Social Attitudes Toward Old-age Retirees in a 23-year Perspective

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Abstract

The aim of the present 23-year follow-up of a Swedish survey on social attitudes toward old-age retirees is to examine what changes have occurred in socio-politically relevant behavioral dispositions. Sweden is a prosperous industrial welfare society, which during the past few decades has developed into an even more advanced and prosperous society, where the focus on old people has been double discoursed, focusing on both miseries and prosperities.

From an overall perspective, social attitudes in the studies years 1982 and 2005 look quite similar, despite changes in society and the double discourses on old people. This stability is attributed to the likewise stable economy and its macro-sociological basis for attitudes, but also to the fact that social attitudes toward the elderly are rooted in some very basic and stable values in society.

In 1982, as in 2005, nearly 90 percent of Swedes viewed retirees as having valuable assets in the form of life experiences that should be passed along to younger generations. Increasingly, retirees have been ascribed the same right to welfare benefits as the gainfully employed, and there is increased agreement that the public welfare system should be responsible for old people’s care and service. These attitudes exist within the framework of a strong, unwavering belief in or hope for serial reciprocity – that the taxes you pay during working life will be returned to you as welfare during old age. The yet existing distrust in such serial reciprocity has decreased, but is still noticeable. However, retirees still have to face the expectation that they should not compete with young people on the labor market, even if this particular attitude has weakened somewhat over the 23-year period. And, in 2005, there was still a non-negligible 40 percent of Swedes who felt that old people have no business being in parliament – even if this attitude has declined from the 1982 level of 60 percent.

During the 23-year period, opinions on how to distribute individual retirement benefits have changed, however – from a “same for all” stance to a new “related to earlier income” stance. This is interpreted as a new wind of individualistic utilitarianism in social attitudes. In 1982, this particular attitude was related to the political orientation of the respondent – a correlation that has disappeared over the years. This is a general tendency, in which not only political orientation, but also variables such as education level, gender and age have lost their explanatory power. Thus, social attitudes seem to have become individualized beyond such variables.
Background

Social attitudes, which constitute the behavioral disposition component of the attitude complex, concern how we, in various socio-politically relevant respects, view the position of old people in a changing society, and how we are inclined to act, for example allowing or prohibiting retired people access to the labor market or the parliament.

The study reported herein is a 23-year follow-up of a Swedish survey on social attitudes toward retirees. The survey was first performed in 1982, and then replicated in 2005, allowing us to study the changes that have occurred over this 23-year period.

During this period, Sweden has generally experienced advancements in technology, prosperity and welfare, although there was a temporary three-year-long recession at the beginning of the 1990s. However, at both points of measurement, 1982 and 2005, Sweden has shown a positive development, and during the period as a whole, Sweden has exhibited growth in GNP. Thus, the general economic level was considerably better in 2005 than in 1982. If we look at available comparative data, when the GNP volume index is set to 100 in 1980, it reaches 143 in 2004. In other words, over these years, the GNP has increased by about 40 percent. Sweden has also, during the 23-year period, become a slightly more ‘mature’ society, as the proportion of individuals 65+ years of age has increased from 16.7 to 17.3 percent. The proportion of individuals 80+ has increased from 3.4 to 5.4 percent.

Swedes have also become better educated during the period. The proportion of people 16-84 years of age who have a 'post-gymnasium' education has doubled from 16 to 33 percent. In the same vein, most but not all indicators of social welfare have improved during the period, both for the whole population as such and for old people. For example, the proportion of 65- to 84-year-old people living in their own self-contained houses has increased from 50 to 58 percent. The proportion who live in confined quarters has dropped from 3 to 0.5 percent. The percent who could not raise SEK 14,000 (in 1982 SEK 3,000) for an unexpected expense has dropped from 13 to 8 percent, and the proportion of 65- to 84-year-old people who subjectively regard their health as good or very good has increased from 51 to 56 percent.

At the same time, however, the proportion of old people (65-84 years) who have been victims of threats or violence has increased from 1.3 to 1.6 percent. And, if we look at the minority of old people in need of home-help care and special housing, there have been cutbacks in the accessibility of home help and the waiting lists for special housing have grown longer. The media have focused a great deal on problems such as Alzheimer’s disease and predictions of an upcoming demographic boom in the
senior population, at the same time as considerable governmental efforts have been made to create a better life for and more positive images of old people.

Thus, when we compare social attitudes toward Swedish old-age retirees in 1982 with those in 2005, we must do so against the backdrop of a prosperous society that has become more prosperous during the period, at the same time as the focus on the oldest old has been characterized by double discourses – a misery perspective together with a perspective of favorable aging. Results of the present study may show us something about what is to be expected in other societies with similar characteristics.

**Sensitizing concepts**

In the present examination of social attitudes in relation to old people, two particular perspectives have served as a foundation from the outset in 1982 and contributed to the instrument used here. One of these perspectives concerns older people’s opportunities to be utilized as resources in society. The other is based on exchange theory.

**The Resource perspective**

In much of the early gerontological research, emphasis was put on the misery perspective, that is, on the losses and state of dependence associated with aging. One of the features of our early research, however, has been that we strive to counterbalance this view by consciously attempting to perceive aging as a process in which opportunities for resource liberation increase. Thus, stimulated by scholars such as Kerr (1969), Weinberg and Goeller (1976), and Bertelman (1977) and Streib (1978), we abandoned the perception of old people as a primarily a dependent group, in favor of a view of them as a possible cultural, human, intellectual and labor resource in society. Given this point of departure, it was important to try to determine in what respects older people are regarded as resources in, e.g., interpersonal relations, the labor market or parliament.

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1 Besides a substantial targeted governmental investment in gerontological research, there have been several political ventures aimed at elucidating the positive content of aging. Within the past decade, starting in 1998, an important commission worked under the heading “Rivålderstrappan” (Tear down the age barrier). This work finally resulted in 100 political propositions in the report Senior Citizen 2005, which was given to the parliament. Before this, almost every important Swedish organization as well as all important voluntary organizations were supplied with a “pro-old-age report” (Rivålderstrappan, 2002) and asked for their opinions and additional suggestions on how to create a situation of better and more positive aging for Swedes – this also included attitudes toward and knowledge about aging and old people. Also, between 1982 and 2005, The National Board of Health and Welfare produced no less than 180 reports/publications/books aiming at better conditions for, and better understanding and knowledge of old people.
Exchange theory

Another theoretical perspective involves our awareness of the exchange and power relations that prevail between older and younger people in society. Such a perspective ultimately falls back on a single phenomenon, that is, the mutual give and take that has been discussed throughout history. Caesar stressed that no obligation is more essential than repaying a kindness; he added that everyone mistrusts a person who forgets to reciprocate a service. The concept of reciprocity emerged from such sources and has stimulated, among others, Emerson (1972 a, 1972 b, 1976) in his seminal works on exchange theory, which we have borrowed from. And, as described by many (e.g., Cook & Whitmeyr, 1992; Walker, et al., 2000), the concepts of exchange, reciprocity and power are still very useful for conceptualizing and analyzing social structure.

When we use the concept of reciprocity in everyday language, we are generally referring to a certain mutuality in social relationships. Individuals who enter a social interaction assume reciprocal rights and duties in relation to one another. Each expects to be repaid in proportion to what he/she has given. However, to clarify why we are discussing the reciprocity norm in the social attitude context, it should be stressed that the theoretical points of departure we are dealing with here constitute the basis of social welfare policies in general and the status of old people in society in particular. Sociopolitical scholars, such as Pinker (1979), have pointed to the importance of the reciprocity norm in the sociopolitical context. According to Pinker, in a modern welfare model, one must pay great heed to the reciprocity norm if one is to prevent groups or individuals from ending up in a state of complete dependence on a welfare provider. He then starts from the assumption that a reciprocal relation can be characterized by varying degrees of reciprocity. Moreover, he assumes that, in the human consciousness, a line is generally drawn between those who provide and those who receive a social service, and that one’s status is raised or lowered depending on whether one is a provider or a recipient. As Blau (1964) put it, exchange is closely related to power.

As suggested above, an exchange relation need not imply a completely balanced exchange between the parties in the relation. In reality, the relation between what one gives and what one receives – or what the parties in an exchange get in relation to one another – may be said to constitute a variable, which can be called an exchange ratio. Clark (1972) made a point of this and stressed that a balanced exchange only represents one of several exchange ratio outcomes. In reality, we see a general tendency toward institutionalizing one or the other type of exchange ratio. Institutionalization of a particular exchange ratio often reflects the morality or value norms that mark a given society. In addition to an exchange ratio entailing that each individual will receive an equal share in the long run – which we will call a parity norm for the exchange ratio – Clark also pointed out that the exchange ratio can also entail social altruism. Institutionalization of such an exchange ratio implies acceptance of the legitimacy of social welfare transfer payments. Such payments imply that a certain societal group is ensured a minimum standard, even if the group does not contribute to the system to the same extent as
it takes advantage it. Rosenmayr and Rosenmayr (1978) maintained that the type of exchange we usually call social welfare transfer payments is completely dependent on the enablement of such altruism or, as Rosenmayr put it, a moral surplus in the exchange ratio.

Meeker (1971) mentioned still another possible exchange rule, namely status consistency. This rule entails that the benefit the parties gain from an exchange relation should be proportional to their individual status. The belief that it is legitimate for the gainfully employed to have a greater portion of the economic surplus at their disposal than retirees do can be interpreted in terms of status consistency. According to this view, it is reasonable and fair for the gainfully employed, who are thought to be more important and of higher status, to have a bigger piece of the pie. The exchange rule referred to here is conceptually very near the concept of distributive justice, which has primarily come to be associated with Homans (1961).

According to Emerson (1976), we must furthermore be observant of an exchange ratio that reflects the goal of achieving greatest utility for those individuals or groups that are part of the exchange relation, a principle that, on the micro level, might be termed individual utilitarianism or self-interest.

A final concept of great interest when talking about exchange relations is that of serial reciprocity. It is the old people in society who have built up the material welfare the young enjoy today. In light of this, we could claim that it is now the duty of the young to provide for these people in their old age. Thus, the young find themselves in a debt relation with respect to older people. This debt relation constitutes a way of introducing the concept of time into the discussion of exchange and reciprocity. Through a debt relation, a certain amount of time is allowed to pass between a gift and a gift in return. The time that has passed implies just such a debt relation, as according to traditional moral standards, one should not harm a person to whom one is indebted.

Debt relations such as these serve an important purpose in keeping a social system in balance. This also implies that we can view such relations between individuals or groups of individuals as valuable in preserving a social system. In an analogous way, it is also the case that changing a social system is facilitated if such debt relations are dissolved. The concept of serial reciprocity is commonly used to denote the debt relation inherent in the notion that an adult helps his/her child in order to receive help in return during his/her old age. This help may then be provided by society or another third party. When this serial reciprocity functions on the societal level, we imagine that what we do for old people today will be done for us when we are old.

However, in a rapidly changing society such as our Western society, there may be a tendency to release people from reciprocal debt relations such as those mentioned above. In the present context, it is interesting to investigate how matters stand here.

In summary, we can state that an exchange relation may be guided by institutionalized norms, which result in very different exchange ratios. Norms for how exchange ratios act can include:
1. Parity, i.e., equal benefit
2. Altruism, i.e., moral surplus
3. Individual utilitarianism, i.e., maximal personal benefit
4. Status consistency, i.e., accordance between benefit and status
5. Serial reciprocity

These five norms for possible exchange relations may be called *exchange rules*. As concerns the exchange relations between younger and older people, on a group or individual level, it has been our concern to try to discern which exchange rules apply and how these rules may have changed over the years.

**The surveys in 1982 and 2005**

In 1982, a mail survey was sent to a random sample of 2,040 Swedish inhabitants in the age range 15-75 years. The net sample after deaths, emigration, etc., was 2,025 individuals, of which 1,293 returned the questionnaire. This corresponds to a response rate of 64 percent of the net sample.

In 2005, a mail survey was sent to random sample of 2,001 Swedish inhabitants in the age range 16-85 years. The net sample after deaths, emigration, etc., was 1,918 individuals, of which 1,015 returned the questionnaire and an additional 265 were interviewed by telephone. In all, 1,280 individuals participated, which correspond to 67 percent of the net sample.

As a simple test of the demographic representativity of the respondent groups in each study, they have been compared with the whole Swedish population with regard to age distribution within the age span studied. In both 1982 and 2005, the age distribution of the respondent groups matched the corresponding age distribution in the Swedish population at the corresponding time, as tested by Chi² for goodness of fit.

The questionnaires sent out in 1982 and 2005 contained exactly the same statements on social attitudes, as presented in Table 1. As mentioned above, the statements were generated on the basis of two theoretical perspectives: the resource perspective and the exchange perspective.

For each statement, the respondent was asked to agree or disagree with the statement. In addition to the statements, the questionnaires also requested information on a common set of background variables.

Whenever the results from the two surveys are directly compared, the age span is restricted to 16-75 years in both studies.
Table 1. Social attitudes in 1982 and 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The right to make demands</th>
<th>Percentage agreeing</th>
<th>diff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensioners must accept lower Level-of-living as compared to the gainfully employed</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The gainfully employed must be allowed to have a higher level of living as compared to the pensioners</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensioners and gainfully employed shall have equal parts of the wealth in society</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a pensioner you have same right to demand as the gainfully employed</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gerontocracy

| It feels safer if the Swedish parliament is made up with older politicians | 24      | 19   | -5** |
| It is natural that older persons are the bosses over younger ones | 44      | 42   | -2 ns |

Juvenocracy

| It feels safer if the Swedish parliament is made up with younger politicians | 29      | 19   | -10** |
| No politician in parliament should be older than 65 | 60      | 44   | -16** |
| It is natural that younger persons are the bosses over older ones | 30      | 28   | -2 ns |

Parity in material decline

| It is not acceptable that pensioners keep their spending power at times of recession, when others get poorer | 69      | 58   | -11** |
| At times of recession both gainfully employed an pensioners must tighten their belts | 86      | 75   | -11 |
| Since many old people have experienced economically bad times, it may be right that they at a recession may keep their spending power while others loose spending power | 29      | 29   | 0    |

The right to work

| Pensioners should to a greater extent be given access to the labour market, if they want this themselves | 34      | 40   | 6** |
| Pensioners should not compete with young people on the labour market | 83      | 79   | -4    |
### Equality of retirement benefits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage agreeing</th>
<th>diff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Irrespective of what one has done earlier in life, all pensioners should receive the same amount as pension</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>-23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The amount received as pension should be directly proportionate to the earlier income</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Responsibility for care

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The responsibility for old peoples care and service should not only rest with society, but also with family, neighbours, church and other organizations</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>-13 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old peoples need of care and service should first and above all be on public expense</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Serial reciprocity

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
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<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Since taxes are paid for the wealth of today’s pensioners, one can expect to have it nice as a future pensioner</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>-6 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even if you pay taxes for the wealth of today’s pensioners, you can not count with a nice time as a future pensioner.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>-2 ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Exchange value

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The life experience of today’s pensioners is hardly of any value for today’s younger generations</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An important mission for old people is to share their life experience with the younger ones</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>-1 ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05  ** p < .01  ns not significant

### Dimensions of the social attitudes

Using factor analysis, reported by Tornstam (1984), the statements derived from the above-described theoretical inputs have been reduced to the nine attitude dimensions described below.

For comparability, the data from 2005 have been organized in the same way as in 1982, that is building on the factor analysis from 1982, even if a factor analysis on the data from 2005 produces a marginally different composition of the dimensions. Table 1 provides, statement by statement, the proportions of respondents who agreed with the statements in 1982 and 2005. The dimensions are...
presented below in the order in which they were generated by the factor analysis (highest eigenvalue first).

1. The right to make demands

The attitude dimension The right to make demands comprises attitude statements of two kinds. One group of statements is tied to the exchange norm previously called parity. Parity is expressed in these attitude statements such that retirees and the gainfully employed should have the same proportion of the societal pie and should have the same right to make demands. The other group of attitude statements in this attitude dimension is tied to the exchange norm previously called status consistency, i.e., a desired accordance between the benefits one receives and the status one has in society. The respondents who subscribed to the latter exchange norm believed that retirees – because they are not gainfully employed and are therefore of lower status – should also have lower benefits. Retirees must resign themselves to having a lower standard of living than the gainfully employed have. Theoretically speaking, one could say that this attitude dimension is polar in nature, in that the two exchange norms parity and status consistency are set against each other.

Note that the concentration of respondents’ responses to the attitude statements comprising this dimension is highly skewed toward the parity norm. For instance, 83 percent of respondents in 1982 and 89 percent in 2005 agreed with the statement that retirees have the same right to make demands as the gainfully employed do. At the same time, however, a rather large minority, around 33 percent, considered that retirees must resign themselves to lower living standards than the gainfully employed have.

For the further analysis, a simple additive index, linearly transformed to a range between -100 and 100, has been computed, such that 100 on the index indicates maximum support of the parity norm, while -100 indicates maximum support of the status consistency norm. The mean values of this index for the two years 1982 and 2005 are presented uppermost in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows, as already mentioned, that this dimension is highly skewed toward the parity norm, but also that, on average, Swedes’ attitudes have shifted somewhat more toward the parity norm during the 23-year period.

Although the majority of respondents, in both years, stressed the parity norm over status consistency, we still find slight differences between various subgroups in the dataset. The correlations between the social attitude dimensions and a set of background variables are presented in Table 2.
Figure 1. Changes in social attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The right to make demands</td>
<td>.16***</td>
<td>.18***</td>
<td>.14***</td>
<td>.04 ns</td>
<td>.07*</td>
<td>.04 ns</td>
<td>.21***</td>
<td>.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerontocracy</td>
<td>.01 ns</td>
<td>.11***</td>
<td>.30***</td>
<td>.11*</td>
<td>.19***</td>
<td>.09*</td>
<td>.11***</td>
<td>.02 ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenocracy</td>
<td>.00 ns</td>
<td>.01 ns</td>
<td>.12**</td>
<td>.09 ns</td>
<td>.19***</td>
<td>.24***</td>
<td>.02 ns</td>
<td>.02*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parity in material decline</td>
<td>.00 ns</td>
<td>.03 ns</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>.05 ns</td>
<td>.07*</td>
<td>.09*</td>
<td>.18***</td>
<td>.05 ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The right to work</td>
<td>.04 ns</td>
<td>.03 ns</td>
<td>.11*</td>
<td>.07 ns</td>
<td>.16***</td>
<td>.12***</td>
<td>.04 ns</td>
<td>.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality of retirement benefits</td>
<td>.04 ns</td>
<td>.10**</td>
<td>.13**</td>
<td>.06 ns</td>
<td>.08*</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>.30***</td>
<td>.25***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility for care</td>
<td>.12***</td>
<td>.04 ns</td>
<td>.31***</td>
<td>.24***</td>
<td>.26***</td>
<td>.06 ns</td>
<td>.15***</td>
<td>.11**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serial reciprocity</td>
<td>.08*</td>
<td>.02 ns</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>.19***</td>
<td>.09*</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>.03 ns</td>
<td>.05 ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange value</td>
<td>.06*</td>
<td>.01 ns</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>.06 ns</td>
<td>.13***</td>
<td>.11***</td>
<td>.08*</td>
<td>.09*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

Table 2. Eta correlations between background variables and social attitudes
With regard to *The right to make demands*, Table 2 shows that, in 1982, the greatest correlation was with the political orientation of the respondent. Behind the eta-correlation of .21 was the pattern that socialists, to a greater extent than non-socialists, were oriented toward the parity norm. Over the 23-year period, this difference has all but disappeared. This disappearance is due to the fact that right-wing respondents have shifted toward the parity norm. In 1982, the right-wing respondents, on average, had an index value of 22, which in 2005 has increased to 40, while the left-wing respondents had a value of 50 at both points in time.

Table 2 also shows gender and age differences regarding the right to make demands. Women were, to a greater extent than men, oriented toward the parity norm – a gap that is the same in 2005 as it was in 1982, although both men and woman have shifted slightly more toward the parity norm.

The age difference found in 1982 is, interestingly, that younger respondents, to a greater extent than older, were oriented toward the parity norm. This age difference has disappeared in 2005.

For each dimension, we have checked for cohort development changes. This is done by comparing an age group in 1982 with a 23-year-older age group in 2005 to discover, for example, whether the category including those who have aged from 15-26 years in 1982 to 38-49 years in 2005 have changed in any particular way. With regard to *The right to make demands*, no statistically significant intra-cohort changes were observed. This implies that the overall shift toward more parity in the answers is partly due to the disappearance of respondents who, in 1982, were 66+ and who, in 2005, were not left in the sample.

### 2. Gerontocracy

The attitude dimension *Gerontocracy* comprises attitude statements connected with the degree to which one views old people as a resource in leadership. Prior to conducting the factor analysis, we had expected *Gerontocracy* and the next Juvenocracy dimension to constitute opposite poles of the same attitude dimension. Thus, at one end of the scale we expected an emphasis on older people’s value as leading figures, and at the other an emphasis on younger people’s value as leading figures. The factor analysis, however, did not support our predictions. Instead, these two poles on our hypothetical scale formed two separate factors or dimensions. And, as seen in Table 1, the proportion of respondents agreeing with the statements have dropped in both these dimensions, which supports the notion that they must be handled separately.

An additive index ranging from -100 to 100 (max Gerontocracy) has been created for the *Gerontocracy* dimension.
Figure 1 shows, as already mentioned, that there has been a minor drop in the Gerontocracy attitude during the 23-year period. The drop has been from a not overly gerontocratic stance to a stance that is even less gerontocratic.

There have been some changes, however, in how the Gerontocracy attitude is distributed. The correlations in Table 2 indicate differences between respondents of different ages and political orientations. In 1982, a distinct pattern was observed, such that the older the respondent, the more of the Gerontocracy attitude. In 2005, this pattern was still observable, but much less significant. The older respondents have become less “age-centric”.

Also, in 1982 there was a difference between respondents with left- and right-wing sympathies. The right-wing sympathizers were significantly more gerontocratic. This difference has disappeared during the 23-year period, as right-wing sympathizers have again come closer to left-wing sympathizers. In 1982, the right-wing respondents, on average, had an index value of -22, which in 2005 has decreased to -43, while the left-wing respondents had an index value of -39 at both points in time.

Table 2 also shows a correlation between education and Gerontocracy, which however is a spurious relationship caused by the fact that older respondents, who at the same time, and particularly in 1982, are more gerontocratic, have fewer years of education. When gender, age, education and political orientation are introduced as independent variables in an MCA analysis of the data from 1982 (not shown), the explanatory power of education disappears. When an MCA analysis is performed on the 2005 data, only gender retains its significant explanatory power, with men being slightly more gerontocratic. Thus, during the 23-year period under study, the degree of gerontocratic attitudes has not only dropped slightly, it has also ceased to be a matter of age and political orientation, and instead become weakly connected with gender.

The analysis of intra-cohort changes indicates that the overall drop in gerontocratic attitudes is primarily a result of the disappearance of the oldest and most gerontocratic respondents from 1982. The oldest generations have dropped out of the study. Yet, the intra-cohort changes show, as described in Table 3, that each cohort in fact has moved slightly away from the non gerontocratic extreme, while still being on the non gerontocratic side. This change is however statistically significant in only two of the four studied cohorts.

Thus, although the general overall comparison between 1982 and 2005 shows a decline in gerontocratic attitudes, intra-cohort changes show a tendency toward the opposite. Translated to a possible developmental pattern, it may well be that society as such has become less gerontocratic, due
Table 3. **Cohort analysis of Gerontocracy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Born within years:</th>
<th>Age in 1982</th>
<th>Age in 2005</th>
<th>Mean values 1 on index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Year 1982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1929-35</td>
<td>47-62</td>
<td>70-85</td>
<td>-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1936-45</td>
<td>37-46</td>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>-47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1946-55</td>
<td>27-36</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>-53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1956-66</td>
<td>15-26</td>
<td>38-49</td>
<td>-53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Range: -100 (no gerontocracy) to +100 (max gerontocracy)
* p<.05    ns not significant

to the disappearance of the oldest and most gerontocratic generations, at the same time as the modal individual developmental pattern still reveals an increase in gerontocratic attitudes.

3. **Juvenocracy**

The attitude dimension *Juvenocracy* comprises statements that emphasize the value of young people having leadership functions.

As with the afore-described *Gerontocracy* dimension, the stress on *Juvenocracy* has also decreased during the 23-year period. In this case as well, the pattern goes from a not overly Juvenocratic stance to a stance that is even less Juvenocratic. As can be seen in Figure 1, this decrease is even more pronounced than the decrease in gerontocratic attitudes.

A correlation with age was observed in the 1982 data (Table 2), such that older respondents exhibited more of the *Juvenocracy* attitude, indicating a tendency to pass things on to the younger generations. In the 2005 data, this age pattern has disappeared. The *Juvenocracy* attitude does not correlate with age or gender. Instead, the strength of the correlation with education has increased. Respondents with shorter/lower education are more Juvenocratic. This correlation remains the same even when age is controlled for in an MCA analysis.

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2 Multiple Classification Analysis (MCA) is a type of variance analysis (ANOVA) that allows any kind of data, even categorical data. As with an ordinary regression analysis, it produces beta values showing the relative importance of an independent variable when the others are controlled for.
The intra-cohort analysis shows a tendency for all cohorts to have decreased in *Juvenocracy*, even if this is statistically significant in only two of the four cohorts.

In summary, we find that the Juvenocratic attitude has decreased significantly over the 23-year period and fallen into a pattern in which only low education as such seems to be related to a higher degree of *Juvenocracy*.

### 4. Parity in material decline

One of the poles in the first-mentioned attitude dimension – *The right to make demands* – was closely connected to the exchange norm we have called parity. With regard to this first dimension, parity referred to the notion that retirees and the gainfully employed should have a right to an equal piece of the ‘societal pie.’ The present attitude dimension – *Parity in material decline* – also expresses an aspect of the parity norm, but in this case, the desire is for parity with regard to material decline. Two of the attitude statements in this dimension express the notion that the gainfully employed as well as retirees must help to bear the consequences of a declining social economy. It should be noted that a majority of 86 percent of respondents in 1982 and 75 percent in 2005 agree with the statement that both the gainfully employed and retirees must tighten their belts in situations of economic decline.

Another statement in this dimension expresses the notion that old people should not have to bear the burden of an economic downturn. Over the years, a constant 29 percent of respondents feel it is reasonable that older people maintain their purchasing power while others experience reduced purchasing power. The latter statement exemplifies the exchange norm we have called altruism, i.e., moral surplus. Thus, the present attitude dimension is also polar in nature to the extent that it sets the exchange norm of parity against the exchange norm of altruism, where the parity norm, as demonstrated in figure 1, outbalances the norm of altruism. This outbalancing, however, has been modified over the 23-year period, as there has been a slight but statistically highly significant shift in the altruistic direction.

As shown in Table 2, in 1982 we found mentionable correlations with the respondent’s age and political orientation. The older respondents as well as those with left-wing sympathies were slightly less oriented toward the parity pole of the scale, and thus, relatively speaking, somewhat more oriented toward altruism. In 2005, these correlations have disappeared as the younger respondents have aligned with the older respondents’ slightly less parity-oriented attitude, and the right-wing respondents again have become more like the left-wing respondents. The left-wing respondents, on average, have moved 2 scale points toward less parity (and more altruism), while the right-wing respondents, on average, have moved 14 points in the same direction.
The intra-cohort analysis has shown that the youngest cohorts, those born between 1946-1966, have moved significantly toward altruism, while the older generations, those born between 1929-1945, have retained almost the same attitude over the 23-year period.

In summary, the dimension *Parity in material decline* is markedly skewed in the parity direction, but has become somewhat less skewed between 1982 and 2005, because those groups who were more parity oriented in 1982 have become somewhat less so.

5. *The right to work*

The two attitude statements brought together within the attitude dimension *The right to work* have their roots in the resource perspective. The statements deal with whether it is legitimate to allow retirees to enter the labor market and to give them the opportunity to be utilized as labor force resources. With regard to this dimension, the focus of the responses is on the restrictive side, that is, respondents did not feel that old people have any business being on the labor market. In 1982, no less than 83 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that retirees should not compete with young people on the labor market. At the same time, however, a rather large minority (34 percent) agreed with the statement that more room should be made on the labor market for retirees who wish to work. The responses to these statements in 2005 have shifted a few percentage points toward the ‘right-to-work’ side, but are still skewed in the ‘should-not-compete’ direction, and when combined into an index, we see a shift toward a slightly reduced ‘should-not-compete’ attitude, as shown in Figure 1.

Besides the general somewhat reduced ‘should-not-compete’ attitude, Table 2 also shows an age correlation in 1982 that has disappeared in 2005. In 1982, one specific age category was less ‘should-not-compete’ oriented in its attitudes than were others. These were respondents in the age range 26-35 years. In 2005, this peculiarity was no longer observed. At both points in time, however, we find a correlation with education, such that respondents with a lower/shorter education were even more oriented toward the ‘should-not-compete’ pole than were those with a higher/longer education. This difference remains even when age is controlled for in an MCA analysis.

The intra-cohort analysis reveals that the only cohort showing statistically significant change over the 23-year period includes respondents born between 1929-1935, who were 47-62 years of age in 1982 and 70-85 years in 2005. They have become significantly less ‘should-not-compete’ oriented. The changes for the other cohorts are in the same direction, but not statistically significant.
6. Equality of retirement benefits

As concerns the attitude dimension *Equality of retirement benefits*, two exchange norms are once again set against each other. The attitude statements that combine to form this attitude dimension relate to retirement benefits and how they are calculated. The content of one attitude statement is characterized by parity, that is, everyone’s retirement benefits should be the same, whereas the content of the other is characterized by status consistency, that is, that the benefit level should be proportional to the income a person has had during his/her working life.

In 1982, the general response trend here was that, on average, there was more agreement with the parity norm than with the status consistency norm – a pattern that has reversed in 2005 (Figure 1). In 2005, the responses are skewed toward the status consistency side. In 1982, 62 percent of respondents felt that all retirees should receive the same amount of retirement benefits regardless of what they have done previously. In 2005, this figure has dropped to 39 percent, at the same time as the proportion of respondents who support the status consistency statement has increased from 48 to 60 percent. The intra-cohort changes are all in the same direction, statistically significant (p<.001) and about equal in magnitude in all cohorts.

Table 2 shows that, in 1982, we had correlations with age, education, and in particular with political orientation. The differences were such that the younger the respondent, the more oriented toward the parity end of the scale, and also that the left-wing sympathizers were more oriented in this direction than were the right-wing sympathizers. Whereas 69 percent of respondents in the age category 66-75 years agreed with the statement that the received retirement benefits should be directly proportionate to earlier income, only 37 percent of the 16- to 25-year-olds felt the same way. And, whereas 60 percent of the right-wing sympathizers agreed with this statement, only 41 percent of the left-wing sympathizers did so. There was also a minor difference between respondents with lower and higher education levels, such that those with lower education exhibited attitudes that were more parity oriented. The above-mentioned correlations remain even when controlled for each other in an MCA analysis.

The changes occurring over the 23-year period are that the afore-mentioned age correlation has disappeared, at the same time as a minor, but statistically significant gender difference has appeared, such that men are slightly more oriented toward the status consistency pole. In 2005, 65 percent of male respondents agreed with the statement that the received retirement benefits should be directly proportionate to earlier income, as compared to 56 percent of female respondents. A more substantial and persistent difference is found when comparing the right-wing respondents, of whom 70 percent agree with the above-mentioned statement, with the left-wing sympathizers, of whom 52 percent agreed with this statement. In this 23-year perspective, the gap between left- and right-wing
sympathizers remains almost the same, although both categories have shifted toward status consistency, i.e. feel that retirement benefits should be related to earlier income and not equal for all.

7. Responsibility for care

The attitude dimension Responsibility for care is polar in the sense that, at one end of the scale, it expresses the opinion that it is primarily society, i.e., the public sector, that should be responsible for the care of old people, whereas at the other end, adult children, other relations and neighbors are thought to be responsible for care and services. In 1982, the general response trend was already skewed toward the end of the scale stressing public Responsibility for care, and has become even more skewed in this direction over the 23-year period (Figure 1). In 2005, no less than 88 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that meeting old people’s needs for care and service should be first and foremost publicly funded. A rather large, but decreased proportion, however, felt that adult children in older people’s families, neighbors, etc. also have this responsibility (see Table 1).

At both points in time, as shown in Table 2, we have an age correlation, such that the older the respondent, the more stress on public funding. Also at both points in time, the left-wing sympathizers are more inclined to stress society’s responsibility before the responsibility of children, neighbors, etc. The correlation with education in 1982 (those with lower education were more inclined to prefer public responsibility) is partly a spurious correlation caused by the link between age and educational level. When age is controlled for in an MCA analysis, the correlation between educational level and the index value is reduced by half.

When we reach 2005, the most conspicuous correlation is that with age, such that the older respondents, just as in 1982, exhibited a higher inclination to place the responsibility for care on society and public funding. This age difference also shows an interesting intra-cohort pattern, as described in Table 4.

Table 4. Cohort analysis of Responsibility for care

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Born within years:</th>
<th>Age in 1982</th>
<th>Age in 2005</th>
<th>Mean values 1 on index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Year 1982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1929-35</td>
<td>47-62</td>
<td>70-85</td>
<td>-29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1936-45</td>
<td>37-46</td>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>-04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1946-55</td>
<td>27-36</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1956-66</td>
<td>15-26</td>
<td>38-49</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Range: -100 (public expense) to 100 (family, etc.)

** p<.01  ns not significant
As demonstrated in Table 4, all four cohorts have shifted toward putting more stress on society’s responsibility and public funding, even if this change is not statistically significant in the oldest cohort. There is, however, systematism in the intra-cohort changes, such that the younger cohorts have changed the most and “caught up with” and even slightly passed the oldest generation in the process toward putting more stress on society’s responsibility.

8 Serial reciprocity

One of the two statements tapping the serial reciprocity dimension expresses a positive trust in or hope for such reciprocity, while the other one conveys a skeptical outlook.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, the Serial reciprocity scale is skewed toward having faith in, or hoping for, Serial reciprocity, and there has been no significant change in this over the 23-year period.

As shown in Table 2, faith in/hope for Serial reciprocity correlates with age and education. Both in 1982 and 2005, the older age categories expressed greater faith in, or hope for, Serial reciprocity. Also, in both years, the respondents with lower/shorter education demonstrated a slightly greater belief in, or hope for, Serial reciprocity. This latter pattern remains even when age is controlled for in an MCA analysis.

Although a great majority, both in 1982 and 2005, believed in, or hoped for, Serial reciprocity, a substantial minority also signaled doubts. In both years, around 50 percent agreed with the statement that you cannot count on a pleasant future as a retiree even if you have contributed with your taxes your whole working life. In fact, in 1982, no less than 40 percent of respondents agreed with both statements in the Serial reciprocity scale, that is they hoped for Serial reciprocity, but they had doubts about it when thinking forward to their own retirement. In 2005, these skeptics decreased to 33 percent, which is a minor, but statistically significant (p<.01) drop.

The cohort analysis accounted for in Table 5 shows two particular cohorts that have become less skeptical over the 23-year period. These are the middle cohorts that have approached or even reached retirement age between 1982 and 2005. In Cohort 3, those born between 1946-1955, the proportion of skeptics dropped from 40 to 28 percent. The very same middle cohorts have also significantly shifted their overall index value toward having faith in, or hoping for, Serial reciprocity.

In summary, then, a large and invariable majority of Swedes view their taxes in terms of Serial reciprocity, but still tend to question whether they will get anything back in retirement benefits when it is their turn. This skepticism has, however, decreased slightly over the years.
Table 5. Cohort analysis of proportion of Skeptics (percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Born within years:</th>
<th>Age in 1982</th>
<th>Age in 2005</th>
<th>Mean values on index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Year 1982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1929-35</td>
<td>47-62</td>
<td>70-85</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1936-45</td>
<td>37-46</td>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1946-55</td>
<td>27-36</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1956-66</td>
<td>15-26</td>
<td>38-49</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p<.01    ns not significant

9. Exchange value

The attitude dimension Exchange value reflects lines of thinking found in the resource perspective. The overall response distribution for the statements collected in this dimension reveals a highly positive view of old people's Exchange value with regard to conveyance of life experience (Figure 1). As shown in Table 1, in 1982 no less than 97 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that it is important that older people in society share their life experiences with the young. In 2005, 23 years later, the outcome is the same – 96 percent of respondents agreed with the statement. In both years, only 10 percent of respondents felt that the life experiences of old people hardly can be of any value to today’s younger generations.

As shown in Table 2, there are some correlations regarding the attitude dimension Exchange value. In 1982, the oldest respondents were less likely to ascribe a positive Exchange value to old people. The response pattern among respondents was similar up to a boundary of about 65 years of age. The group that deviated from the rest in 1982 contained respondents between 66 and 75 years, who ascribed to old people a considerably lower Exchange value than did other age groups. This pattern has disappeared in 2005, such that there are no statistically significant age differences in this regard (see Table 2).

At both points in time, however, the respondents with lower/shorter education ascribed somewhat lower Exchange value to retirees. This pattern remains even when age is controlled for in MCA analyses. The difference between the educational categories is, however, entirely due to differences in responses to the statement that the life experiences of today’s retirees hardly can be of any value to today’s younger generations. In 1982, 14 percent of respondents with lower/shorter education agreed with the statement, while only 4 percent of those with higher/longer education did so (eta .17; p<.001). In 2005, the corresponding figures were 13 and 5 percent (eta .14; p<.001). The above differences
between respondents with different educational levels remain even when age is controlled for. The above pattern can perhaps be interpreted in terms of the well-known fact that it takes some education to understand how little one knows, and where to find knowledge, experience and wisdom.

We may ask, however, what the generally very positive outlook on old people’s *Exchange value* actually reflects. It could be that this type of attitude statement elicits socially desirable, but in no way binding responses. It could also be, however, that the responses reflect a cultural lag (Ogburn, 1922), in which old attitudes linger some time even after they have become obsolete in a society in developmental flux. Finally, of course, we may have targeted one of the very stable components of human society. The fact that the very positive outlook on old people’s *Exchange value* regarding life experiences has remained stable over the 23-year period gives some support to the latter interpretation. Even in a highly industrialized and prosperous society in flux, old people’s life experiences generally seem to be a highly valued commodity. This leads us to a summarizing discussion of our results.

**Discussion**

Let us begin with a simple overview of the social attitudes studied and of what has happened between 1982 and 2005:

- Swedes were – from the beginning in 1982, and even more so in 2005 – inclined to advocate equal welfare rights to the gainfully employed and retirees.

- With regard to calculation of retirement benefits, Swedes have changed from a “same for all” stance to a “related to earlier income” stance.

- In times of economic recession, Swedes thought that both the gainfully employed and retirees must tighten their belts, even if they have moved slightly in direction toward the belief that retirees should be spared.

- In 1982, and still in 2005, Swedes believed strongly, or hoped, that the taxes they paid during working life would be returned when they retired, but they also felt somewhat skeptical as to whether this would in fact occur – a skepticism that has faded somewhat over the years.

- To a high and increasing degree, Swedes placed the responsibility for old age care on society and public funding.

- Swedes attributed an invariably high value to the experiences old people have to share with younger generations.

- Swedes, however, in 1982 and in 2005, tended to think that retirees should not compete with young people on the labor market.
Swedes showed neither a marked Gerontocratic attitude nor a Juvenocratic one. Both these tendencies have diminished over the years, but still in 2005, 44 percent of Swedes thought that no member of parliament should be older than 65, something that 60 percent thought in 1982.

Returning to the initial theoretical sensitizing concepts and the resource perspective, it can be concluded that Swedes expressed double discourses regarding old-age retirees as resources. They were unchanging in ascribing an extremely high value to the life experiences old people have to share with younger generations, at the same time as old people were less sought after on the labor market.

Regarding the principles for exchange, we can conclude that the parity norm, with one special exception, seems to be quite important and stable with regard to social attitudes toward old-age retirees, even if its importance has increased somewhat with regard to retirees’ rights to make demands, and decreased somewhat with regard to how times of recession should be dealt with.

The special exception from the dominance of the parity norm regards the dimension of equality of retirement benefits, where the parity norm has come to be outbalanced by the norm of status consistency. The importance of the latter norm has increased and in a certain respect come to compete with the parity norm. While the modal pattern in 1982 was that retirees and the gainfully employed should have equal parts of the wealth (parity), and that all retired people should receive the same superannuation (parity), the modal pattern in 2005 still implies that retirees and the gainfully employed should have equal parts of the wealth (parity), but that the benefits retired people receive should be determined by their earlier income. One interpretation of this statistically highly significant change is that, on the principal level, the parity/equality norm still rules, but as salaries have increased, people have started to respond to statements in the retirement-benefits dimension from a more personal, prospective angle, such that responses are increasingly influenced by the norm of individual utilitarianism. Given such an interpretation, it is not status consistency as such that underlies the responses, but rather this factor of individual utilitarianism. We can assume that it is probably not the norm of status consistency as such that is generally increasing in importance, because status consistency, as captured in the right-to-make-demands dimension, as the opposite pole to the parity norm, has lost its relative importance over the 23-year period.

The norm of altruism seems weak, given the way it was measured as an opposite pole to the parity norm when dealing with times of recession. This weakness, however, has not increased over the years. It has become somewhat less weak – indicating that there is probably not an ongoing process of disappearance of altruism, but rather the opposite.

The above discussion focused on modal patterns and some changes occurring between 1982 and 2005. But, if we, instead of focusing on details and differences, look at the overall result, we cannot avoid being struck by how similar the results from 1982 and 2005 are – disregarding the new wind of individual utilitarianism described above. The similarity of the results is most clearly evident when we
examine the actual percentages of respondents agreeing with the various statements (Table 1) – and somewhat less evident in Figure 1, where the statements have been condensed to dimensions and presented in a blown up scale with 200 scale points (ranging from -100 to +100). Table 1 tells that for only seven of the 22 items the 2005 responses are 10 or more percentage points away from the 1982 data. For the remaining 15 items the 1982 and 2005 results are six or less percentage points away from each other.

A number of societal phenomena occurring between 1982 and 2005 could have been expected to change social attitudes to a greater extent than we have observed here. For example, we have experienced rapid technical development into an IT society, in which old people are often regarded as obsolete. We have repeatedly been reminded of a forthcoming demographic bomb, caused by the assumed galloping increase in old people in the population, and we have likewise repeatedly been reminded of the increasing societal problems related to Alzheimer’s disease, at the same time as society’s incapacity to provide housing for the oldest old has been on the agenda. Given these dynamics, it would seem plausible to expect greater changes in social attitudes toward old people than we have observed.

However, at the same time as these societal phenomena have been occurring, Swedish society has been characterized by economic stability and growth. Thus, one interpretation of the similarity of our results across the 23-year period may be that the macro-economic situation is the most important factor for stability of or change in social attitudes toward the elderly. What we have seen is a society that, at both measurement occasions, is characterized by prosperity and economic growth, thus forming the same macro-sociological basis for similar responses to the items.

As suggested earlier, yet another interpretation of the similarity of results is that we have targeted specific social attitudes that reflect some very basic and stable values and norms in society. For instance, the high and stable stress on the parity norm for exchange could be interpreted as the crown principle of reciprocity, which Caesar declared as essential and which with few exceptions still marks our way of thinking. Thus, the suggestion that such norms and values are destined to rapid change in a society in flux is not supported by our data.

It must be remembered, however, that 23 years is a relatively short period of time when talking about social change, and particularly when considering Ogburn’s (1922) previously mentioned concept of cultural lag. It takes time before values and norms change.

Returning to the details again, there are many statistically significant differences, but they are not, with one exception, striking. The striking exception is that, regarding the question of how to distribute the retirement benefits, Swedes have become much more inclined to advocate a system in which benefits are directly proportionate to earlier income – what we have termed status consistency. In fact, in this
case, the modality has changed from stressing parity (that retirees should receive the same amount of money irrespective of earnings during work life) to stressing status consistency.

However, another way of interpreting this is that the result does not really imply abandonment of the principle of parity. It rather implies that the principle of parity has shifted from an aggregated level (equal retirement benefits for all people) to the individual level (equal in relation to the earlier income). This latter interpretation implies a shift from collectivism to individualism regarding calculation of retirement benefits.

If we look at this matter more closely, differences in opinion between Swedes with left- and right-wing sympathies come to the fore. The left-wing sympathizers are comparatively less inclined to stress the status consistency or individualistic norm, even if they also have shifted toward this norm. Both left- and right-wing sympathizers have moved in this direction, maintaining the same difference between them. Also, at both points in time, those with a higher education, and probably higher income, are more inclined to stress the norm of status consistency/individualism.

Underlying the above matters could be the simple logic that it is easier to be equality and parity oriented if you yourself in one sense or another are less privileged. Being a low educated person or feeling affinity with the socialist block often goes hand in hand with being less privileged. The interpretation could then be that the responses reflect an individualistic utilitarianism, in which those who think they have an economic advantage to defend are more prone to stress the status consistency norm. And, because the economy has improved during the 23-year period, more people in 2005 felt they had an economic advantage to defend, thus explaining the general shift toward the status consistency norm. The latter interpretation is supported by the fact that all intra-cohort changes go in this direction – toward putting more stress on status consistency (or individual utilitarianism). As cohorts have grown older and earned more money, they have shifted toward the standpoint that retirement benefits should be related to previous income – an individualistic and utilitarian stance.

In 1982, the above difference between respondents with different political sympathies, in which the left-wing sympathizers were more prone to advocate parity and equality, also emerged regarding The-right-to-make-demands dimension. Left-wing sympathizers were more inclined to advocate retirees’ equal rights than were right-wing sympathizers. However, over the 23-year period, this difference has diminished as the opinions of right-wing sympathizers have approached those of left-wing sympathizers.

This pattern of right-wing sympathizers moving toward left-wing sympathizers has also been observed with regard to the Gerontocracy dimension and the Parity-in-material-decline dimension. Most importantly, and to sum up, the impact of political orientation has weakened over the years. The only two dimensions for which political orientation of the respondent still matters in 2005 with any mentionable strength are Equality-of-retirement-benefits (eta = .25) and the Responsibility-for-care
This observation is in accord with the notion that as prosperity and welfare progress, the importance of political ideologies dissolves. Kerr (1969) suggested that as prosperity and wealth increase, the traditional political ideologies will approach each other and lose their former importance. Differences other than political ones will become more important. For example, belonging to the same generation or having the same educational level may be more uniting than are political ideologies.

When looking across the nine dimensions, however, we find no support for the notion that the respondent’s age has increased in importance for social attitudes and substituted the importance political preferences once had. On the contrary, over the 23-year period, the explanatory power of age has decreased or disappeared for seven of the nine attitude dimensions. Moreover, the explanatory power of education has generally decreased or disappeared. Educational level shows no increased explanatory power for any of the attitude dimensions.

In summary, across the nine attitude dimensions and the four explanatory variables we have systematically used, it is more difficult to predict attitudes in 2005 than in 1982. In 2005, attitudes are generally less related to gender, age, education and political preferences as compared with 1982. Consequently, there is no support for the idea that the importance of gender, age and education has replaced the importance of political ideologies with regard to determining attitudes. Generally speaking, since 1982, all these factors have become somewhat less suitable for predicting attitudes. In other words, it is not only political ideologies that may have lost some of their importance for social attitudes in a prosperous welfare society, but also differences related to traditional variables such as gender, age and education. With a reservation for the small set of explanatory variables we have used, one hypothesis is that the variations we see in social attitudes toward old people may become increasingly individualized and less related to traditional socio-structural circumstances such as education level, political orientation, gender and age.

Finally, if we venture to draw on the present study to predict future developments in other societies like Sweden – societies that are industrialized, prosperous and wealthy, and that are growing even more so, but that also exhibit double discourses – the future definitely does not look so gloomy for old people, as was once suggested by the Modernization Theory (Cowgill & Homes, 1972). This theory has certainly been rejected by most modern gerontologist, but still is conveyed by gerontology laymen, journalists and politicians.

Thus, in a prosperous and economically wealthy society, which is growing even more so, it may be expected that social attitudes toward retirees will not generally become more negative, but rather develop from good to better, even if a few question marks remain. Retirees will invariably be looked upon as having valuable assets in the form of life experiences. Increasingly, retirees will be ascribed the same right to welfare benefits as the gainfully employed. Future retirees, for good or worse, can look forward to public opinion entailing that the retirement benefits received should be proportionate.
to the salary received during working life, at the same time as there will be increasing agreement that the public welfare system should be responsible for old people’s care and service. All this is expected to occur within the framework of a strong, stable belief in or hope for Serial reciprocity. Existing distrust in such Serial reciprocity will probably decrease, but still be noticeable. However, in times of recession, retirees will be expected to tighten their belts together with the gainfully employed. Retirees will also, still, live up to the expectation that they should not compete with young people on the labor market, and there will still be a non-negligible attitude implying that old people have no business in parliament – even if this attitude is declining. In a modern prosperous welfare society, however, there is no room for marked Juvenocracy - or for marked Gerontocracy.

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Hompage of the Social Gerontology Group: www.soc.uu.se/research/gerontology/

References


