

SSSP Newsletter: Division on Youth, Aging, and the Life Course

Spring 2011

EDITOR'S NOTES (By Chris Wellin, YALC Division Chair)

Greetings to members of the SSSP Division devoted to *Youth, Aging, and the Life Course*. As the Chair of the YALC Division, I'm committed to doing all I can to advance the quality and vitality, both of our sessions at the annual meeting (to commence in Las Vegas from August the 19th through 21st) and of the linkages between the community of scholars, teachers, practitioners and activists within the association who have interests in this broad and dynamic interest area. Although the newsletter will, I hope, be useful to Division members, it is but one way for people to exchange ideas; below, I'll discuss in more length the rationale and options for the YALC division to consider other ways (in addition to the newsletter) to enhance the flexibility and timeliness of our communication.

This is the first of two newsletters that you will receive during 2011 (the second will arrive in the summer, shortly before the annual meeting). The current newsletter contains items reflecting news and various aspects of members' activities, including: 1) the revised *Mission Statement* and bibliography posted to the SSSP website; 2) information about the 2011 Program in Las Vegas; 3) graduate student papers from 2010 that deserve "honorable mention" and exposure, as examples of important, innovative new scholarship by people early in their careers; 4) a synopsis of one of the Thematic Presentations from last year's meetings in Atlanta; and 5) news about members' achievements and publications.

****Call for Nominations for Incoming Chair of Special Problems Division on Youth, Aging, and the Life Course****

A crucial issue I need to raise is the need for our division to hold an election for a new Chair. I hereby solicit names of those who are interested in serving the SSSP in this significant way. Nominees must be current members, in order accept a nomination, and self-nominations are also acceptable. I ask PLEASE that nominees of either sort be forwarded to me any time before **FRIDAY, MAY THE 6TH**.

The primary roles of the Division Chair are to help in organizing the division's sessions at the Annual Meeting, and also to communicate with members via the Divisional Newsletter. Personally, I can say that the rewards of the position are great—especially the opportunity to plan new sessions and create new linkages with other divisions within SSSP—and the responsibilities are quite manageable. Whoever takes on the position will have my full support and guidance, just as I was fortunate to have from my predecessor, Heather Dillaway. I am also happy to address questions (cwellin@ilstu.edu; (309) 438-7698).

Our Revised Mission Statement and List of Scholarly Sources.

The following text was posted earlier this year, on the SSSP website. You can find it, along with other material (including, for newer members, earlier newsletters) via the “Special Problems Divisions” link at the SSSP homepage:

We concur with Carolyn Perucci’s (YALC Divison Chair, 2005-2007) preceding mission statement, that: “From the perspective of the SSSP Division of Youth, Aging and the Life Course, a just society would enable full participation, appropriate to age, throughout the life span, without any discrimination or oppression on the basis of age, sex/gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual preference and disability, and their intersections. More specifically, in a just society, youth would have adequate nurturance, nutrition, housing, and education for participation in a global economy. Adults would have adequate employment and a work/family balance that permitted doing care work for the young, the old, and the disabled. Senior citizens would have adequate social support, financial resources, and health care for the preservation and restoration of good health.” This set of principles and goals, though appearing to be quasi-Utopian in the current political economy of the U.S., is in fact enshrined in the Older Americans Act, passed in 1965 (and amended through 2006). The Act’s Declaration of Objectives for Older Americans reads includes:

- (1) An adequate income in retirement in accordance with the American standard of living.
- (2) The best possible physical and mental health which science can make available and without regard to economic status.
- (3) Obtaining and maintaining suitable housing, independently selected, designed and located with reference to special needs and available at costs which older citizens can afford.
- (4) Full restorative services for those who require institutional care, and a comprehensive array of community-based, long-term care services adequate to appropriately sustain older people in their communities and in their homes, including support to family members and other persons providing voluntary care to older individuals needing long-term care services.
- (5) Opportunity for employment with no discriminatory personnel practices because of age.
- (6) Retirement in health, honor, dignity—after years of contribution to the economy.
- (7) Participating in and contributing to meaningful activity within the widest range of civic, cultural, educational and training and recreational opportunities.
- (8) Efficient community services, including access to low cost transportation, which provide a choice in supported living arrangements and social assistance in a

coordinated manner and which are readily available when needed, with emphasis on maintaining a continuum of care for vulnerable older individuals.

(9) Immediate benefit from proven research knowledge which can sustain and improve health and happiness.

(10) Freedom, independence, and the free exercise of individual initiative in planning and managing their own lives, full participation in the planning and operation of community based services and programs provided for their benefit, and protection against abuse, neglect, and exploitation. (42 U.S.C. 3001)

In 2011 scholarship, service, and teaching about youth, aging, and the life course present new vistas, as well as challenges. First, we can note challenges. The demographic aging of populations in the U.S., Western Europe, Japan and elsewhere is raising public concern—even alarm—about the viability of public pension and health care systems. Such alarmism tends to reinforce negative, “problem-centered” views of late life that have too often characterized social gerontology since its inception in years after WWII. The crisis of the financial system in recent years, helping to fuel a deep and lasting recession, have compounded fears: a large proportion (estimates hover around forty percent) of those currently of or approaching retirement age have had to revise life plans because of the loss of housing equity, pension benefits, and buying power due to slow wage growth. In turn, the delayed labor market exit of tens of millions of baby boomers—whether by choice or necessity—exacerbates unemployment and, at least potentially, generational conflict. The same fiscal pressures have led to cuts in social service programs at every level of government, programs on which the most economically vulnerable older and disabled people rely. Increasing privatization and commodification of services, set in motion by Neo-Liberalism in politics and cultural discourse, has substantially eroded the network and goals of the “Older Americans Act of 1965 and its later amendments.

In a more sanguine spirit, societal aging has enriched and expanded the meaning and roles of kinship networks, and many in the post—WWII baby boomer cohorts are bringing to later life a history of social commitments and community participation that will be vital social resources in the years to come. Better health for many older people (a variable still strongly linked to socioeconomic status, informal support networks, and race/ethnic and gender inequality) will provide a promising “Third Age,” post-retirement, for tens of millions of older adults. Already we are seeing the flourishing of intergenerational programs, in domains spanning youth development and mentorship, education, occupational development and the arts. For nearly a decade we have had the *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, an outlet for theoretical and applied research on the topic.

Also exciting is the vitality and growth in the study of youth and other life-stages, in keeping with the promise of a life-course framework. The SSSP is poised to advance this

mission, given its increasingly global, comparative character. Moreover, timely but long-neglected issues, such as “Care-Work”—which bridges aging and illness, family/kinship roles, health care institutions and policies, gender dynamics, and disability studies—have become active sites of scholarship and advocacy within the Society. Through co-sponsorship of conference sessions, and the alliances these activities create, the division on Youth, Aging, and the Life Course has built strong bonds with other SSSP divisions, such as those devoted to Disabilities; Crime and Juvenile Delinquency; Health, Health Policy and Health Services; and Institutional Ethnography.

YALC DIVISION SESSIONS AT THE 2011 MEETING OF THE SSSP*

August 19th –21st
Las Vegas, NV
Harrah's Las Vegas

In mid-May, the SSSP will publish the preliminary program for the 2011 conference. Among our divisions sessions are the following:

- 1) **Impact of Economic Recession on Housing and Work Careers**
- 2) **"Non-Traditional" Students in Higher Education: Personal and Institutional Accommodations**
- 3) **Strategies and Constraints: Living with Chronic Illness in Diverse Settings and Communities**
- 4) **Models of, and Barriers to, Social Participation among Older and/or Disabled People**
- 5) **Youth, Schools, Communities, and "Justice"**

These sessions will feature some two dozen presentations, not counting those by discussants, reflecting the breadth of topical and analytical approaches of YALC members. In addition, YALC is involved in a roughly equal number of co-sponsored sessions.

At last summer's (2010) meeting in Atlanta, the Division on Youth, Aging, and the Life Course organized a session devoted to the SSSP Conference Theme of Social Justice Work: "Social Justice Work and the "Aging Network": Forms of, and Constraints on, Activism in the Helping Professions." Invited panelists included Kamini Maraj Grahame and Gale Miller. Brooke Hollister, another panelist, was unable to attend. She graciously made her written comments available to the editor. The point of departure for the session was to move beyond an abstract commitment to social justice work, and to consider social, political,

professional and/or academic constraints on fulfilling the ideal of social justice work. In engaging the question, Brooke, a critical gerontologist, draws on her experience with groups such as the Gray Panthers. Also, she finds a strong affinity between this ethos and project, and that of "Public Sociology," which has been articulated by U.C.-Berkeley sociologist Michael Burawoy.

The New Public Sociologist

By Brooke Hollister, Ph.D.

**Department of Social & Behavioral Sciences
University of California, San Francisco**

Given the SSSP conference theme for 2010 (*social justice work*), I began thinking about how Public Sociology might be evolving with, or being left behind by, new internet and communication technologies. Social movement theorists are also struggling with such questions in terms of how social movements track outcomes, and open up their organizational, operational and intellectual capital to the outside world via the internet.

The first time I heard my mentor, Dr. Carroll L. Estes say that she wanted to be a "wrinkled radical" post-retirement, I knew I had found my intellectual home. Through Dr. Estes I had the privilege of working and studying in an environment that encouraged everything from including publics in research analysis and data interpretation, to standing on a street corner with a placard and a bull horn or crashing the Charles Schwab stakeholder meeting to confront him on his anti-Social Security stance. Dr. Estes also introduced me to the Gray Panthers, a 40 year old social and economic justice organization, on whose board I now serve as Vice Chair. Although I never had the opportunity to meet Gray Panthers' founder, Maggie Kuhn, I feel as though I am often stopping myself in my academic life to ask, "What would Maggie do?" Though I have tried to keep my Gray Panthers' growl out of faculty meetings, this training as a public sociologist and the work I have done with the Gray Panthers has provided me with an indispensable lens through which I view the world and my work.

Michael Burawoy (2005) defined public sociology as "...a sociology that engages with diverse publics, reaching beyond the university, to enter into an ongoing dialogue with these publics about fundamental values." After Burawoy's 2004 American Sociological Association address calling for an expansion and adoption of public sociology as a major element of the larger discipline, many sociologists worried that such a shift would upend the discipline. (Burawoy's website includes published debate on the topic.) The thinking seemed to be: "We've worked so hard to compete against other disciplines to establish ourselves as true scientists following rigorous methodology, and contributing extensively to library bookshelves, cross disciplinary development, and the prestige of the academy. Why knock the pedestal out from under ourselves or throw ourselves out of the ivory

tower?" I do not believe that this debate has been resolved, nor should it be. Surely, just as sociologists use different methodologies, some are drawn to publics and others are not. What I think needs to be explored, however, is *how internet and communication technologies can facilitate the "expansion and adoption of public sociology as a major element of the larger discipline."*

The methods and ease with which one can interact with publics have changed. With internet and communication technologies (eg. phones, email, fax, websites, blogs, social media websites), activities of public sociologists needn't be very visible or time consuming. Although, this does not alleviate the challenge of how to incorporate this work into one's academic portfolio and having these accomplishments acknowledged, these tools can facilitate powerful and potentially anonymous involvement in public debate.

This enhanced "digital" involvement with publics can change the way we, as academics, reconcile working within restrictive disciplines and institutions and wanting to work with publics and advance progress on issues of collective interest. Public sociologists' actions may be in the traditional forms of participating with publics, or through support of online advocacy campaigns. These campaigns often involve responding to email action alerts, emailing legislators, or commenting on articles, blogs, message boards, or social media sites like Facebook or twitter. Contributing leadership, guidance, debate, or simply sharing ideas or calls to action with publics can also be facilitated by telephone, e-mail, web conferencing, and social media.

Thus, while there has been great progress in our capacity to participate in public debates, there has been too little progress in how that participation is counted towards academic advancement or acclaim. For many progressive academics, perhaps the question has shifted from: *"Do I or do I not act as a public sociologist?"* to *"In what ways and how extensively and visibly do I want to act as a public sociologist?"* Moving forward as public sociologists, committed to some kind of social justice work, we need to ask: *"Am I content with this improved ability to individually reconcile my desire to act as public sociologist?"* *"How might these changes in internet and communication technologies change the way public sociology is valued within the discipline and the academy?"* And, finally, *"How can we expand academic merit and promotion review processes to include these activities?"*

The activities that the new technologies allow create new venues for the distribution of scholarly ideas. These types of activities are in keeping with C. W. Mills' view of "The Promise" of sociology to transform private troubles into public issues; today, however, we face new potential venues and channels. Internet and communication technologies have not only improved the variety, ease, and anonymity of actions, but also the ability of publics to track outcomes, which will be important when academic review

boards decide to acknowledge this important work. Just as journals advertise their circulation (ala “impact factors”), so can blogs and websites report the number of IP addresses accessing posts. Counting students in a classroom might be equivalent to counting viewers of a YouTube lecture, and counting members of a collaborative community project to counting members of an online community such as a Facebook group, or followers of a twitter account. If these new tools are changing the way that social movements measure outcomes, why can't they also be used by public sociologists to document and defend their actions, and claim the value of their work with publics?

So what would Maggie do? We are reminded of the "Gray Panther growl":
Raise both arms, reaching for a peaceful world; open the eyes wide to see suffering and need; open the mouth to cry out against injustice; stick out the tongue; growl three times from the depth of the belly.

Reference

Burawoy, Michael. (2005). “For Public Sociology.” *AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW*, 2005, VOL. 70 (February: 4–28).



Maggie Kuhn: Founder, in 1971, of the Gray Panthers.
(August 3, 1905 - April 22, 1995)

Graduate Student Paper Awards Honorable Mention for 2010 Submissions

In addition to Kirsten Song (Rutgers University) who won the 2010 YALC Graduate Student Paper Award, other promising young scholars submitted papers. We include synopses here to recognize their achievement.

Coming of Age in Rural America: Sense of Purpose, Coping, and Perceived Progress toward Adulthood

By Brooke Dolenc Nott

Oregon State University

Abstract. Young adults' experiences in their 20s and early 30s require special attention because of the sociodemographic changes, subjectivity of young adulthood, and the institutional restrictions and opportunities related to this developmental phase. Accordingly, the present study examined the past and present contexts, experiences, and perceptions of young adults from a rural community influencing their transition to adulthood. The study's results indicate that feelings of progress in several domains of young adulthood are interrelated, including work, education, finances, physical health, leisure activities, spirituality, involvement with community, and personal growth, as supported by past research on interrelated goals (Sneed et al., 2007).

The findings also suggest that sense of purpose and proactive coping skills in young adults are strong predictors of perceived progress in adulthood, as supported by previous research that sense of purpose and proactive coping skills are linked with positive outcomes and well-being (Hammond, 2004; Cheng, 2001). Researchers have conjectured that such psychological constructs are vital for young adults given the structural changes of this developmental phase and the individualized paths young adults take (Settersten, 2007). As rural young adults are experiencing many changes, a purposeful outlook would seem especially important in guiding their decisions and managing unstable and unpredictable experiences in life.

***Invisible Violence and Unfelt Pain:
Narratives from Adolescent Aggressors and Victims***

By Jennifer J. Esala
University of New Hampshire

Abstract. It has been demonstrated that violence perpetration and victimization are strongly associated, but little research has addressed this association in the rural context or the lived-experience of becoming entangled in violence perpetration and victimization. Through a survey of rural adolescents (N=651) and in-depth semi-structured interviews with a subsample of seventh grade students and their mothers (N=56), this paper addresses the gendering of violence, four specific processes leading to entanglement in violence perpetration and victimization and establishes a correlation between violence perpetration and victimization in the rural context. The invisibility of violence to adults in the community and the subsequent normalization and desensitization of adolescents to violence help explain the entrapment of the adolescent interviewees in both violence perpetration and victimization.

Spotlight on the 2011 Program: “Aging in Spaces/Places”

One of the exciting sessions planned for the meetings in Las Vegas is that on “Aging in Spaces/Places,” organized by Mary Byrnes, of the Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Western Carolina University. Professor Byrnes is trained in urban planning, as well as sociology, and is also an accomplished visual sociologist. She has organized a very creative panel, including Elena Portacolone, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Social & Behavioral Sciences at the University of California, San Francisco. Elena will speak on The Expanding Universe of Living Alone, and offers this synopsis of her presentation:

Eric Klinenberg’s book, *Heat Wave*, took the world by surprise with his “social autopsy” of the deaths of 521 Chicago residents, mostly over 65 and living alone. On the surface, a natural heat wave caused those deaths. As in a thriller, in his (2002) book, Klinenberg unravels the social factors at the root of the death toll: Isolation, fear of crime, and the inability to afford air conditioning exacerbated the effect of the soaring heat of those 2.5 days of July 1995.

Following the footsteps of Klinenberg, Elena Portacolone, a PhD candidate of the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of California in San Francisco, has taken a close look to the expanding universe of elders living alone in the US. In 2006 more than a third of all Americans over 75, some five million, lived on their own. Thanks to the “longevity revolution” and to the desire to live at home rather than in an institution, this trend will increase. San Francisco for instance is filled by single-headed households: 41% of San Franciscans of all ages live alone (the US average is 26%) and 40% of San Franciscans over 75 are solo dwellers according to the 2006 American Community Survey. Living alone in older age can be a deliberate choice or the product of events beyond control: Death or institutionalization of a significant other, lack of family, the reluctance to be a burden, the desire for a feeling of belonging, or a history of living alone for years are all pathways to solitary living.

As a panelist of the “Aging in Spaces/Places” session, Portacolone will discuss her ethnography of 46 San Franciscans over 75 living alone. Portacolone is particularly interested in understanding the conditions and perceptions of precariousness reflected in some informants’ narratives. “It is an impossible existence,” says Paul, a 92-year old former insurance executive who would consider “taking a pill” to end his life.

Portacolone develops the theme of *precariousness* to point to this generalized concern about a lack of stability beneath one’s feet, and about struggles that accumulate with the passing of time. Recognizing and moving beyond the idea that human life is ephemeral, Portacolone contends that the precariousness encountered in her fieldwork is socially constructed. Ageism, a tattered social network, elusive and fragmented public

policies, and the informal organization of the real estate market all influence this precariousness.

In her paper Portacolone reflects on the relationship between housing arrangements and the construct of precariousness. Informants are divided in three categories: 1) residents of apartments or houses in the city, 2) residents in buildings for seniors and 3) hotel room dwellers. The contrast of these three living arrangements illuminates the role of housing policies and the real estate market in either deflecting or aggravating a sense of precariousness. I pursue the question: *In which living arrangement did informants feel more or less "precarious"?* This project builds on prior work such as *Elders Living Alone* (1992), by Robert Rubenstein, et al. and other sources.

Do You Have a Great Idea for a SSSP session topic at the 2012 meetings? We need help thinking about and organizing SSSP sessions related to issues of youth, aging, or the life course at the 2012 meetings, and the topics are endless! If you have an idea for a panel session or if you would like to propose a session, please contact Chris Wellin (cwellin@ilstu.edu). (309) 438-7698. Also, if you would be willing to write a column for the newsletter—addressing teaching, research, advocacy, or other activities or issues relevant to SSSP's broad mission, we need and will welcome your contributions.

A final issue is whether YALC members would like to have a more timely and flexible way to communicate with one another. In a world where *Facebook* and other social networking sites have become both pervasive and user-friendly, this is an option some members may want to consider. Another option would be a list-serve, but this would raise questions about where and by whom it would be sponsored, etc. Communication about teaching, scholarship, advocacy etc. is vital for the roughly 250 YALC members. However, the bi- or tri-annual Newsletter is an imperfect (and only intermittent) vehicle for such exchanges. As YALC Chair, I *welcome* views about the need for and/or drawbacks of another, digital channel of communication for division members.

Remember to renew your membership in the YALC Division when you renew your SSSP Membership for 2011! Also think about giving a gift membership to students!

Phillip R. Newman reports: The 11th edition of his lifespan text, *Development Through Life: A Psychosocial Approach*, co-authored with Dr. Barbara M. Newman and published by Cengage/Wadsworth will be published and available in mid-February, 2011.

Chris Wellin published "Growing Pains in the Sociology of Aging and the Life Course: A Review Essay on Recent Textbooks" in *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 38 (4): 373-382 in October of 2010.

