

Social Context Theory¹

A systems model of social change based on social needs and social issues

¹ For more detailed discussion of concepts contained in this paper, see various listed publications by L. Earle

Leon Earle
Northern Territory University
Australia

Tony Earle
University of South Australia
Australia

Abstract

The theme of this edition is community development in the North Australian region. The articles included discuss ways of advancing positive community involvement, and report on a range of issues that impact on community development. Social Context theory is presented as a tool of analysis for examining social changes and associated needs among individuals in societies over time. The concept of community development has particular relevance to the fields of psychology, social psychology, and community services, because individuals look to the availability of community involvement options, and the potential they offer, for accessing social activities and social support networks. Social Context theory is therefore central to community development.

Definitions

The term "community" implies a sense of personal belonging that comes from a shared awareness and acceptance of a range of beliefs, activities, and social interaction patterns among individuals

regardless of cultural background. These reflect a degree of integration across central social institutions such as family, education, leisure, religion, health, government, and economy and provide guides as to how we behave.

Community "development" is an ongoing social building process, designed to enhance shared awareness and social integration among community members, by facilitating comprehensive and productive ways of involving individuals, of all ages, in productive activities and social interactions. This broad definition implies cross-cultural and cross-generation linking, through major accessible forms of community involvement, including work, recreation, education, and community service. The notion of 'development' in the social sense represents a commitment to build upon a community's shared activities and interactions consistent with the emerging needs in a society's changing social context.

A major focus of community development is to meet the challenge of change (social, cultural, economic, technological) with vision. In this task, community professionals must plan to address emergent social and personal needs for the general population, as well as developing compensatory initiatives for those marginalised by the social context of a particular society.

Setting the scene

In recent years, those controlling work processes have employed non-social mediums, such as technology, to maximise monetary outcomes in what has become an idealisation of production efficiency. It is ironic that societies have allowed the forces that promote, control, and glorify work on the one hand to systematically

plot the disengagement of so many people from it on the other. Moreover, this stripping process has been performed without the serious development of alternatives for constructive human participation. Such a process is analogous to a hit-and-run accident. The perpetrator is not held responsible, and the victim has little recourse. Grief and anger follow, and ongoing frustration, as well as a sense of personal loss, prevails.

In the period of economic rationalism that prevailed in the 1990's and early 2000's, those workers identified as being superfluous to management efficiency objectives were systematically targeted and exposed; sector by sector, and labelled as "redundant" or "retrenched." The number separated from work is significant and their subsequent transition to productive community involvement avenues remains a community development issue.

We in Australia have allowed the consolidation of a societal system that marginalises many people from societal participation, promotes dependency and isolation, and offers short term compensatory assistance only to its casualties, without seriously seeking to find new and productive alternatives for inclusion.

These are critical "human factors," and the time has therefore now arrived for psychologists, in collaboration with members in the community professions, to advance awareness of the need for social building, so that enduring community involvement becomes a first priority. More specifically, the challenge before us is to construct a social context that will facilitate a basis for activities and social interaction at the community level, making the quest for meeting lifestyle needs, at the

individual level, a priority and a reality rather than a mere romantic ideal. Perhaps our collective corporate memory processes require some serious re-programming, to entrench a social component that has a priority commensurate with the needs of humans as *social* beings.

A systems perspective

During the 20th century, various sociological and psychological theories and models have provided useful approaches to assisting our understanding of societal and social change. Yet there is a need for a more enduring theory, one that considers collectively the *macro social forces* which impact on individuals in society and the *micro socialisation processes* that influence both individual and collective thinking and subsequent *social behaviour patterns*. Added to this, we must include the vital component of time when these interactions and changes take place.

Social Context theory has a social psychological orientation. That is, the model is used to identify societal structures and socialisation processes in a given prevailing *social environment*, as well as the associated patterns of social behaviour they facilitate, or inhibit, among individuals in society at any given period of *time*. Social Context theory also provides a means of examining social agitation forces initiated by individuals and groups who seek to change or challenge broader societal structures and social beliefs, in order to establish new social behaviours.

Social environment dimension

This is a key dimension in the model, and it has three major components:

- **Societal structures (Shapers)**
These are macro social forces that shape the ways in which people approach their daily living activities and relationships either directly or indirectly. They are external to individuals, and include factors such as technology, social class, demography, urbanisation, mass media, and the various social institutions that serve to influence the patterning of social behaviour between and among individuals in society, such as family, education, religion, leisure, health, economy/work and government.
- **Social processes (perceptions, attitudes, values)**
Social processes comprise the internal forces (perceptions, attitudes, and values) that are central to the socialisation of individuals in society. They tend to serve as ‘societal supporters,’ in that they provide a degree of consistency and uniformity in people’s views, and a crucial facilitating (and in some cases non-facilitating) link between prevailing societal structures and common (accepted) social behaviour patterns.
- **Common patterns of social behaviour (social realities)**
The prevailing common patterns of social behaviour represent the social realities that most individuals collectively acknowledge as guides to their thinking and actions. This incorporates consideration of the various folkways, mores (norms), and laws present in a society.

Time dimension

This is defined as any particular period, such as the World War I era, the Great Depression, the World War II era, the

post-war baby boom era, the economic rationalism period, the new millennium transition (Y2K); as a policy implementation phase, such as migration legislation, aged care reform and work-for-the-dole.

The time dimension is critical when examining the power of the existing societal forces in maintaining social behaviour patterns, and the endeavours of individuals agitating for change to improve social conditions and better meet specific social needs. Indeed, there are time periods when the social context of society is more receptive to change, and also times when change is difficult. Astute politicians monitor the relationships between societal structures and social perceptions, attitudes, and values, when championing social reforms, or alternatively when pressing for restraint and stability. These positions are commonly aligned with being seen as progressive or conservative.

Consistency between macro pressures (societal structures such as class, technology, media), and micro pressures (perceptions, attitudes, and values) held by individuals at a given point in time, tends to drive the third component; namely, common patterns of social behaviour or ‘outcomes,’ that are reflected in a community’s norms and laws. These are the social realities generally accepted by a society. Inconsistencies between macro societal structures and micro processes, by contrast, provide the momentum for social change. Proponents of change utilise this through initiating social agitation and creating social turbulence. Such conflicts can become social change movements instigated by those who consider the prevailing societal structures to be perpetuating social inequalities and dysfunctional outcomes, thereby failing to

meet established and changing human needs.

Social Context theory can be used as a tool of analysis to identify, understand, and make predictions in relation to social issues and societal needs. More specifically, it can be applied to *social issues* that affect the life chances of individuals in society (e.g., social inequalities, unemployment, the social needs of specific groups, such as aged, Indigenous Australians), and also to *social concerns* that have implications for present and future lifestyle challenges (e.g., conservation, migration).

While Social Context theory is conceived to be applied by those in the disciplines of social psychology, psychology, and sociology, it can also be used by practitioners in human services professions, such as community development, social policy, social work, community work, community services, financial planning, public relations, education, and health. A social contextual framework offers the versatility to do this, because it is comprehensive in scope, systematic in structure, and provides ongoing currency because of its inherent time dimension. Analysis can start from any point in the social context, namely society structures (e.g., class), micro processes (e.g., attitudes), or social behaviour patterns (e.g., societal or community norms). To a certain extent, the commencement point is influenced by professional orientation. Many sociologists identify a macro structure, psychologists a micro process, and community personnel (such as social workers, policy personnel, and politicians), patterns of social behaviour as their initial particular focus.

Social Context Theory: An application

From Table 1, there are two key stages in applying the model. The first stage consists of identifying the social context prevailing, and defining any inherent dilemmas within it, such as the emerging predicament of older people in Australia. Many of these are retiring earlier and living longer, and yet finding themselves increasingly isolated and marginalised from involvement in the community mainstream.

In this case, we might say that the work oriented socialisation focus of the 20th century did not specifically cater for the needs of older people. Until the 1950s, this was not an issue, because men retired at 65 and their life expectancy was around 67. Consequently, an expected two-year retirement period was not seen as a community involvement issue. Women lived around four years longer, and retired at 60. However, because they had a care and maintenance role linked to the home, the need to diversify their options was not regarded as a community development challenge.

Table 1
Stages in applying Social Context Theory

STAGE 1:	IDENTIFYING THE PREVAILING SOCIAL CONTEXT: DEFINING ANY INHERENT PROBLEM(S)/DILEMMA(S) (e.g., meeting leisure needs in a work oriented social context)
Phase 1:	The existing and inhibiting life cycle socialisation pattern (e.g., primarily work and production driven). See Figure 1.
Phase 2:	Dysfunctions (or negative consequences) implicit in the prevailing social context. This includes the problems/dilemmas confronting individuals and groups that inhibit or deny the needs and concerns of some sections of society, resulting in marginalisation, withdrawal, and inactivity. See Figure 2.
STAGE 2:	THE EMERGENCE OF A CHANGE PROCESS AND THE CREATION OF A MORE INCLUSIVE SOCIAL CONTEXT This tends to be a reaction to the restrictions, inequalities, or shortcomings implicit in Stage 1, and identifies new information about <i>what</i> the problem is, <i>who</i> is affected and <i>how</i> .
Phase 1:	Social agitation to change the prevailing, inhibiting attitudes and norms, to accommodate the concerns and needs of marginalised sectors, and develop an informed awareness of new possibilities. See Figure 3.
Phase 2:	An emerging contemporary social context incorporating more inclusive attitudes, beliefs and laws in an accommodating societal structure. See Figure 4.

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Pre-work</i>	<i>Work</i>	<i>Post-work</i>
Major characteristics	Period of preparation	Period of establishment and consolidation	Period of retirement
↓	↓	↓	↓
Societal expectations	A right to childhood. A developmental period.	To be productive. Adaptation to work roles.	A right to leisure. A degree of withdrawal from past roles.
↓	↓	↓	↓
Socialisation emphasis	<i>Preparatory</i> socialisation.	<i>Adaptive</i> socialisation.	<i>Resocialisation</i> to non-work lifestyle.

Features

Pre-work years: *Preparatory socialisation* with a central work orientation and an implicit but peripheral preparation for leisure.

Work years: *Adaptive socialisation* with a central work orientation as people adapt to work roles and consolidate their positions.

Post-work years: *Re-socialisation* to a lifestyle based on leisure is assumed, but preparatory and adaptive socialisation through leisure education is neglected. Consequently broad productive community involvement possibilities beyond work are largely ignored.

Figure 1
The work oriented life cycle socialisation pattern

Stage 1, Phase 1

From Figure 1, the pre-work socialisation focus in the 20th century was primarily preparation for work-related roles (*preparatory socialisation*). The emphasis during the work years was on *adaptive socialisation*, as people endeavoured to establish and consolidate themselves in their work roles. In the early part of the 20th century, the focus for many women was to complement the role of their partner, by working to establish and consolidate a successful home environment. The post-work years were associated with retirement, where individuals withdrew from work roles to pursue a non-work lifestyle. While this assumed a *re-socialisation process* to non-work pursuits, the need for some kind of preparatory and adaptive socialisation processes, normally expected through experience, were largely ignored. Indeed re-socialisation to something new assumes both preparatory and adaptive socialisation.

Stage 1 reveals that the life cycle socialisation emphasis for most of the 20th century reflected a work-oriented social context. Consequently, the societal structures shaping people's lives (technology, class, demographic composition/urbanisation, mass media, and the social institutions of family, education, religion, leisure, health, economy, and government), coupled with prevailing social processes (perceptions, attitudes, values) reinforced a work-driven orientation. Thus, the post-work social reality of retirement failed to provide equally valued recognition and legitimacy for the worth of non-work community involvement options of older people.

Stage 1, Phase 2

In the latter part of Stage 1 (Figure 2), a growing consciousness of the dysfunctions implicit for older people, in a work-oriented social context, began to emerge. Growing numbers of older people, social gerontologists, and human service personnel, began to highlight limitations in lifestyle choices as a result of structural restraints prevailing, negative societal attitudes, and a social distancing of the elderly.

Stage 2, Phase 1

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was social agitation by social activists seeking more positive recognition and better conditions for older people. The development of broader community involvement options beyond work (e.g., recreation, community service, education) was advanced as a crucial need, given that men and women were living 20 to 30 years beyond their retirement. New attitudes then began to be promoted through media social marketing. This is depicted in Figure 3, which represents a detailing of the Societal Supporters component from Figure 2.

Stage 2, Phase 2

As a result of Stage 1, phase 2, governments were pressed to introduce (anti age-discrimination) legislation. This in turn helped to free older people from many of the prevailing stereotypes and practices, which had inhibited opportunities and devalued their roles and status. These changes set the scene for a revised social context more receptive to the needs of older people, as depicted in Figure 4.

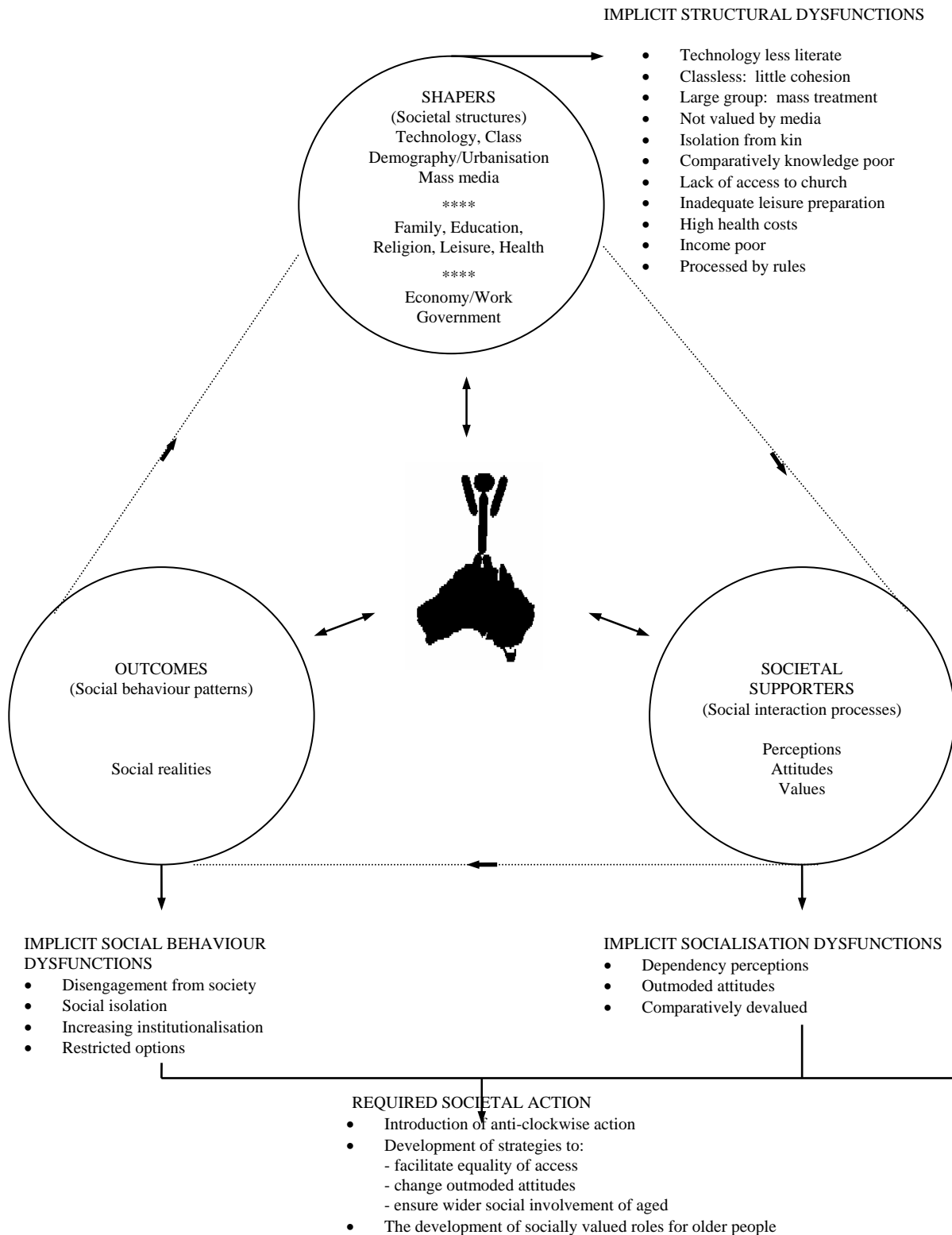
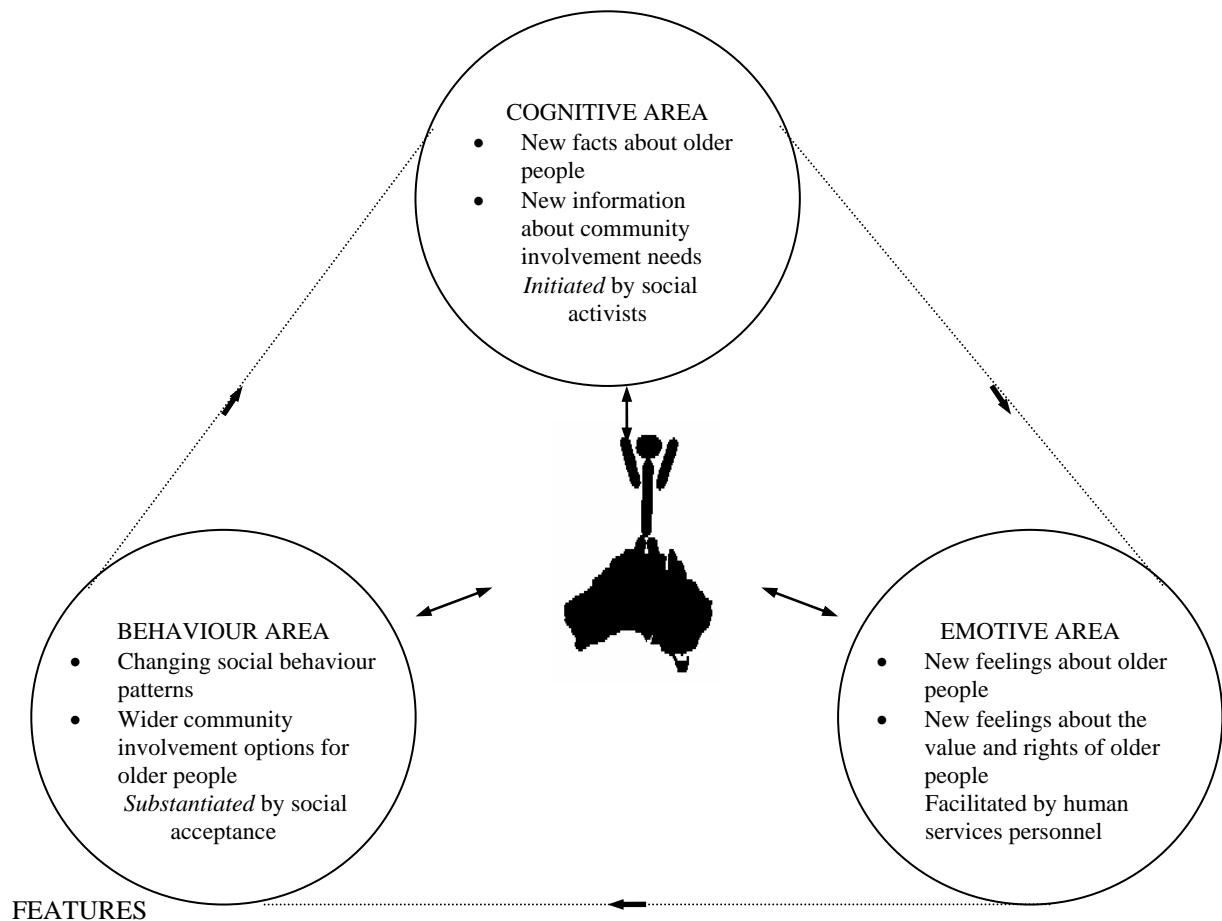


Figure 2
Prevailing inhibiting (work oriented) social context



1. *Cognitive area*
 - Introduction of new relevant information
 - Supporting structural changes (eg via legislation)
 - Awareness-raising re new information about the nature and significance of productive community involvement avenues
2. *Emotive area*
 - Attempts to facilitate positive feelings about the worth of older people
 - Attempts to facilitate positive feelings about the community involvement of older people
3. *Behaviour area*
 - Emergence of changing social behaviour patterns among older people (eg norms, laws)
 - Emergence of changing social interaction patterns and relationships across the life cycle
 - Wider participation of older people in the pursuit of community involvement options
 - Active and valued support for older people facilitated by human services professionals

Figure 3
The attitude change process
(Detailing of Societal Supporters from Figure 2)

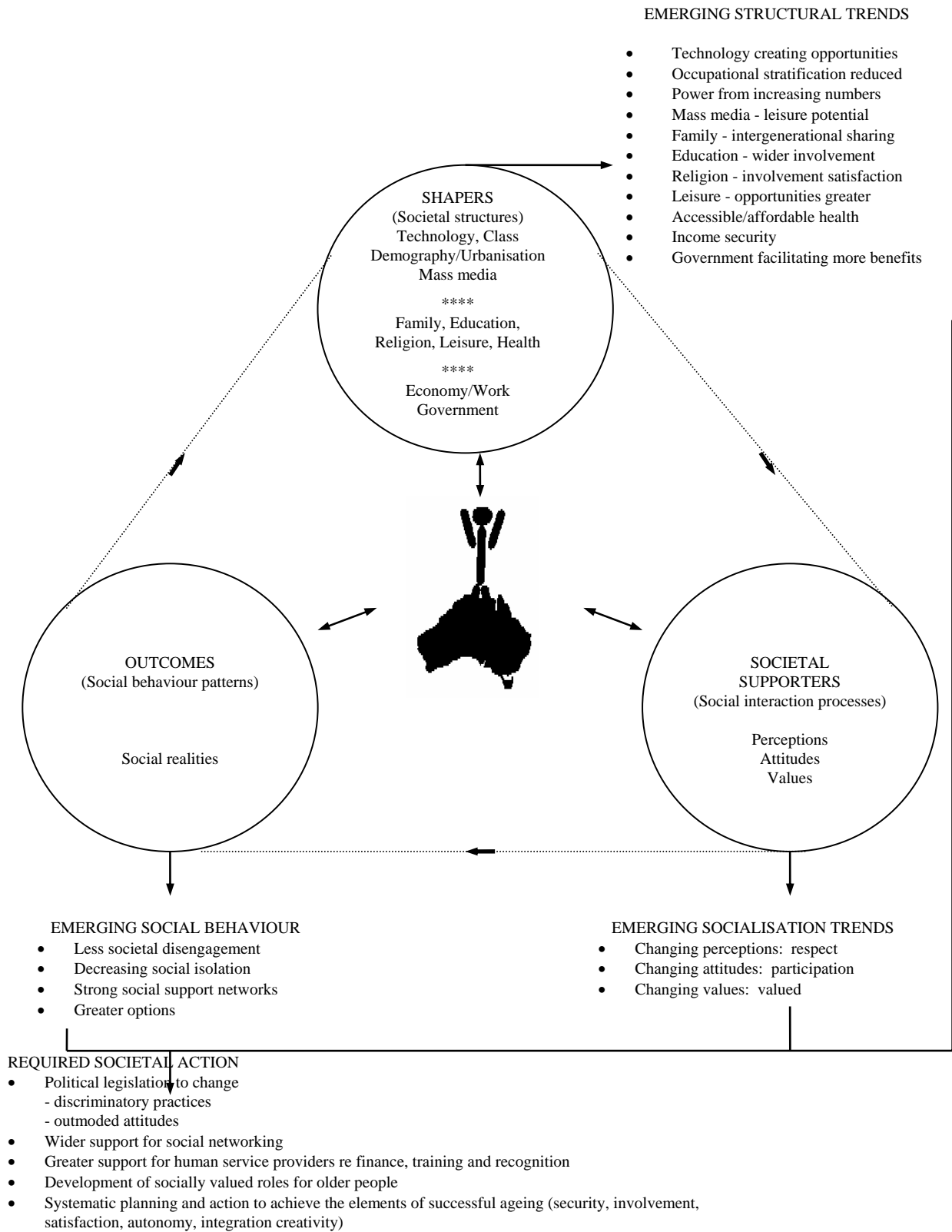


Figure 4
 The emerging need/issue inclusive social context

Conclusion and Summary

The quest to change the social context of any society, in order to meet the needs of a specific marginalised group of individuals, or to address concerns relating to a serious social issue, represents a community development challenge. In this sense, Social Context theory may be seen as a process-oriented community development theory, to be used by social psychologists and community professionals dedicated to advancing the needs and concerns of individuals in society, who have yet to be fairly accommodated by the existing social context.

One major application of this theory, in the context of contemporary ageing in North Australia, is summarised in Figure 5. Other issues in Australian society that could be examined by applying Social Context theory include (1) the quest among Indigenous Australians to secure a series of rights over the last fifty years such as the right to vote, the right to work without discrimination, citizenship, land rights, and reconciliation conditions; (2) the conservation issue; and (3) the emerging issue of young Australian born males who some assert have been sacrificed as a generation in the promotion of equal opportunity/affirmative action related "issues," such as racism, multiculturalism, and feminism.

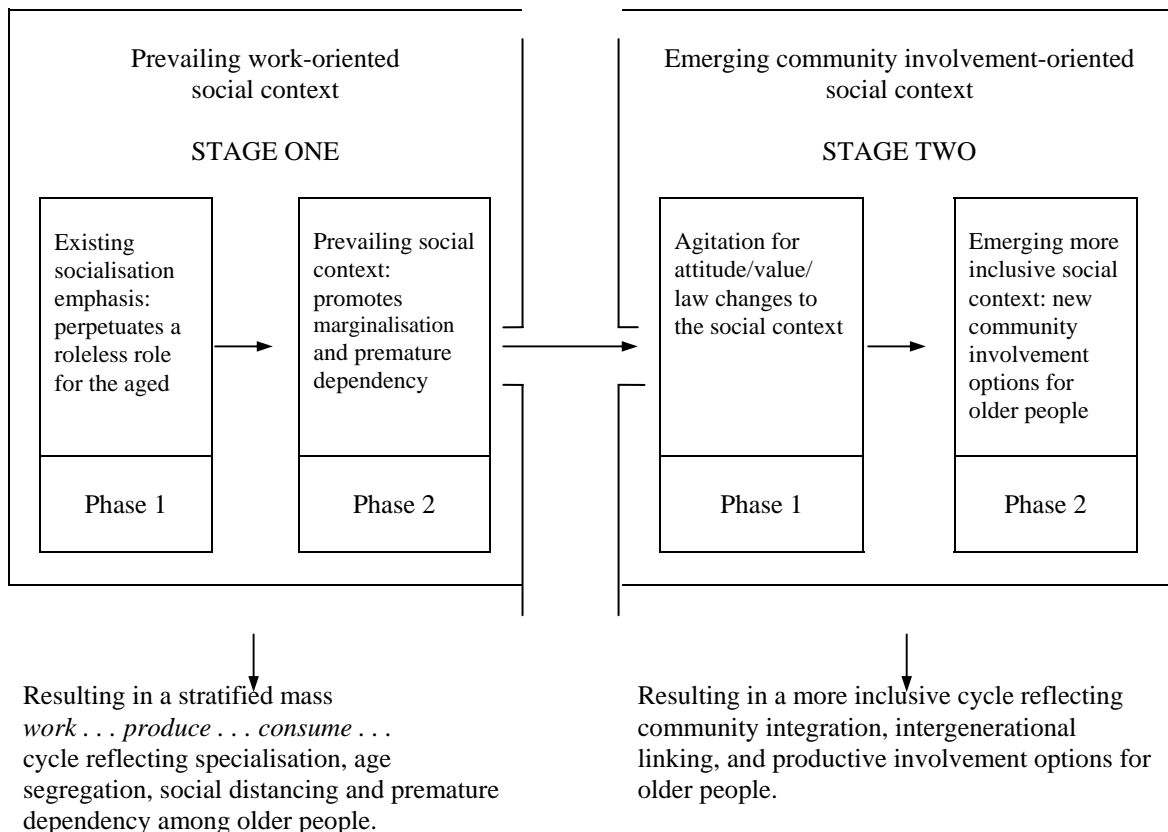


Figure 5
Changing the social context to broaden life chances for the aged

References

Cowgill, D., & Holmes D., (Eds). (1997). *Ageing and modernisation*. New York: Appleton - Century-Crafts.

Cox, H. (1992). *Later life: The realities of ageing*. Newark, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Earle, L. (1996). *Successful ageing in Australian society: A community development challenge*. Adelaide: ROA Australasia.

Earle, L., & Earle, R. (1997). *Northern Territory Vision Paper for Successful Ageing*. Darwin: ECS.

Earle, L., & Fopp, R. (1999). *Introduction to Australian society: A sociological overview*. Sydney: Harcourt Brace.

Hagestad, G., & Neugarten, B. (1985) Age and the life course. In R. Binstock & E. Shores (Eds), *Handbook of ageing* (2nd edition). New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Havighurst, R., Neugarten, B., & Tobin, S. (1964) Disengagement, personality, and life satisfaction. In P. E. Hansen (Ed), *Age with a future: Proceedings 6th International Congress of Gerontology in Age With a Future*. Copenhagen: Munksgaard.