

III Corporeality

Social and Cultural Gerontology and the Importance of the Ageing Body

Abstract

This chapter examines the emergence of cultural gerontology as an important approach to understanding ageing in contemporary society. It will outline its origins within longer established methodologies operating within mainstream gerontology which have been preoccupied with the interconnections between ageing and health. It will also discuss its relationship with the different approaches that emerged out of what has been called the “cultural turn” in the humanities and social sciences. Bringing these two themes together, this chapter will engage with how the ageing and older body becomes a site for examining the position and performativity of older people. Old age is both socially constructed and a recognition of a series of inexorable biological processes. Drawing on the idea that the corporeal dimensions of ageing are often neglected in cultural gerontology, the position is developed that a focus on how the older body is lived in different cultural contexts can deepen our understanding of not only contemporary ageing, but also of societies located in the historical past.

1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the development of the field social gerontology and shows how it frames our understanding of contemporary old age. I will argue that social gerontology has developed a number of approaches to understanding what has been presented as ‘the problems of old age’. In locating social gerontology within this context, I wish to demonstrate how a knowledge of social gerontology is important for the historical understanding of old age as well as how these themes mark out ageing today. The chapter will also examine the role of cultural gerontology and the way in that it addresses some of the absences present in social gerontology, most notably around the meanings associated with old age and the ageing body.

Before we begin outlining the different strands of social gerontology, it is critical to demarcate what we are referring to when we talk of ageing and old age respectively. Often these terms are used interchangeably, as well as inconsistently. At its most simple,

ageing is a physiological process whereby the body accumulates physical changes across the lifespan. Old age on the other hand, is a status or social category marked by a particular chronological age or by a set of social markers and / or physiological signs. The problem of old age flows from the fact that ageing is a universal experience. Humans age after reaching maturity. Development is a different biological phase of life and needs to be separated from ageing. The biologist of ageing Bernard Strehler pointed out that ageing is both universal and intrinsic.¹ Significantly, he adds that ageing is also, in general, irreversible and ultimately deleterious. This corporeal dimension is important in studying ageing and old age, because it provides a critical context to the understanding of how the social construction of old age has less role flexibility than other statuses or lines of social division.² This tension is present in terms of how old age is demarcated in every society on the planet as well as the factors that are seen to be important. This includes how gender and reproduction contribute to the social locations of age, with the menopause being a cultural factor in attributing an 'aged' status in many societies. It is also important to note that over the life-course age is associated with a growing risk of illness and disability. Historically, life expectancy was also constrained by high infant mortality that resulted in old age (however defined) being restricted to a minority of the population.

2 The Modern Problem of Old Age

Moving on from a focus on ageing towards a consideration of the category of old age, the significant social and historical variation regarding at what point old age begins, and who is included in this category, has led to a concern with the status of older people. This has generally taken the form of questions related to how older people are incorporated into social and cultural divisions such as class, gender and disability.³ In addition, there has been an interest in whether the shift to industrialisation and urban living has diminished the status accorded to old age, or whether there has been a more contradictory picture across time and geography. This has often taken the form of studies of age-stratified

1 Bernard L. Strehler, *Time, Cells and Aging*, New York 1962.

2 Chris Gilleard / Paul Higgs, *Social Divisions and Later Life. Difference, Diversity and Inequality*, Bristol-Chicago 2020.

3 Sara Arber / Jay Ginn, *Gender and Inequalities in Health in Later Life*, in: *Social Science & Medicine* 36,1 (1993), pp. 33–46; Mark Priestley, *Disability. A Life Course Approach*, Cambridge 2003; John Vincent, *Inequality and Old Age*, London 2003.

societies and the importance of age as a source of wisdom as well as a dimension of social power. Equally, the significance of kinship relationships in mobilising resources for the care of older people has been identified as a property of specific social relations based in agrarian and often non-European cultures.⁴ This has, however, been highly contested and is seen as a projection of an idealised past which is mainly used for comparison with a less than ideal present.⁵

For social gerontology, such considerations situate the ‘modern’ problem of old age. This problem arises out of the decreasing productivity of the older workers under industrialisation and their consequent inability to maintain themselves in a wage economy. Drawing on the historical evolution of retirement within Western Europe and the English speaking settler colonies outside Europe such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand in the late 19th and early 20th century, social gerontology has explicitly linked old age with the concept of retirement from the labour force.⁶ This social construction of old age as retirement has become so powerful in modern society that the age of eligibility for a state retirement pension has become synonymous with old age itself. As with many codifications of social processes into social policy, the introduction of pensions brought with it (and further deepened) already existing discriminations and normative expectations: state pensions were, in the main, provided for men, and were granted on the expectation that the recipient would completely exit the labour market. Retirement therefore became an issue of income maintenance rather than one of social care. The emergence of retirement as a potential ‘stage of life’ also promoted the importance of chronological age as the key determinant of the status of old age. The choice of a particular age for pension eligibility has shown much variability with different countries choosing different ages for a variety of reasons; rarely have they connected to any medical or scientific justification.⁷ The accurate recording of births and the consequent capacity to ascertain correct age thus became a fundamental task in the construction of the modern state. It also became essential to what has come to be described as the ‘institutionalization of the life course’ whereby individuals find themselves moving through a sequence of state

4 David G. Troyansky, *Aging in World History*, London 2015 (Themes in World History).

5 Andrea Luh, Das „Goldene Zeitalter der Alten“? Alter in historischer Perspektive, in: *Zeitschrift für Gerontologie und Geriatrie* 36,4 (2003), pp. 303–316.

6 Chris Phillipson, *Capitalism and the Construction of Old Age*, London 1982 (Critical Texts in Social Work and the Welfare State).

7 Montserrat Pallares-Miralles/Carolina Romero/Edward Whitehouse, *International Patterns of Pension Provision II. A Worldwide Overview of Facts and Figures*, Washington 2013 (Social Protection and Labor Discussion Paper 1211).

sanctioned social processes such as schooling, work and retirement; all of which organise their lives.⁸

If the institutionalisation of retirement has become old age, then it is not surprising that how retirement is structured – and the assumptions that flow into it – becomes the reality of the lived experience of older people. Assumptions about social redundancy, social dependency as well as chronic illness and disability ensures that old age becomes a category of social and health policy.⁹ Moreover, it suggests that social gerontology is an applied social science akin to social administration dealing with the problems of old age. If the early and mid-20th century witnessed the institutionalisation of retirement as a stage of the life course, then it can also be argued, that the late 20th and early 21st centuries represented the point that retirement became a near universal experience for most citizens in the high-income countries of Europe, North America and Australasia. At the beginning of the 20th century, policy makers assumed that the majority of the labouring population would not reach old age and therefore not live long enough to draw a retirement pension, or if they did, it would represent a relatively short period of their lives. Much of the social policy surrounding the establishment of the post-war welfare states therefore saw old age as a residual area of activity primarily concerned with poverty alleviation or care for the chronically sick. Those interested in studying old age, particularly in the UK, not only identified the pre-eminent role of the state in shaping the lives of the retired population, but also concluded that it was governmental lack of interest in this unproductive section of the population that led to retirement being in the words of Peter Townsend ‘a tragedy’.¹⁰ Concentrating on the very low level of the UK’s universal state retirement pension, researchers such as Townsend coined the term ‘structured dependency’ to describe the poor position that older people occupied in society.¹¹ Being ‘structured’ into dependency, not only exacerbated the disabilities produced by ageing, but provided a template for excluding older people from society. This occurred through the devaluing of older people’s contribution to society and the portrayal of them as ‘a burden’ that the rest of society had to bear. In 1969, across the

8 Martin Kohli, *The Institutionalization of the Life Course. Looking Back to Look Ahead*, in: *Research in Human Development* 4,3–4 (2007), pp. 253–271.

9 Stephen Katz, *Disciplining Old Age. The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge*, Charlottesville 1996.

10 Peter Townsend, *The Family Life of Old People. An Inquiry in East London*, Harmondsworth 1963.

11 Id., *The Structured Dependency of the Elderly. A Creation of Social Policy in the Twentieth Century*, in: *Ageing & Society* 1,1 (1981), pp. 5–28.

other side of the Atlantic, Robert Butler described this as constituting what he termed 'age-ism'; a form of exclusion which deliberately echoed the struggles of race and gender that arose in the ferment of the 1960s.¹²

Structured dependency and ageism brought to the emergent field of social gerontology a number of questions that had not readily concerned earlier policy orientated researchers: What was the role of old age in a society in which retirement was universal and where the numbers of those aged over retirement age continued to grow? In Europe, a sociology of old age had not emerged, with ageing being generally absent from the concerns of theorists and mainstream researchers.¹³ In America, on the other hand, the success of the relatively newly implemented social security system was the motivation for programmes of research as well as thinking about the transformation of old age brought about by mass retirement.¹⁴ Many research projects, examined the relatively new problem of old age: How was it possible for older people to adjust to the 'roleless role' of retirement in a society in which role-integration was one of the markers of American society, at least as far as functionalist theory was concerned.¹⁵ Following the theorisation of the mid-20th century sociologist Talcott Parsons there was certainly pessimism that anything in retirement could replace the manifold roles provided by formal employment. Accepting that retiring represented a withdrawal from society and a loss of influence and status was the starting point to what has become known as the "Kansas City Study" which introduced the idea of disengagement theory which suggested that older people actively 'disengaged' from society as a way of completing psycho-social development.¹⁶ This disengagement took the form of a re-orientation of 'ego energy' on private projects and family relationships rather than an engagement with society as a whole. The disengagement of older people was understood as being for the mutual benefit of both the older person, as well as for the whole of society. Society benefitted because to function efficiently there needed to be room for younger cohorts to take up the positions occupied

12 Robert N. Butler, Age-ism. Another Form of Bigotry, in: *The Gerontologist* 9,4 (1969), pp. 243–246.

13 Paul Higgs/Ian Jones, *Medical Sociology and Old Age. Towards A Sociology of Health in Later Life*, London 2009 (Critical Studies in Health and Society).

14 W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Crossing Frontier. Gerontology Emerges as a Science*, Cambridge 1995.

15 Woodrow Morris, The Roleless Role of the Aging, in: *PsycCRITIQUES* 7,3 (1962), pp. 112–114.

16 Victor Marshall, Sociology, Psychology, and the Theoretical Legacy of the Kansas City Studies, in: *The Gerontologist* 34,6 (1994), pp. 768–774.

by older cohorts. A failure to do this threatened social stability as well as inhibited innovation and development. Significantly, Disengagement Theory reproduced the gendered roles of the 1960s, with men disengaging on retirement whereas for women it occurred on being widowed.¹⁷ Criticisms of the approach emerged almost as soon as it was put forward, often centring on whether disengagement was a chosen or imposed condition. This reflected tensions that existed around the degree to which old age was structured, or was an outcome of individual agency. This split continues in research and policy in North America where approaches that stress individual adjustment to retirement and old age such as Activity Theory¹⁸ have played a key role in shaping social gerontology. Other researchers, however, have continued to claim that ageing continues to be marked by inequality and that this is reflected in ageism and the life-long effects of such inequalities. Social class related gradients in life expectancy, illness and disability have long been noted by medical sociologists,¹⁹ and while much of this work has generally ignored inequalities after retirement, a number of researchers have long been interested in the way that the life course reflects these inequalities. Theories of cumulative disadvantage / advantage have been particularly influential in explaining how disadvantages at particular points in the life course have been amplified over the decades to produce poorer health and income in old age.²⁰ One highly influential study illustrating these ideas is Glen Elder's "Children of the Great Depression", which was a longitudinal study of the effects of the 1930s economic crisis in America.²¹ Elder integrated social and biological sciences to examine the multigenerational impact of poverty and his work has provided a framework for many social gerontologists wishing to foreground structural issues in explaining the diversity of the older population in the United States. To this approach needs to be added the view of what has come to be termed 'Critical Gerontology'. Carroll Estes' "The Aging Enterprise", which reflected many of the ideas regarding the structured dependency of older people, added specifically American concerns about managed care and the fiscal

17 John Hendricks, Revisiting the Kansas City Study of Adult Life. Roots of the Disengagement Model in Social Gerontology, in: *The Gerontologist* 34,6 (1994), pp. 753–755.

18 Robert Havighurst, Successful Ageing, in: *The Gerontologist* 1 (1961), pp. 8–13.

19 Mel Bartley, Health Inequality. An Introduction to Concepts, Theories and Methods, London-New York 2016.

20 Stephen Crystal/Dennis Shea, Cumulative Advantage, Cumulative Disadvantage, and Inequality among Elderly People, in: *The Gerontologist* 30,4 (1990) pp. 437–443.

21 Glen Elder, Children of the Great Depression, London 2018.

crisis of the state.²² Estes' contribution – meshed with the work of Alan Walker²³ and Chris Phillipson²⁴ – took Townsend's ideas and integrated them with an approach developed from political economy that saw the disadvantages of old age as a product of the workings of the economy and the different class interests enshrined there.

On both sides of the Atlantic, social gerontology has generally coalesced around the problematisation of old age in society, even if many key thinkers rail against such negativity.²⁵ Most recently, this approach has seen the adoption of the concept of precarity as a way to understand the disadvantages that older people experience in different parts of their lives.²⁶ These disadvantages range from the inadequacies of social care, through the differential impact of globalisation on funding social policies for older people, to the instability of individualised pension arrangements in securing a consistent income in later life. In summary, mainstream gerontology has continued to locate old age through the prism of social administration with policy makers being the principal actors shaping later life. One consequence of this is that in some senses the negative experiences of old age are conditioned by powers outside of old age itself, and that older people themselves are not considered reflexive or are capable of agency.

3 The Third Age and the Cultures of Ageing

If mainstream social gerontology takes a pessimistic approach to ageing in the modern world, then this has been countered by arguments centring on the idea of old age representing a third age rather than simply being a terminal destination of the institutionalised life course. Drawing on an awareness that retirement in the last decades of the 20th century differs considerably from the old age experienced by previous cohorts of retirees,

22 Carroll Estes, *The Aging Enterprise. A Critical Examination of Social Policies and Services for the Aged*, San Francisco 1979 (Jossey-Bass Social and Behavioral Science Series).

23 Alan Walker, *Towards a Political Economy of Old Age*, in: *Ageing & Society* 1,1 (1981), pp. 73–94.

24 Chris Phillipson, *The Social Construction of Old Age. Perspectives from Political Economy*, in: *Reviews in Clinical Gerontology* 1,4 (1991), pp. 403–410.

25 Toni Calasanti/Neal King, *Beyond Successful Aging 2.0. Inequalities, Ageism, and the Case for Normalizing Old Ages*, in: *The Journals of Gerontology. Series B* (2020) (DOI: 10.1093/geronb/gbaa037).

26 Amanda Grenier/Christopher Phillipson, *Precarious Aging. Insecurity and Risk in Late Life*, in: *Hastings Center Report* 48 (2018), pp. 15–18.

the appeal that post-working life might represent a positive experience has been evident to many older people contemplating their own lives after exiting work. There have been widely acknowledged positive epidemiological changes in the health of the older population which alongside the 'compression of morbidity'²⁷ has supported the claim that people are not living longer and sicker as a consequence of increased life expectancy, but rather that they are living relatively longer and fitter. At a policy level, this has challenged many of the age-associated boundaries that were taken as obvious in the mid-part of the 20th century such as setting retirement ages at 60 or 65. These socially constructed institutionalised status transitions presumed that older workers would be unable or unwilling to continue working such was the close connection between chronological age and disability. Not only has there been an increase in disability free life expectancy after retirement,²⁸ but often people can live in retirement for decades after they have left the formal labour market. The opportunities for a post-working life which is not primarily overshadowed by illness, disability, and death, may explain the widespread interest in early retirement that has been a mark of successive cohorts of late 20th century workers. While this aspect of the transition to retirement is not without other 'push' factors such as the re-organisation of work practices and the restructuring of the economy, the fear of the tragedy of retirement does not seem to be a limiting factor, the way it was in earlier decades.²⁹

The growth of income and assets in later life may also be another factor in transforming the experience of old age.³⁰ In part, one could argue that this is a consequence of the success of the post-war welfare states challenging the life cycle theory of poverty; a result whereby older people experienced poverty in old age as the incomes that they achieved in middle-age could not be matched after retirement. Significantly, most high-income countries have seen not only the minimisation of poverty in later life, but in addition, the income of the retired population has grown relative to that of other pop-

27 James Fries, *The Compression of Morbidity*, in: *The Milbank Quarterly* 83,4 (2005), pp. 801–823.

28 Eileen Crimmins/Mark D. Hayward/Aaron Hagedorn/Yasuhiko Saito/Nicolas Brouard, *Change in Disability-Free Life Expectancy for Americans 70 Years Old and Older*, in: *Demography* 46,3 (2009), pp. 627–646.

29 Paul Higgs/Gill Mein/Jane Ferrie/Martin Hyde/James Nazroo, *Pathways to Early Retirement. Structure and Agency in Decision-Making among British Civil Servants*, in: *Ageing & Society* 23 (2003), pp. 761–778.

30 Chris Gilleard/Paul Higgs, *Contexts of Ageing. Class, Cohort and Community*, Cambridge 2005.

ulation groups.³¹ The work of the historian Peter Laslett has been highly influential in challenging thinking about old age and in particular for suggesting that the third age was a putative ‘crown of life.’³² Laslett saw the period of post-work as one of potential self-development and self-enrichment. Drawing on both demography and epidemiology, he believed that both individuals and societies had reached a historical point where the third age was both possible and desirable. Laslett’s premise was that in the third age, older people are free from many of the obligations of work and family that had previously prevented them from realising their full potential. Probably, best known for his role in stimulating the development of the University of the Third Age in the UK as well as in many other countries, Laslett’s idea of the third age, while exhortatory in tone is one that has resonated among those who could be described as constituting the ‘youngest old’. He was also aware that in thinking about the third age, it was important to recognise that later life too has its limits and postulated the presence of a fourth age of terminal decline, dependency and ultimately death. Critically, he described the fourth age as a short-lived phenomenon, ‘a terminal phase’ reflecting the compression of morbidity outlined above. Certainly, this understanding of the losses of the fourth age finds its echo in the adoption of the concept of ‘frailty’ by geriatric medicine as a way of distinguishing the health needs of the older population. Rather than concentrate on chronological age as the critical factor in an assessment, what is now measured is how an individual scores on one or other indices of frailty. Frailty is a ‘catch-all’ term used to describe those people whose bodily systems are on the verge of a total breakdown, and for whom death is a likely outcome.³³ Those deemed frail may be a relatively small proportion of the older population, but they come to represent the other side of the positive attributes of Laslett’s third age.

Laslett’s radical re-working of the nature of later life has been a wellspring for ideas such as ‘successful ageing’³⁴ and ‘productive ageing’³⁵ that have made a case for a more positive view of the possibilities of later life in contemporary societies. In separating the

31 Chris Gilleard, *The Changing Fortunes of UK Retired Households. 1977–2017*, in: *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 40 (2020) (DOI: 10.1108/IJSSP-05-2020-0162).

32 Peter Laslett, *A Fresh Map Of Life. The Emergence of the Third Age*, Cambridge MA 1991.

33 Paul Higgs/Chris Gilleard, *Personhood, Identity and Care in Advanced Old Age*, Cambridge 2016.

34 John Rowe/Robert L. Kahn, *Successful Aging*, in: *The Gerontologist* 37,4 (1997), pp. 433–440.

35 Patrick O’Reilly/Francis G. Caro, *Productive Aging. An Overview of the Literature*, in: *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* 6,3 (1995), pp. 39–71.

third age from the fourth age, Laslett has been joined, maybe somewhat inadvertently, by other important writers thinking about later life, who also wanted to see old age as being constituted by two different constructs; suggesting that the new realities of later life were now recognised by researchers and policy makers. Paul Baltes accepted that whilst much was possible in post-working life there were constraints.³⁶ It is important to acknowledge that the plasticity of the brain as well as the capacity of the body will reach a point where such adaptability would start to diminish, and that ageing would reach its limits and become qualitatively different from the agency typifying the third age. Baltes, as befits a psychologist, is particularly concerned about the plasticity of the brain and he brings a new dimension into the divisions between the third and fourth age, namely the problems connected with cognitive impairment and dementia.³⁷ It is paradoxical, therefore, that as much of the ageing experience has become more open to individual agency the limits of old age have increasingly become bound up with degenerative brain disease that seems to represent all that is (and has been) dreaded about living too long.

4 Cultural Gerontology

In the context of the differing explanations of old age in contemporary societies provided by the different schools of thought within social gerontology, there has also emerged a distinct approach influenced by the 'cultural turn' that occurred in the humanities and social sciences in the 1980s. This turn represents a shift in thinking; one that was directed at making culture and meaning the key concerns of a range of academic disciplines. Cultural gerontology brought to the study of ageing an interest in how old age could be understood in terms of its cultural significance, as well as showing how there were many different possible dimensions to ageing in disparate situations and media. As pointed out earlier, social gerontology has been a field of study dominated by structural accounts of the social processes and institutions that create old age. Cultural gerontology having engaged with the ideas of feminism and post-modernism has played a role in

36 Paul B. Baltes / Jacqui Smith, *New Frontiers in the Future of Aging*. From *Successful Aging of the Young Old to the Dilemmas of the Fourth Age*, in: *Gerontology* 49,2 (2003), pp. 123–135.

37 Sébastien Libert / Georgina Charlesworth / Paul Higgs, *Cognitive Decline and Distinction. A New Line of Fracture in Later Life?*, in: *Ageing and Society* 40 (2020), pp. 2574–2592.

counterbalancing the dominant paradigms of social gerontology and their prioritising of structural processes over ones of meaning and affect.³⁸

Cultural gerontology has pointed out that culture constitutes a major part of the nature of social relations. While anthropologists had studied ageing and old age across many different societies, until recently there has been relatively little work done on cultural ageing in Europe and North America. Cultural gerontologists, on the other hand, have wanted to make the point that older people also need to be viewed as engaging in the creation of identities, as well as in the negotiation of social relations. Implicitly criticising mainstream social gerontology for its lack of attributing agency to older people, cultural gerontology has shown how the discursive construction of society enabled researchers to show how discourses not only created the experiences of later life, but how they also lead to resistance to the taken for granted inequalities faced by older people.³⁹ Consequently, one of the key roles that cultural gerontology plays in contemporary thinking about ageing is to challenge the way that ageing is organised around policy-focused concepts of old age. Policy-orientated gerontology does not recognise that, as in all cultures, there are other ways of being old, as well as other aspects of ageing such as race, gender and sexuality that have their own meanings and social relations. While the range of approaches covered by the umbrella term cultural gerontology cannot do justice to all of their differences and disparate views, it is acknowledged that its overall impact on social gerontology has been to facilitate a shift away from the determinacy of structure and towards a more 'individualized' understanding of later life. Not only is more emphasis given to ideas of personal agency, the capacity for identity construction in later life is also highlighted.⁴⁰

The interest in deconstructing the discourses of ageing is not limited to the subject of the cultural meanings of old age in society, but now extends to criticising the very assumptions contained in commonplace terms such as ageing. The more humanities-engaged field of Ageing Studies can be referred to as Age Studies. Humanities scholars such as Margaret Morganroth Gullette have argued that the term Age Studies, in preference to Ageing Studies, does not contribute to perpetuating the 'decline narrative' that

38 Julia Twigg/Wendy Martin, *The Challenge of Cultural Gerontology*, in: *The Gerontologist* 55,3 (2015), pp. 353–359.

39 Rachel Pain/Graham Mowl/Carol Talbot, *Difference and the Negotiation of 'Old Age'*, in: *Environment and Planning D. Society and Space* 18,3 (2000), pp. 377–393.

40 Laura Hurd Clark, *Older Women's Bodies and the Self. The Construction of Identity in Later Life*, in: *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie* 38,4 (2001), pp. 441–464.

is implicit in the term ageing.⁴¹ This narrative is not only negative to older people, but also acts as a form of trauma underpinning the experience of ageism itself. This position pivots around the idea that the physiological concepts of ageing are in fact ideological. This may be a reflection of the epistemological relativism connected to the ‘cultural turn’, however it does also represent a new angle of studying the connections between embodiment and ageing.

Age studies has consequently shifted the focus of cultural gerontology onto topics that have conventionally lain outside the purview of conventional social gerontology. One major area where this has happened is around the ageing body. This concern has not just centred around the experiences of the ageing body but has examined how subjectivity is formed in the mediation between older people and discourses of health and disability. In addition, consumption and consumption practices increasingly give rise to new ways of ageing that go beyond conventional discourses of later life. Drawing on Foucault’s idea of ‘the technologies of the self’⁴² has meant that the role of ‘body-work’ too has become an important theme in contextualising the ‘new ageing’. Examining the commodification of fitness and health in later life, as well as the way in which personal appearance is graded through the articulation of ageist concepts has become an important part of work in this area.⁴³ Following from this, one key dimension that this approach has led to is an examination of the part played by anti-ageing technologies in encouraging older people to position themselves as youthful, as against being defined as ‘old’.⁴⁴ This work meshes with concerns regarding the absence of sexuality in conventional accounts of old age.⁴⁵ Age studies as an extension of cultural gerontology has as a consequence revived an interest in ideas of ageing as a form of oppression as well as opening up perspectives allowing ageing to be understood as a combination of differing intersectional processes operating at many levels that negatively impact on older people. Drawing attention to the various

41 Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Against ‘Aging’ – How to Talk About Growing Older*, in: *Theory, Culture & Society* 35,7–8 (2018), pp. 251–270.

42 Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self. A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, Boston 1988.

43 Kristi A. Allain/Barbara Marshall, *Foucault Retires to the Gym. Understanding Embodied Aging in the Third Age*, in: *Canadian Journal on Aging/La Revue canadienne du vieillissement* 36,3 (2017), pp. 402–414.

44 Beatriz Cardona, ‘Healthy Ageing’ Policies and Anti-Ageing Ideologies and Practices. On the Exercise of Responsibility, in: *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 11,4 (2008), pp. 475–483.

45 Sue Westwood, *Ageing, Gender and Sexuality. Equality in Later Life*, London 2016 (Routledge Research in Gender and Society 49).

ways that old age is framed by negative discourses, brings us once again back to the discussion of ageism.

5 Ageism

Ageism has been an important linking concept in social gerontology ever since it was coined by Robert Butler⁴⁶ in the late 1960s. According to Butler, “ageism reflects a revulsion on the part of the young and middle-aged for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, ‘uselessness,’ and death”.⁴⁷ He went on to argue that ageism might parallel racism as the great social issue of the late 20th century. The combination of personal and structural concerns evident in his essay have continued to the present day, and that the term provides a link between conventional social gerontology, cultural gerontology and age studies. While there is agreement that ageism is a concept that accounts for the negative experiences that affect older people *as* older people in such areas as employment, health care and social policy; how such a concept is supposed to operate is less clear, however, and often difficult to demarcate from other aspects of social life.⁴⁸ Are positive representations of older life as ageist as those that portray negative imagery? Certainly, images of older happy heterosexual couples ‘selling’ the third age as a lifestyle have been interpreted as forms of insidious ageism with corresponding negative effects on the position of older people.⁴⁹ As a result there is no agreed definition of ageism and as many different approaches to detecting its presence. Often, what is at stake is how human ageing as a corporeal process connects with old age as a social construction.

The social category of old age is not completely arbitrary, and there are losses and limitations connected with becoming old. These losses may have been modified in contemporary circumstances given that the chronological ages linked to increases in morbidity and disability. As the debate around the division between the third and fourth age has shown, there are still limitations to human life at the oldest ages. This can in part account for the discrimination that older people encounter, equally important however is the truism ‘that all would like to live long, but few want to grow old’. Ageism may

46 Robert N. Butler, Age-ism. Another Form of Bigotry, in: *The Gerontologist* 9,4 (1969), pp. 243–246.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 243.

48 Gilleard/Higgs, *Social Divisions* (see note 2).

49 Barbara Marshall, Happily Ever After? ‘Successful Ageing’ and the Heterosexual Imaginary, in: *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 21,3 (2018), pp. 363–381.

be a relatively modern concept but its existence before the 1960s and in cultures other than in Europe and North America can be gleaned from the disciplines of both History and Anthropology. Discussions about the nature of ageing in historical scholarship have started to recognise the importance of examining both aspects of the context of ageing: looking at the demographic and archaeological aspects of ageing in historical societies as well as the representations of old age in records and artefacts.⁵⁰ These studies can illuminate whether old age was a more valued status in the past, or whether it was not. It can also provide insights into the inequalities of old age that may be present in historical societies where social position might be the key determinant of a good old age. Equally, many historical sources describe ambivalent and even hostile attitudes towards older people, particularly those suffering from cognitive or physical impairments. Such attitudes varied greatly with 'death hastening' behaviours often enacted alongside reverence for old age.⁵¹ Gerontology can therefore benefit from an engagement with historians of old age, in part to facilitate a move away from its concerns with the present circumstances of old age, but also to develop more fully an awareness of the difference between ageing and old age.

6 Conclusion


In this chapter, I have sought to outline the nature of social gerontology to give historians a broad outline of the concerns of this field of study. I believe that I have presented the major approaches to the topic to illustrate the tension between structural and policy-orientated positions and those focussed on issues of agency. I have also stressed the developing role of cultural gerontology in adapting to some of the changes that have occurred in contemporary society particularly around the importance of the body. There is a paradox in that many social gerontologists of all hues often ignore the corporeal experience of the ageing body, concentrating instead on the social status of old age as if these aspects are only lightly connected. This is where evidence of the historical nature of ageing can act as a corrective to notions of 'disembodied' ageing. Presenting the contradictions present in social gerontology will, I hope, be of use to those researchers examining the nature of ageing and old age in historical contexts. Certainly, the way that historical accounts of old age have been incorporated into social gerontology demon-

50 Joanna E. P. Appleby, *Why We Need an Archaeology of Old Age, and a Suggested Approach*, in: *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 43,2 (2010), pp. 145–168.

51 Michael Brogden, *Geronticide. Killing the Elderly*, London 2001.

strates how ideas from outside particular 'disciplinary silos' can have influence, or lead to some degree of revision. This 'triangulation' is vital to the intellectual health of any field of study. Social gerontologists, as do all those studying ageing, need to ensure that they are not using concepts in an anachronistic fashion and back projecting them onto an imagined past. We all need to be aware of the assumptions we are making about the position of old age in society, whether the society is contemporary or historical. Being open to multiplicity of structures and opportunities in these different societies and different times can only enhance the project of understanding the experience of growing old wherever and whenever it occurs. I hope that this chapter can facilitate a productive 'fusion of horizons' so that social gerontologists and historians can better understand each other in the production of knowledge in this important area.

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