

## chapter 3

# The Aging Population, Social Trends, and Changes of Behavior and Belief

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In this chapter, I consider how changing characteristics of our population and related exogenous conditions may alter attitudes and beliefs about older people. The chapter applies current social-psychological theory to attitude change about older people. The basic argument is that exogenous demographic, economic, and social conditions change behavior and that behavior changes attitudes. This idea may be used as a framework for research to understand future stereotypes of older people, changing attitudes about social issues involving the elderly, and new attitudes about aging.

### GENERAL MODEL

The general theoretical model of attitude change adopted in this chapter is that various exogenous forces cause behavior to change, which in turn causes attitudes to change (see Figure 3.1). Exogenous forces include such conditions as changes in the demographic age structure, swings in the economic and political health of the nation, and various changes in social norms.

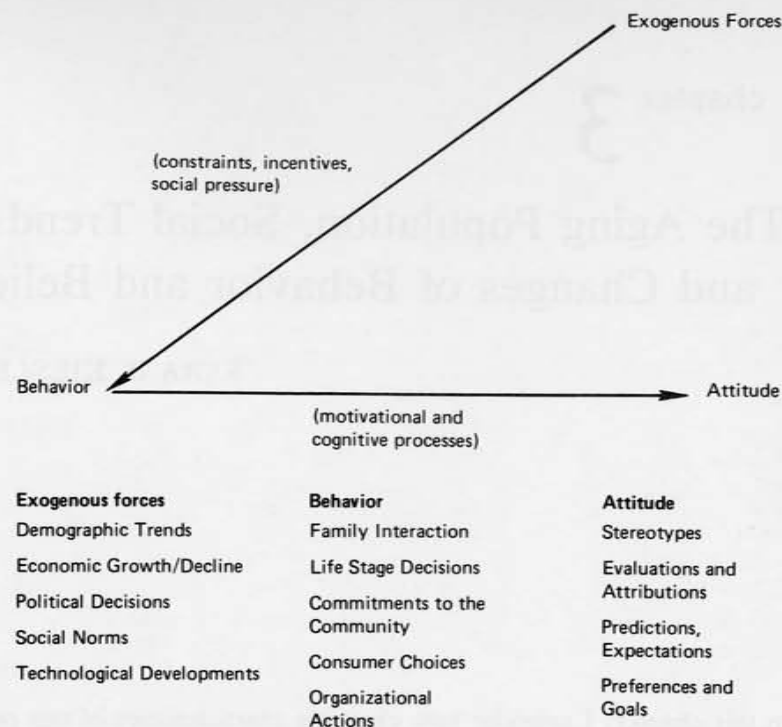


Figure 3.1. General model of attitude change.

In the first phase of the model, these external conditions and trends influence the immediate context in which individuals and their families act: The context affects their behavior. An example of the effect is the demographic trend toward improved life expectancy, which can increase the average person's number of older relatives. This increased number of relatives is part of the context of family interaction. Perhaps it means that people spend holidays with family members rather than traveling alone or with friends. Or perhaps they turn down jobs offered in faraway towns to stay near elderly parents. In this instance, the mortality rate is considered the exogenous force and the holiday activities or decision not to move are the behaviors influenced by it.

Exogenous forces influence behavior through constraints on decisions, perceived incentives, and social pressure. A family deciding whether to move West, for instance, may be constrained by having a grandmother's welfare to consider. Exogenous demographic conditions also attach incentives to the family's alternatives. For example, redistribution of the population toward the South and the West affects the family's judgments

about job opportunities there. Finally, explicit and implicit social pressures on the family transmit social norms about behavior or imply sanctions for violating norms. The family may feel that staying with Grandma is the right thing to do, despite their personal preferences.

The three factors—constraints, incentives, and social pressures—are considered intervening variables in the model that link general external circumstances to individual decisions and actions. Although often they are much more complex than the previous examples indicate, for the purposes of this discussion only a simple effect is assumed: On average and for large groups of individuals, stronger incentives and pressures as well as more constraints (or fewer alternatives) will increase the probability and strength of exogenously caused behavior.

Researchers have uncovered many important areas of behavior that are influenced by exogenous forces. Increasing divorce and remarriage among older people, for example, has meant that many of them now acknowledge two or even three "immediate" families (see Furstenberg 1981), which means changes in family interaction patterns and access to more relatives across the age span. Important decisions about one's life are another set of behaviors influenced exogenously. Such decisions as to have or to delay having children or to retire earlier or later are in part a function of past living standards and future prospects in one's occupational class (e.g., Easterlin 1973, Morgan 1979, Oppenheimer 1981). Commitments to the community (such as volunteer work and voting), consumer choices (such as buying and selling a house), and organization or group action (such as committing funds to building a nursing home) are other categories of behavior that social psychologists have typically studied as internally caused by preexisting attitudes and socialization but that are also influenced exogenously.

In the second phase of the general model, behavioral changes caused by exogenous forces influence attitudes. Social psychologists have studied many kinds of attitudes in the last several decades. These include:

1. Stereotypes of people—that is, beliefs about the attributes of group members (e.g., Bruner and Tagiuri 1954, Hamilton 1979).
2. Evaluations of people and their behavior and attributions of causality for their behavior (e.g., Anderson 1967, Zajonc 1968, Jones and Nisbett 1971, Nisbett and Valins 1972).
3. Predictions and expectations, including "social schemata," chains of behavior that seem to go together (Nisbett and Ross 1980, Ross *et al.* 1977, Snyder and Swann 1978).
4. Preferences and goals (e.g., Zander 1968, Maloney and Schonfeld 1973).

The general model draws on two major theoretical views in social psychology to explain how behavior affects the kinds of attitudes just listed. First, there are motivational theories, which include dissonance, equity reactance, commitment, and self-awareness theories (Festinger 1957, Walster *et al.* 1973, Brehm 1966, C. Kiesler 1971, Duval and Wicklund 1972). These theories differ among themselves in some important ways, but not for purposes of the model discussed here. All of the motivational theories predict that an individual's own behavior arouses motives or drives that in turn change attitudes. Generally, the motives concern self-enhancement or protection of self, and the attitude change is in the direction of maintaining self-esteem. For instance, suppose a man commits himself to financial responsibility for an aged parent whose resources are otherwise limited; suppose also that the man's decision implies some lesser contribution to his children's education than he had originally intended. The man would be motivated to justify and explain his new position to himself. To satisfy this motive to justify his decision, the man could change his attitudes. He might increase his liking of the parent (improving his parent's deservingness) or come to feel more confident that people in general care for their elderly relatives (increasing the social desirability of his decision).

To summarize the simple role of motivation in the general model, exogenously caused behavior is assumed to arouse individual motives, usually to justify the behavior and protect self-esteem. Post hoc justification leads to attitudes that place the behavior in a good light from the actor's point of view.

The kinds of attitudes that change because of motivational processes include: stereotypes that enhance the desirability of one's in-groups (Campbell 1967); evaluations and attributions that "explain" behavior (e.g., Grune and Lepper 1974, cf. Bandura *et al.* 1977); expectations for the future or past history that are revised to reflect positively on the desirability and rationality of decisions (Aronson 1966); and changes in preferences and goals that make behavior consistent retrospectively (Jones and Berglas 1978). The model does not specify which kind of attitude will change in particular cases, however; this must be evaluated separately.

In contrast to the motivational view, cognitive theories of attitude change focus on the role of thinking, learning, and remembering in attitude change (e.g., Bem 1972, Harvey 1976, Harvey *et al.* 1978, Taylor and Crocker 1979, Cacioppo and Petty 1979, Petty *et al.* 1980). Here, too, there are some important differences among theories, but a general statement is possible. It is asserted that behavior influences an individual's information, and that the individual's inferences from information or from memories of information influence attitudes (e.g., Ross

and Sicol 1979, Snyder and Uranowitz 1978). For example, reading what newspapers say about nursing home fires provides information affecting one's inferences and attitudes about the dangers of nursing homes. Cognitive theoretical research aims at discovering what individuals will infer from such pieces of behavioral information.

According to the cognitive approach, it is the informative aspect of behavior that changes attitudes, and anyone's behavior can be informative. Either behavior in general or one's own behavior can change attitudes. Hence, the man who agrees to take care of his aged parent acquires information about himself from his behavior. His behavior speaks of a generous benefactor helping a person in need. However, he might reach the same conclusion about someone else who was to care for his aged parent or about all people who take care of their parents. The attitude that he is a generous person, then, is not necessarily a self-enhancing one; cognitive theories explain its acquisition quite well.

To summarize the simple roles of cognition in the general model, exogenously caused behavior produces information. Inferences are drawn from the behavioral information; they make sense of it. Inferences are used in developing and changing attitudes. Again, the general model does not specify which kinds of attitudes will change in specific cases, only that they will end up intelligibly related to the behavior.

The rest of this chapter is divided into four sections. The first section describes the application of the general model to the case of an aging population, especially its effects on behavior and attitudes about the elderly and aging. In the second section, it is proposed that the behaviors that are changed by the aging of the population will vary in the extent to which they involve motivational and cognitive processes of individuals. The third section describes the effect of individual motivational processes on attitudes about older people and aging. The fourth section describes the attitudinal effects of individual cognitive processes. These last sections show that motivational and cognitive theories predict different kinds of attitude change and complement each other.

### APPLICATION TO THE AGING POPULATION

The general model proposed here can be applied to the case of an aging population (see Figure 3.2). An aging population may be defined informally as a change in the age distribution of the nation toward an increasingly older average age and a larger proportion of older persons in the total. In its final effect on attitudes, the aging population is theoretically interchangeable with any exogenous trend in society, as long as the behavioral effects are the same. (Behavior is the crucial factor

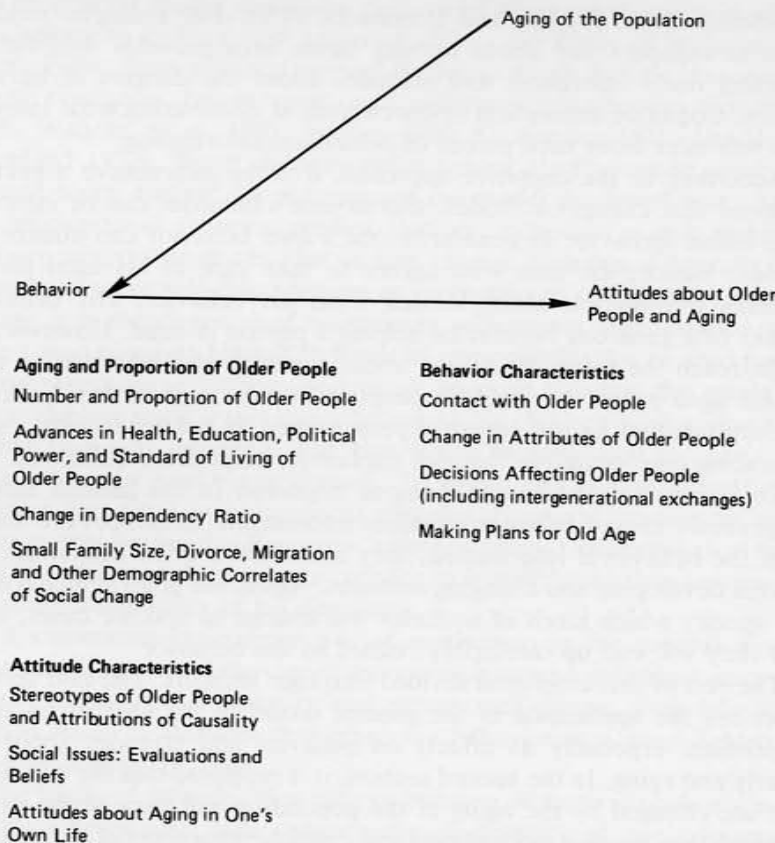


Figure 3.2. Application of the model.

intervening between exogenous conditions and attitude change.) However, demographic aging as we are experiencing it in this country has features that suggest a relatively strong indirect effect on attitudes about the elderly and aging.

One effect of the aging of the population is that a large number of people are more involved with older people. There is more personal contact or interaction with older people and more learning about social and personal issues related to aging, such as retirement and long-term health care. Advances in the health, education, political clout, and living standard of older people will also increase contact and knowledge of them, because older people will appear more frequently in the community, in business, and in politics.

Increased contact with older people and knowledge of them will affect attitudes about the kind of people they are (stereotypes) as well as attitudes about the social issues that affect them (see, e.g., Insko and Wilson 1977). These changes of attitude will occur even if more contact only elaborates current impressions of older people. Enriching perceptions of older people would help popularize new subcategories of older people (e.g., young-old versus old-old) and cause greater awareness of the heterogeneity of outlook and needs of older people.

The demographic aging of the population is likely to affect attitudes relevant to social issues even more strongly, however, because of the public and private decisions to be made about older people (Wack and Rodin 1978). Although advances in the well-being of older people is true generally, a minority of older people are poor, ill, or too frail to care for themselves. This minority is growing disproportionately faster than the overall group of persons over 65. Declines in mortality are increasing the numbers of people who are very old, the numbers who have no immediate family, and the numbers who have very few financial assets. As a result, public organizations responsible for older people and also relatives of poor, alone, sick, or frail older people will have to make difficult decisions about their care. More intergenerational decisions and transfers of resources will be necessary. The decisions may involve higher taxes targeted to social security and Medicare, more publicly supported housing and community facilities for older people, more government regulation of family responsibilities for elderly parents, more professionalization of services and specialized training for people serving older clients, and more pressure on employers not to discriminate against older people. If the numbers of older persons increase and they support these decisions and the decisions actually are implemented, the total effect on attitudes about social issues affecting older people could be considerable.

Another demographic characteristic of the aging population is its (noncausal) association with significant social change, such as smaller family size and higher divorce rates (e.g. Waring 1975). These changes are circumstantial but significant because of the likelihood that social change plus a larger population of older people will have a synergistic effect on behavior and attitudes. For example, because of the increase in the numbers of single people and childless people and the decrease in household size and the number of marriages, both old and young Americans may seek close relationships outside the immediate family to a greater degree than they did in earlier times. In addition, smaller and less permanent households may promote a less disciplined family life because of fewer domestic responsibilities and less isolation of family



members from people outside the family. This extrafamilial interaction and loosening of family ties will take older people out of tight family circles. Some will seek equally close circles of age peers. But others will break tradition to participate in age-integrated recreational and work activities such as active sports, political campaigning, and attending college. This proximity and association of young and old could lead to more frequent cross-peer friendships and kin-like relations.

Old age is a unique "stigma" because most people expect to acquire it eventually. In addition to having effects on attitudes about older people, the demographically aging population will cause many people to think more about their own old age, to plan for it, and to change attitudes about their own aging. For example, the trend toward building communities exclusively for the elderly and toward designing condominium facilities that will be attractive to them provokes middle-aged couples to buy homes now for future use in retirement. These purchasing commitments could affect attitudes about the desirability of attaining the age of retirement.

In addition to changing attitudes about aging, exogenous social change will combine synergistically with the greater numbers of elderly to affect an individual's plans for old age. For instance, the highly publicized divorce rate has apparent ill effects on older women, many of whom are left in financial straits. Seeing this, younger women may be encouraged to seek employment or work more hours as a way of ensuring their own security in old age. The two factors—a salient divorce rate and seeing more older women who live alone—interact so that the total effect on women's employment would be greater than the sum of the two exogenous forces.

All of the previous arguments are to the effect that characteristics of the aging population are pervasive, and either alone or in combination will affect behavior and decisions involving older people and one's own aging, which in turn will affect attitudes about older people and aging.

Another reason the aging population is important is that it is salient, and the causes of behavior and decisions in the future will be attributed more frequently (and perhaps inaccurately) to the aging population or to the older age of people. For example, higher government expenditures for services to the sick and poor may be blamed on political pressures exerted by older people (Hudson 1978). On the individual level, people may attribute the decisions of older individuals or families who move, buy an apartment, support a candidate, or take up a hobby to their advanced age (see S. Kiesler 1975).

The "graying of the nation" as well as the aging of individuals will be a likely target of causal attribution for many political, economic, and

family decisions because age is a highly visible and discernible aspect of people. Like gender and race, age is an attribute that people use in initially categorizing individuals and groups (see Taylor *et al.* 1978). This makes age (also gender, race, and other physical characteristics) a much-used key to organizing the social environment in thought, and as a result age easily comes to mind as a causal variable (Cantor and Mischel 1979).

Attributing the cause of behavior to people's age obviously is related to attitudes about older people and aging. In fact, attributions of cause are attitudes, and they are often significant ones (e.g. Nisbett and Borgida 1975). For instance, some people believe that age causes declines of intelligence and extreme social behavior (e.g., both talkativeness and withdrawal). These theories could lead to the exclusion of older people from informal social and work groups. Such exclusion would elicit behavioral confirmation of the attributions in older people (see Word *et al.* 1974, Zanna and Pack 1975, Snyder *et al.* 1978, Messe *et al.* 1979).

Our aging population, then, will affect attitudes about older people and aging for two general reasons. First, the aging population is a strong exogenous force. Characteristics of the aging population will increase contact with older people, change behavior toward them, and affect preparations that people make for their own aging, all tending to integrate older people into society. Second, it is argued that the aging population is a conceptually relevant exogenous force. The aging population will seem to change behavior independent of its actual effects. This perception will result from the salience of age as an attribute of people and is itself an attitude.

Because of the previous arguments, the application of the general model to aging (Figure 3.2) posits a significant connection between the demographic aging of the population and individuals' attitudes about older people and aging. It is this connection to which the remainder of this chapter is addressed.

### General Behavioral Effects of the Aging Population

In this section, I consider the motivational and cognitive effects of exogenously changed behavior. In order to understand how increased contact with older people, decisions affecting the elderly, changes in attributes of older people, and planning for old age affect attitudes, we must first examine more closely the motivational and cognitive processes activated by behavior change.

The general idea that behavior influences attitude is an old one, but Festinger's dissonance theory (1957) was the first well-tested model of the effect in social psychology. Festinger asserted that behavior has motivational implications and affects attitudes through motivational processes. Attitude change is a response to personal drives or tension (motivation) aroused by behavior.

In dissonance theory and other motivational models, certain perceptions of behavior are important because of their influence on motivation. These perceptions of behavior include its being seen as freely chosen or internally motivated. They are perceptions that increase the personal relevance of behavior and its implications for self.

More recently, an approach to studying how behavior influences attitudes has used theories of information processing from cognitive psychology (e.g., Nisbett and his colleagues' work [Nisbett and Ross 1980], which draws on the experiments of Kahneman and Tversky [1973]).

Recent information processing and social cognitive theories do not address behavior, but they imply that attitudinally relevant aspects of behavior are those that activate attentional, encoding, retrieval, and other processes of thought and memory. These aspects of behavior include its salience and perceived connection with other behavior. These features of behavior make it informative in the sense that it can be meaningfully organized in memory.

The significance of the distinction between motivational and cognitive processes is that they differ functionally. Motivational processes are correlated with variables that are personally relevant and change attitudes that touch individuals' feelings about themselves. Cognitive processes are correlated with aspects of behavior that are informative and cognitively activating and that change attitudes more generally.

The lists of variables correlated with each set of processes is not the same among theorists, but there is general agreement on each side. Personally relevant and motivating behavior is correlated with the explicitness of one's behavior, with perceived choice, perceived low exogenous pressure, and experiencing of the consequences of the behavior. Informative and cognitively activating behavior is correlated with salience of behavior, its association with prior classification of behavior in memory, and its consistency or inconsistency with inferential processes.

Each grouping of characteristics of behavior implies a different effect on attitudes and has been used in various studies of attitude change. For example, taking an explicit public position on a social issue activates the motivational process of psychological commitment. Commitment causes resistance to persuasive attacks on the attitudes one has or develops to justify the public stance (C. Kiesler 1971, also McGuire 1964). Among

characteristics important in cognition, salience focuses attention on gender or racial minorities in groups and promotes attributions of causality for a group's behavior to them (Taylor *et al.* 1979, Taylor and Fiske 1978).

In some few cases the motivational and cognitive processes activated by behavior lead to the same predictions for attitude change. For example, motivational theories predict that post hoc justifications of expenditures of effort cause egocentric attitudes, such as explaining away one's failures but taking credit for one's successes (Schlenker and Miller 1977). An example would be blaming one's difficulties in obtaining a promotion on a hidden negative attitude of senior employees and then believing the promotion they actually support is entirely due to one's own ability to persuade them. Cognitive theories also predict egocentrism. For instance, because of our having expected our own efforts in work to be successful (at least more frequently than we expect failure) and having organized our memories to confirm those biased expectations, we will remember good outcomes of our own performance better than we remember bad ones. This would make for egocentric attitudes (e.g., Miller and Ross 1975). Such overlapping predictions are of concern to theorists interested in identifying the underlying variables that cause attitude change (Bradley 1978).

In this chapter, we are concerned with the application of both motivational and cognitive processes to attitudes about older people and aging. The evidence so far suggests that the distinction between motivational and cognitive processes is useful for our purposes in the following sense: Examining personally relevant behavior and the variables that have been studied as aspects of such behavior (e.g., perceived choice) seems most likely to result in clear predictions of self-enhancement and post hoc justifications of behavior affecting older people as well as plans for one's old age. Informative behavior and the variables associated with it, on the other hand, seems most useful for clearly predicting attitude change that reduces ambiguity about older people and aging and helps maintain an organized concept of age. It would seem reasonable to expect, however, that both sets of processes might converge toward the same end product, that is, attitudes about older people and age that are somewhat self-promoting rather than "fair," and clear or consistent rather than "accurate."

### Motivational Processes

When the general model is applied to the effects of an aging population on attitudes about older people and aging and motivational processes are

viewed as intervening between behavior and attitude, the result is an emphasis on the motivating effects of a person's own behavior (Figure 3.3). Motivational theories assert that behavior that activates motives must be relevant to a person's view of himself or herself; this relevance is difficult to predict unless it is the person's own behavior that is examined (cf. Jones and Davis 1965).

Three areas of personal behavior would seem most relevant to the present discussion: personal contact with older people, decisions made affecting older people, and plans made for one's old age. In each of these areas of behavior, the potential relevance of behavior to self is relatively obvious.

A person's capacity for attention to or involvement with his or her own behavior must be limited nevertheless. Only so much of one's own behavior can be pursued with thought and reflection about its implications for self (Langer 1978, Langer and Newman 1979). Therefore, we look for conditions that make one's personal behavior psychologically motivating. These conditions are those that create the perceptions alluded to in the last section—that rivet the choice and responsibility for one's own behavior on oneself.

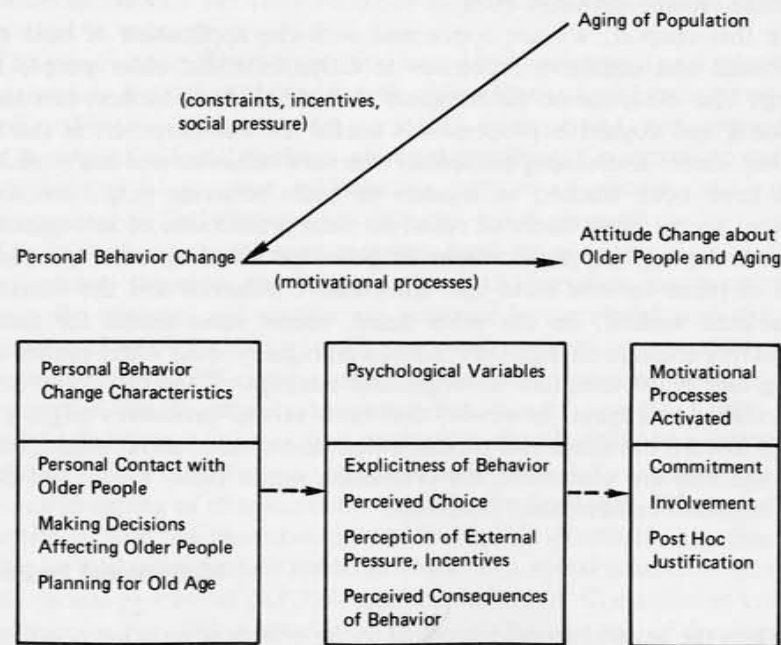


Figure 3.3. Application of the general model, motivational process aspects.

The first perception is that one's behavior is clear and explicit, as with a public statement or observed behavior. Because such behaviors involve others and are hard to revoke, they are both involving and committing (C. Kiesler 1971). An example of explicit behavior is declaring to one's family and employer the intention to retire. The announcement would increase one's psychological involvement in retirement and commitment to it.

A second perception is of high personal choice. When people perceive they have chosen their actions, they cannot easily deny them or avoid feeling responsibility for them. As a result, they rationalize the value of their choices. For example, voluntary retirement will cause persons to enhance the perceived attractiveness of retirement (cf. Kimmel *et al.* 1978) and of the people with whom they interact more frequently (e.g., Tyler and Sears 1977).

A third perception is of weak external (exogenous) pressure on one's behavior. Regardless of what is actually the case, the perception that one has control of one's behavior and acts for reasons of internal preference increases commitment and post hoc justification. For example, retiring despite insufficient retirement income or other external incentive to fully explain why one retires enhances one's impression of retiring because of personal preference. If one retires voluntarily and partly without sufficient external pressure or incentive, one is liable to become more intrinsically motivated to retire. This intrinsic motivation could include heightened perceptions of the value of leisure time or a desire to spend retirement time in nonmarket but useful work (see Lepper and Greene 1975, Folger *et al.* 1978). Of course, the opposite effect would occur if one postponed retiring without external pressure or incentive to do so (such as delaying retirement even though one must work for inadequate pay).

The motivational theories assert that greater pressure and stronger incentives reduce commitment and post hoc justification of behavior. The prediction for persons who retire voluntarily is that modest pensions and high foregone wages will lead to greater increases in intrinsic motivation and positive attitudes about retirement than will high pensions and modest foregone wages. For persons who delay retirement, modest foregone pensions and high wages would improve attitudes about work, but not so much as high foregone pensions and modest wages would. In sum, the greater the outside influence people perceive on their decisions, the less they will change their attitudes enhancing the value of their actions or preferences.

A final important perception is that one's behavior must seem to have consequences and implications for oneself. This condition is satisfied



when personal behavior has an outcome that must be faced. For example, suppose a man retires and then experiences much more boredom than he had imagined. As a result he would have to explain his retirement to himself in view of the negative consequence. The prediction would be that he discovers retrospectively other good aspects of retirement or explanations of his decision to retire (I did it to satisfy my wife; I was in poor health).

Here it is implied that negative consequences of action and failure to achieve goals can lead to attitudes that nevertheless support previous poor choices. This suggests that preferences and goals will change in response to success (or ambiguous consequences) more readily than they will change in response to failure (see Zander 1968). For instance, decisions to delay retirement while building savings that turn out to be less than expected will reduce financial aspirations less than successful decisions to delay retirement and to save will increase financial aspirations. In our culture, which typically distorts the ideal and actual rationality of decisions, the result is overrationalizing decisions whose outcome is poor, that cause conflict, or that are otherwise unproductive (see Morgan 1979, for data on retirement decisions).

All of the predictions in the previous examples about retirement have a parallel in other kinds of attitude changes about older people and aging. Some of these are illustrated in Table 3.1. The predictions of Table 3.1 are speculative, but they have a basis in previous research on social change. The data of Mason *et al.* (1976), for example, shows that increased ideological support for dual careers and changes in sex roles followed the dramatic increases of women's employment. The work of Blake (1974) on expressions of ideal family size in polls suggests that ideals followed changes of actual family size. Natural experiments of S. Kiesler (1977) support the idea and show the effect of perceived choice. Larger-scale studies of attitudes have also shown the effect of fertility behavior on attitudes (Ryder 1979, Lee 1979). Finally, evidence from the negative income tax experiments indicates how foregone wages result in justifications such as increases in nonmarket work (Devaney 1979).

In sum, data on large-scale changes of behavior indicate that exogenous forces do cause attitude change through post hoc justification of behavior. The data encourage predictions that the aging population will bring about new attitudes about the elderly and aging that justify or rationalize demographically caused changes of behavior.

#### PERCEPTIONS OF CHOICE AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

One of the most difficult theoretical questions about motivation and attitude change concerns perceptions of choice and responsibility when

TABLE 3.1  
Examples of Attitude Change in the Motivational Process Model

| Exogenous forces associated with aging population                                        | Behavior                                                                                     | Motivational process (individual)                                                         | Attitude change toward older people and aging                           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Examples of change in stereotypes</i>                                                 |                                                                                              |                                                                                           |                                                                         |
| Increased numbers of older people                                                        | More people in middle-age have responsibility for aged relatives                             | Perceived responsibility for (family) consequences                                        | Believed importance of grandparents                                     |
| Increased proportion of older people in population                                       | Consumers buy products marketed for older persons                                            | Perceived choice of "mature" products: clothes, household goods, etc.                     | Older people viewed as more innovative, flexible, and "mature"          |
| Smaller family size                                                                      | Older people seek close relationships among far relatives and outside family                 | Attribution to individuals (not to external pressure) for cross-age relationships         | More variability accepted in older persons' friendships                 |
| <i>Example of change in social issue beliefs</i>                                         |                                                                                              |                                                                                           |                                                                         |
| Laws banning age discrimination                                                          | More people work with older employees                                                        | Post hoc justification of adjustments needed (e.g., postpones promotion of young workers) | Greater valuing of employee stability, discipline, and loyalty          |
| Shift in nature of dependency ratio (more old dependents; fewer young dependents)        | Shift in public expenditures (e.g., from schools and playgrounds to parks and tennis courts) | Increased involvement of adults in community services                                     | Legitimization of public services for adults (e.g., camps and colleges) |
| <i>Examples of change in attitudes about one's own aging</i>                             |                                                                                              |                                                                                           |                                                                         |
| Improved health and physical condition of older people                                   | More people expect "second careers" (postretirement employment)                              | Perceived control over life events; choice of risks                                       | "Retirement" redefined or replaced as stage of life                     |
| Increased numbers of older working couples; older women have more financial independence | Decisions to readjust or coordinate work and retirement; more older couples divorce          | Subjective uncertainty over role choices                                                  | Attitudes adjust to new roles for independent older women               |



behavior changes as a result of exogenous forces. In general, when personal behavior responds to features of an aging population, the effect on attitudes will depend on how influential the features seem to be. The paradoxical prediction is that strong exogenous characteristics associated with our aging population (such as large increases in social security outlays) are more likely to change behavior (such as working more hours to increase after-tax income) but also more likely to be perceived as the responsible cause of the behavior change. Since lack of choice and responsibility for one's behavior reduces commitment to it and minimizes tendencies toward self-justification, any changes in attitude that took place would only reaffirm beliefs in external causes (e.g., "I'm working more only because my taxes are too high").

The opposite effects exogenous forces can have are illustrated in Figure 3.4. In the figure, the exogenous variable is inflation, the behavior is delayed retirement, and the attitude is justification of delayed retirement, that is, improved attitudes toward employment in old age. In the figure, inflation at moderate levels is assumed to be just barely strong

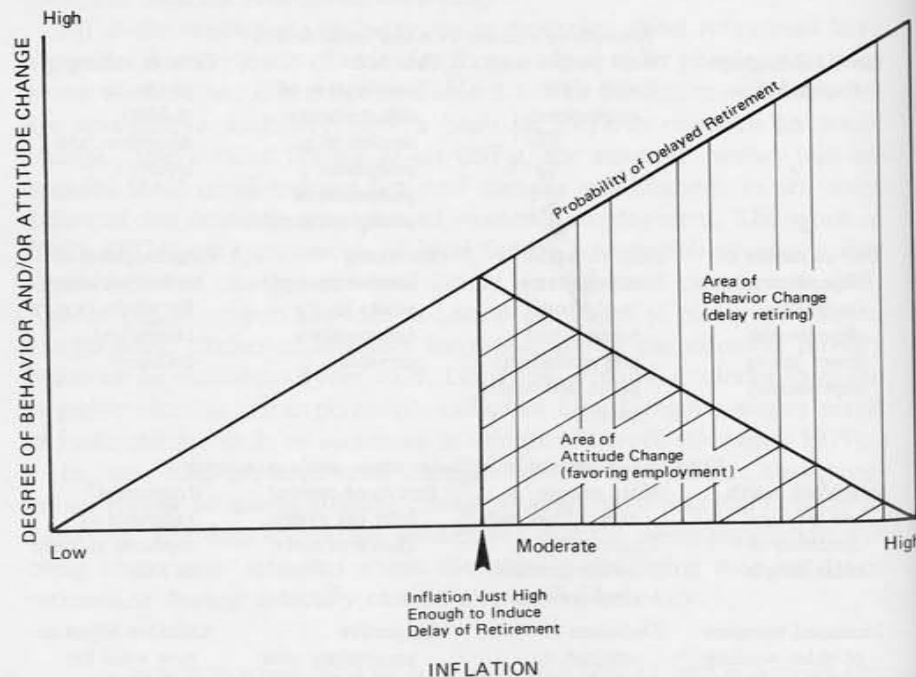


Figure 3.4. Example of inflation as an exogenous force causing behavior and attitude change in hypothetical group of older persons.

enough an incentive to cause a hypothetical group of people to change their behavior, that is, to delay retirement. At this point, attitude change justifying the decision is greatest. If inflation is any greater than that just needed to change the behavior, however, attitude change is reduced. The reason for the reduced attitude change is that the extra incentives to delay retiring only reduce perceived choice.

The perception of own choice and responsibility versus external pressures (or incentives) is obviously crucial. It would be useful to identify those exogenous forces whose influence is more or less associated with personal decisions in the minds of the public. Which social trends do we view as limiting individual choice and which as expanding it?

Most experimental research in social psychology that has used manipulated levels of choice has proceeded intuitively. Perceived choice or responsibility (which are not always identical) have been manipulated by informing subjects they had choice, by pointing out or allowing them to experience the consequences of decisions, by informing them their decisions are deviant or unlike others', by offering bogus alternatives or similar alternatives, and by inducing them to declare they have made their "own" decisions publicly. Observing the effects, researchers have concluded that choice and responsibility derives from feelings of personal control (Wortman 1976), subjective rather than objective uncertainty (Harvey 1976), discounting of external attributions of cause (Kelley 1967, 1973), and from having to face the negative outcomes of one's choices (Cooper and Worchel 1970).

This theoretical work suggests some hypotheses regarding personal choice or responsibility and exogenous forces:

1. Strong and independent exogenous forces reduce perceived choice and responsibility—because they reduce perceived control. They cannot be ignored as causes of behavior and threaten freedom of choice.  
*Examples:* Rising prices; clear political pressures from retired persons' lobbies; high demand for housing units built for older people.
2. Conflicting or rapidly changing exogenous forces reduce perceived choice and responsibility—because they reduce perceptions of control and increase objective uncertainty.  
*Examples:* Inflation (as a disincentive to retire) along with organizational pressures to retire early; social change in family stability and structure; unclear political crises.
3. Exogenous forces that people view as positive increase perceived choice and responsibility—because having positive alternatives causes higher perceived control and subjective uncertainty.

*Examples:* Improvements in services actually available to old people; economic recoveries; technological inventions.

4. Exogenous forces that attract various groups of people to deviate from norms or innovate increase perceived choice and responsibility—because innovation and variability denote personal independence and cause discounting of external attributions.

*Examples:* Increased popularity of “preventive” medicine and exercise; increased frequency of unmarried couples living together.

5. Exogenous forces representing gradual and long-term social change increase perceived choice and responsibility—because they are subtle and encourage internal attributions but increase subjective uncertainty.

*Examples:* Married women entering (or staying in) paid employment; the decline in large family size.

These hypotheses, while somewhat speculative, suggest the behavior changes that, in an aging population, will also place the onus of the behavior on those who change. Table 3.1, in illustrating the kinds of attitude change predicted by motivational processes, builds on the hypotheses to predict behavior.

### Cognitive Processes

Anyone's behavior has the potential to influence the development of attitudes. But according to research on cognitive processes (mostly on memory and problem solving) only a limited portion of behavior will actually influence attitudes through its value as information.

One limit to the informativeness of behavior is lack of fit with prior organization of thought, especially firmly held expectations. For example, contact among age groups might have no effect whatsoever on what younger people think older people are like (and vice versa) because any actions of either side that might disconfirm expectations are simply ignored or distorted (see Rose 1980). Furthermore, each age group will forget the behavioral data but remember the conclusions they drew from it (Trope 1978).

Another limit to the informativeness of behavior is that only so much behavior can claim a person's attention. A number of cognitive processes correlated with the active use of information—notably clustering, categorization, and organization in encoding and recall—require attention and effort (see Hasher and Zacks 1979).

A third limit to the informativeness of behavior is imposed by active inferential processes that make use of some pieces of behavioral infor-

mation more than others. For instance, observers sometimes (but not always) use concrete actions of one person rather than general observations of behavior to predict what people will do in the future (Tversky and Kahneman 1973, Quattrone and Jones 1980, Nisbett and Borgida 1975).

Because information's usefulness is limited, at least three psychological variables attached to behavioral information will determine the eventual effect of behavior on attitudes about older people and aging. The discussion of attitude change in this section is organized around these variables and is summarized in Figure 3.5.

The first variable is observers' current expectations of older persons and aging. These expectations will determine how new behavioral information is encoded and retrieved (e.g., see Anderson and Pichert 1978). An analysis of Rose (1980) suggests that new information is encoded or recalled so that it bolsters old stereotypes. The second variable is the salience of observed behavior affecting older people. Salience influences attention and evaluative inferences, which in turn will influence judgments and attributions of causality to older persons or to age (see Taylor and Fiske 1978). The third variable is stability and change of the per-

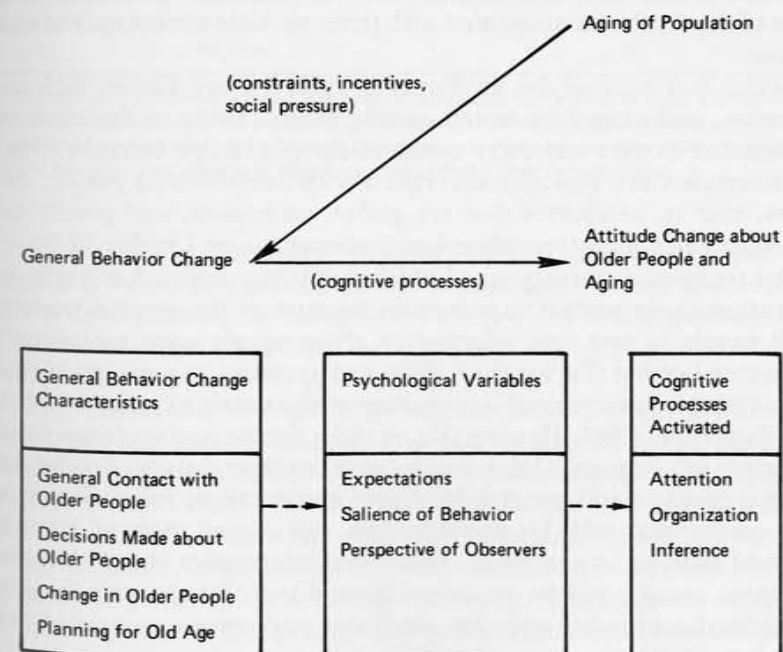


Figure 3.5. Application of the general model, cognitive process aspects.

spective of observers of older people, aging, and those involved in decisions affecting older persons. Changes of perspective affect attributions for social and personal change (see Jones and Nisbett 1971, Silka 1980) and hence attitudes about the interests and goals of older people and about the nature of aging.

### EXPECTATIONS

In an earlier section, it was claimed that because apparent chronological age is an easily distinguishable and distinguishing characteristic of people, age is used to categorize them and their behavior. Older age is the central attribute used in comparing a person's resemblance with prototypical older people who define various stereotypes such as "grandma," "elder statesman," and "senior citizen" (Brewer 1979). These stereotypes, like other categories based on age (e.g., teenagers), create firmly held and rather global expectations of behavior. For example, one expects any grandmother to behave sweetly toward children. The stereotypes therefore influence the categorization of older people in many broad taxonomies: of personality, occupation, stage of life, interests, and so on. Table 3.2 illustrates the potential influence by listing some of the attributes associated with three possible stereotypes of older persons.

Notice that most of the attributes in Table 3.2 are simple, lack concreteness, and cannot be tested against reality; many of the attributes are negative in tone and carry connotations of extreme behavior. These characteristics are typically correlated with unelaborated person categories, that is, categories that are global, undetailed, and poorly connected to behavioral (operationalized) concepts (see Linville 1979).

The traditional stereotypes of older people (as depicted in Table 3.2) are extremely important expectations because of the general tendency of all people to sort new information about people using categories of group membership (Taylor *et al.* 1979) and to distort its meaning or recall so that what is remembered is consistent with existing expectations (e.g., Hamilton *et al.* 1980). Hearing that an older female acquaintance carries important job responsibilities might cause traditionalists to wonder how she manages to fulfill her grandmotherly and domestic roles. Seeing her male counterpart with his grandchildren will remind them of his interpersonal skills as an executive. Behavioral information about older people, then, usually will be organized around their membership in global age-defined categories and the simplistic stereotypes associated with those categories.

TABLE 3.2  
Attributes Associated with Photographs of Elderly People\*

| Three "Grandmothers"    |               | Three "elderly statesmen" |               |
|-------------------------|---------------|---------------------------|---------------|
| Version 1               | Version 2     | Version 1                 | Version 2     |
| Accepting               | Accepting     | Aggressive                | Aggressive    |
| Helpful                 | Helpful       | Intelligent               | Intelligent   |
| Trustworthy             | Trustworthy   | Conservative              | Conservative  |
| Traditional             | Traditional   | Dignified                 | Dignified     |
| Serene                  | Serene        | Neat                      | Neat          |
| Kindly                  | Kindly        | Authoritarian             | Authoritarian |
| Optimistic              | Optimistic    | Traditional               | Intolerant    |
| Calm                    | Calm          |                           | Competitive   |
| Cheerful                | Cheerful      |                           | Strong-willed |
| Neat                    | Neat          |                           | Active        |
| Emotional               | Dignified     |                           | Aware         |
| Three "senior citizens" |               | Unsorted                  |               |
| Version 1               | Version 2     | Version 1                 | Version 2     |
| Lonely                  | Lonely        | Traditional               | Kindly        |
| Old-fashioned           | Old-fashioned | Conservative              |               |
| Traditional             | Weak          |                           |               |
|                         | Worried       |                           |               |

\*The attributes listed were selected by a majority of subjects from a list of 44 traits, one-half positive and one-half negative, previously implicated in stereotypes of the elderly. Also, different subjects sorted 40 photographs into groups of, for example, grandmothers. Matching attributes with groups of photographs generated two versions of each stereotype. Adapted from Brewer (1979).

Because of the distortions described above, one could argue that exogenous trends producing behavior change (e.g., greater contact with older people; planning for old age) would serve only to reaffirm traditional attitudes and stereotypes. But there are two ways changes of behavior could change expectations significantly.

First, Cantor and Mischel (1979) and others have reported that many stereotypes and person categories have subcategories in the same way that object categories do (Rosch 1978). An example they use is "religious devotees" and "social activists" as subcategories of "committed persons." Attributes attached to subordinate categories are much richer in detail, patterned, behaviorally concrete, and situation-specific than the attributes of global categories. Also, attributes of subordinate categories overlap; they may be less polarizing of groups than more global categories.

Knowing people relatively well not only causes less categorization on



the basis of only one or two central characteristics but promotes greater attention to configurations of attributes across time and place (see Cantor and Mischel 1979). Therefore, obtaining greater total amounts of information about older people and observing them in different settings (e.g., employed in nontraditional jobs) should cause the formation of more subcategories of older people: rich grandmothers versus ordinary grandmothers; mean elder statesmen versus wise elder statesmen; sick aged versus active and bright aged. While these elaborations of thinking would not banish categorization on the basis of old age, they could contribute to the impression of variability among groups of older people and heighten expectations that older people hold membership in other person categories. When appropriate, we might more readily think of an older John C. Smith as a competitive person in games, a sympathetic listener to his friends, and an incisive problem solver for the community as well as a man enjoying his retirement.

A second way new information could change expectations is through automatic processing of information about older people and aging.

Research on memory encoding processes (e.g., Kahneman 1973, Posner and Snyder 1975, Schneider and Shiffrin 1977) has shown that certain mental operations occur automatically, without effort, are unaffected by practice and motivation, and possibly not by learned expectancies and conceptual biases either. Among these automatic operations is the remembering of the frequency of events such as written words, visual images, opinions, and observed attributes of a person (see Hasher and Zacks 1979).

That frequencies elicit automatic "event-driven" memory processes rather than effortful "concept-driven" processes is significant for this discussion because of the implication that exogenously caused changes in the frequency of behavior will be encoded and recalled without bias even though the categories into which they fall are biased. For instance, we could perceive that more older people are joggers these days but continue to perceive the prototypical jogger as a young person.

Nevertheless, frequency information could change the perceived implications of being categorized as an older person or of aging itself. For instance, as we learn that retired people are taking paid jobs, retirement will imply taking a rest with less certainty, and the association of old age and illness will be weakened. This change of meaning need not depend on the truth of changes in behavior; frequencies of assertions affect meaning, too (Hasher *et al.* 1977). Hence, the more often we hear it asserted that half the residents of retirement communities are gainfully employed, the more true it will seem. And the more "retired" people

we think are employed, the more likely we are to believe that older people are active, energetic, and capable.

The mental association of old age and negative attributes (e.g., low productivity, ill health) is particularly significant in that intercorrelations of rare attributes are exaggerated (Hamilton and Gifford 1976). When older people's behavior seems more like that of middle age, however, the inappropriate over-association of old age and negative attributes should decline. We may see instead an overestimation of the correlation of high productivity and good physical condition with older age (e.g., overestimates of the productivity of older workers).

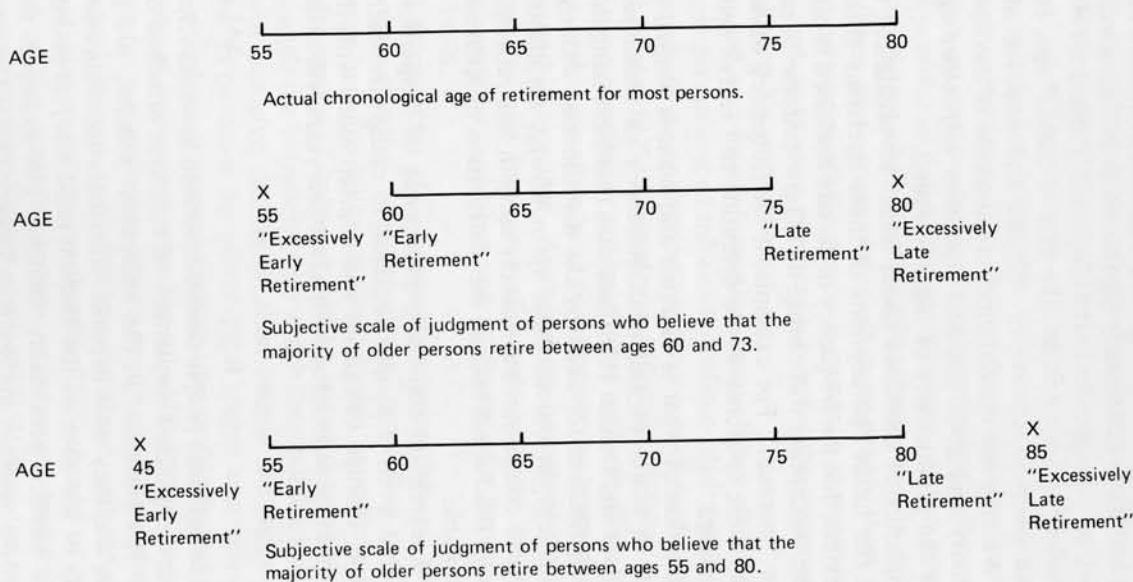
Since the frequency of decisions about issues involving old age will also increase in the future, perceptions of these decisions should also change. To the extent that the frequency of certain decisions is processed automatically, the perception will change as to how extreme or rare they are and thus how "normal." For example, if the frequency of decisions to retire before 65 were to increase, the definition of "early" retirement would shift downward.

The public definition of what is extreme and what is normal may be viewed as a shift in scales of judgment. Research on social judgment (Upshaw 1969, Eiser and Osman 1978) indicates that increasing the range of a behavioral distribution (or skewing the distribution) widens scales of evaluative judgment (or moves them up or down). As illustrated in Figure 3.6, what now constitutes excessively early or late retirement will seem less excessive (and abnormal) as the distribution of retirement age becomes more variable.

In summary, research on automatic processing of frequency information suggests that even if people continue to categorize each other on the basis of age, old age categories will overlap more with those of middle age, and behavior associated with advanced years will seem more attractive.

#### SALIENCE

Many opinions about older people can be described as social schemata. Social schemata are organized sequences of behavior attached to particular situations. For instance, in the retirement schema, old people take up oil painting and they walk in parks. Schemata are often miniature stories about parts of life such as the stereotypical story of retirement. Schemata are also implicit personality theories. For example, there is the idea that as people age they mellow (see Langer 1978). The encoding and recall of social schemata is an effortful process requiring attention, although less so with practice and experience.



**Figure 3.6.** Effect of perceived frequency of retirement at various ages on perceptions of how extreme and excessive the age of retirement is.

Because salient human behavior is behavior that stands out and commands attention, it may be highly amenable to effortful processing and to detailed organization, including incorporation into social schemata. Behavior made salient by our aging population as well may be increasingly better organized in thought and remembered in terms of detailed social schemata. This implies that people will be more conscious of the role of older age in schemas of social behavior and public decisions ranging from jogging to investing money.

The latter effect would be of minor interest if not for the fact that focusing attention has the further effect of biasing one's evaluations and judgments. Salient people, attributes, and behavior are not only remembered, but inferred to be important. Salient people are perceived as causes of events. For instance, Taylor *et al.* (1979) showed that people overestimate the effects on a group of a minority in the group, that is, of the salient portion of the membership. Vinokur and Burnstein (1978) showed that people who give novel arguments in a group are salient and are more persuasive than those who offer old familiar arguments. McArthur and Post (1973) showed that merely sitting people beneath a lighted lamp heightens their perceived importance as influencing events. This research implies a shift in the presumed importance of older people as a result of exogenous forces making their behavior more salient.

A related argument, mentioned earlier, is that salient aspects of the aging population as a whole will seem causal. Characteristics of the aging population such as the gray lobby and divorce among older people will be held responsible for social change generally, and public choices affecting older people such as changes in taxes will be viewed as more politically and economically influential.

#### PERSPECTIVE

The implication of much of the research on cognitive processes is that new behavioral information will elaborate and exacerbate attitudes about the elderly and aging but will not change them drastically. Exogenous events, however, may change the perspective of those exposed to new behavioral information and in that way cause a fundamental revision of attitudes.

Changes of perspective, which occur when people become members of new groups or have to change their goals, influence attitudes through the interaction of perceiver changes with information changes. For instance, a person who moves from Group X (clerk) to Group Y (retired clerks) will be changing as a perceiver: reorganizing his or her mental categories of "our interests" and "their interests," for example. In form-



ing attitudes, the change of perceiver's perspective is coupled with any new information received from acquaintances in the new group and actions as a member of the new group. The discovery that pensions are inadequate, which is learned as a result of retirement as a clerk, is evaluated with a new perspective for organizing that information. (At the least it has relevance to self-schemata.) One outcome may be the addition of attitudes, as when the retired clerk becomes an amateur expert and advocate for pension reform. More generally, exogenously caused changes of perspective by large groups should lead to reattributions of cause for social change and conflict including new attributes about the role of older persons in society.

The research on changes of perspective and their effects on attribution is based on the theoretical work of Kelley (1967), Jones and Nisbett (1971), and others. A general finding about perspectives is that observers tend to view behavior as internally caused by the personality and preferences of actors (Ross 1977). In contrast, actors view their own behavior as a reasonable response to the situation and to others. The reasons for this difference in the attribution of observers (them) and actors (us) is that actors have a unique perspective. Consider: (a) From our own visual perspective as actors, we can observe and attend to other people and situations better than we can observe and attend to our own behavior, so other people and situations readily come to mind as a cause of our behavior (e.g., Storms 1973). Furthermore, (b) we know that in the past we have responded differently to different people and situations (Ross and Scioly 1979). Finally, (c) although we can remember images of the behavior of others, we recall verbally encoded schemata of our own behavior (Lord 1980). As a result, our own behavior seems embedded in a whole configuration of personal plans and thoughts about the circumstances of behavior.

The self versus other difference of perspective causes a significant difference in attitudes about the self as compared with attitudes about others. One's own visions, one's own interests, and one's own groups seem reasonable and rational, that is, responsive to actual constraints, incentives, and pressures from outside forces. In contrast, others seem more responsive to their own internal preferences and agendas. In conflicts between only two people, each person attributes the cause of the problem to the other's motives or personality (Orvis *et al.* 1976), in part because of each person's necessary difference of perspective and its effect on attributions. If groups are involved in conflicts of interest, the difference of perspective accounts for opposing views of the cause of the conflict; that is, for each, the aggressor is the other side.

An example of attributional conflict is illustrated in Figure 3.7. In the figure, an older employee attributes his decision to delay retirement to the situation: the attractiveness of his work and the money he earns. The employer's young colleague, however, attributes the decision to delay retirement to the personality of the older man (except when the older employee's financial situation clearly accounts for the delay of retirement).

Attributional conflict caused by differences of perspective varies with perceptions of exogenous conditions. Two variations of exogenous conditions are shown in Figure 3.7: technological change and retirement benefits, each of which increase internal attributions of the delay of retirement. According to attribution theory, in delaying retirement, despite high retirement benefits and the fact that his or her skills have

Conditions Under Which Retirement Is Postponed

|                                                              |                                                                               | Foregone Retirement Benefits<br>Relatively Good | Foregone Retirement Benefits<br>Relatively Poor |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Technological<br>Obsolescence<br>of Older<br>Workers Is High | Old worker: "I work because I like working and it keeps me young."            |                                                 | Old worker: "I can't afford to retire."         |
|                                                              | Young colleague: "He only keeps working because he has no outside interests." | XXX                                             | XX                                              |
| Technological<br>Obsolescence<br>of Older<br>Workers Is Low  | Old worker: "I work because I enjoy it."                                      |                                                 | Old worker: "I can't afford to retire."         |
|                                                              | Young colleague: "He keeps working because he has no outside interests."      | XX                                              | X                                               |

Figure 3.7. Examples of an attributional conflict over the causes of delayed retirement. (X's denote degree to which external circumstances fail to explain why older workers remain on the job [delay retiring] and the degree of attributional conflict. Where XXX exists, two external forces are inconsistent with working and attributional conflict is greatest.)

become obsolete, the older worker attributes his or her behavior to the value of the work itself.

Figure 3.7 contains an implied hypothesis as to how changes of perspective in our aging population may alter attitudes. First, the figure shows how intergroup conflict between young and old could be reduced or heightened by changes in the perception of causal exogenous conditions. For example, interage conflict would decline if strong exogenous forces irrelevant to age, such as international conflict, took the "blame" for differences of interest between young and old but not for their interests in common. Even more change of attitudes would result from redistributing age group memberships. The old now prefer to see themselves as middle-aged (Bultena and Powers 1978). If only exogenous conditions were to increase the attractiveness of older age as an attribute (e.g., greater power of older persons in work organizations) and the lines separating age groups moved, perspectives on attributional conflict would move, too.

One way exogenous forces change perspectives is suggested in an analysis by Silka (1980). According to her analysis, individuals have difficulty observing changes in themselves, whether the change concerns their organization of information or their inferences from it. As a result, they attribute change in themselves to social change. An example is when people get used to stories of criminal attacks on old people and come to think that crime against old people has declined.

Other examples: A committee of citizens is to decide on a major urban sports facility for the elderly, but political differences cause the discussions to last several years. Because of their increasing familiarity with the arguments supporting the facility, the committee perceives a large increase in the numbers of athletic older persons. Here again, change in frequency of opinions heard changes perceivers, who in this case perceive a group to have changed. (Nevertheless, it is unclear whether the 75-year-old jogger will replace the 75-year-old porch sitter as a prototype of old age.)

Another example is a committee of citizens who learn that no local nursing home has facilities for active sports and are moved to recommend that such facilities be built. Having acted as though old people who get sick may get well again, the committee perceives that the clientele of nursing homes has changed drastically.

The previous examples suggest that exogenous changes associated with our aging population that change public group memberships and goals and change information about other people at approximately the same time will also alter beliefs about older people significantly. In the past, simultaneous changes of social groups and goals and of information

about social groups were caused by economic growth in the 1920s, the depression of the 1930s, World War II, and the civil rights movement. These forces realigned economic and political groups (e.g., industrialists hired educated youth; government officials devised large public programs for the poor), and behavioral information about the groups changed as well (e.g., people learned how schooling benefited the young; they heard that the poor deserved relief). The interaction of these two phenomena produced new attitudes about the young, the poor, minorities, and women. Today, the aging population is a force with similar potential for changing attitudes about the aged.

## CONCLUSION

According to the models used in this chapter, large demographic, economic, and social trends often bring about significant changes in individual behavior. The significance of change in behavior is its subsequent effect on attitudes. Our aging population will have far more importance than merely commanding public resources and increasing family responsibilities for aged relatives. It will create new ideologies of age, new expectations of work and workers, and new norms of kin interaction. Changes in our society change all of us as individuals.

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