Journal of Aging Studies 26 (2012) 285–295

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Journal of Aging Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jaging

Aging and the course of desire

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 10 June 2011
Received in revised form 18 January 2012
Accepted 30 January 2012

Keywords:
Theory
Desire
Generativity
Social breakdown syndrome
Social factors

ABSTRACT

The desire to make a difference in the world, to receive the esteem and approval of others, and to be attractive to others for the person one is, is a basic human longing. The fate of such desire over the course of life is a subject that has largely been relegated to studies of changing patterns of sexual activity with advancing age. The broader topic of the human desire to remain actively engaged in the world has yet to be fully developed and incorporated within sociological theories of aging. We know little of the variables that affect the workings of desire and the circumstances under which desire is more or less likely to be manifest. Due to its reluctance to bridge the disciplinary boundaries that separate structural and social psychological approaches to theorizing age, sociologists of aging and the life course have rarely considered the ways in which human desire for recognition, love, and influence affect behavior at various points in the life course. In this paper, I address the problem of the social breakdown syndrome that is thought to bring about an atrophy in the skills and talents of those in old age. With concepts drawn from the dramaturgical literature in sociology, I argue that those who continue to benefit from the emotional energy that derives from satisfying and productive social interactions will age in ways that cannot be explained by existing sociological theories of aging.

Introduction

The desire to make a difference in the world, to receive the esteem and approval of others, and to be attractive to others for the person one is, is a basic human longing (Stillman and Baumeister, 2009). This longing may diminish in old age but not necessarily as an intrinsic, natural part of the aging process. Sociological theorizing about aging has been largely silent on the social dimensions of desire; due to a reluctance to bridge the disciplinary boundaries that separate structural and social psychological approaches to theorizing age, sociologists in the field have rarely considered the ways in which human desire for recognition, love, and influence affect behavior at various points in the life course. Despite negative stereotypes associated with old age, there are some who persist in their desire to influence their surroundings. My focus in this paper is specifically on the topic of continued desire of older persons to remain engaged in the world and, through their work and leisure projects, to continue to receive the social approval of friends, family, and neighbors.

The American writer, Kurt Vonnegut, once observed that characters should want something in every scene, even if it's only a glass of water (Watrous, 2010). In real life as well, yearning, or what among German-speakers is known as Sehnsucht, is an essential component of our humanity (Scheibe, Blanchard-Fields, Wiest, & Freund, 2011). In Philip Roth's (2000) novel, *The Human Stain*, Coleman Silk is a seventy-one-year-old classics professor and dean of faculty at a small college who begins an affair with an illiterate thirty-four-year-old cleaning woman also employed at the college. The relationship, following two years upon the death of his wife, came unexpectedly into Coleman's life. It is a relationship that is intimate, chaotic, tempestuous, and highly sexual, this last detail facilitated by Coleman's prescription for Viagra. According to Coleman, without this life enhancing drug, the relationship would not be.

> "*Without Viagra I would have a picture of the world appropriate to my age and wholly different aims. Without Viagra I would*

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doi:10.1016/j.jaging.2012.01.004

have the dignity of an elderly gentleman free from desire who behaves correctly, I would not be doing something that makes no sense. I would not be doing something unseemly, rash, ill considered, and potentially disastrous for all involved. Without Viagra, I could continue, in my declining years, to develop the broad impersonal perspective of an experienced and educated honorably discharged man who has long ago given up the sensual enjoyment of life. I could continue to draw profound philosophical conclusions and have a steadying moral influence on the young, instead of having put myself back into the perpetual state of emergency that is sexual intoxication." (p. 32).

Coleman's friend Nathan, to whom he related the details of his relationship with his new lover, is a reclusive writer who himself is at an age – sixty-five – when sexuality is often associated more with memories of time past than with present habits. But Coleman's story of his passionate affair with Faunia Farley caused Nathan to reconsider the reclusive, nonsexual life he had chosen for himself.

"*… all the comforting delusions about the serenity achieved through enlightened resignation vanished, and I completely lost my equilibrium. Well into the morning I lay awake, powerless as a lunatic to control my thinking, hypnotized by the other couple and comparing them to my own washed-out state. . . . How can one say, "No, this isn't a part of life," since it always is? The contaminant of sex, the redeeming corruption that deidealized the species and keeps us everlastingly mindful of the matter we are*."

The transgressive nature of the relationship between Faunia and Coleman grants them the possibility of structuring their emotional bond on a foundation that is unusually open and honest. For Faunia, the facts of Coleman's age and the difficult circumstances surrounding his retirement, are confronted without pretense or prevarication.

"You didn't deserve that hand, Coleman. That's what I see. I see that you're furious. And that's the way it's going to end. As a furious old man. And it shouldn't have been. That's what I see: your fury. I see the anger and the shame. I see that you understand as an old man what time is. You don't understand that till near the end. But now you do. And it's frightening. Because you can't do it again. You can't be twenty again. It's not going to come back. And this is how it ended." (p. 232–3).

So it seems that the lives of both Coleman and Nathan, the two older men of this novel, have become increasingly isolated, withdrawn, disengaged, and not surprisingly, sexually inactive. They both have rationalized their situation as having beneficial, salutary effects. No longer are they captive to the powerful lusts of younger men and so are freer, they insist, to live unburdened by the weight of a constant desire to want and to be wanted. The appearance of Faunia into the quiet life of Coleman tears away the scrim of pretense that sustains this rationalization and jolts Coleman into the recognition that desire is indeed always there.

The character of Coleman Silk, it may be argued, is too singular to serve as a helpful case study in an essay such as this that professes to be a scholarly discussion of theories of aging. The story of a retired seventy-one-year-old college professor beginning a lust-filled affair with a woman who not only is almost forty years younger than he but who is also a universe apart in terms of education and social standing is not one the details of which could easily be generalized. Yet there is something in the story of Coleman, Faunia, and Nathan – the continuing relevance of *desire* throughout the life course – that is important for theories of aging to understand (Leibovici, 2007). It is for that reason that I could not think of a better example than the characters in this story with which to begin this analysis of aging and the course of desire.[1]

Desire

Desire, an emotion that is often reduced to its sexual connotation of sensual appetite or lust, also refers, however, to a number of other feelings, including that "which is directed to the attainment or possession of some object from which pleasure or satisfaction is expected; longing, craving; a particular instance of this feeling, a wish" (OED). In this sense, among the possible desires that humans may possess, one might include a longing for justice, peace, a cessation of pain, wealth, fame, security, a car that starts reliably, a balmy summer evening, or even, perhaps, the wish to be able to turn back the hands of time and regain if only to an approximate degree the physical vitality and youthful appearance we once possessed. We long for second chances to undo old mistakes, as well as for other idealistic, counterfactual, romantic, and unlikely events and developments.

In everyday usage, desire often refers to anything that a person might wish to possess, consume, or achieve. We long to consume, taste, experience, own, and enjoy. We also strive to accomplish, achieve, succeed, attain, and otherwise to influence the course of events in ways that are deemed by the individual or group to be necessary, rewarding or beneficial. The infinite variety of such everyday, mundane experiences that individuals could be said to *desire* requires that we specify more precisely the way in which the use of desire in this paper differs from the more general notion of motivation.

In this paper, I use the term *desire* to refer to any a longing to possess or attain, particularly objects or objectives that are outside of everyday experience or beyond our usual grasp. As

[1] Even in the realm of literature and the arts, the character of Coleman Silk is unique. There have been many stories of people in mid-life who desire to be young again and to know once again the *amour fou*, the crazy intense sexual desire of a new love, and who may actually enter into such affairs. Mrs. Robinson's affair with Benjamin in the 1967 film, *The Graduate*, is one instance, as is Lester Burnham's abortive infatuation with his daughter's friend, Angela, in the film, *American Beauty* (1999). A darker and more realistic examination of this theme is found in Bertolucci's acclaimed film from the early 1970s, *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), in which the character Paul, thrust into crisis following the death of his wife, enters into an ill-considered and ultimately fatal affair with a young woman he meets while looking for an apartment. Some of the plays and novels of Tennessee Williams also focus on the frustrated desires of aging characters and, more specifically, aging women, in the play *Streetcar Named Desire* and the novel *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*. Even considering the Hal Ashby film, *Harold and Maud* (1971), a story of a friendship and ensuing romance between a disturbed eighteen-year-old boy and an extraordinary seventy-nine-year-old woman, the Roth novel stands apart for the depth and seriousness with which it presents the situation of the septuagenarian Coleman and the last love of his life, Faunia.