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Editorial

Editorial for special issue *Ageing, body and society: Key themes, critical perspectives*

Over the last two decades significant theoretical, methodological and empirical developments have explored the social, biological and cultural dimensions of our bodies as we grow older. An earlier concern within ageing studies that a focus on the bodies of older people represented a return to biological determinism and an overly medical approach has been replaced by a realisation how a focus on ageing bodies offers a novel lens to examine a range of existing sociological and theoretical concerns. These include the nature of the body, self and ageing; social identities and social inequalities; lived experiences and everyday life; the role of materiality and consumption in the cultural constitution of age; health and illness; and ageing across the full lifecourse from midlife to deep old age.

It is over twenty years since Peter Öberg published his seminal article in *Ageing & Society* on the absent body in gerontology (Öberg, 1996). It is therefore timely to bring together established and emergent researchers to review the wealth of work in this area, and to take forward key debates, enhance current and emergent theoretical perspectives, and disseminate empirical research in ‘ageing, body and society’. In particular, this special issue aims to highlight and explore interconnections between the corporeality of ageing bodies and the socio-cultural context in which we live.

The special issue has built upon the international networks and focus of the *British Sociological Association (BSA) Ageing, Body and Society* study group¹ for which the co-editors Dr. Wendy Martin and Professor Julia Twigg have been co-convenors since 2007. Through international symposia and an annual one day conference, the study group has brought together international academics and researchers whose work focuses on ageing, bodies and embodiment, exploring and debating different theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches and empirical findings.

Absence/presence of the ageing body

The body is central to our everyday lives. Ageing moreover is a key indicator of difference that is deeply embedded in our physiology (Twigg, 2006). Popular and media accounts of ageing often represent these bodily and visual markers of age in terms of corporeal changes, such as grey hair, wrinkled skin, increased body weight, the experience of “slowing down” and the onset of health conditions. Growing older is therefore experienced and perceived within and through our bodies (Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011). These discourses and images of ageing are reinforced within the dominant biomedical discourse that emphasises the process of senescence, decline, the onset of ill-health and loss of function. As Katz (2010) aptly comments, the physical, social and cultural body is the foundation of gerontological knowledge, for ‘if the body did not age there would literally be no gerontological story to read or write’ (Hepworth, 2000, p. 9).

Ageing studies did not initially address the body. In part, this omission was an attempt to escape from overly medical accounts of old age (Tulle, 2015; Tulle-Winton, 2000; Twigg, 2006). Old bodies, subjected to a medical gaze, are conceptualised as distinct and rational biological entities, that can be observed and measured, thus becoming ‘objects’ of medical expertise (Tulle-Winton, 2000, p. 72). The dominance of biomedicine however was first challenged by political economy perspectives that argued that experiences of older people were determined not only by biology but by structural, economic, political and social processes including retirement, social class and gender (Arber & Ginn, 1991, 1993; Estes, 1986, 1991; Estes, Biggs, & Phillipson, 2003; Walker, 1981, 1987, 1993). These perspectives aimed to separate ageing from dominant discourses of ill-health and biological decline. In this context a focus on ageing bodies was viewed as a backward step, an unwelcome return to biological determinism and narratives of decline (Twigg, 2003, 2004, 2006). As a result, social constructionist accounts gained prominence, and the body ‘disappeared’ (Gilleard & Higgs, 1998; Öberg, 1996; Tulle-Winton, 2000). The ageing body thus became inadvertently marginalised in ageing studies, left to the biomedical sciences that are then criticised by gerontologists for being reductionist and objectifying (Katz, 2010). This leads to a paradox within ageing studies (Katz, 2010; Öberg, 1996), for whilst the ageing body is central to the everyday lives of older people, it is relatively absent from gerontological and sociocultural discourses. As Katz argues this represents ‘the paradox at the heart of social gerontology, whereby the body becomes the target of the overlapping resistance to and denial of aging’ (2010, p. 358).

Our embodied experiences of everyday life are also absent from view (Leder, 1990). We are not routinely noticing and directing our bodies nor are we always consciously aware of our body whilst undertaking everyday practices, such as, walking, smelling flowers or observing our visual world (Nettleton & Watson, 1998). As Leder argues:

¹ The *Ageing, Body and Society* study group is part of the *British Sociological Association (BSA)*. See <https://www.britisoc.co.uk/groups/study-groups/ageing-body-and-society-study-group/> for more information.

While in one sense the body is the most abiding and inescapable presence in our lives, it is also essentially characterized by absence. That is, one's own body is rarely the thematic object of experience. When reading a book or lost in thought, my own bodily state may be the farthest thing from my awareness (Leder, 1990, p. 1)

Empirical research has demonstrated how the body in everyday life is taken for granted except when bodily states, such as pain and ill health, and bodily changes associated with ageing, intrude on our daily routines and we become consciously aware of our corporeality (Bendelow & Williams, 1995; Williams & Bendelow, 1998). The tension between the absence/presence and the invisibility/visibility of the ageing body remains a key feature of work on ageing.

Whilst cultural perspectives have challenged the biomedical accounts of ageing, bringing to the fore how the ageing body is culturally and socially constructed, there are however limitations to social constructionism, as bodies do age and die and ageing therefore does require an analytic engagement with the corporeality and materiality of our ageing bodies (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Katz, 2010; Twigg, 2003, 2004, 2006). The visible manifestations of ageing, such as, greying hair, sagging skin and reduced physical capacities, not only bring the physiology of our bodies to the fore, but highlight bodily changes and limitations that are neither merely symbolic nor social constructions. The analytic reality of our corporeality is therefore difficult to evade: for whilst we are “aged by culture”, we are also aged by our bodies (Twigg, 2003).

In this context, researchers in ageing are continually required to balance the recognition of physical changes that are associated with growing older, whilst avoiding inadvertently reinforcing the alternative negative and positive stereotypes, and, at times, ageist discourses, that focus on the body (Katz, 2010). As Gubrium and Holstein (2003) argue, the ageing body is not an objective constant presence in everyday life but is instead an experiential entity that at times feels very noticeable and evident, a body that at times intrudes into daily routines, whilst at other moments recedes from view. So whilst experiences of the body are variable, concurrently transient and ever-present, for older people it is the increasing visibility of an ageing body that needs to be managed and given new meanings and explanations (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 206). The body is therefore an unfinished biological and social entity that can continually change, within certain limits, through participation in our everyday lives (Shilling, 2004).

The emergence of cultural gerontology

An intellectual shift from structure associated with the political economy school, towards agency, associated with cultural analyses, has opened up the possibilities for more reflexive accounts that focus on identities and lived experiences of old age (Gilleard & Higgs, 1998; Twigg, 2003, 2004, 2006; Twigg & Martin, 2015a,b). The emergence of consumer culture, postmodern and cultural perspectives, and masking theories (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1990, 1995; Gilleard & Higgs, 1998, 2000, 2005; Gullette, 1997, 2004; Twigg & Martin, 2015a,b; Woodward, 1991) brought the nature of body and self into analytic focus:

This literature drives forward the earlier agenda of social constructionism, but in a more radical way, showing how the body itself is social constituted. Essentialising discourses in relation to the body need to be replaced by ones that recognize its nature as a social text, something that is both formed and given meaning within culture. The ageing body is thus not natural, is not prediscursive, but fashioned within and by culture (Twigg, 2004, p. 60)

Cultural perspectives therefore destabilised earlier conceptual distinctions between nature/culture, biological/social and reclaimed questions and concerns about ageing bodies that had effectively been handed over to medicine.

The Cultural Turn came quite late to ageing studies, reflecting the tendency of the field to be dominated by practical issues and policy concerns. It is mainly in the last decade that its influence has begun to be fully felt, with cultural perspectives increasingly impacting on the field, with new theorising and new subject areas evident (see Twigg & Martin, 2015a,b). The scope of ageing studies has significantly expanded and it is no longer dominated by the perspectives of medicine and social welfare. Not only does age increasingly feature as an analytic category across the social sciences but this tendency is also reflected in the arts and humanities. The focus on researching ageing bodies has moreover been central to this interdisciplinary work that draws together research across the arts, humanities and social sciences within Cultural Gerontology (Twigg & Martin, 2015a,b). In particular, the complex interplay between the body and its social and cultural constitution in age has come to be recognised as one of the central themes of cultural gerontology (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013, 2015).

The expansion of consumption culture has created a new arena within which subjectivities are being forged and has resulted in a new emphasis on lifestyle as the locus for identity. A focus on subjectivity and identity, also reflects the shift in analysis from structural aggregate forms of sociality towards more fluid conceptions of ‘being in society’ (Rojek & Turner, 2000). An emphasis on agency has moreover reinforced a sense of society as malleable, as something that is inherently plastic, constituted in and through cultural practices and discourses, capable of being made and remade through changing lifestyles, values and discourses (Nash, 2001). There is also a stronger understanding of how social representations constitute and remake what they represent. In this context art, photography, novels, films, music and theatre do not only explore later years but can influence how we understand, embody, and perform age and ageing. Cultural perspectives have therefore become a key territory for changing how we negotiate our embodiment and age.

Cultural gerontology has moreover led to a fuller and richer account of later years in which the subjectivity and identities of people in mid to later life, and the full expanse and depth of their lived experiences of age, has been at the forefront of analysis (Twigg & Martin, 2015a,b). These developments have produced a renewed emphasis on old age from the perspective of older people themselves rather than the external, objectifying, and often denigrating ones from the dominant culture, that tends to homogenise and stereotype old age. The Cultural Turn therefore emphasises the range and variety of older people's experiences and views, and has resulted in a new interest in diversity, exemplified in work around gender, ethnicity, ‘race’, sexuality, and disability.

Outline of special issue

The aim of this special issue has been first to bring together academics and researchers whose work focuses on ageing, bodies and embodiment to explore and debate different theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches and empirical findings; second to explore key developments and highlight new areas of research and ideas emerging about ageing bodies; and third to highlight and debate interconnections between the corporeality of ageing bodies and the socio-cultural context in which we live. In this context, we are delighted to have brought together internationally renowned researchers in the area of ageing, body and society as well as emergent researchers and writers who in their current work consider the significance of embodiment and ageing bodies.

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