

The Midwest Council for Social Research in Aging: A History Compiled by Harold L. Orbach

The Midwest Council for Social Research in Aging (MCSRA) was created by sociologists from the Midwest Sociological Society as part of the initiatives undertaken by Midwestern states in preparation for the January 1961 White House Conference on Aging. As early as January 1959, Arnold M. Rose, who served as Chairman of the Minnesota Planning Committee appointed his Minnesota colleague Marvin J. Taves as research director for the Minnesota program. Included in this research was a survey of the conditions, needs and use of facilities among the aging. Other states started their programs later that year, and some of them found it convenient to utilize the schedules and research procedures developed in Minnesota. The common procedures used by Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota and South Dakota, geographically contiguous states, made it possible for them to compare their results.

This possibility of comparing results gave rise to a series of meetings of the sociologists who had conducted the five-state studies as well as other sociologists interested in aging research in the Midwest. The third meeting, held at the time of the White House Conference in Washington, D.C., formulated the initial plans for the MCSRA. In addition to publishing a summary comparison of the results, the group looked forward to an expanded program of collaborative basic research in aging.

During the winter and spring of 1961 a search for funds for MCSRA led to a small grant from Community Studies, Inc, of Kansas City, for organizational purposes followed by equal grants from the Kansas City Association of Trusts and Foundations and the Hill Family Foundation of St. Paul for a two-year research program. Amelia Wahl, of the Midwest regional office of the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare did much of the organizing work under the guidance of Marvin J. Taves and Warren A. Petersen of Community Studies.

MCSRA was formally organized at a special session of the Annual Meetings of the MSS at Omaha in April, 1961 that included virtually all of the Midwestern sociologists interested in research on aging, save the University of Chicago which had a long history of research in aging dating from the mid-1940's. By this time, sociologists from Kansas, Nebraska, Wisconsin and Illinois had joined the group and representatives of 20 social science departments were included in MCSRA. An executive committee was elected and set out a plan of organized "seminars" to initiate and carry out the research. Seven summer research grants were awarded to members of the group to assist them in developing the research programs and further grants were made to faculty to assist them in carrying out research projects through at least a month in the summer for analysis and writing. Six such "seminars" were held in the next three years, some at the annual meetings of the MSS, where the members presented initial drafts of their research that were criticized and revised and the stimulation of others in a socially relaxed atmosphere led to a sense of real collaborative effort even though each participant had their own research projects. During this time a number of graduate students also received grants to participate in the studies of their advisors, giving rise to a form of traineeship that led to master's theses and doctoral dissertations. These two programs -- stipends for faculty for summer research project development and completion and funds for graduate students that would lead to graduate theses and dissertations -- gave rise to the development of a collaborative training program for the future which became MCSRA's hallmark identity over the next 30 years. Meanwhile, MCSRA also was developing a program of publications.

In 1962, through Community Studies, it published two monographs that combined the data and findings of the five-state surveys prepared for the 1961 White House Conference on Aging: *As Senior Citizens See Themselves*:

A Survey of Aging in the Upper Midwest, and Aging in the Upper Midwest: A Profile of 6300 Senior Citizens. The 1961-1963 research seminar program resulted in the 1965 volume *Older People and Their Social World*, which contained 23 chapters covering topics from social participation, family interaction, health, and population to theoretical issues and the problem of the application of research to social policy.

MCSRA served as the host for a special Gerontological Society Committee on Research and Development project, funded by the National Institutes of Health, using the collaborative seminar approach. The results were a series of papers published in a special issue of *The Gerontologist* in 1971, raising issues of future directions for research. A proposal funded by the Administration on Aging resulted in a three volume *Research Instruments in Social Gerontology*, published in 1982-84. And in 1985 an edited volume with papers from MCSRA members, *Social Bonds in Later Life*, began a series of three volumes of papers on further topics of health, illness and disability and the rural aged.

In 1965 MCSRA received funding from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to begin an Inter-University Training Program that used the seminar method to bring together 3-4 times a year Pre-Doctoral students and Post-Doctoral faculty members from across the member departments of MCSRA. After 1975, with the creation of the National Institute on Aging, the funding was shifted to the NIA. From the original 20 departments in the eight states of the MSS region, at its "peak" MCSRA included over 45 departments in 31 universities that also included Purdue, Colorado and Oklahoma and Oklahoma State, universities in closely contiguous states whose faculty and students participated in the MSS. The NIA discontinued funding in the early 1990's when it adopted a Bio-Medical individual mentoring model for its training programs.

The model of the MCSRA training program involved bringing together able talented and predoctoral students, promising and research-oriented post-doctoral faculty fellows and faculty with active research programs in social gerontology in intensive research seminars where participants presented their work and received critical responses and suggestions of other seminar members. All mixed together on an equal basis presenting progress reports of their work, dissertation plans and proposals and ideas for research. Each of the 3-4 seminars had special visiting scholars who were recognized national leaders in aging research who presented their latest work as part of major seminar themes. These visitors also were present for student and post-doctoral fellow presentations and joined in the discussions. They were also available for individual consultation in the free time and meal-time and after periods. The seminar programs were designed to serve as a rich supplement to the student's home institution's program and a MCSRA faculty member served on the student's supervisory committee. All awards were made on a competitive basis with applications made by the students or post-doctoral fellows with the support and recommendations of their home institution faculty. The pre-doctoral students received yearly stipends, in addition to tuition and research and travel funds. Seminars were often scheduled to coincide with national sociological and gerontological meetings to further facilitate the student's receiving a more "cosmopolitan" approach to their professional field. Post-doctoral fellows received two-month summer stipends in addition to travel funds for all seminars and additional support for travel to professional meetings and small sums for research development.

The success of the program and of MCSRA as a whole can be seen in its record and the achievements of its participants. To begin with, a dozen MCSRA faculty have been Presidents of the MSS (at one time three Senior MCSRA faculty in a row were Presidents of the MSS) and more than 40 faculty and graduates have been or are Chairs of major departments in the

MSS region and elsewhere in the country. One former pre-doctoral trainee was Vice-President and then President of the ASA, a post-doctoral fellow has been President of The Gerontological Society and four former pre-doctoral and post-doctoral fellows have been or are editors of major journals in the field of aging. At least eight former pre-doctoral students have been or are heads or Directors of Institutes of Aging.

Of some 117 pre-doctoral trainees since the NIH Training Program, 89 completed PhD's, the others MA's. Counting awards made prior to the NIH program the numbers are 120 trainees and 92 PhD's. Some of the trainees with terminal MA's never-the-less were highly successful in applied and public sociological and social science positions, The program also awarded 55 post-doctoral fellowships during the NIH period from 1966 to 1991. There were some five earlier post-doctoral awards, the most notable of which was to Helena Z. Lopata who later became one of the Program's Training Directors for Post-Doctoral Fellows as well as among MCSRA's Presidents.

MCSRA was born in the MSS and remained a strong presence at the annual meetings with many sessions devoted to topics in the field of aging and social gerontology. And it was Helena Z. Lopata, in her year as President of the MSS who ended the three-decades "boycott" of Chicago as a meeting city, inaugurating the current cycle of regular meetings in what has become the largest meetings of the MSS.

Most of the original founders of the MCSRA are no longer with us and even some of our early trainees have retired and are inactive. So it is with the goal of re-invigorating the collaborative work of the past that MCSRA members had a special reunion and gathering in St. Louis in 2008 to inaugurate an annual competitive Betty Havens Scholarship Award. Betty Havens, a member of the first generation of MCSRA pre-doctoral trainees, left a bequest to MCSRA and this is being combined with the existing MCSRA Funds, deposited with the MSS, to create an endowment which will fund this scholarship. These funds receive some small royalties from previously published MCSRA-sponsored publications and dues and donations to MCSRA.