

# Theorising Social Gerontology: The Case Of Social Philosophies Of Age

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## Abstract

This paper examines the way in which social theory can enrich our understanding of aging identity with specific reference to the range of theories which have emerged over the past 30 years. In particular, the paper is concerned with locating and scrutinising the accelerating theoretical developments in social gerontology and moves to reviewing their key concerns. The different social theories and philosophies which have materialised exemplify an interpretation of the consequences social policy has for older people. This opens up the pathway to understanding social gerontology more creatively.

## INTRODUCTION

There has been an unprecedented rise and consolidation of theoretical publications relating to age and aging that has cut right across and through social and human sciences (Bury 1995). Social Gerontology is multidisciplinary and is the principal instrument of orthodox theorising about old age particularly in US, UK and Australasian academics (Phillipson 1998; Biggs and Powell 2001). Turner (1989) and Phillipson (1998) both acknowledge that social theory must be brought into the frame of analysing old age. This paper faces up to this challenge and is concerned with highlighting the major theoretical ideas which have informed social understanding of age and aging in recent years. The analysis of the major theoretical ideas which have influenced understanding of social gerontology in recent years: functionalism, marxism, feminism and postmodernism. It is important to illuminate the contrasting theories of age and aging, as research papers in mainstream social gerontology have not attempted to review these theories in an attempt to understand the philosophical dimensions of human experience.

## SOCIAL THEORY AND THE RISE OF FUNCTIONALIST ACCOUNTS OF AGE AND AGEING

The broad pedigree of social theories of age can be located to the early post-war years with the concern about the consequences of demographic change and the potential shortage of 'younger' workers in USA and UK. Social gerontology emerged as a field of study which attempted to

respond to the social policy implications of demographic change (Vincent 1996). Such disciplines were shaped by significant external forces. First, by state intervention to achieve specific outcomes in health and social policy; secondly, by a political and economic environment which viewed an aging population as creating a 'social problem' for society (Jones, 1993). This impinged mainly upon the creation of functionalist accounts of age and aging primarily in US academics. Functionalist sociology dominated the sociological landscape in the USA from the 1930's up until 1960s (Blaikie 1999). Talcott Parsons was a key exponent of general functionalist thought and argued that society needed certain functions in order to maintain its well-being: the stability of the family; circulation of elites in education drawing from a "pool of talent" (Giddens 1993). Society was seen as akin to a biological organism – all the parts (education/family/religion/government) in the system working together in order for society to function with equilibrium (Giddens 1993).

The important point to note is that theories often mirror the norms and values of their creators and their social times, reflecting culturally dominant views of what should be the appropriate way to analyse social phenomena. The two theories which dominated American gerontology in the 1950s of Disengagement and Activity theory follow this normative pattern. Both disengagement and activity theories postulate not only how individual behaviour changes with aging, but also imply how it should change.

This was seen in the United States via the dominance of the

structural-functionalist school via the work of 'disengagement theorists' (Phillipson 1998). Such major protagonists of disengagement theory was Cumming and Henry (1961) who looked at how older people should disengage from work roles and prepare for the ultimate disengagement: death (Powell 2000). There are two broad schools of thought within the functionalist umbrella theory: Disengagement theory and Activity theory. The former is the most controversial. Disengagement theory is associated with Cumming and Henry (1961) and proposes that gradual withdrawal of older people from work roles and social relationships is both an inevitable and natural process:

'...withdrawal may be accompanied from the outset by an increased preoccupation with himself: certain institutions may make it easy for him' (Cumming and Henry 1961: 14).

For this variant of functionalism, this process benefits society, since it means that the death of individual society members does not prevent the ongoing functioning of the social system. Cumming and Henry (1961) further propose that the process of disengagement is inevitable, rewarding and universal process of mutual withdrawal of the individual and society from each other with advancing age – was normal and to be expected. This theory argued that it was beneficial for both the aging individual and society that such disengagement takes place in order to minimise the social disruption caused at an ageing person's eventual death (Neurgarten 1998).

Retirement is a good illustration of disengagement process, enabling the aging person to be freed of the responsibilities of an occupation and to pursue other roles not necessarily aligned to full-pay of economic generation. Through disengagement, Cumming and Henry argued, society anticipated the loss of aging people through death and brought "new blood" into full participation within the social world (cited in Katz 1996). Bronley (1966: 136) further portends 'in old age, the individual is normally disengaged from the main streams of economic and community activity'. Not surprisingly for Bromley (1966 quoted in Bond and Coleman 1993: 44)) 'The (disengagement) process is graded to suit the declining biological and psychological capacities of the individual and the needs of society'.

A number of critiques exist: firstly, this theory condones indifference towards 'old age' and social problems (Bond & Coleman 1993). Secondly, disengagement theory underplays the cultural and economic structures have in creating, with intentional consequences of, withdrawal. This theory

engages in sociological reductionism in pre-supposing that 'old age' is bound up with the explanation of 'disengagement' and engages in 'functional teleology' (Giddens 1993) in attempting to explain old age in terms of its effects or 'death'. Also, Kastenbaum (1993) claims disengagement theory represented a threat to the promotion of a positive and involved lifestyle for ageing persons across the lifecourse. Both advocate a retired old age as a 'natural' period of transition. In order to legitimise its generalisations, disengagement theory self-praised itself to objective and value-free rigour of research methods: survey and questionnaire methods of gerontological inquiry. In a sense, by arguing for 'disengagement' from work roles under the guise of objectivity is a very powerful argument for governments to legitimise boundaries of who can work and who cannot based on age (Powell 1999).

Activity theory is a counterpoint to disengagement theory, since it claims a successful 'old age' is can be achieved by maintaining roles and relationships. Activity theory actually pre-dates disengagement theory. In the 1950s Havighurst and Albrecht (1953 cited in Katz 1996) insisted ageing can be lively and creative experience. Any loss of roles, activities or relationships within old age, should be replaced by new roles or activities to ensure happiness, value consensus and well-being. For activity theorists, disengagement is not a natural process as advocated by Cumming and Henry. For activity theorists, disengagement theory is inherently ageist and does not promote in any shape or form 'positive ageing'. Thus, "activity" was seen as an ethical and academic response to the disengagement thesis which re-casted retirement as joyous and mobile.

Nevertheless, Activity theory neglects issues of power, inequality and conflict between age groups. An apparent 'value consensus' may reflect the interests of powerful and dominant groups within society who find it advantageous to have age power relations organised in such a way. Whilst Phillipson (1998) sees such functionalist schools as important in shaping social theory responses to them, such functionalist theories 'impose' a sense of causality on aging by implying you will either 'disengage' or will be 'active'. This can be argued to be a form of 'academic imperialism' where the activities of aging people are dictated to and from theoretical models which reconstruct age and aging along lines of enforced experiences. They are very macro orientated and fail to resolve tensions within age-group relations which impinge upon the inter-connection of 'race', class and gender with age.

## **POLITICAL ECONOMY**

As an intellectual backdrop against such functionalist theoretical dominance, Political Economy of Old Age emerged as a fashionable theory in both sides of the Atlantic, drawing from Marxian insights in analysing the capitalist complexity of modern society and how old age was socially constructed to foster the needs of the economy (Estes 1979). This critical branch of Marxist gerontology grew as a direct response to the hegemonic dominance of structural functionalism in the form of disengagement theory, the biomedical paradigm and world economic crises of the 1970s. As Phillipson (1998) points out in the UK huge forms of social expenditure were allocated to older people. Consequently, not only were older people viewed in medical terms but in resource terms by governments. This brought a new perception to attitudes to age and aging. As Phillipson (1998: 17) teases out:

‘Older people came to be viewed as a burden on western economies, with demographic change... seen as creating intolerable pressures on public expenditure’.

A major concern of ‘political economy of old age’ was to challenge both the theoretical dominance of functionalist thought and biomedical models of age and aging. The political economy approach wanted to have an understanding of the character and significance of variations in the treatment of the aged, and to relates these to polity, economy and society in advanced capitalist society.

The major focus is an interpretation of the relationship between aging and the economic structure. In the USA, Political Economy theory was pioneered via the work of Estes (1979), and Estes, Swan and Gerard (1982). Similarly, in the UK, the work of Walker (1981), Townsend (1981) and Phillipson (1982) added a critical sociological dimension to understanding age and ageing in advanced capitalist societies. For Estes, Swan and Gerard (1982) in the U.S.A, the class structure is perceived as the major determinant of the socio-economic position of older people in advanced capitalist society. For Estes (1979) political economy challenges the ideology of older people as belonging to a homogenous group unaffected by dominant structures in society. Estes (1979) claims political economy focuses upon an analysis of the state in contemporary societal formations. Here, we can see how Marxism is inter-connected to this theory. Estes looks to how the state decides and dictates who is allocated resources and who is not. This impinges upon retirement and subsequent pension schemes. As Phillipson

(1982) points out, the retirement experience is linked to the timing of economic reduction of wages and enforced withdrawal from work has made many older people in the UK in a financially insecure position. Hence, the state can make and break the fortunes of its populace. Consequently, current governmental discourses of cutting public expenditure on pensions and increasingly calling for private provision legitimises ideological mystification stereotypes of “burden” groups and populations. In the USA, Estes, Swann and Gerard (1982) claims that the state is using its power to transfer responsibility of welfare provision from the state and onto individuals. Indeed, blaming people for non-provision of own savings obscures and mystifies that real economic problems derive from the capitalist mode of production and political decisions (Powell 1999).

American Political Economy then is a ‘grand’ theory drawing from Marxian historiography, locates the determining explanatory factors in the structure of society and focuses upon welfare and its contribution to the institutional decommmodification of retired older people. Negative attitudes towards older people and impoverished position are best explained by the latter’s loss of social worth brought about by their loss of a productive role in American society that puts premium on production (Estes et al. 1982).

Similarly, this is an argument reiterated by critical gerontological writers in the U.K on the social position of older people. In particular, Townsend (1981) observes that society creates the social problems of old age through ‘structured dependency’ embedded in institutional agism through lack of material resources via poverty, retirement policies, negative consequences of residential care, and passive forms of community care services. Townsend focuses on a ‘structural’ perspective of ‘rules and resources’ governing older people in advanced capitalism and wider social system. Importantly, Townsend claims is approach as:

‘one whereby society is held to create the framework of institutions and rules within which the general problem of the elderly emerge or, indeed, “manufactured”. In the everyday management of the economy and the administration and development of social institutions the position of the elderly subtly changed and shaped’.

(Townsend 1981: 9)

Similarly, Walker (1981) argued for a ‘political economy of old age’ in order to understand the position of older people. In particular, Walker (1981: 77) paid attention to the ‘social creation of dependency’ and how social structure and

relations espoused by the mode of production which helps intensify structural class marginalisation. In a similar vein, Phillipson (1982, 1986) considers how capitalism helps socially construct the social marginality of older people in key areas such as welfare delivery. The important argument to be made is that inequalities in the distribution of resources should be understood in relation to the distribution of power within society, rather than in terms of individual variation.

### **FEMINIST GERONTOLOGY**

Coupled with this, there has been an acceleration of Feminist insights into understanding age and gender as key identity variables of analysis (Arber & Ginn 1991 and 1995). There are two important issues: first, power imbalances shape theoretical construction; second, a group's place within the social structure influences theoretical attention they are afforded. Henceforth, because older women tend to occupy a position of lower class status, especially in terms of economic status than men of all ages and younger women, they are given less theoretical attention. According to Acker (1988 cited in Arber and Ginn 1991) in all known societies the relations of distribution and production are influenced by gender and thus take on a gendered meaning. Gender relations of distribution in capitalist society are historically rooted and are transformed as the means of production change. Similarly, age relations are linked to the capitalist mode of production and relations of distribution. "Wages" take on a specific meaning depending on age. For example, teenagers work for less money than adults, who in turn work for less money than middle-aged adults. Further, young children rely on personal relations with family figures such as parents. Many older people rely on resources distributed by the state.

There is a "double standard of ageing" with age in women having particularly strong negative connotations. Older women are viewed as unworthy of respect or consideration (Arber and Ginn 1991).

Catherine Itzin sees the double standard of aging as arising from the sets of conventional expectations as to age-pertinent attitudes and roles for each sex which apply in patriarchal society. These are defined by Itzin as a male and a female 'chronology', socially defined and sanctioned so that the experience of prescribed roles is sanctioned by disapproval. Male chronology hinges on employment, but a woman's age status is defined in terms of events in the reproductive cycle.

Arguably, Arber & Ginn (1991) claim because women's

value is exercised the awareness of a loss of a youthful appearance brings social devaluation; vulnerability to pressure is penetrated by cosmeticisation. Daly (cited in Arber and Ginn 1991) draws a mirror image between western cosmetic surgery and the genital mutilation carried out in some African societies: both cultured practices demonstrate the pressure on women to comply with male standards of desirability and the extent of male domination. For older black women, the ideal of 'beauty' portrayed by white male culture was doubly distant and alienating, until growing black consciousness subverted disparaging language and argued 'black is beautiful'.

Arber and Ginn (1991) claim patriarchal society exercises power through the chronologies of employment and reproduction, and through the sexualised promotion of a 'youthful' appearance in women. As a result, many older women suffer from a 'double jeopardy' thesis through age and sexual discrimination.

### **POSTMODERN GERONTOLOGY**

In addition to these broad and macro based theories, there has been a vast interest in Postmodern perspectives of age and aging identity underpinned by discourses of "better lifestyles" and increased leisure opportunities for older people due to healthier lifestyles and increased use of biotechnologies to facilitate the longevity of human experiences (Blaikie 1999; Featherstone & Hepworth 1993, Featherstone & Wernick 1995 and Powell & Biggs 2002). The intellectual roots of 'postmodern gerontology' derive from Jaber F. Gubrium's (1975) sociological analysis of the discovery and conceptual elaboration of Alzheimer's disease in the USA and the establishment of boundaries between 'normal' and pathological aging, old age is seen as a "mask" which conceals the essential identity of the person beneath. The view of the aging process as a mask/disguise concealing the essentially youthful self beneath is one which appears to be a popular argument (Featherstone & Hepworth 1989, 1993). When asked at the age of 79 to describe what it felt like to be old, the author J.B. Priestley replied:

'It is as though, walking down Shaftesbury Avenue as a fairly young man, I was suddenly kidnapped, rushed into a theatre and made to don the grey hair, the wrinkles and the other attributes of age, then wheeled on stage. Behind the appearance of age I am the same person, with the same thoughts, as when I was younger' (Puner 1978: 7).

There are two underlying issues for Featherstone and Hepworth (1993) which should be understood as the basis

for understanding postmodern gerontology. Firstly, the image of the mask alerts social gerontologists to the possibility that a tension exists between the external appearance of the body and face and functional capacities and the internal or subjective sense of experience of personal identity which is likely to become prominent as aging traverses through the lifecourse.

Secondly, older people are usually 'fixed' to roles without resources which does not do justice to the richness of their individual experiences and multi-facets of their personalities. Idealistically, Featherstone and Hepworth argue that a postmodern perspective would deconstruct such realities and age should be viewed as fluid with possibilities not constrained by medical model decline discourses.

According to Powell and Biggs (2000) the direct use of new technologies to either modify the appearance or performance of ageing identity is symptomatic of postmodern times. To paraphrase Morris (1998) technologies here hold out the promise of 'utopian bodies'. Indeed, Haraway's (1991) (cited in Powell and Biggs 2002) original reference to cyborgic fusion of biological and machine entities has been enthusiastically taken up by postmodern gerontology. The list of technologies available extends beyond traditional prosthesis to include virtual identities created by and reflected in the growing number of 'silver surfers' using the Internet as a free-floating form of identity management. Thus Featherstone and Wernick (1995: 3) trill that it is now possible to 'Re-code the body itself 'as biomedical and information technologies make available' the capacity to alter not just the meaning, but the very material infrastructure of the body. Bodies can be re-shaped, remade, fused with machines, empowered through technological devices and extensions'.

Coupled with this, the control of the aging body had been enhanced by external constraining virtue of the corset, contemporary shaping has involved active working, through exercise and diet. The multiplication of magazine articles, self-help manuals, diet and exercise clubs, extending through midlife and beyond also bear witness to the popularity of attempts to work on the self in this way.

The use of diet and exercise as techniques specifically related to later adulthood, is closely related to the growth of leisure and a lifestyle approach to the creation of late life identities (Turner 1989; Powell & Biggs 2000 and 2002). It therefore resonates beyond the simple fuelling and repair of the bodily machine to include a continual re-creation of the

self within a particular social discourse. This discourse closely associates the construction of a healthy lifestyle with positive self-identity.

Indeed, closely related to postmodern gerontology is also a small body of knowledge pertaining to 'Foucauldian gerontology' deriving in Canadian (Katz 1996; Frank 1998) and UK (Biggs & Powell 1999 and 2000; Powell & Biggs 2000, 2002; Powell & Cook 2000; Wahidin & Powell 2001) academics. This Foucauldian theoretical development attempts to understand age and aging through conceptual exploration of power/knowledge and how surveillance practices from professionals such as 'medics' or 'social workers' further marginalize, normalize and provide shape to the experiences of older people (Powell & Biggs 2000).

## **CONCLUSION**

These theories have been at the forefront of understanding old age in US, UK and Australasian academics. Taken together, these theoretical currents have been influential in providing social gerontology with a rich social dimension. Such social theories have been used also to analyse pressing social issues such as, elder abuse, the gendered nature of age, the politics of power relations between older people and state/society and community care. The purpose of this paper has been to amalgamate the key ideas of social theories of age in order to stress the importance of social philosophy to understanding age and aging.

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