Changes in the Family and the Position of Older Persons in Germany

by

GERHARD BAUMERT

Frankfurt am Main, Germany

The Changing Social Position of the Young and the Old

A comparison of empirical knowledge about modern society with the picture of social life that we can derive from different literary sources of the past reveals basic changes in the structure of the family. This comparison also reveals basic changes in the role and status of the old. It appears that these two tendencies are strongly interrelated: the changes in the role and status of the old affect the structure of the family, and the changes in the family in turn affect the position of the old.

Our focus will be upon the changes in the family as far as they affect the old. However, at least passing consideration should be given to some changes in the relative position of the young and the old in the society. In pre-industrial civilisations, in which the economic and social conditions remained almost unchanged from one generation to the other, experience was most important for the functioning of the society. Since experience accumulates with increasing age, older persons were accorded positions of high prestige and respect. By contrast, in modern industrial societies, characterized by rapid technological progress, experience has lost much of its value. It is adaptation that is now of ever increasing importance for the maintenance of the social system. The loss of status and respect for the old as a consequence of the decreasing value of experience is accentuated by the difficulty old people have in preserving adaptability with increasing age.

Observations in Germany show that this tendency toward a loss of status of the older persons has gained momentum during the last fifty years in accordance with the acceleration of economic development; there is evidence that it was stronger than ever in the last decade. The changing position of the old

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finds its most obvious expression in the present situation on the labor market: younger applicants are consistently preferred to older ones, and older persons are forced into early retirement. A similar trend toward younger candidates can be observed in the sphere of politics.

These fundamental changes in the relative position of the young and the old in our society should be kept in mind, when we analyze the changes in the family as they affect the older persons. Some of the changes we observe within the family are undoubtedly influenced by the general changes in the position of the older persons within modern society.

Trends in the German Family and the Effect of the War

According to studies on the development of the family as a group of related persons living together in one household, we find in Germany a distinct trend toward the smaller family consisting of the married couple and their minor children. We also observe the emergence of new relationships between family members. The majority of the families in Germany is still characterized by a more or less intense predominance of the husband.1 However, there is little resemblance to the former authoritarian position occupied by the father in the older bourgeois and patriarchal type of family prevailing in the last centuries. The trend is to an equalitarian partnership-type of family in which family life is no longer centered around the figure of the father; rather husband and wife consider each other as equal partners who jointly decide family issues.2 Thus, the observations fit into the general trend of modern family development as it is found in the Western societies and some of the societies in the East as well – a development of which Ernest W. Burgess gave an early description about fifteen years ago. Again, as far as Germany is concerned, there is evidence of an acceleration of the changes in family structure and family life during the last five decades, and an especially strong stimulation by the events of World War II.

Different views were held by German scholars in recent years about the influence of the specific situation in Germany during the war and postwar period. In the first investigations after the war it was observed that the number of persons making up a family household had increased. Sociological studies found evidence of stronger cohesion among family members.3 Having turned into evacuees and refugees, the young couples or widows moved into the house of their parents; the older persons moved to their middle-aged children. Often

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3 Helmut Schelsky, Wandlungen der deutschen Familie in der Gegenwart, 3rd. ed. Stuttgart 1954