CHAPTER 15  Inequalities of Youth and Age

Lecture Outline

I. Sources of Age Stratification
   A. In many societies age determines a great deal about the opportunities open to a person and what kind of life that person leads.
      1. The study of aging and the elderly is termed gerontology.
   B. All societies channel people into age grades, or sets of statuses and roles based on age.
   C. The transitions among these age grades create a life course and are often marked by ceremonies known as rites of passage.
   D. Age cohorts are people of about the same age who are passing through life's stages together.
      1. The "baby boom" cohorts, which were produced by rapid increases in the birthrate from about 1945 through the early 1960s, have profoundly influenced American society.
      2. A sizable proportion of the children of the baby boom generation are members of minority groups.
   E. By life expectancy we mean the average number of years a member of a given population can expect to live beyond his or her present age.
      1. As life expectancy in a population increases, the proportion of the population that is dependent on the adult cohorts also increases.

II. Age Stratification and Inequality
   A. In urban industrial societies there are distinct patterns of stratification in which age defines the roles one plays and the rewards one can expect.
      1. Inequalities of age are compounded by those of race and gender to produce particular forms of inequality among the aged in industrial societies.
   B. The forces of social change unleashed by colonialism, industrialization, urbanization, and population growth have tended to disrupt the formal age grade systems of smaller, more isolated societies.
   C. The Challenge of Youth
      1. Today teenagers and young adults spend far more time in educational institutions making themselves ready for an ever more demanding labor
market. As a result, adolescence, the phase of life considered to be relatively free from full adult responsibilities, often lasts well into the young-adult years.

a. During those years young people have increased freedom to try out different identities and associate with different kinds of peer groups.

b. This leads to the emergence of an ever-greater variety of subcultures among young people.

2. Social definitions of childhood differ immensely throughout the industrial world as well as between modern and traditional societies.

3. As a result of increasing incomes and the passage of child labor laws, children became economically “worthless” but emotionally “priceless.”

4. There is a growing gap between “priceless” children and children who bear a heavy burden of poverty and deprivation.

D. Age and Inequality

1. At the turn of the twentieth century, the largest segment of the U.S. population living in poverty or near-poverty conditions was the elderly.

2. As a result of programs such as Social Security and Medicare, rates of poverty among the elderly have decreased dramatically.

3. The situation is not nearly so positive for elderly members of minority groups.

4. People from poor and working-class backgrounds are more likely to engage in psychosocial risk behaviors such as smoking and to experience a higher than average number of lifetime negative experiences, which affect their health in old age.

5. As people age, they experience more medical problems and disabilities, but this does not mean that they must inevitably withdraw from social life. Longer life spans need to be accompanied by new concepts of social roles in more advanced years.

6. Ageism is an ideology that justifies prejudice or discrimination based on age. As the proportion of older people in a society increases, the prevalence of ageism also increases.

III. Social Movements among the Elderly

A. As the population as a whole has aged, the impact of the elderly on American society has increased. This is changing the way sociologists view old age.
Before the 1970s the most popular social-scientific view of aging was disengagement theory, the belief that as people grow older they gradually “disengage” from their earlier roles.

An alternative view of the elderly, known as activity theory, states that the elderly need activities that will serve as outlets for their creativity and energy.

Today gerontologists tend to reject both of these theories, seeing older people demanding opportunities to lead their lives in a variety of ways based on individual habits and preferences.

The growing proportion of elderly people in the population has led to increased concern about the quality of life of the elderly and about death and the dying process.

One outcome of this concern is the hospice movement, which attempts to provide dying people and their loved ones with a comfortable, dignified alternative to hospital death.