Cornman and Kingson bemoan the growing national debate’s focus on what entitlements the United States can afford, elevating deficit reduction and decreased federal responsibility to primacy. They caution that by framing the national debate too narrowly, we lose sight of the values and commitment to social justice that undergird a humane society. It is with these values that the debate must start. We need to be clear in defining our accepted public values, so we can go on to the question of how society ought to respond to the current crisis.

Fahey picks up this theme. He points out that, in contrast to earlier life cycle stages, societal goals for older persons are fraught with confusion. Noting that our technical skills have outstripped our moral responses, Fahey calls for a dialogue that considers the ethical basis for political, social, and personal behaviors.

The need to recognize the diversity of today’s and tomorrow’s older persons, which is underscored by Cornman and Kingson, is highlighted by Silverstone and Hudson as well. Both caution against allowing the gains achieved by the older population in general to obscure the inequality and inadequacy of those gains, and the vulnerability of some major subpopulations. If we are to truly understand our aging society, we must guard against simplifying complex situations.

Silverstone points out that the older people of tomorrow may look quite different from those of today. These differences will be evident across several dimensions. More confident in being old, tomorrow’s older people are likely to redefine both old age and the aging process. Cornman and Kingson, too, stress that much of the future picture remains uncertain. We must recognize and respect this uncertainty. It is this very uncertainty, coupled with, as Hudson notes, the potential for policy shifts from both the liberal and conservative positions, that makes the need for a firm value base so compelling.

Cornman and Kingson conclude their paper by identifying the questions that need to be addressed in a national dialogue on aging. Fahey, too, raises questions that demand attention for an informed national discussion. Many of these questions raise profound ethical concerns, in terms of both individual and societal responses to aging.

In discussing implications for the field of social work, Silverstone underscores the importance of seeing the extended family as the focus of attention. Fahey, too, identifies the importance of seeing individuals in a larger context, emphasizing social work’s traditional concern with larger systems as well as with individuals. Both authors stress the need for the profession to redefine the ways help is provided based on the changing characteristics of the client population and the larger societal context. And both underscore the pressing need for social workers to become increasingly skilled at using information technology.

To paraphrase Hudson’s conclusion, the debate on the future of aging is in considerable turmoil. There are no easy answers; there are many hard questions. All four articles caution us to take the time to carefully ponder these questions and recognize the complexities of our aging society. If we are careful to first draw a map of the terrain, we will be less likely to get lost along the way.

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