

**ELDERLY ALIENATION, SATISFACTION, AND SOCIAL CLASS**

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**BACKGROUND**

Alienation usually refers to certain perceptions and feelings that individuals have about themselves and aspects of their social environment. According to Seeman (1959), alienation is characterized by five symptoms: social isolation (real or perceived), meaninglessness, normlessness, powerlessness, and self-estrangement. Alienation is typified more accurately by degree and direction. Social structures and institutions often attribute to the aged feelings of having little if any control over their life situation. Ambivalence and existential meaning loss occur. Frankl (1963), held that man is a spiritual being motivated not by the will to pleasure or the will to power but by the will to meaning. Aged persons find themselves in a state of melancholy where they become desensitized to the inherent values in their own being and subsequently to the values outside themselves. Reisman (1971), maintains that alienation is genesis of loneliness. He set forth a typology of man as inner-directed and man as outer-directed as a function of the social structure. A social structure imposing inner direction consists of increased personal mobility, rapid accumulation of capital, technological shifts and constant expansionism. The source of direction for the individual is "inner" in the sense that it is implanted early in life by the elders and directed towards generalized, inescapable goals. Inner directed persons receive more input to the self with no opportunity for reciprocity. The other directed individual has as its source others on whom s/he depends on for validation and unlike the inner directed person who is acted upon, is engaging in activity.

Park's notion (1959), of marginal man emphasizes that while an individual's personality has a physiological makeup, it achieves its final form under the individual conception of self. This conception is determined by the role which society assigns the person, and the attitudes others in society form of him. The aged persons find themselves in a marginal, alienated position.

Weiss (1973), has focused on disengagement theory as a descriptive model for aliena-

tion. As society has increased in mobility and complexity, individuals are forced to engage and disengage from significant others. This may occur developmentally in terms of age and peer pressure or by formal positioning in a social stratum. The constant shifts in structural definitions reduce the chances for the longevity of relations with others.

Alienation and its association to the lower class has been demonstrated in several studies (Faris, Dunham 1960, Hollingshead, & Redlich 1958, Meyers 1959). The elderly person of low socio-economic status not only has been structurally "disengaged" from society, but if in a lower class has the likelihood of being alienated as well. The alienation in terms of magnitude and intensity is higher. Thus mental disorders in the elderly may have to do not with intrinsic personality disorders but rather with structural shifts. Faris and Dunham (1960), found that the elderly residing in the central business districts of lower class status, were more likely to be alienated or isolated and that these factors are thus related to the high rates of schizophrenia.

**THESIS**

It is the purpose of this investigation to determine whether alienation is a function of social class and life satisfaction for the general population as well as for the aged population. Implicit in such an investigation is the notion that structural difficulties in American society are the agents of alienation for most, but particularly for the aged as they are forced to disengage from mainstream society. With such disengagement comes feelings of isolation, powerlessness, and meaninglessness.

**METHODOLOGY**

Data were obtained from the 1978 General Social Science surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). These are national multistage area probability samples designed to represent the adult population of the United States. Frequencies and percentages were extracted from the data set for the total population sampled and those of the sample population who were classified as

aged (65 years and older). Three variables, alienation, social class, and life satisfaction were developed into scales. The N was 1525 for the total population and 254 for the aged population. By factor analysis the alienation scale retained 6 out of 6 items which were indicative of a high interrelationship in response pattern. Likewise, the life satisfaction scale retained 5 of 5 items. The social class scale retained 2 out of 3 items which proved to be a significant response pattern. The typical objective measures of social class includes education, income, and type of occupation. Type of occupation had a insignificantly low factor loading, thus was not considered in the social class scale.

### FINDINGS

Analysis of variance on these three variables yielded a significant difference in alienation by social class and life satisfaction for both the total population and aged groups as shown in Table 1. The lower the mean score indicates higher alienation. The aged population who were of a low social class and scored low on life satisfaction also proved to be the most alienated.

Table 2 contains the mean scores ranked on

alienation for the general population and for the aged when both variables, social class and life satisfaction are controlled. Also included in Table 2 are the eight scores of both groups ranked by their means from high alienation to low alienation. As in Table 1 the lower the mean score indicates the higher the level of alienation.

### DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that for both the total population and the aged population that alienation is at least, in part, a function of social class and life satisfaction. Rank ordering of the alienation means for both groups, reveals that those who score high on life satisfaction and social class scales are significantly less alienated. Those who scored the lowest on the same variables are more alienated. The scores that compose the mid-range of alienation mean scores are of similar interest here. Those scoring high on life satisfaction but low on social class were more alienated based on mean scores than those scoring low on life satisfaction and high on social class. If we take into account that the life satisfaction scale was a subjective measure, and the social class scale was an objective measure of income and

**TABLE 1: ALIENATION BY SOCIAL CLASS & LIFE SATISFACTION**  
(Alienation scaled 1, High to 6, Low)

<i>Class</i>	<i>Aged N</i>	<i>Alienation</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Total N</i>	<i>Alienation</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Low	116	1.34	16.4	.001	800	1.39	35.6	.001
High	132	1.50			709	1.50		
<i>Satisfaction</i>								
Low	126	1.38	3.2	.077	827	1.40	30.2	.001
High	122	1.45			682	1.49		

**TABLE 2: ALIENATION BY RANK CONTROLLING SATISFACTION & SOCIAL CLASS**

<i>Satisfaction</i>	<i>Class</i>	<i>Aged N</i>	<i>Alienation</i>	<i>Total N</i>	<i>Alienation</i>
Low	Low	63	1.31	499	1.36
High	Low	53	1.36	301	1.45
Low	High	63	1.46	328	1.47
High	High	69	1.53	381	1.53

education, then with respect to alienation, social class, the objective measure seems to hold better. Some psychologists have maintained that alienation is psychologically based having little to do with social structure, describing personality disorders and the inability to cope. (Fromm-Reichman 1959) This research would indicate that if alienation is a function of an objective social class measure then the genesis of the problem, especially for the aged lies in the constraints of an imputed social stratum. Though psychological accounts may accurately diagnose symptoms of normlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation, the pathology of alienation would seem to rest in external structural constraints. If we assume that all persons engage and disengage from society at many times in their life course, then we must also ask why the elderly in less industrialized countries score lower on measures of alienation. (Shanas, 1968). The implications that are structural changes must be made for the reduction of alienation in persons, particularly, the aged. For not only must the aged cope with the physiological processes of growing old, but they must also cope with the structurally imposed alienation intensified within their age cohort. Future research should differentiate between generic structural problems and generic personality problems which effect alienation. A synthesis of both is desirable.

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