

The Ages of Man: Shakespeare and social protection through the life-course

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Introduction

Readers of earlier Perspectives and blogs on this site (see, for example, [The Seven Deadly Myths of Social Protection](#)) will recognise that there are two opposing ideologies of social protection. The first is manifested in the neo-liberal "poor relief" approach: poverty-targeted, conditional, and focused on ameliorating the symptoms of current deprivation. The second is represented by a more inclusive, universal approach that aims to tackle the fundamental causes of poverty, often based on addressing vulnerabilities through the life-course. Let us turn to William Shakespeare, the greatest writer in the English language, to help us understand the overwhelming advantages of the second approach.

In Act 2, Scene 7 of *As You Like It*, written in 1599 or 1600 at the apogee of his illustrious career, the "Bard of Avon" wrote a famous monologue setting out the seven ages of man. The "ages" are not always depicted in the most flattering light, as befits the nature of the melancholy Jaques who articulates them. But they nonetheless provide a useful framework for thinking about a life-course approach to social protection. So, in this paper, I have taken the Bard's seven ages to examine vulnerabilities at each stage of the life-course and propose potential social protection interventions that may be used to mitigate them.

Three important messages about social protection already emerge from the opening lines of the soliloquy:

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.*

The first is the emphasis on "all the world" and the implication that social protection should be available to all: in other words, that it should be inclusive and provided universally. The second is the explicit focus on "all men **and women**", underlining that social protection needs to be gendered to reflect the fact that men and women may experience different vulnerabilities requiring nuanced responses. And the third is that one man – and "man" is used throughout to denote "woman" as well – "plays **many parts**" in the course of his or her life and is therefore exposed to changing vulnerabilities and needs over time.

Infancy

*At first, the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.*

Infancy is perhaps the stage of a person's life when he or she is most in need of protection. Indeed, such protection should ideally start at conception, and should cover – at an absolute minimum – the "first 1000 days". The vulnerabilities of the "mewling infant" would include: malnutrition, resulting in permanent physical stunting and reduced cognitive development; missed immunisation and growth monitoring; limited access to ante- and post-natal care; and the possible loss of parental care from bereavement or migration. Social protection responses to counter these vulnerabilities would include: maternity/paternity benefits and leave entitlements through social insurance; and a universal maternity grant, family allowance or child benefit funded by government – since this is such an important investment for the future – possibly in a way that incentivises attendance at birth counselling, facility-supervised birth, birth registration, regular growth monitoring,

and vaccinations. They might also encompass access to childcare services for working mothers of young children – like the “nurse” in whose arms this particular Shakespearean infant is mewling – as argued in a recent [blog](#).

School age

*And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school.*

Key vulnerabilities of the “whining student” would include child labour, and the inability (for whatever reason) to access school or to have a satisfactory environment in which to study; malnutrition, which, whilst not having the same irreversible consequences as during infancy, can still impede growth, learning and mental development; and, again, the loss of parental care from bereavement or migration. Social assistance is important here, particularly in ensuring access to school (for girls in particular, but also for boys) and in optimising the quality of the learning environment. Instruments would include child grants – such as South Africa’s Child Support Grant – educational stipends, bursaries and school meals. Furthermore, pensions for the elderly would help those children whose parents have migrated or died, an example of how interventions at one stage of the life-course can be extremely beneficial at other stages.

Youth

*And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress’ eyebrow.*

The “woeful ballad” of challenges faced by young adolescents would include: a lack of adequate skills to enter the labour market and consequent unemployment or underemployment; the inability to access appropriate training; resultant feelings of inadequacy, alienation and frustration; the risk of being pressured into early marriage; and – for young girls – the dangers of early pregnancy and motherhood. Social assistance responses should include the availability of secondary and tertiary education stipends and support to access free technical vocational and educational training. Helping to keep children in education is one of the most effective methods of reducing teenage pregnancy and early marriage, but social legislation

– together with investment in its enforcement – also has a role to play. Here too, it is worth noting that many of the problems of young people listed above could have been avoided through better social protection during infancy and school age.

Working age

*Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon’s mouth.*

For those in physically demanding employment, there are significant risks of work injury, sickness and invalidity. As Shakespeare cautions, however well things are going and however fast one’s “reputation” is rising, the “bubble” can always burst suddenly: the result is reduced income and sometimes dramatically diminished well-being for the household. Where such employment is in the formal sector, like our “bearded soldier” here, such risks should be covered by contributory social insurance schemes: unemployment benefit, work accident compensation, sickness benefit, and invalidity insurance. For those in the informal sector, there needs to be access to Government-financed social assistance in the form of grants for disability and chronic illness. Other gendered vulnerabilities at this stage would include domestic violence, demand for dowry payments, discrimination against women in the labour market, unavailability of childcare services, and the need to look after ageing parents. Many of these can be addressed through social assistance – such as child grants, family allowances and old age pensions – which allow others to care for children and parents so that mothers can return to employment (a further example of how interventions can have benefits across the life-course). Others – such as domestic violence, dowry and sexual discrimination – are best addressed by other policies (or a mix of policies).

Maturity

*And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part.*

Maturity is depicted as a time of moderate comfort and in a relatively positive light (perhaps because Shakespeare was at this established stage when he wrote the play!). But during this phase of the life-course there are still risks, not only the continuing ones of accident, sickness, and invalidity but also, increasingly, of unemployment (or at least underemployment), and the inability to find new work. Key social protection responses will include the range of social insurance benefits mentioned above. But social assistance is also required for those outside the formal sector: this might take the form of income tax credits, direct income transfers, an employment guarantee scheme, public works opportunities, or retraining for new employment.

Old age

*The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound.*

The vulnerabilities faced in old age, as expressed so eloquently by Shakespeare, include increasing frailty (“his big manly voice, turning again toward childish treble”) and a decreasing ability to work (“his shrunk shank”), although it is worth remembering that many older people nonetheless continue to work: for example, some 50% of farmers globally are more than 60 years old. There is also the possible lack of care from family, and discrimination in areas such as accessing the labour force or obtaining credit. At this “sixth age” of the life-course, support to the “slipper’d pantaloon” should consist of an old age pension. Ideally this would be one with three tiers: a foundation tier of a universal non-contributory citizens’ pension; a mandated compulsory contributory old-age benefit funded through social insurance; and voluntary pensions provided by the private sector which would be funded from additional savings made at the stage of having a “fair round belly with good capon lined”. Having access to income allows the elderly to remain active contributors to social

networks, rather than becoming dependent on others or – worse still – being excluded from family support as a result of being viewed as a burden.

Death

*Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.*

The final stage of each individual’s “eventful history” is indeed “mere oblivion”. But even here social protection has a valuable role to play, in ensuring that the surviving members of the household are not left bereft, or “sans everything”. From a social insurance perspective, this would include death benefits, funeral insurance and survivors’ allowances. Informal systems include savings schemes and burial societies. And government assistance might include a social pension for widows who have not yet attained the qualifying age for an old age pension.

Conclusion

Shakespeare knew a thing or two about life and hardship, and about “shuffling off this mortal coil”. The unmitigated cynicism of Jaques in *As You Like It* is a constant reminder that grief, sorrow, suffering and death provide the inevitable counterpoint to all human joy and success. Through this melancholy mouthpiece, Shakespeare tells us more about the pre-eminence of the life-course approach to social protection than the majority of learned papers and policy documents on the subject. With that in mind, and in deference to those that persist with the alternate neo-liberal approach, let’s leave the last wise word to another splendid character in the same play, the court jester or “fool”, Touchstone:

*The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man
knows himself to be a fool.*

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About The Author

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Nicholas Freeland is a Social Security practitioner. He read English (and therefore lots and lots of Shakespeare) for Part I of his University degree. As he has moved through his own life course, he is at last understanding the Bard's messages better, and this famous monologue has assumed greater relevance.

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