

Review Symposium

Time and the Elderly

REX TAYLOR

EILEEN FAIRHURST

Haim Hazan, *The Limbo People: A Study of the Constitution of the Time Universe among the Aged*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1980. 199 pp, £10.50. ISBN 07100 04818.

This monograph is based on fieldwork conducted in a day centre for the elderly. The fieldworker is an Israeli anthropologist, the day centre is in North East London and its members are all first or second generation Jewish immigrants. On the basis of this combination one might have expected a highly descriptive and culturally specific account of old age, but Haim Hazan has succeeded in transcending the ethnographic details to arrive at a brilliant analysis of the time dimension in the lives of old people. He shows how the deliberate reordering of the past, the obliteration of the future and the repetitive nature of events in the present all combine to create a new constitution of time which solves some of the existential incongruities and ambiguities confronting most people at the end of their lives. His crowning achievement is his demonstration of the role of time in our social construction of reality. This is quite a claim but after a second reading of the entire book I'm fairly confident that I do not exaggerate.

Each of the five chapters deserves comment. The first, concerned with the 'limbo' state of old people in our society, provides an interesting processual account of the emergence of dependency in Hazan's sample of Day Centre members. This account is grounded in a theoretical perspective on ageing, in which the fundamental problem is not balance between the elderly person and the rest of society but between what the elderly person wants to do and what he/she is able to do. This perspective is refreshing, freeing us from the now arid debate between 'disengagers' and 'activists' and, at the same time, forcing us to confront the growing literature on differential coping. Thomae¹ provided the most eloquent statement of this reorientation when he suggested that the focal developmental task of old age is, 'the continuous restoration of the emotional and

behavioural balance between desires and achievements in a situation of increasing potential for imbalance'. In response to this increasing imbalance, or what Hazan calls, 'the gap between the things one can control and those which are still relevant and meaningful but uncontrollable', the members of the Day Centre adopted various coping strategies. Some attempted to mobilise familial and statutory resources to help them maintain a semi-independent existence, some 'retreated' as a prelude to accepting their dependence and a few 'denied' this deteriorating condition through continuing employment. Whatever their earlier strategies or pathways all Hazan's respondents attended the Day Centre and this became an arena for the reconstitution of their social world.

Chapter 2 describes this arena and demonstrates the way in which the physical layout, the modus operandi of staff and the relationship between the Centre and the outside world influence its daily running and, in turn, the sentiments and activities of its members. Hazan is particularly insightful in his analysis of the consequences of the way in which the centre staff construe their work. The social workers were reluctant to view their function merely in terms of the allocation of public resources, i.e., 'welfare work'. Instead, they emphasized their counselling role and tended to use psychological and even psychiatric terms to define and classify their clients' problems. In so doing, and this must be one of the unintended consequences of much professional intervention, they systematically obliterated their clients' former ties and involvements and rendered them increasingly dependent on professional judgement and decision-making. Hazan provides an ingenious illustration of this systematic obliteration in an analysis of four day-centre application forms issued at different times, each revision containing less and less background information on the client. These activities of social workers and other professionals, along with the administrative separateness from the community, combined to create a social environment highly distinct from its surroundings. It became a social enclave in which members were given opportunities to create an alternative reality.

Chapters 3 and 4, the core of the book, deal with the role of different time perspectives in the construction of their alternative reality. Hazan begins with an account of the ways in which members reordered time and he identifies three main strategies – complete erasure, renunciation and equalization – which enable them to cope with their present situation. He emphasizes that these strategies are not mutually exclusive and, indeed, provides a number of examples of conversations and interactions in which all three occur almost simultaneously. Thus, centre members rarely talked about their early married life and it was almost as if there was a taboo on relating occupational histories and accomplishments. Similarly, mentions

of children were usually so critical and potentially hurtful that the general attitude towards them was best described as one of renunciation. The only parts of the past recalled readily and unapologetically concerned situations of apparent social equality – anti-Fascist demonstrations, wartime and army service, rationing etc. Having eliminated those discrepant and disruptive elements of their previous life, how did the Day Centre members go on to construct alternative realities for themselves? Hazan identifies and discusses two ways in which this occurs; firstly, through emphasizing the role of luck and chance in events and, secondly, through denying death. Centre members tended to describe themselves as ‘fatalists’, i.e., at the mercy of circumstances, other people and ‘luck’ or ‘fate’. Thus, success or failure in marriage was just a matter of ‘luck’. Similarly, there was no relationship between what had been invested in children – both emotionally and financially – and the attention and support they had given in return. Health and illness were also subject to chance. You were either lucky or unlucky, and neither self care nor medical intervention could make much difference in the long run. Overall, life was a gamble and there was little point in trying to plan it. Events were seen as beyond one’s control, unlikely to get worse or better through effort therefore the best approach to life was ‘wait and see’ – an attitude ruling out any intentionality and, equally important, adaptable to any circumstances. Given their age and state of health, Centre members were aware of impending death but this was rarely manifested in straightforward verbal and symbolic references. Indeed, Hazan identified something of a taboo on death talk and even on the public display of grief and mourning. Death was something which occurred in the outside world and which constituted the main reason for leaving the Centre. Since members repressed any move away from the Centre so, Hazan argues, death was systematically denied to preserve the Centre as an unchanging social enclave. This cognitive denial of death completes the reconstruction of the Centre as an alternative reality to the outside world. Through Hazan’s consummate skill we begin to see the way in which members conceive of the Day Centre as a timeless sanctuary in which the past is unimportant and the future denied.

Within the sanctuary of the Centre, and in contradistinction to the outside world, members judged themselves and each other on their capacity to care and to render help. Hazan shows how the criteria of care penetrate every possible relationship – between members and between members and staff. Care becomes an end in itself and a sense of belonging was only possible through total immersion in the care system. This caring ideal was translated into patterns of behaviour in innumerable ways – calling each other for lunch, making and serving tea, aiding the disabled

to move around the Centre, exchanging useful information on pensions and other benefits and entitlements, and so on. Everyone gave and received help, was alternatively a benefactor and beneficiary. In this constant ebb and flow of reciprocity specific requests for help were rarely necessary and there was little evidence of direct exchange or regular exchange relationships. The overall emphasis was on the relationship between each participant and the total system and Hazan argues that this relationship, more than anything else, defined an alternative reality for the Centre.

It displaces the frustrating unattainable targets of progress, planning, materialistic and social achievements in favour of a contrasting yet orderly and organised framework for establishing relationships and views. Thus, instead of limited resources distributed, allocated and accumulated on the basis of a zero-sum conception of the social situation, there is only one, unlimited resource, allocated on the assumption of non zero-sum world.

In chapter 5 Hazan discusses the vulnerability of this alternative reality and the ways in which it is defended. The coherence and legitimacy of the care system and its distilled time perspective are shown to be vulnerable to three factors: penetration into the Centre of contradictory concepts, disagreement and conflict between individuals and groups within the Centre and the activities and attitudes of 'renegade' individuals. Joking and joke making constituted the most common form of defence and social control. All undesirable reminders of pre-Centre situations and out-Centre reality were subjects for joking – infirmities, broken marriages, ungrateful children, sex life (or lack of it), work and career and, paradoxically, Jewish institutions and religion. While the incessant joking blurred discord and disagreement there were occasional quarrels between members. These were typically dealt with in one of two ways; by shifting the blame from members to staff or by temporarily isolating the quarrelling members from the social life of the Centre. The occasional member who persistently dissented from Centre behaviour and ideals was ostracized, and case studies of Rebecca and Marian provide good illustrations of the process and its inevitable outcome – departure from the Centre. Hazan concludes:

The transition from a past-future oriented society to a present-bound community is a well regulated process, and so is the daily interaction and grouping among participants. Participant faces a clear-cut choice between identifying himself – in word and action – with the principles of the social reality in the Centre or else with those of the world outside. No compromise is acceptable . . . In this respect the experience of participation is total and indivisible, and the submergence of the individual into a new time universe makes a complete coherent change in his existence.

This summary, extensive though it is, does not do proper justice to Hazan's

monograph, neither to the richness of his observations nor to the skill and complexity of his analyses. In short, it is one of the best books on old age that I have ever read. The obvious comparisons are with Jaber Gubrium's² account of multiple realities in a nursing home and Jennie Keith-Ross's study³ of a French retirement community. I find it rather surprising that Hazan makes no mention of either study; but must admit that I also find it difficult to see how a reading of either could have improved his own work.

By comparison with my admiration, any criticisms or doubts I have about the book are rather slight and trivial. Despite my earlier claim that Hazan generally succeeds in transcending the ethnographic particulars I am left with some doubts about the universal applicability of some of his findings. Most of these doubts stem from the self-selected nature of the Day Centre sample. They all became members because they were either widowed, lonely, or had been abandoned by their adult children. The selective obliteration of their past lives makes sense in relation to these experiences. But those of us who have worked on non-institutionalized samples of the non-problematic elderly know that many people grow old without this sense of loss and abandonment, and they neither feel the need to obliterate the past nor do they cease to think about and plan for the future. I also have some doubts about generalizing some of Hazan's observations to the non-Jewish elderly. Many of his Day Centre members were immigrants, and because of this fact alone, we might expect a high degree of dislocation in their past lives. More important than this however is their general resistance to religion and their denial of the supernatural and an after life. Hazan provides so many examples of this anti-religious feeling that we must accept that the concept of an after life has no place in the reality of Centre members. I find it difficult to believe that a sample of elderly Christians, however nominal their beliefs, would contrive to obliterate religion in this fashion. Therefore, the overall effect of his choice of sample may have influenced some of his observations, specifically those relating to the systematic obliteration of past and future.

My second doubt stems from the incomplete incorporation of Hazan's sample into the reality of the Day Centre. By definition, it accounts for only eight or ten hours of a twenty-four-hour day. What do Rebecca and Marian and all the other participants do when they are not at the Centre? I am not asking for a complete account but I do feel that Hazan should have given more attention to the movement between the two worlds of home and Day Centre. This is touched on in chapter 5 where he discusses threats to the Day Centre reality but his main emphasis here is on those threats stemming from pre-centre situations rather than on those stemming

from the daily movement in and out. There is clearly scope for further analysis specifically focussed on this intermittent alternation.

Finally, and on a methodological note, I was left wanting to know more about Hazan's role as an observer. In a brief methodological appendix he notes that:

Some of the most valuable pieces of information were gathered during events which one might describe as manufactured by the researcher.

Presumably he is referring to the group discussions, biographies, poems and written accounts solicited from staff members which are used throughout. I have no doubt that Hazan found them valuable data, but I would like to know more both about the particular conditions of their production and their analytical status.

REX TAYLOR

MRC Medical Sociology Unit, University of Aberdeen, Scotland

NOTES

- 1 Thomae, M., *Bonn Longitudinal Study of Ageing, Contributions to Human Development*, Vol. 3, Basel, Karger, 1976.
- 2 Gubrium, J. F., 'On Multiple Realities in a Nursing Home' in *Late Life*, ed. J. F. Gubrium, Springfield, Thomas, 1974.
- 3 Ross, J. K., *Old People: New Lives*, Chicago University Chicago Press, 1977.

TIME AND THE ELDERLY

Many of the meticulously executed surveys which have characterized the study of old age in the United Kingdom paint a broad landscape. Those of us who want to flesh out the literature by gaining a feel of the experience of being old often turn to the autobiographical or semi-autobiographical works of such individuals as Ellen Newton, Gladys Elder, Jane Tulloch or the novelist Barbara Pym.¹ With the publication of Haim Hazan's book we have now an academic source to consult.² And a welcome addition this book is to the ever increasing literature on old age; not least because he defiantly eschews the atheoretical nature of much of the English literature and explicitly addresses theoretical matters.³ In doing so, he raises for me, important theoretical and methodological issues about unfolding and interpreting the experience of being old. Such matters, therefore, are the concerns of this paper.

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Hazan's study is an ethnography of a Jewish day centre in a London borough referred to as Marlsden. He relates the way the Centre becomes the major focus in the lives of many of the participants (as the individuals who attend the Centre call themselves). Hazan argues that, in becoming committed to the Centre and its activities, the participants are simultaneously constructing an alternative reality to that existing outside of the Centre. The mechanism through which this is done, contends Hazan, is via an alternative time universe.

The contrast between the social relationships and experience of participants before and after attending the Centre are emphasized in Hazan's distinction between the pre-Centre situation and Centre life. In identifying aspects of the former, he weaves together material from a range of sources, viz, socio-economic history of the Jewish population in Marlsden, the way participants cope with illness and bereavement; the social attitudes encountered by the elderly from both Jewish organizations and the wider society and decision making informing attendance at the Centre. From this exercise, Hazan skilfully portrays the typical biography of newcomers to the Centre. They are the survivors of a close-knit matrilocal kinship network, once characteristic of Jewish life in the East End of London. With predominantly unskilled working background, their more affluent contemporaries or offsprings have moved to other parts of London. Many have received help from local social service departments or Jewish charitable organizations. Newcomers to the Centre are accustomed to being viewed by the non-aged primarily in terms of physical and mental disabilities at the expense of their life history and personal identity, akin to children and as needing day care for the opportunity it provides for meeting other people, irrespective of any other benefits to be gained from attendance.

To Hazan, the socially constructed notions of old age held by the non-aged result in the allocation of a 'static' role to the old but this does not match with the elderly's experience '... of change of disintegration and deterioration' (p. 46). This incongruity Hazan conceptualizes as the limbo state. Moreover, it encompasses '... three discrepant experiences of time. (a) The past, the life history of the individual loses its meaning. (b) The official solution to their plight involves seclusion, often institutionalization, and effectively, the freezing of their social condition. (c) This is incongruous with the active experience of accelerating deterioration, and the consciousness of death in which time is eliminated' (p. 89).

The Centre provides a locale in which participants can resolve the conflicts between these different experiences of time. It offers them the opportunity to re-order time by revising the past and gives them a sanctuary from the 'rejection, disintegration, sequestration and alienation of the

non-Centre world'. Unlike there, the ethos of the Centre is one of encouraging participants to exercise autonomy in decision-making. There are few rules and regulations at the Centre and participants are involved in organizing activities. Not only does this differentiate the Centre from the 'outside world' but also the activities maintain the boundary between the two. Social workers, on behalf of participants, handle the payment of various bills and disseminate information about state benefits so that the former are the link between the Centre and the outside world. For many of the participants, attendance at the Centre gave them the opportunity to transform their self-image and often they referred to the Centre as a 'family' and to each other as 'brothers' or 'sisters'.

But over and above all these matters, the most important factor which distinguishes the Centre from outside is its notion of care. Furthermore, Hazan contends that care is the cornerstone of the alternative reality found in the Centre. Whereas care and concern for participants are absent from their social encounters outside the Centre, within it they are pervasive. Unlike the concept of care operating outside the Centre, that found in the Centre is not inextricably linked with reciprocity but rather becomes an end in itself. The Centre notion of care is one of giving unstinting help to others without expecting it to be returned. Examples of help include making and serving tea, aiding the disabled to get around the Centre and informing each other about state benefits.

The Centre ideology of care had a number of consequences for the way participants talked about and conducted their lives. Firstly, it enabled participants to see themselves not merely as passive recipients but as active contributors. Secondly, as far as participants were concerned, attendance at the Centre was not so much to relieve boredom, loneliness or any of the other reasons identified by the non-aged as the function of day care but rather to give help to others. Thirdly, since participants were there to give help, Centre staff could also be the objects of the care ethos.

Hazan graphically unfolds how the participants construct their social world and the pivotal position in its genesis occupied by the ideology of caring and helping. The Centre becomes a haven in which social relations and responses by one's peers are based upon a different order of things to those outside. Certainty becomes apparent so that irrespective of authority, power or personal attributes participants can expect to be cared for and helped by others. The reader enters the day-to-day happenings at the Centre but it is when Hazan relates these to the notion of time and identifies the Centre's social world as an alternative reality that, for me, theoretical and methodological issues are raised. It is to these I now turn.

Hazan notes that, 'In unravelling the time universe of the Centre people I used an empirical approach but had to grapple with a highly

abstract concept of time' (p. 2) and, subsequently, 'People rarely speak of time and then only in relation to situations outside the Centre and particularly with respect to "passing of time" . . . Though it is both elaborate and significant their concept of time must be sought obliquely' (p. 89).

Clearly, Hazan is aware that making sense of interaction in terms of abstract concepts may not be an easy task. I would suggest there is a difficulty in setting up the Centre as an alternative reality for that concept itself is problematic. The notion of alternative reality implies quite distinctive social worlds such that individuals living in each would have no way of knowing about the other's world. Neither Schutz nor Berger and Luckman, to whom Hazan refers, located their discussions of alternative reality in concrete situations. On the contrary, they were abstract and devoid of any interactional context and therein lies the problem with which a researcher is confronted who finds alternative reality an appealing concept. Yet Hazan vividly describes daily life at the Centre and in doing so demonstrates that some of its features are quite different from those experienced outside. But I am not convinced one can claim from that that the social world of the Centre constitutes an alternative reality. It seems to me that Hazan is talking about a different *version* of reality held by participants as compared with individuals outside the Centre. In constructing our versions of reality we address putatively competing versions and some elements of them take a place in our version of reality. In building their social world of the Centre the participants specifically addressed the world outside it and, finding it lacking in care, that became a major part of the version of reality found in the Centre.

Moreover, not just one but a number of versions of reality are accommodated in the Centre. Hazan shows that able-bodied men give the greatest commitment of all participants to the Centre. For these men, unlike women and the physically handicapped, the Centre is the most important aspect of their lives. Thus, matters of gender and physical disability dent the alternative reality provided by the Centre. The perspectives of women and the physically handicapped on the Centre are influenced by activities outside it. Far from obliterating what goes on outside the Centre, they incorporate some of its elements in constructing their version of reality. For women, domestic activities and preparation for the Sabbath or Jewish festivals continued to provide a meaningful thread to their lives. The disabled, by the very nature of their physical condition, were dependent upon staff for certain services and so were unable to fully conform with the ethos of unconditional help.

Just as Hazan's notion of alternative reality is too abstract so I would contend is that of time. To Hazan, the absence in the Centre of the conventional relationship between giving and exchange at some time in the

future points to the existence of a different view of time and one which determines the participants' social world. In advancing such a position Hazan seems to be adopting one in which the participants are puppets who merely react rather than act. On the contrary, the participants are actively involved in constructing their social world and, in doing so, I would argue they orient themselves to time and take it into account when acting.⁴

For me, a perplexing aspect of Hazan's analysis is that his rather abstract theoretical ideas of time and alternative reality sit rather uneasily alongside his ethnographic approach. If one accepts Geertz view that the purpose of ethnography is to provide 'thick description' in order to unfold the nuances of meaning which are vital to our understanding of cultural groups, then it seems Hazan's description of the social world of the Centre more than complies with that aim.⁵ But somehow the richness of his fieldwork material is lost in the move from substantive description to theoretical analysis. I was disappointed by this, for I think the strength of an ethnographic approach is that categories to facilitate understanding and/or explanation are firmly grounded in interaction observed by the fieldworker.

Given that time lies at the core of Hazan's analysis and his note of seeking the participants' idea of time 'obliquely' as they rarely talked about it, it is a pity he does not give us more detail of how he did tease out this matter of time. This would have enabled a more explicit link to be made between ethnographic material and theoretical framework. Indeed, since Hazan is one of the few English researchers to do an ethnography of old age it would have been useful to have had a more general discussion, or a specific reference to his Ph.D. thesis upon which this monograph is based, or how he did do his field work. I found it tantalizing to be told that some of the most valuable pieces of information were gathered during events which one might describe as 'manufactured by the researcher' (p. 185).

Hazan deserves our congratulations, for it is refreshing to come across a book which locates our understanding of old age in a theoretical framework. As I have indicated Hazan offers us an analysis which is thoroughly challenging. A book as stimulating as this merits a place on all our shelves.

EILEEN FAIRHURST

Department of Geriatric Medicine, University of Manchester

NOTES

- 1 Elder, G., *The Alienated*, Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1977; Newton, E., *This Bed my Centre*, London, Virago, 1980; Pym, B., *Quartet in Autumn*, London, Panther, 1979; Tulloch, G. J., *A Home is not a Home*, New York, Seabury Press, 1975.
- 2 Hazan, H., *The Limbo People: A study of the Constitution of the Time Universe Among the Aged*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.
- 3 See, for example, Abrams, M., *The Elderly: An Overview of Current British Social Research*, Centre for Policy on Ageing, London, 1978. Atkinson, M., 'Social Integration as a Limiting Feature of Theoretical Approaches to the Sociology of Aging.' Paper presented at the 8th World Congress of Sociology, Toronto, 1974, and Johnson, M. L., 'That Was your life: a Biographical Approach to Later Life,' in Munnichs, J. M. A. and van den Heuval, W. J. A. (eds) *Dependency or Independency in Old Age*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1976.
- 4 For a development of the argument that time is a matter to which individuals orient see Fairhurst, E. and Lightup, R., 'Arc there People After 50? Issues in Qualitative Research in Growing Older.' Paper presented to the Annual Conference of the British Society of Gerontology, Aberdeen, September 1980.
- 5 Geertz, C., *The Interpretation of Cultures*, London, Hutchinson, 1975.