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The Serendipitous Life and Career of Dr. Jay Sokolovsky

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When looking at a successful career from the outside, it is easy to see it as a linear trajectory, with each decision fully intended from the outset. However, with a deeper exploration, some successful careers are actually amalgamations of serendipitous moments and chance. From the start of any career, it is important to say yes to opportunities that suit one's interests and stay connected to professional organizations that, from the beginning, have created networks for like-minded professionals.

Dr. Jay Sokolovsky has spent a major portion of his career studying aging as a cross-cultural phenomenon. Judging from his wide-ranging publications, it would appear from the outside that a clear path has marked his professional trajectory. Yet, he insists that his journey in anthropology is based on serendipity. While initially a physics major, anthropology captured his attention during his sophomore year of college, in large part due to the fascinating cultural practices, such as yogi rituals, that he learned about. From that moment, Dr. Sokolovsky refocused his educational goals to align with his budding interest in anthropology.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we met Dr. Sokolovsky via Zoom to hear about his professional life. Even through the barrier of a computer screen, it is clear that he is a warm and vibrant person, who sees the importance of anthropology and invests endlessly in his students. "I have been pushing for my students to go to graduate school because there are huge opportunities if you can figure out how anthropology can contribute to the world," said Dr. Sokolovsky.

Upon completing his Ph.D. at Penn State University in 1974, Dr. Sokolovsky focused his research on globalization among indigenous communities in Mexico. He eventually made the decision to move into academia but found that the climate was overloaded with competitive candidates. When he was not able to snag a teaching position, he ended up in New York City teaching as an adjunct at a few different schools. Soon, his first serendipitous moment would come to fruition when his connection to a close friend and psychiatrist, Dr. Carl Cohn, paved the way for Dr. Sokolovsky to become involved in what would later become his life's work. Dr. Cohn was in New York City at the time, working with communities of individuals recently released from mental asylums. Dr. Sokolovsky joined Dr. Cohn and his team of cultural geographers, psychologists, and sociologists. The team ended up publishing an article on human organization, which according to Dr. Sokolovsky, ended up becoming the "first applied work on health issues and released mental patients coming into urban areas."

The realization that many of their research participants had spent decades in asylums, led Dr. Cohn to suggest a study on older adult populations. Initially not convinced that he would have much to contribute on the topic of aging, due in part to his previous work centered around indigenous

populations, Dr. Sokolovsky eventually conceded and began working alongside Dr. Cohn in this new study. They set out to begin their work by looking at older people in residential hotels in New York City. Between 1974 and 1976, their team completed research that led to several publications, but it wouldn't be until another serendipitous event that Dr. Sokolovsky would recognize his calling as a specialist in the field of aging.

In 1976, the stars aligned when the opportunity to teach at the University of Maryland, Baltimore arose, alongside an increasing national interest in aging and gerontology. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) became more interested in developing new ways of understanding the issues revolving around aging and offered fellowships for researchers. Previous research focused primarily on broad surveys, which didn't help to aid in designing programs that were suitable for encompassing issues surrounding elder care, ranging from the environment to healthcare to treating cognitive decline (i.e., dementia). The summer before starting at UMBC, the NIH offered fellowships through the University of Chicago to, "learn how to apply social science to the study of gerontology and aging." There, Dr. Sokolovsky met researchers such as Christine Fry and Kevin Eckert, amongst others, who were also interested in researching anthropology and aging. Up until that time, limited studies were done on this topic of research, although Dr. Sokolovsky notes that there were individuals such as Barbara Anderson and Margaret Clark (who he calls the godmother of the anthropology of aging), who pioneered this branch of the field.

Dr. Sokolovsky found that these connections went beyond the scope of anthropology and traversed across multiple disciplines, all working together to develop the most sophisticated research on aging possible. With no professional organizations to address the topic of aging at the time, Dr. Sokolovsky and Dr. Christine Fry, and others, created a network of research that became the framework for understanding gerontology. This network also became instrumental in restructuring the grant proposal process by placing social scientists and their specialties on grant proposal advisory boards. Eventually, an entire organization was created called the "Association for Anthropology, Gerontology," (now called the Association for Anthropology, Gerontology, and the Life Course). The shift in mindset from simply studying "old age" to studying the entire life course expanded anthropological research in ways that included researching how the concept of "old age" continues to change in our own society. Even more interesting is that as Dr. Sokolovsky's research continued through this wormhole, he found earlier anthropologists such as the famous Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson had also written on the subject of aging.

Dr. Sokolovsky realized that up until this point, aging was always closely associated with death—instead of having its own identity in research categories. Even though anthropological publications did exist that addressed aging, such as Margaret Clark and Barbara Anderson's, "Culture and Aging: An Anthropological Study of Older Citizens," anthropology had yet to really embrace this subject matter compared to other social sciences at the time. Working alongside Dr. Cohn in New York City provided Dr. Sokolovsky the opportunity to demonstrate how anthropology can be used to make a difference in communities. Dr. Sokolovsky acknowledges in his first book on the subject of aging, that anthropology provided a landscape to look "outside the surface" beyond what other disciplines had to say about aging, in order to see "how things were really functioning in the deepest part of people's lives." An anthropologist's perspective is both unique and vital to helping physicians understand both the cultural aspects of medical systems and medical systems themselves.

Dr. Sokolovsky played – and continues to play – a vital role in developing the field, although it was not the path he intentionally set out on. He says: "I literally got sucked into this void – I mean, it was a void that was missing in anthropology." From 1978 to the late 1980s, Dr. Sokolovsky notes that Ph.D. degrees

in the field of anthropology and aging “took off”; many students were finding grants and publishing work that ultimately developed into the field it is now. Dr. Sokolovsky understands the unique ways anthropology contributes to all other fields and its ability to enhance most disciplines. He explains: “Anthropology can really make a difference – not only in people’s lives, but it can interface with other disciplines that think they are doing applied gerontology, whether it’s in social work, medicine, or psychiatry.” Moreover, Dr. Sokolovsky mentions a study with social workers from the Census Bureau and a team of undergraduate anthropology students to study the homeless communities in the Baltimore–Washington area. The study revealed to the social workers and to Dr. Sokolovsky, that the anthropology students were more equipped to go into the homeless communities and hear the voices of their research participants without any preconceived notions or predetermined ideas of what their lives were like. As a result, the anthropology students provided the most powerful information used in the report to the Census Bureau.

Dr. Sokolovsky notes that during the review process of his first book, a reviewer accused him of anthropological chauvinism – but he does not shy away from that accusation,

[They] were right! . . . In much of the book, my point was that many of the issues that sociologists, psychologists, and physicians thought they were solving with the disciplines looking at aging, they were really looking at it from the outside – at the surface, and they weren't looking at how things were really functioning in the deepest part of people's lives.

Dr. Sokolovsky says that the advice he often gives to young graduate students, who might be working in public health, in pharmacies, or in hospitals is, “Don't become a physician; Become a professional anthropologist who helps physicians understand medical systems and the cultural aspects of that,” he continues to say, “If that is being an anthropological chauvinist, I'm really proud of that.”

This interview would not be complete without gaining Dr. Sokolovsky’s perspective on the current COVID-19 pandemic. Being an expert on the topic of aging, Dr. Sokolovsky addresses the ways anthropologists working alongside older adults in nursing homes were making the biggest contributions in understanding how our cultural systems intertwine with addressing this outbreak. He said,

How cultural systems are working either to help people deal with the social aspects of this in terms of promoting a psychological, social, and medical environment where people can limit the spread of the virus and also come up with cultural mechanisms as a hopefully temporary substitute for the kinds of human interaction that can sustain people that are in compromised medical conditions.

Additionally, there may be positive cultural aspects of the pandemic that activate society to redesign some of the structures that organize it, such as redesigning less congested cities, rethinking how we deal with food and development of urban gardening, and most importantly on the topic of aging, such as redesigning older age living environments. We can already see changes in society as biomedicine and healthy lifestyles transform our ideas of getting older. Dr. Sokolovsky notes polymath philosopher, Harry Moody’s coinage of the term: “wellderly,” which aptly addresses the new mindset surrounding age. Many anthropologists now conduct research on the topic of aging and challenge the notion of stigmatized senescence.

Dr. Sokolovsky encourages students interested in the anthropology of aging to become members of AAGE, which will provide them professional connections, grant, and funding opportunities. Additionally, he urges undergraduate students to start thinking about the ways anthropology can contribute that differs from the types of research already done on aging. "Become an anthropological chauvinist, but not an obnoxious one," he added. As an example of the contribution, anthropology has the capacity to make, he mentions his oldest friend, Carl. "[Carl] started a community clinic for assessing cognitive impairment and dementia in the heart of this relatively poor, multiethnic community [in Brooklyn], and he started—he got funding to start a training program for physicians." Dr. Sokolovsky has been engaged with the clinic for the past decade offering training in anthropology and aging lectures as well as going on rounds with physicians and sitting in on initial interviews with patients. He told us, "One of the things I've been able to do is to show how an anthropological approach to interviewing can get at materials that the standard clinical interview doesn't get to."

Dr. Jay Sokolovsky is a trailblazer in the world of anthropology and aging, who embraced serendipitous opportunity to build a successful life and career. He has paved the way for many more anthropologists to follow in his steps studying the cultural complexities of aging. Dr. Sokolovsky has just recently retired from the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, but there is no doubt his legacy and contributions will continue to inspire generations of anthropologists as the study of aging continues to develop along new paths. Old age as we know it is changing, and thanks to Dr. Sokolovsky and his early team of social scientists, we have been offered the awareness that this is a critical and extremely relevant study for the social sciences. Through his example, Dr. Sokolovsky shows us that, like his career, research is not always – and in fact, it rarely is – a linear path where all parts are known in advance. Rather, it is about being open to opportunities when they present themselves and pondering how anthropology can uniquely contribute to the world we know.