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ABSTRACT

Drawing from recent research, this paper attempts to refute some of the commonly held assumptions about the inevitable decline of intellect as part of the aging process and point to ways educators can expand educational opportunities for older adults. After exploring some of the myths and stereotypes about senile, disoriented, helpless, rigid, unproductive, and slow old people, and explaining that these myths are believed by older adults as well as their children, the paper examines recent research findings that belie these assumptions. Among these findings are the following: (1) barring illness or disease, aging is associated with a slowing down of information retrieval functions, but not with a loss of intellect or an impaired ability to learn; (2) when older workers are allowed to self-pace the intake of information, they can use their experience in problem solving and exhibit as much or more competence as their younger colleagues; (3) society's negative view of the elderly fosters erosion of self-reliance and internal locus of control; and (4) studies of the television viewing habits of older adults indicate that these people are not disengaging, but rather want to remain informed and involved in life and human affairs. The final sections address ways that educators can help increase the involvement of older people in education, suggesting that they be offered activities and pursuits appropriate to their abilities. (LAL)

INEVITABLE DECLINE: EXPLODING THE SENILITY MYTH

A Position Paper

by

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Abstract

As the demographics of America continue to change, junior and community colleges are confronted with more and more students older than the traditional college-age cohort. Teachers must know what to expect from these "new" older students who have decided to continue their formal education at a time when institutions of higher learning are facing declining enrollment and tight budgets. Teachers need to be aware of the problems that the elderly face in returning to school, and of the pertinent learning theory that can help them to meet the needs with which gerontologists are so familiar.

INEVITABLE DECLINE: EXPLODING THE SENILITY MYTH

Assumptions about the inevitable decline of intellect as part of the aging process are insidious, convincing, and tenacious. In our youth-oriented society, generalizations and stereotypes about the deterioration of elderly people have built up gradually, almost subliminally. The mass media have promoted the image of the disoriented, helpless old person. Even the many examples of "late-blooming" artists and novelists, professionals in many career fields, and especially those who keep physically fit throughout their lifetime, are discounted as exceptional.

A typical conversation in Middle America, circa 1984:

"Poor Granny! The mind is the first thing to go. She'd forget her head if it weren't attached!"

"Yes, and she used to be so alert and 'with it.' Now it seems like she doesn't want to do anything."

"Or like she can't do anything. Guess we'll have to put her in a nursing home."

But children of aging parents are not the only persons who believe this myth. The old people themselves are led to believe it, too! (Field, 1972) "Senility" has become a catchword: an explanation for every slight lapse (usually ignored or imputed to fatigue or anxiety in younger people). In fact, "burnout" has replaced "nervous breakdown" as an epithet for dysfunctions up through middle age, while "senility" remains the cause of every problem of old age. This is the definition of senile from The Random House Dictionary:

Senile: adj. 1) suffering from mental or physical decline because of old age,
2) of or belonging to old age or aged persons.

How true is it that "physical and mental decline...belong to old age"? Physiologically, the number of brain cells begin to decrease from the twenties onward (Carmichael, 1976). Rather than appreciating that brain cells begin to die (and new ones develop to replace them) throughout one's life, popular belief has it that atrophy begins abruptly and proceeds at an alarming rate at age 65. Mental faculties are not necessarily lost with the unreplaced cells. Arteriosclerosis is certainly not a disease confined to the old, but it is viewed that way. Symptoms of senility are often psychologically induced, as well. After hearing from all sides that this is the natural condition of aging, people tend to behave as expected. The antidote is difficult to administer. Lawrence Galton, in a popular book written for the layman,

Don't Give Up on an Aging Parent (1975) claims, "Age-association (of diseases) is exploded by seeing young people suffering from 'old' diseases." In fact, many medical authorities feel that serious diseases such as high blood pressure, acute heart attacks, diabetes, and even cancer are less ominous in the elderly, as far as chances for survival are concerned. "Better at 70 than 40," is the consensus of doctors (Calhoun, 1978).

Myths about the rigid, cranky, or gullible personality are also firmly entrenched in Western society. In 1930, a 78-year-old woman psychologist wrote a slim volume describing the typical slow, inflexible, dependent, disagreeable, slovenly, forgetful, useless, untruthful, and unhappy oldster. This self-centered person was often subject to tantrums when not bored or in imaginary pain (Martin, 1930). Mrs. Martin decided that "Growing old is living in the Past." In her therapy clinics, she found that her patients were "using past experiences for present-day needs (having) a preoccupation with creature comforts because there was nothing to think of but themselves." She drew them out with life histories, still a viable strategy today, and as they would relax and tell, they began to work through old fears and rationalizations to involvement with others again. Half a century ago, Mrs. Martin perceived of herself as the exception to "old at 65." She must have been exceptional as a woman in the then male-dominated field of psychology. Offering herself as a role-model seemed effective back then, before the technique was described in research studies.

More recently, behaviorists classify behavior as progressive or regressive, coping or frustrating to one's goals; however, they claim that all behavior is learned through reinforcement. Even older people, with their habits deeply ingrained, change behavior to meet current needs. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, those who depend on others for food and shelter will also require attention and approval from those nurturers. If lonely, one may act childish to receive attention or positive reinforcement for that behavior. Increasingly, he will resort to helplessness, which may then be cruelly exploited by the "benefactor" (Erp & Freeman, 1971).

Calton describes the "Set in Their Ways Myth" as a result of previous trial-and-error. Many older people may reject what seems like a progressive and original measure because it isn't really new. Somewhere in their past experience, they have heard of this solution before and remember that it did

not work then. Or some do-gooder will propose an expensive improvement for the old folks without realizing what impact it may have on a fixed income. The elderly don't have to "Try it--you'll like it"; they already know that they won't like it. Galton writes that people over 40 are more likely to suggest practical ideas on the job because as a group they exhibit "less wasted energy, more control, efficiency, tenacity, persistence, attention span, (and) achieved status" (Galton, 1975).

The assumption that older workers are unproductive, apathetic, and slow is an extrapolation from observation of problems involving physical strength, visual and auditory acuity, and reaction time. This assumption is unwarranted if it is the basis for understanding the relationship between chronological age and ability to perform on the job. Still, it is difficult to expose the illogic in this argument. For the over-65's, sense impressions are bombarding them too fast for proper processing, with much of the information being garbled or missed entirely due to diminished hearing, sight, and nerve sensitivity. Short-term memory capacity becomes overloaded, especially in a sequence of repetitive tasks or in the case of seemingly inappropriate content which prior experience tends to ignore. Associative recall is thus impaired, and the retrieval of information system is out of order. The mental set, anticipation of outcomes based on past experience, may not help in a new situation. Furthermore, the inability to sort quickly enough through facts stored in memory for those applicable to the present problem can cause mental fatigue, certainly loss of self-confidence, and finally, even the lack of desire to continue. The job becomes threatening, and the possibility of ridicule or censure increases. The last stage is withdrawal from the work: little speed causes less production, and leads to lack of motivation.

Empirical studies with senile psychotics (Botwinick & Birren, 1973) demonstrates that diminished output of both control and experimental groups is less a function of age-related mental capacity than of the steps in receiving, processing, storing, associating, and retrieving information. Like a computer with a broad data base, the information is stored properly; however, "access time lengthened with the amount (of information) stored" (Birren, 1964). The slowing down is normal in aging, but cannot be considered evidence of mental decline (Galton, 1975). Therefore, when the speed factor is separated from the required task, no changes in intellect become apparent, barring illness or

disease. And learning--the capacity to acquire new knowledge and skills--is unimpaired.

In a longitudinal study on men ranging initially from ages 71-81, the retest results after ten years were very close to beginning scores. Birren notes (1964) that certain compensations for diminished perception are "...verbal fluency, a reasoned approach, stored information, richer associations, greater depth and wider range of knowledge, greater discrimination and judgment, stability, self-knowledge, purpose, perseverance, attention, and efficiency (less error, better use of energy)."

> The mature individual is processing less information per unit of time... (but) organizing discrete bits of information into concept groups (which) helps process bigger chunks... (Birren, 1964, author's emphasis)

When the workers are allowed to self-pace the intake of information from the environment, they can use their experience in problem-solving, and exhibit as much competence or more than their younger colleagues. The point is that most elderly people are aware of their physical limitations and can adjust to compensate for them.

In a study designed to distinguish normal attrition of sensory powers and memory from pathological disorders, Liliane Israel (1976) finds that

> Although the aged subjects required more repetitions, their processing was slowed, and their field of attention easily diffused, they continued to learn and were more tenacious than the young. Their ability to acquire new material was not different from younger subjects, except when other factors were introduced: e.g. lower level of formal education, little opportunity for practice, anxiety, or feeling of irrelevance of material. However, subjects with mental disorders demonstrated loss of previously acquired knowledge and inability to acquire new concepts. (Author's emphasis)

Similar results are noted by Nancy Bayley (1956). Individual patterns of growth and change mandate longitudinal rather than cross-sectional studies. Differences within the same age group could be attributed to college education, skill in a particular occupation, cultural influences, stress, values and attitudes, physical deprivation, and environmental and measurement factors. Such a complex mechanism is the human organism that even diet therapy often seems to improve memory.

What are some of the most persistent influences of society's view upon the behavior of the elderly? Convinced that "you can't teach an old dog new

tricks," who will waste effort trying? "Let sleeping dogs lie," because if they are disturbed, they might snarl and snap at their would-be benefactor. So the elderly are gradually squeezed out of the picture, increasingly excluded from all kinds of social participation, made to retire early from work, relegated to "retirement villages," nursing homes, or the scrap heap. Samuel Beckett's stark image in Endgame (1957) of Hamm's ancient parents stuffed into ashbins has become a consciousness-raising symbol for advocates of the rights of the elderly; however, in Alvin Toffler's "throwaway society," (1970) no one is more disposable, dispensable, and replaceable, than the elderly. Easiest of all is it to legitimize the process of withdrawal and isolation by labeling it disengagement. The "senior citizen," presumable aware of imminent demise, will suddenly realize that he must "set his house in order and make peace with his maker." Suddenly, "I'm old," he thinks, and acts accordingly. Robert Butler's Theory of Life Review describes the process of self-reexamination as necessary "to resolve past conflicts and restructure the present to meet death with serenity" (Borges & Dutton, 1976). But is this process inevitable?

Aronson & Graziano (1976) cite studies supporting the importance of self-concept on behavior. Social role fosters either coping or breakdown: people who are labeled "incompetent" are easily convinced of their deficiencies and become dependent. Even generic labels like "Old Man" and "Senior Citizen" can be taken personally. When self-reliance or the internal locus of control becomes eroded, people do not take responsibility for their own actions, and feel helpless and hopeless. Human behavior reflects societal expectations.

The social climate affects functioning, and senility becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Borges and Dutton (1976) discuss youth's "3 r's toward old age: repudiation, repugnance, and repulsion." When "old-and decrepit" is considered one word, the bias is hard to break. Old people themselves begin to reflect the stereotypes, acting ugly, slow, dumb, and helpless, sick, sexless: in short, senile. How different from Dickens' gentle portrait of the Aged Parent, who may be a little hard-of-hearing and childlike, but who never appears childish or ill-natured.

Somehow, empirical findings that give the lie to this type of overgeneralization continue to make little impact on the wholly negative concept of old age. In an article titled, "The Assessment of Television Viewing Behavior of Older Adults," Davis (1975) contends that the elderly's self-reported

patterns of television viewing include "diverse interests, like any other population, but preferences for news and public affairs, indicating a desire to keep up, using tv as a primary information source." The study targeted programs most watched by this audience. For advertisers, implications are clear: these people are not disengaging, but want to remain informed and involved in life and human affairs. Far from being "removed from social participation," Hess (1975) finds that a higher percentage of 75+-year-olds vote in national elections than any other segment of the population. The elderly may suffer role loss, economic deprivation (although this too is not inevitable), mandatory retirement, an uncertain future as we all do, but they don't perceive of themselves as old until forced to by our youth-loving culture. "People do not move into new age groupings until they can no longer compete successfully in the old" (Havighurst & Wolfenberg, 1956).

So with their ego status denigrated and social roles severely curtailed, the older Americans lack the heart to learn. What can educators do to expand the life space which has been so artifically constricted? First, the elderly need not be reminded of their motor, neural, and sensory limitations and of the decline in physical strength and endurance. They can be offered activities and pursuits appropriate to their abilities. They can self-pace to gain the additional time necessary to process information. If handball is out of the question, they can still enjoy the challenge of golf. If lifting, pushing, and bending are medically prohibited, they can direct the efforts of others or employ mechanical devices and the judgment and experience acquired over the years. Some of their formal education may be outdated, but that is true for the most recent college graduate as well.

The language faculty of the elderly is better than ever. A college graduate who knows 10,000 words at age 22 is likely to know 40,000 by age 65 (Birren, 1964). They need less feedback to know when they are right. Younger colleagues sequence tasks; older ones break jobs down into workable components. Their concentration and perseverance will solve problems, where younger workers may engage in aimless trial-and-error experimentation. Their slower hand/eye coordination and reflexes are compensated for by a rich ever growing set of communication skills and by a memory bank crowded with information. They think before acting, because they do not have to imagine the consequences--they have been there before. They are physically younger,

better educated, and healthier than 60-year-olds were a half century ago. They know themselves and their alternatives. They have made their mark in life, and seek little recognition from outside themselves. They have learned how to learn.

At one of the first White House Conferences on Aging (1971), the strongest recommendation was to involve the elderly in the planning of programs designed to meet their needs. The Joint Resolution read in part:

> ...assisting middle-aged and older persons to make the preparation, develop skills and interest, and find social contacts which will make the gift of added years of life a period of reward and satisfaction...(with) emphasis on the right and obligation of older persons to free choice and self-help in planning their own futures.

The assumption is that active, involved people in their youth will continue to be so in later life, if permitted by society. Along with Erik Erikson, Calhoun (1978) believes that "older persons can continue to grow and change if (the) social attitude is one of acceptance...The elderly are no less able to learn and retain new material than younger people." In 1980, the Director of Adult Education of the Baltimore Public Schools, Thomas Van Sant, stressed "emphasis on ability...not golden age clubs and mindless recreational diversions, but education for later life (which will produce) vigorous, active, demanding men and women." Some recommendations include:

> ...the public school system should share the responsibility of altering negative attitudes about the elderly and teach about "dynamic maturity."
> ...the colleges should develop a curriculum on aging similar to those on childhood and adolescence.
> ...teachers' training should include preparation for a constructive approach to later life.
> ...fundamental changes in our value system (will regard) volunteer and avocational work as worthwhile (as paid employment).
>
> (Calhoun, 1978)

Federal grants and state programs alike are geared toward these goals, with outreach efforts, antidiscrimination legislation, and "Golden Age" benefits. But the most direct method of salvaging a wasted human resource lies in the concept of Lifelong Learning. What can they study? There is no topic or skill that is closed to a motivated student. "Older and retired adults indicate a great interest in learning for personal development" (Dutton, 1980). The non-traditional students (those older than college age) are the mainstay of today's

junior and community colleges suffering from declining enrollment, and counseling departments on university campuses are offering special programs and courses designed to assimilate these new/old learners.

> Adults must continue to learn. Learning, like breathing, is a requirement of life. (Rubkin, 1980)

This is the hope we have for exploding the senility myth, the inevitability of decline in advanced years.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Roberta Boss received an M.A. degree in English Education from the University of Maryland in May 1981, completed her coursework toward the doctorate, and was admitted to candidacy in February 1984. Her dissertation title is

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A recent presentation was DEVELOPING RHETORICAL SKILLS IN "BASIC WRITERS," at a conference jointly sponsored by Northern Virginia Community College and the Greater Washington Area Association for Developmental Educators (GWAADE) at the University of Maryland College of Adult Education, College Park, February 9, 1984. Additionally, she has conducted several workshops at the Washington Area Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (WATESOL) conventions, the latest of which is a demonstration of a microcomputer program to teach sentence-expansion and modification (Northern Virginia Community College, October 13, 1984).