



Unmasking the ‘elderly mystique’: Why it is time to make the personal political in ageing research



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ABSTRACT

This article uses feminist scholarship to investigate ‘the elderly mystique’—which contends that the potential of old age is masked by a set of false beliefs about ageing (i.e. *ageism*) which permeate social, economic, and political life (Cohen, 1988).

The article presents a theoretical model which explores the extent to which institutionalised ageism shapes the trajectory of life after 60.¹ The hypothesis underpinning the model is simple: *The challenge for ageing societies is not the average age of a given population, but rather, how age is used to structure economic, social and political life.* An inter-disciplinary framework is used to examine how biological facts about ageing are used to segregate older from younger people, giving older people the status of ‘other’; economically through retirement, politically through assumptions about ‘the grey vote,’ and socially through ageist stereotyping in the media and through denial and ridicule of the sexuality of older people. Each domain is informed by the achievements of feminist theory and research on *sexism* and how its successes and failures can inform critical investigations of *ageism*.

The paper recognises the role of ageism in de-politicising the lived experience of ageing. The paper concludes that feminist scholarship, particularly work by feminists in their seventies, eighties, and nineties, has much to offer in terms of re-framing gerontology as an emancipatory project for current and future cohorts of older people.

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Introduction

‘Demographic change in Europe is seen as a challenge for many policy areas... As many of these areas involve a significant share of public finance expenditure, population ageing is also subject to examination from the perspective of fiscal sustainability.’ (European Commission, 2014:9)

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¹ Throughout this article the term ‘older people’ refers to those aged over 60 years.

This article calls for a capacity-based and culturally embedded knowledge base for ageing. The approach presented is ambitious as it involves challenging the dominance of biomedical and cost-oriented approaches to research on ageing. The quotation from the European Commission at the opening typifies the latter. The work builds on critical interventions such as Cole's (1992) *Journey of Life* which delineated the transition of scholarship from concern with the meaning of age to the management of ageing: ‘...aging has been brought under the dominion of scientific management, which is primarily interested in how we age in order to explain and control the aging process’ (Cole, 1992: xx). Policymakers focus on providing health and social care services for an older population, which, they assume, will become ever more dependent (European Commission,

2014; National Institute on Aging, 2007; 1). This perspective on ageing has intensified with the adoption of austerity policies in Europe and the US since the financial crisis of 2007–08 (Donald, Glasmeier, Gray, & Lobao, 2014; Phillipson, 2015).

Like gender, race, and class, age is an important dimension of social and individual experience, but it has received much less attention from researchers and social activists (Laslett, 1995: 4). The article presents a model proposing that 'the challenge for ageing societies is not the average age of a given population but, rather, how age is used to structure economic, social and political life.' The focus of the article is 'ageism': defined as the institutionalised and endemic use of social norms and conventions which systematically disadvantage people on the basis of chronological age. The main implication of the model is that there is untapped potential in old age; if only its inhabitants were not subject to ageist social norms and contradictory social policies, ill-suited to ageing societies. For example, under austerity, early retirement policies are commonplace, a practice which contradicts the need to delay retirement in response to greater longevity.

The article aims to address what leading critical gerontologist Phillipson (2013: 167) identifies as 'the biggest omission of the past 50 years... the failure to explore the potential gains of an ageing population.' The article links women's writing about the lived experience of ageing within the cultural gerontology frame to structural explanations of ageism from the political economy approach. As such, the article aims to make important connections between personal experiences of ageing, and institutional responses to longevity.

The elderly mystique

The elderly mystique is analogous to Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, which is oft credited with providing the impetus for the women's liberation movement in the United States (Friedan, 1963). The *Feminine Mystique* refers to the 'strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform' (Friedan, 1963: 1). In his exposition of the *elderly mystique* Cohen (1988) refers to a similar gap between lived experience of old age and societal expectations of older people which are based on 'the detritus of gerontophobic views,' whose origins have been attributed, variously, to modernisation, demography, and rising economic wealth. Cohen cites Rosenfelt's (1965 cited in Cohen, 1988: 24) articulation of the impact of such gerontophobia on one's self-perception and social status with advancing years:

'the participant in the elderly mystique knows society finds it hard to accept, let alone forgive, his existence. An unobtrusive attitude of punishment and retaliation is endemic in modern life. The old person expects derogation in explicit terms.'

Gerontology has successfully demonstrated the problems of ageing. More recently, longitudinal studies such as the English Longitudinal Study on Ageing have provided quantitative evidence of age discrimination (Rippon, Kneale, & Steptoe, 2014). Practitioners such as geriatric physician Bill Thomas argue that segregation of older people with dementia into care homes amounts to age-based apartheid, supported by social

norms which relegate people with dementia a sub-human status (Thomas, 2015). Nursing scholars in the critical tradition have argued that older people with severe dementia experience an effective 'social death' (Brannelly, 2011).

In recent decades, scientific work has devised models to counter senescence (growing older conceived of as deterioration or decline) (Palmore, 1990: 12) through 'successful ageing' (Rowe & Kahn, 1987). Active and/or successful ageing proposes that decline can be avoided through adopting a 'busy ethic.' Active ageing has now been critiqued as an over-simplification of old age, which served to homogenise the diversity of people's lived experience of ageing (Bülow & Söderqvist, 2014). Bülow and Söderqvist's (2014) eloquent and balanced historical review of 'successful ageing' speaks to a wider trend in the ascendancy of cultural conceptions of ageing. Even still, there have been few attempts to investigate whether institutionalised ageist social norms might influence these approaches (Liang & Luo, 2012). What is so wrong with getting older that we rarely study the developmental potential of old age, the adaptability or ingenuity of older people, or the opportunities presented by longevity?

One challenge in unmasking the elderly mystique is that ageing scholarship lacks the support of a counter-cultural political movement comparable with that provided by the women's movement for feminism. In their seminal work, Arber and Ginn (1991: 9) argue that 'Gerontology is not an action oriented perspective in the way that feminism is.' The absence of a link between scholarship and activism persists 40 years after Butler (1975) coined the term 'ageism' and 21 years after Friedan (1993) published *The Fountain of Age*. Arber and Ginn (1991: 28) admit that 'the parallels between feminism and anti-ageism are striking and numerous.' It seems there are also differences, and, until recently, these have seemed insurmountable.

Perhaps the demography of gerontologists as a population plays a role in its apolitical development. As retirement continues to be practised, few gerontologists have adequate lived experience of ageing to make a knowledge claim on the basis of experience. Gerontology itself is rather youth oriented; Friedan compares the analysis of ageing by gerontologists rather unfavourably with the experience of growing older as described by participants she was interviewing for her book, *The Fountain of Age*:

'Looking around the panelled room of my first Harvard meeting on "Ethical Issues in the Care of the Aged," I realized that, aside from my own, there was only one white head of hair. It belonged to a man who was a pioneer in the study of age and was about to retire (it seemed gerontologists must also retire at sixty-five). These bright young Turks of the new ageing field were mostly men who maybe started out in psychiatry, doing post-docs in 'geropsychiatry' (there was a lot of research money available for Alzheimer's syndrome studies), and a few women staking out new turf as legal-medical 'ethicists.' Listening to those experts on aging talk about 'them' – the problems of those sick, helpless, senile, incontinent, childlike, dependent old people, all alone, or draining the finances of their families, a burden on Social Security system and the hospitals – I thought how different their concerns were from those women and men who had been telling me about the surprising changes in their own

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