Although much previous research on the early years of the life cycle of man, social scientists have recently turned their attention to the middle and later years. These later stages of the life cycle become increasingly significant as man becomes increasingly likely to live them out. A man born in the middle of the past century was engrossed with the activities of the first four decades of life, the span through which, on the average, he was then likely to live. Today, a man born in the United States can look forward, on the average, to living well into his sixties; a woman can look forward, on the average, to living well into her seventies.

The growing awareness of how many people are affected and how little is known about the aging process has resulted in a proliferation of research. Not only has the number of studies multiplied, but their scope has broadened to span many disciplines. Research objectives are manifold. Many studies focus on diverse aspects of the aging individual, such as his adjustment to retirement, his ability to learn, his disposition toward crime or suicide, his psychomotor skills, his attitudes toward leisure and death, and his response to institutional care. Many other studies examine varied aspects of the society, such as the age composition of the labor force or the electorate; the bases for public policy on social security, medical care, or housing for the aged; and age as a factor in the income structure, in mental health, or in urban-rural residence of the nation’s population.

Much theorizing about the multifaceted findings has been specific to particular research objectives and to particular conceptual and disciplinary frameworks. As yet there is no unified body of knowledge, no general theory of aging, that can be transmitted to students, applied in professional practice, or tested and amplified through further research. The materials assembled in this volume run to many hundreds of pages of discrete findings, despite prodigious efforts to select, simplify, and systematize. The user of this book must make his own further selections from a vast array of information.

There are, however, running through the innumerable specifics, certain persistent themes that seem to emerge. These represent different ways of abstracting from the over-all process of aging as it occurs in human beings and as it affects and is affected by society. (See Exhibit 1-1 for a schematic representation of the aging process.) One broad set of findings concentrates attention on the life cycles of aging individuals or cohorts (generations of individuals born at the same time), describing, for example, how the personality develops, experience accumulates, or adjustments are made to new roles. A second set of findings refers to the society as the composite of many cohorts at different life stages. These findings describe, for example, how, at a given point of time, old and young fit together in a cross section of the labor force or the family.

These two aspects of the total process, though abstractly separable as a means of reducing complexity, are, of course, concretely interdependent. Over the lifetime of any individual or cohort, not only the organism, the personality, and the age-appropriate roles but also the structure of the society and the roles it affords are simultaneously changing as norms, mores, attitudes, or knowledge change, or as wars or economic depressions may occur. It is not the same society with which each
EXHIBIT 1 1 Schematic representation of the aging process, showing selected cohorts over time

Stages in life cycle

Early years Middle years Later years

new cohort of individuals interacts, just as the nature of the individuals is not constant. Individual aging and social change interpenetrate and affect each other. Thus, a full understanding of either requires a third approach that combines the other two: a study of the sequence of cohorts as they fit together within the changing society.

This Introduction provides a brief conspectus of some findings as they refer to these three aspects of the larger process: the age structure of the society, the life cycles of individuals or cohorts, and successive cohorts in relation to social change.

THE AGE STRUCTURE

A major portion of the research examined in the Inventory focuses on cross sections of the society at given points of time (for example, the year 1960, in Exhibit 1·1), taking a slice, as it were, from the several cohorts. The cross-section data have an important validity of their own, applying to the age structure of the society and the place of the individual within this structure. (It is interesting that this structural focus often differs from the original intent of the investigator, whose objective instead was to study the individual as he ages.)

Every society has an age structure; it is divided into young, middle-aged, and aged segments (see, for example, Parsons, 1942; Linton, 1942). In certain respects, the age structure is analogous to the class structure (the division along lines of money, power, or prestige). The several age strata, like the class strata (though only roughly distinguishable, to be sure), maintain a patterned relationship to one another, tending to change together in an orderly
For example, old and young may give complimentary responses to a war or to a change of norms. But a peculiarity of the age structure is its physiological base, its dependence upon the organic metabolism and inevitable decay of the constituent members. Thus, the mobility or succession of individuals through the age strata, unlike social mobility through the class structure, is not entirely contingent upon motivation or recruitment but is, in part, biologically determined. The particular individuals composing any given age category are continually moving on and being replaced. (However stable the contours of the waterway, the water passing a particular spot is ever changing; one can never step twice into the same stream.)

The age strata within the society differ not only historically but also in many other respects. Each cohort has unique characteristics because of the particular historical events it has undergone, the particular knowledge and attitudes it has acquired in childhood, or the particular number of its component individuals (see, for example, Ryder, 1965; Cain, 1964). In addition, at a given time, each cohort is at a different life-cycle stage from all the others, and therefore it differs from them in the roles members are expected to play, in the rights and privileges accorded by society, and in the sheer number of years of experience behind and future potential ahead. Moreover, the age structure is significantly implicated in other basic aspects of the society: the economic, political, and cultural systems; and the family, the neighborhood, and various other social groupings.

The demographic base

Many findings in the inventory describe the characteristics and changes in the population that comprises the several age strata. In the United States, there has been a marked rise over the century in the number of older people, paralleling the expansion of the population as a whole. The age category 65 and over, for instance, rose from three million persons in 1900 to nearly seventeen million by 1960. Numbers of older people have been increasing even faster than the total population as declines in fertility rates have reduced the accretions to the younger age categories, while declines in mortality rates have allowed increasing proportions of people to survive into old age. Thus, between 1850 and 1960, the proportion of the total population who were 65 and over rose from 3 per cent to 9 per cent; the proportion between 45 and 64 rose from 10 per cent to 20 per cent.

Incidentally, the boundaries of particular age categories vary from study to study, and people of diverse ages may be defined as old. Whatever category is used, it contains a range in ages. In the category 65 and over, for instance, there are nearly 900,000 persons in the United States who are over 85 (persons who are themselves old enough to be the parents of other older persons aged 65 and over).

Not only the number and proportion of older people but also the sex ratio in the older population has been changing over time. Mortality rates are generally higher for males than for females (even for some animal species), and at the older ages, this discrepancy has been widening. Among older people 75 and over, there are now only about 73 men for every 100 women.

Such changes in the age composition of the population have important societal implications; for example, for government involvement in programs for older people, for the increasing supply of mature individuals available for the labor force, or for the structure of the family as all the family members, but particularly the females, tend to live longer.

The organic base

The age structure of the society is fundamentally affected by biology not only through the succession of births and deaths but also because individuals at different stages of life show important differences in both physical structure and function. With age, there is a decline in the number and quality of vital cells and a decreased ability to adapt to changes in the environment.

In line with these age-related differences, the health of older people is generally poorer than that of the young. Though older people have fewer acute illnesses, they are more subject to chronic conditions: such impairments as failing vision or hearing, or such diseases as rheumatism and arthritis, heart disease and high blood pressure. Some four out of five persons 65 and over have at least one chronic condition. Thus there are increases by age in physician visits, in the number and duration of hospital stays, and in the number of days spent in restricted activity or in bed. Nevertheless, only a small proportion (15 per cent) of the chronically ill old people report themselves to be so severely handicapped that they are unable to carry on their major activity, whether it be a job outside the home or housework.

Moreover, physical changes that are associated with age are related not only to health but also to behavior (though the causal linkages seem far from clear). For example, older people, when compared with younger people, are more likely to show deficits in sensory and perceptual skills, in muscular
strength, in the ability to react quickly, in complex 
sensorimotor coordination (such as that required in 
driving a car), and, most important of all, in mem-
ory, learning, and various aspects of intellectual 
functioning.

Unfortunately, there is little information about 
trends over time in health, physical functioning, or 
the associated changes in behavior. For the popula-
tion as a whole, to be sure, the rising proportions of 
older people point to the likelihood of increasing 
prevalence of the chronic conditions associated with 
senescence; indeed, there have been increases over 
the century in death rates resulting from such dis-
eeses of later life as heart disease or cancer. But it 
is uncertain whether older individuals today are 
healthier than older individuals in the past. Medical 
advance may have improved their physical condition, 
or it may, by interfering with the principle of survival 
of the fittest, have yielded a larger but less hardy 
population of older people.

Whatever the trends may be, the inferior physical 
state of the older segments of society, in contrast 
to the younger segments, has both societal ante-
cedents and societal consequences. Health is condi-
tioned by such social factors as standard of living, 
education, and advances in medicine and public 
health. In turn, the physical state of older people 
sets limits to their social adjustment and to the con-
tributions they can make to society.

The educational background
The age strata of the society are distinguished from 
one another not only in demographic and organic 
bases but also in educational background. Older 
people have far less formal education and less re-
cent education than younger people. Among people 
75 and over, 72 per cent have had only eight years 
of schooling or less, compared with 17 per cent of 
those aged 25 to 29. Moreover, although the aver-
age educational attainment of older people is rising, 
the lag of old behind young persists.

These striking age differences in education have 
widespread ramifications throughout the society. 
Since comparatively few older people are well edu-
cated, few of them possess those characteristics, 
typically valued in our culture, that are associated 
with high education. Thus, the less educated major-
ity of older people are less likely than the few who 
are well educated to remain active; they are more 
likely to retire and less likely to belong to voluntary 
associations or to read or to want to learn more. 
They have lower incomes. They are distinctly less 
happy and less optimistic about the future; but at 
the same time, they are less introspective and less 
ready to doubt their own adequacy as spouses or 
parents. They are more negative in their view of 
death and think about it more, although fewer of 
them are disposed to plan for it.

Findings of this sort raise numerous questions 
that require answers through further research. Do 
the old differ from the young in various character-
istics and attitudes because the majority of them 
fail to meet some absolute level of educational at-
tainment? Or are the differences in some sense 
relative to the rising educational level of the popu-
lation as a whole? Will age differences tend to disap-
pear as most older people in the future attain the 
educational levels of today's younger people? Or 
will the continuing educational gap between old and 
young set the old continually at a relative disad-
antage, even though they are increasingly better 
educated?
Age categories in the population differ not only in level but also in recency of education. Thus, the content of knowledge and attitudes acquired vary by cohort. The information imparted to doctors or engineers during their training, for instance, differentiates sharply between the backgrounds of old and young. Yet within each cohort, there is a certain age homogeneity in values and beliefs (about what is good, beautiful, or true) among individuals who were educated at the same point in history.

It is interesting to note that one reason education can make such enormous differences among the age strata is that it is almost completely concentrated in the early years of life. A person enters adulthood with a fixed educational background that functions sociologically in almost the same way as such inborn characteristics as skin color or sex. Adult education (a channel that might close part of the age gap) is developing, but it still reaches only small proportions of people in their middle or later years.

Age and the economy
The age structure is closely linked to the economy. Here again, older people tend, on the average, to be comparatively disadvantaged, although individual variations are great. Their low status is indexed by their comparatively low rates of participation in the labor force and by their low average incomes.

Today less than one-third of men 65 and over are in the labor force, a drop over several decades from approximately two-thirds in 1900. Estimates suggest a possible reduction to one-fourth by 1975, provided present trends continue. Despite a great deal of research, no firm explanations for the decline have been satisfactorily demonstrated. Although there appear to be parallel declines in most industrialized countries (in contrast to agricultural countries), there are such notable exceptions as, for example, a rise in the United States during the war years.

The striking discrepancy in participation rates between older and younger men (most younger men are in the labor force) has differential consequences for the age strata, affecting not only their respective involvement in the goal-directed activities of the society but also their financial status and the time available for their leisure pursuits.

In regard to financial status, people over 60, and even those in their 50's, have markedly lower median incomes than people in their middle years, even after various adjustments are made (for example, for family size). Over time, there have been increases in the income and the purchasing power of older people, with a declining share from earnings and a rising share from social security and other retirement benefits (often paid in fixed dollars). However, relative to the rising levels of income for the country as a whole, older people continue to lag behind the young.

Considerable attention has been paid by the federal government and other agencies to the problem of how the older person, once retired, is to receive the goods and services produced by the working members of the population. Such programs as social security, Medicare, or the Older Americans Act have alleviated some difficulties and set a floor to older people's income, but they have not brought this income up to the level of younger families.

Age and the polity
Age is linked in a somewhat different fashion to the political system, where older people are signifi-
cantly involved, despite their low education. For example, older people are at least as likely as younger people to vote. They are more likely to identify strongly with one of the major parties. They are better represented among the politically elite and in leadership positions in many types of decision making. They are more disposed to keep up with the news and with public affairs through the mass media.

In general, older people are more conservative than younger people in their political ideology. There are important exceptions, however, as on issues affecting their own economic self-interest. For example, the old tend to support extensions of social security or Medicare, but frequently vote against school bonds. Yet there is little indication whether, over time, the rising level of older people's education may be associated with a less conservative stance or with a generally greater flexibility of attitude.

On the whole, age appears to contribute, for better or for worse, to the stability of the political structure. Despite the often-expressed fear that older people may be widely susceptible to extremist pressures, they are divided more evenly between the two major parties than younger people are, and they tend to hold strongly to these party commitments.

Age and religion
Religion assumes greater importance among older than younger segments of the society, although the research (which is less complete than research on the polity) does not show whether religious values become intensified with aging or whether the older cohorts reflect a stronger religious emphasis in their early training. The aged are more caught up than the
young in such personal observances as Bible reading and prayer, and elderly members of religious organizations benefit from a variety of special programs such as home visits and nursing homes. However, church attendance falls off in the oldest years.

Age and the family
Over the past century, the family has been importantly affected by changes in the age structure of the society. Although this change is usually described as the isolation of the nuclear family, it may perhaps be more accurately described as the subdivision into two nuclear families: the young couple with their dependent children and the middle-aged or aged parents.

As life expectancy has risen, husbands and wives have become increasingly likely to survive together into old age, and the age of widowhood has been postponed. Today, by age 65 and over, most men (about two-thirds), but a minority of women (about one-third), are living with their spouses.

Moreover, most of those 65 and over (nearly 80 per cent), whether married or widowed, maintain independent households. Over time, this way of living has been increasing, as decreasing proportions of older people live in the same household with their children. Even when households are shared today, the older person is, more often than not, himself the head of the house or the host, not a guest or subordinate in the home of his child. Living entirely alone is a frequent pattern among older people. This is especially true among women, over one-fourth of whom (nearly all widows) live alone. Moreover, the norms appear to favor separate households for older people, except for those who are ill.

Living separately from children does not necessarily mean complete isolation from them, however. Some 84 per cent of older people who have living children (and most do) live less than an hour away from the nearest child; and a similar proportion see one of their children at least every week.

Thus, a new type of nuclear family, the independent, mature family (often a single-person family), is developing, with little-explored consequences for the society as a whole.

Age and friendship
Outside of family groups, much of the social activity of older people takes place with age peers. If older people live in neighborhoods where age-mates are available, they tend to associate with friends or neighbors who are similar to themselves in age as well as in sex, marital status, and other characteristics. Thus, older people conform to the general principle of homophily in friendship formation, a finding that seems to controvert certain arguments against age-homogeneous residential settings for older people.

In essence, then, although the aged may remain involved in politics or religion, many of them survive today beyond the age at which they are performing or being rewarded in the major social roles: worker, parent of dependent child, and spouse. This fact has notable consequences for society. It has sometimes been interpreted as a waste of potential resources. Whether there is, in fact, such a waste (an important question from many points of view) can be answered only through examination of the character of the older people themselves. What are their capabilities? What are their feelings and motivations? Do they
constitute a potential resource for the performance of society's existing instrumental functions? Or does their freedom from occupational and familial constraints presage a reevaluation of leisure for the society as a whole, in which new functions might be performed by older people?

LIFE CYCLES

The findings from the inventory are relevant for understanding not only the age structure of the total society but also the life course of the individuals who embody the aging process and who perceive and react to the later stages of their lives. In contrast to cross-section analyses that compare the attitudes or experiences of different age strata at given points in time, life-cycle (or longitudinal) analyses trace the shifts in attitude or experience of the same individuals (or cohort of individuals) across time. (See Exhibit 1.1.) The research on the aging individual is, with certain exceptions, much less substantial than that on the age structure, however, and is therefore more difficult to interpret. Moreover, there is great individual variation among older people (even more than there is among young people in many respects), a fact that must be kept in mind continually in interpreting findings that refer to the modal individual.

Dangers of misinterpretation

Scholars often make inferences about how individuals age directly from the cross-section societal picture. The older person qua member of society tends, as we have seen, to become comparatively disadvantaged in many respects, despite the various qualifications and mitigating factors. Thus, in contrast to younger people, the older person typically has poor health and low energy; his educational background is inadequate and out of date; he is deprived of his occupational role; his earnings are cut off, and he is left to live on a fixed retirement income in the face of rising living standards and the declining value of the dollar; he is extruded from the heart of the family group as his children leave home, his spouse ultimately dies, and he is left to live alone.

In the more dramatic accounts, all these tendencies seemingly add up to a tragic stereotype of the older person as destitute, ill, facing irreparable losses, no longer integrated into society, and no longer subject to society's controls and sanctions. Old age appears as the nadir: the end of a long decline that follows peaks that occur at the early life stages in intelligence, capacity for work, income, sexual capability, and so on. Feelings, too, are often supposed to reflect the relatively deprived status of the aged within society, so that the subjective state of older people is presumably characterized by a loss of self-esteem, a deprecatory view of their low education, a sense of dejection and despair over their losses, and anxiety about their health, finances, and death.

How, then, do the actual data on aging individuals compare with such suppositions? A glance at the scattered available clues shows a picture that is, in certain respects, at sharp variance with the stereotype. The older worker's productivity shows no consistent decline. Scholarship is maintained at a fairly high level into old age. There is little evidence that aging brings sexual impotence. The typical older person seems to have a strong sense of his own worth, to minimize his self-doubts, and not even to regard himself as old. The older person seems at least as likely as the younger person to feel adequate and to have a sense of satisfaction in playing his various marital, parental, occupational, or housekeeping roles. To be sure, he does not perceive old age as the happiest period of his life. Nevertheless, he does not worry any more than the young person about his health, his finances, or any of the other difficulties to which he is subject.

Problems of life-cycle analysis

What accounts for this seeming paradox, for the apparent discrepancy between the invidious image of the older person as a member of society and the less negative image of him in his own eyes or with reference to his own earlier life? The discrepancy highlights the conceptual pitfalls of reasoning directly from the age structure of the society to the aging of individuals, the problem of disentangling life-cycle change from social change.

The cross-section analysis, as we have seen, focuses upon different cohorts of persons who are of different ages at given points of time (contrasting their political views, for example, or their competitive chances in the labor market) and yields data essential for understanding the age structure of the society. Since this form of analysis does not focus on life-cycle patterns, however, it provides no direct answers to questions about how the individual ages. It does not indicate which characteristics may change as a result of his growing older (like hair color), or which may remain stationary over his life course (like skin color). Yet a good deal of research, failing to distinguish between cross-sectional and longitudinal views, attempts to reduce one to the
other. As a consequence, there is considerable danger of fallacious interpretation, of erroneously inferring that differences among age categories in the society are due to the aging of individuals.

An apparently absurd example will illustrate this principle. The cross-section finding is that older people tend to have a lower level of education than middle-aged people—an important societal datum. A fallacious life-cycle inference might be that people’s educational background (the number of school grades attended) declines as they age! The fallacy is obvious: There can be no change or deterioration in educational background over the later life cycles of given adult individuals. The cross-section differences among the age strata arise here because social change affected the amounts of education offered to different cohorts at different points in the past.

A more realistic though parallel example is provided by income. Here the cross-section picture shows a peak in the age strata of the 30’s and 40’s—another important societal datum. However, to reason from this that the income of particular individuals tends to fall off after they reach age 45 or so gives a spurious result. In fact, an individual’s income probably does not start to decline (on the average) until closer to age 65. Here, the societal finding occurs because a social change, the continuing rise in the over-all income level, is superimposed upon the life-cycle change. Thus, the cohort now aged 50, even though their income may have continued to rise throughout their own careers, may well earn less than the cohort now aged 50, simply because the younger cohort, by starting later, started at a higher level.

Similarly, intelligence, as measured in cross-section studies, appears to reach a peak among people in their late teens or early 20’s and then to decline with age in the older strata—again a useful societal fact for the teacher of a class, for instance. But to infer that intelligence falls off so early in the life cycles of individuals is open to serious question, as a few longitudinal studies have demonstrated (at least for early and middle adulthood). Here again, the interpretative difficulty seems associated with social change, with the long-term upward trend in education. Intelligence test performance is highly correlated with educational level, and education sets older cohorts sharply below younger cohorts.

Incidentally, there are other sources of dubious interpretations besides this difficulty of separating life-cycle changes from broad social or environmental changes. For example, earlier studies appeared to show that achievement in various scientific and artistic fields reached a peak in the early years of life, although a more appropriate analysis showed peaks for most fields at age 40 to 49 or even later, with continuing performance thereafter. Here the fallacy arose through use of published biographies of individuals of differing longevity. This method can give spurious weight to the productivity of the earlier years by excluding those potentially productive men who did not live long enough to fulfill their promise.

Still another complexity of life-cycle analysis concerns the meaning to the aging individual of his own life course. How, for example, might older people be presumed to respond to the societal situation in which they tend to have less education than younger people? One inference might be that older
people regard their education as inferior or inadequate; indeed, this is the kind of inference very often made. Yet a glance at one of the findings reported in the Inventory shows that older people do not appear to be apologetic about their low education or to regard it as a shortcoming. That is, in this instance, older people do not seem to view their education in terms of their relative deprivation within the society. They seem, rather, to be assessing their education with reference to their own life course, or perhaps to that of their peers. It is not their own education that has changed but the education of younger generations that has changed around them. Thus, to assume one can predict an older person's self esteem simply by knowing his position in the society may lead to an erroneous conclusion.

Such examples point to an important principle, namely, generalizations from a cross-section analysis of the age structure of the society to the life cycle of individuals can be grossly misleading (see, for example, Schaie, 1965). Fallacies such as these pose a particular problem for social scientists because they produce distortions in substantive and theoretical understanding of the aging process. At the same time, there may be consequences for old people themselves. Fallacies can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. To define an older person as incompetent, for instance, may help to make him so. Both scholarly and practical considerations, then, underscore the need for more meticulous analysis and interpretation of existing studies.

Some suggestive findings
Despite shortcomings of method and difficulties of interpretation, important insights emerge from a few exploratory studies that succeed in following individuals over portions of their life course (through longitudinal analysis, panel analysis, cohort analysis, and various specially designed research procedures). Clues from these studies (that may, in turn, dictate the direction of much future research) suggest, in the first place, that aging may be attended by a considerable shifting of goals, a redefinition of problems, and a reformulation of expectations. In regard to health, for instance, many older people appear to adjust expectations downward. Recognizing their disabilities, they may come to accept them as inevitable or unexceptional accompaniments of old age, to rate their own health more positively than doctors do, and to worry no more about it than the young do.

There is, in the second place, a continuing growth and development over the life cycle in many respects (in addition to the foregoing instances of income, intellectual functioning, or achievement) well beyond the point now suggested by cross-section studies. The individual apparently tends to accumulate experience as he ages, to develop a place for himself, and to adapt to expectations. There is an evident increase with age in such serious concerns as in public affairs and, possibly, religion, which may be indicative of a search for some basic or transcendent system of values or meaning.

These are but tentative analyses of the reactions of older people, tentative in that more research spanning the life cycle is needed. As longitudinal studies are expanded, they will undoubtedly reveal more about the aging process and its meaning for individuals as they live through the later stages of the life cycle.

SUCCESSIVE COHORTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Important as it is for research to extend and enlarge such longitudinal studies, the analysis of the life cycle of single cohorts, like the cross-section study, must be further elaborated if it is to yield a more complete view of the over-all aging process (see Exhibit 1.1). In order to understand the subtle interplay of individual aging and social change, it is necessary to use research methods that are more imaginative than those ordinarily employed. Thus, analyses tracing the life course, not of one, but of a sequence of cohorts, can broaden the understanding afforded by either of the two approaches discussed.

On the one hand, the description of the life pattern of a particular cohort cannot in itself reveal the inherent character of the life-cycle process because, with the passage of time, individuals are simultaneously affected both by their own aging and by the trend of social and environmental events. For example, the adjustment to retirement of one cohort (B in Exhibit 1.1) might be quite different from that of a later cohort (C in Exhibit 1.1) if, in the future, retirement were to become more widely accepted and individuals were to be better prepared in advance. Hence, in order to isolate the effects of aging from the effects of social change, it is necessary to study the way in which different cohorts age at different times, in different places, and under different conditions. (Alternatively, the assumption is often
made, perhaps justifiably in special instances, that the environment has not changed or that the environmental change has no material effect, at least in the relevant respects.)

On the other hand, cross-section views are not in themselves enough to show how the structure of the society affects and is affected by the aging of its members. Even the comparison of several cross sections, though revealing trends, does not explain the link between aging and social change. Here it is the flow of successive cohorts through the social structure that allows deeper understanding of social change, since the sequence of cohorts is a major channel for the transformation of society (Ryder, 1965).

A number of studies of consecutive cohorts point to the high potential of this method of disentangling life-cycle change from social change (at the same time illustrating several devices for offsetting the practical difficulty of the adult researcher who will not himself survive long enough to observe the entire lifetime of even a single cohort). One such study, by using lifetime residence histories to reconstruct the migration patterns of successive cohorts, succeeds in determining whether individuals as they age have followed the societal trend of population away from the farm and toward the city. This analysis discovers that the cohorts of people now old have, indeed, tended to follow the over-all pattern; whereas recent cohorts are more likely to move away from larger cities to suburbs. Another study, by utilizing mental hospital records of successive cohorts of newly admitted patients, finds that the over-all shift toward earlier release does not apply to the patients now aged 65 and over. Still another study, by using samples of successive cohorts and controlling the impact of societal shifts in political response to particular elections, demonstrates the individual's increasing identification with the Republican party as he ages.

Many other findings from the Inventory raise provocative questions about the older people of the future, as cohorts who are young today will reach their later years. For example, one study of successive cohorts shows that a husband and wife today live together for a longer period and more independently of other relatives than a husband and wife of an earlier era. What then are the implications for the structure of the family or for socialization processes within the society? Does this mean that the older couple is becoming an internally strengthened family unit? Does the couple's transitional middle-year phase serve as a training period for the later years? Or, to take another example, what changes in the future use of leisure in American society are implicit in a complex set of shifts observed in successive cohorts? Men at age 60 can now expect more than seven years of retirement. Families now have, on the average, a period of asset-building prior to retirement. People are increasingly surviving until retirement. People are increasingly reaching retirement with higher levels of education and after considerable leisure experience in weekends and vacations. How will the lives of older people be affected by such changes?

In conclusion, the findings amassed by social scientists provide detailed description of the position of older people in the society today, a position of relative deprivation in certain spheres (such as the
economic or the educational) but not in others (such as the political or the religious), a position not invariably viewed as invidious by the older people themselves. Yet, social science still has much to learn about how an individual ages, what changes occur as the result of maturation or adult socialization, and how inevitable such changes may be. Social change is continually intervening, so that the older people of the future will not hold a position in society precisely analogous to that of today's older people, nor will they have aged in precisely the same way. Changes have been occurring in immigration and education, so that the cohort born in 1900 contains larger proportions of the foreign born and of the poorly educated than the more recent cohorts. Medical developments are taking place that can affect the future health and vigor of the aged. Social events are occurring that can influence their political attitudes or the peak level of their earnings. Thus, while much existing research emphasizes the disadvantages of being old, there are, nevertheless, few answers to the central question: Will future generations of older persons necessarily suffer similar handicaps?

Works cited in Chapter 1


