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“Age is time, and time is everything, time gets you into the questions of persistence and change, everything is moving through time.” This was a statement by Dr. Christine L. Fry, the founding president of AAGE and emeritus professor at Loyola University Chicago. Dr. Fry is a seminal figure in the development of the field of anthropology of aging and has played an important role in fostering a community of scholars dedicated to understanding gerontology and the life course. In May 2019, in commemoration of the 40th anniversary of AAGE, we had the opportunity to interview Dr. Fry and discuss her career and the future of AAGE, all while simultaneously gaining important insights about gerontology and anthropology.

We began by asking Dr. Fry what led to her interest in anthropology and more specifically, aging. She jokingly gave us an Agatha Christie-esque answer, “I married an archaeologist and he likes old things.” But her honest answer was that her interest in anthropology and aging had been cultivated by an immense curiosity of the unknown. She was first exposed to a culture different than her own when she went to New Mexico. The Native American culture inspired her to explore the vast intricacies of other cultures and social dynamics. She then went on to graduate school at the University of Arizona and was drawn to a community development program that focused on, “applying anthropology to solve problems for people in the third world.” Dr. Fry spoke more about this program and how it was a gateway to her discovery of aging research:

In that seminar, I discovered old people. One of the assignments was to find a community that was in trouble and go out and do ethnography. And that I did. There was a retirement community that was in bankruptcy because it had just been developed and the people bought into the community. . .and then the developer went into bankruptcy. So, the recreation hall, the streets, all the infrastructure was in limbo. . .So I went out there and I said, ‘This is different’ these people are not like my grandparents or any of the older people that I knew in any of the communities I lived. After the seminar, I moved into another one [adult community]. The social distance that was defining old just disappeared and these people were just people. They were living, working, and actually creating a community.

Her experience in the seminar led us to discuss aging as a specialization in the field of anthropology. We wanted to know the benefits of having aging as a specific area of research and expertise within anthropology. Dr. Fry began by discussing aging as a field of study in academia at the time, or the lack thereof:

In terms of the switch to aging as an area—that was not an option in the program I was in. There was no gerontology. There was only one sociologist who had any connection to

gerontology. And I started trying to write a master's thesis and I was really kind of disgusted by the literature. It had nothing to do with nothing in terms of the professional literature. Except there was Margaret Clark. I remember the U of A library—one day I walked out and there was *Culture and Aging* sitting on the display for recent books. It was clear that here was an area that needed help and also an area that had opportunity. I started looking at trying to connect what I was doing in these retirement communities with anthropology but also with gerontology. What I discovered—I think we all discovered—was that gerontologists were welcoming us but primarily for the cross-cultural. It became a niche for anthropology. The benefit of this is, she explains, “if you have a niche in which to expand, you can use anthropology to show that you can actually do much more than the cross-cultural.”

With the help of anthropologists like Margaret Clark and Jay Sokolovsky, and the advent of AAGE, Dr. Fry was able to expand this niche into an actual corporate entity. Dr. Fry's endeavors helped to create a foundation for future studies in the anthropology of aging. Dr. Fry reiterated the benefits of anthropological studies of aging: “Anthropology enables us to ask -in the long term- questions about the social structure that make old age problematic. Old age itself is not problematic except we made it problematic. It turns out that the old are another version of the ‘other’ that needs explanation.” This was a revelation to us. As students of anthropology, Edward Said's (1978) concept of ‘the other’ is something that we often utilize when studying different cultural contexts. However, we had never thought of applying this concept when trying to understand age. Older people are often othered and socially divided in the United States, where we are based, whether we realize it or not. It happens consciously and subconsciously; it is through the way we treat and view older people. Dr. Fry added, “That's what anthropology is good at—to decrease that social distance, the divisions we use in everyday social life. Age is just one of them.”

Staying on the topic of aging and research, we asked Dr. Fry about one of her major research endeavors called, *Project AGE*. Dr. Fry was the co-director of this project, alongside Jennie Keith. The project was an almost 20-year cross-cultural research study dedicated to understanding the meaning of age and the experience of aging across different cultures. The geographic locations of this study spanned across seven different sites, from the !Kung in Africa, to Ireland and Hong Kong. Not only was this a huge endeavor, but it was also complex and multifaceted. Dr. Fry explained to us the many trials and tribulations of first, trying to get the research project started and second, of the actual fieldwork itself:

Project AGE is huge. It took at least fifteen to twenty years of work. It is an experience in and of itself. There are all sorts of dimensions to it. First of all, the infrastructure of setting it up. There was the whole learning of how to work with NIH, getting into budgets and accounting. And then it was getting the team together because this was a team project, it could not be done by two people. So, we had the individual anthropologists, who were individually responsible for each of the seven sites. That was interesting in and of itself because we used AAGE to identify the people with the expertise to be able to hit the ground running when they got to Ireland or Hong Kong or Botswana.

Dr. Fry continued the discussion of Project AGE by sharing the challenges of conducting fieldwork. She remembered that the !Kung had an aversion to the formal interview. Therefore, the anthropologists had to find alternative ways in which to communicate with the !Kung and gather data. Dr. Fry explained how they utilized both qualitative and quantitative data in an attempt to be as holistic as possible. Project AGE is said to be one of the most comprehensive and sophisticated studies of cross-cultural aging. What we found the most fascinating is that Dr. Fry utilized AAGE to achieve this.

Moreover, we inquired about her thoughts on the digital revolution and the digitizing of *Anthropology & Aging*, the official publication of AAGE. She described herself as actually witnessing the digital revolution right before her eyes. Speaking about her experience further, “That is something that most professional organizations had to deal with back in the 1990s. It clearly was the future.” To Dr. Fry, the digitizing of the journal was very advantageous, it allowed for the journal to be accessible and discoverable to all, especially since it is open access and peer reviewed without fees for authors. All the work of AAGE over the course of its existence was neatly organized into one website. Since its origins, AAGE has transitioned through immensely positive changes:

In 1979, when we were creating AAGE, what it's presently doing was not even on the distant horizon in the 80s and 90s. In the beginning, it was only the newsletter, the membership list, and annual meetings. There was no Margaret Clark Award, there was no journal. There was no website—there was no web. There was no email!

Dr. Fry shared with us in an email that in 2004 she had lost contact with AAGE, but that did not hinder her pursuit of gerontological research. In 2011 she published “Culture and Meaning: Strategies for Understanding the Well-being of the Oldest Old,” emphasizing the conversation concerning older individuals and how well-being is experienced is important for the medical community to understand. She noted that well-being *is* the “big question” but currently does not have a good answer.

The problem is—this was learned from Project AGE—well-being is cultural. In culture there are a lot of different ways from getting here to there. It becomes difficult to establish a simple connection between economic issues and well-being. You would like to have a linear connection between wealth and well-being. You would expect from the African sites, to the Irish sites, to Hong Kong and the United States that there would be some linearity and there wasn't. You do have a connection ultimately. Well-being has evolved into a question of successful aging.

With all of the complexities within stratified societies, defining a link between socio-economic factors and well-being on the perceptual impact of successful age is a challenge. The only definite that was shared concerning socio-economic factors is that poverty is not beneficial towards well-being, to which she explains, “is not new.” Poverty is stressful because it requires a great deal of energy and time because a person has to constantly think through their next move, their next meal, and their next bill. Continuing the conversation on age and class we decided to ask why well-being was an important idea for the medical community to understand. Her reply was that medical anthropologists should be concerned with conceptualizations of “successful aging” and how age has become medicalized:

The medical industrial complex is a market that stands next to the military and federal budget. The Middle class goal is to access the medical establishment but what about the other classes like the working class and poverty? Even the healthiest and wealthiest individuals in the end are likely to experience less than successful aging. Add time to the dimension of successful aging and the goal is to keep aging off as much as you can.

The culture surrounding age within the United States essentially defines successful aging in terms of your material security and health. As Dr. Fry points out, no one is exempt from the factor of time; moreover, it appeared that time seemed to affect individuals in poverty more so than those of middle and higher economic classes; financial circumstances interrupt access to medical establishments to the point of being considered unattainable.

As our conversation neared the end, we, as then two senior college students, asked Dr. Fry if she had any advice for anthropologists seeking to establish a career in aging studies and anthropology. She shared that it is important for scholars to figure out what strikes their curiosity and what they find interesting. She believes that anthropology provides “an excellent platform to do almost anything.” She acknowledged that many anthropology students follow different career paths, such as education or medicine, but they still continue to function through an anthropological mindset. For those that choose to continue a career in anthropology the most practical advice she gave was to do fieldwork and to, “understand anthropology and the world that supports it.” She continues, “and that’s the social world. Culture diversifies much faster than the social world that supports it because the social world has constraints.” We believe Dr. Fry’s assertion of discovering a niche is especially important and nearly limitless as cultures continue to change and diversify. There are nuances in cultures that could spark an interest for any prospective anthropologist to discover.

Although Dr. Fry has retired from the field, her interest in aging has not disappeared. In 2018, she and her husband decided to restore a house in the historic district of Bisbee, Arizona. Restoring the past is what anthropologists do, all while trying to understand the nuances of the present. Dr. Fry’s impact on the anthropological study of aging still remains as poignant as the house she decided to rebuild. This is evident with the success of AAGE. We asked Dr. Fry what she would like to see become of AAGE in the future: “Back in 1979, we incorporated AAGE to make it a social person. We gave it eternal life and that transcends any personalities that were involved anywhere along the line. Hopefully, it will go on forever.” However, she did recognize the struggles and tough times that any association, including AAGE, may face throughout its life course. After years of being an association, it can be difficult to find new people who are willing to take on leadership positions. “It can end,” she said, “but I think as a social entity, AAGE will go on doing mostly what living things do and that is, respond to the context in which they are working. I think that AAGE in its success forms a platform to creatively find new ways to meet and discover new needs for its members.”

For Dr. Fry, AAGE is an important part of her identity and she has been able to build a community of dedicated and passionate people, who also see it as a part of their own identities. Dr. Fry foresees a bright future for AAGE, and how far the association has come since its origins in 1979 has been immensely gratifying. She said that it is anthropology students like us that help expand the networks and communities of AAGE. By doing so, we are adding to its longevity. Dr. Fry’s words stirred within us the immediate urge to tell our fellow anthropology peers, and even peers from other majors, to participate in groups and communities, like AAGE. It is important now more than ever to attend annual conferences, AAA meetings, and even create our own associations based on our new anthropological interests and curiosities. In meeting other anthropologists and having conversations, we have a great opportunity to learn something new. It is a way in which we can become active anthropologists and create meaningful communities that will outlive us all.

References

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