KEY IDEAS

OLD AGE

John Vincent

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Recent decades have seen a fundamental change in the age structure of many Western societies. In these societies it is now common for a fifth to a quarter of the population to be retired, for fewer babies to be born than is required to sustain the size of the population and for life expectancy at birth for women to exceed eighty years. This book provides an overview of the key issues arising from this demographic change, asking questions such as:

- What, if any, are the universal characteristics of the ageing experience?
- What different ways is it possible to grow old?
- What is unique about old age in the contemporary world?

The author also examines issues ranging from the social construction, diversity and identity of old age to areas of social conflict over population, pensions and the medicalisation of old age.

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KEY IDEAS

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OLD AGE

John Vincent

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For Julie

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Introduction

KEY QUESTIONS

This book is about the contribution of the social sciences, particularly anthropology and sociology, to an understanding of old age. It seeks to advance our understanding of the world we live in by studying the position of old age within it. The key questions this book poses are: What are the universal characteristics, if any, of the ageing experience? In what different ways is it possible to grow old? What is unique and special about old age in the contemporary world? Answering these questions will illuminate the way we understand society as a whole. It could be argued that the most significant change in modern society lies in its age structure. The period starting from about the last third of the twentieth century has seen the development of new kinds of societies in which one-fifth to a quarter of the population are retired, where fewer babies are born than are required to sustain the size of the population and which see most people living until they are over 80 years of age. There is a strong case that the essential, archetypical characteristic of the modern condition is that of old age.

This book explores the social construction of old age and seeks to develop an understanding of 'old age' as a cultural category. As a consequence there is no simple definition of 'old age' as a starting point. Rather the book explores the way old age becomes a meaningful cultural category to different social groups in different historical and social situations. To do this we need to look not only at the variety of content to the category 'old age', but also at the boundaries between what comes before and what follows old age and the processes of transition of entering and leaving the social identity. We can ask: How do we know about growing older? The collectivity – the 'we' in this question – could be construed as we, the readers as individuals. How do we gain knowledge about ourselves and our ageing? The term might also be taken to denote a social and cultural collective 'we' – the dominant social, cultural and scientific understanding of old age used by people in the 'West'.[1] In order to do this we must look at the ways in which social, economic and political institutions – together with cultural values, images and knowledge about ageing bodies – are created and sustained by people. People exist in particular times and places and are therefore subject to the social influences of their past, of their contemporaries and of their futures. How is the experience of old age embedded in the past? How is old age being transformed in the present? And what influence does knowledge about the future have on our present view of old age? The book will discuss how old age becomes a meaningful concept which people, both the general public and gerontological experts of all kinds, use to explain and understand themselves and those around them. If 'old age' and our understanding of it are a product of society, the logical questions are: How are they different in different societies? How do different cultural traditions, in particular those current in the modern societies of the North/industrial/capitalist/urban world, construct our understanding of old age? The prime focus of this book is to look at the advanced industrial nations of the West. However, in order to understand the societies and cultures in which the majority of readers of this book are

located, we must also reflect on different and contrasting situations.

Individual ageing is universal but does not necessarily lead to an ageing population. Ageing populations are a relatively new phenomenon in anthropological terms. There are entirely different social processes by which individuals and societies are said to age. On the one hand there is the experience that everyone who gets older has. Those who reach 'old age' have this experience in common – an individual experience of getting old and being old. That is the subject of the first chapter of this book. On the other hand the ageing of societies is about population change and reflects alterations in the relative size of age groups in the population. One definition of an ageing population is one with an increasing average age. However, it is important to differentiate the experience of individuals ageing on the one hand, and the causes and social impact of ageing populations on the other. People have always aged, but an ageing population in which the average age of the population is rising steadily into middle age is a new phenomenon. Growing old as an individual in a young population and growing old in a population that already has a high proportion of older people clearly result in different opportunities and problems.

There is a strong temptation to reification, whereby the social characteristics of individuals are assumed to be the social characteristics of societies. It is assumed that a society which is 'old' in the sense of having a high average age also has the characteristics of an older human being – their personality, attitudes, aspirations and capabilities. This is of course a mistake; societies are not individuals and they do not have personalities or personal attributes, they have institutional practices and common ways of behaving. Further inaccuracies develop because not only are individual characteristics reified to a societal level but those characteristics identified are stereotypical and ageist. Hence societies with older populations are sometimes denigrated as being tied by tradition, unproductive, lacking in innovation and even tending to 'senility'.

Throughout this book we will deal with both aspects of old age, the personal and the societal. In each of the six chapters the book will examine the origins and consequences of distinctive features of old age in the contemporary world and demonstrate both the diversity and inequality that are the experience of older people. The chapters are as follows:

Chapter 1, entitled 'The experience of old age', sets out to demonstrate the manner in which we come to view ourselves as old. It looks at the interpersonal processes by which we recognise old age in ourselves and in others. It examines the ways in which particular cultural constructions of old age have become prevalent in Western society. Further, it provides comparative material to illustrate that the same constructions of old age are not to be found universally, but rather that there is a wide diversity of experience of old age across the world. Among these patterns of diversity are the inequalities and disparity in standards of living that older people experience.

Chapter 2 is based on discussion of historical and contemporary changes to the life course. This includes consideration of family, friendship, kinship, community and work patterns and how they have changed between and through different life courses. Issues of gender, class, ethnicity and migration are incorporated into this discussion. The life-course approach which links historical processes, personal biography and social structure is a key tool in understanding not only old age but contemporary society as a whole. The importance for social science in understanding life-course processes, in particular the experiences of successive generations and their interactions, is drawn out.

Chapter 3 examines the impact on older people of the global crises of poverty, environment and population. It looks at the extent and causes of old-age poverty in the world, and the range of insecurities which older people can experience. Population ageing is not only the experience of the developed world but a global phenomenon.

Chapter 4 concentrates on inequality in old age and intergenerational conflict. Provision for a secure old age can be made

either through the state and citizenship or through private property and pension funds. This chapter looks at the issues of pension fund capitalism, the role of the state in the provision of a 'good old age' and the fundamental issues of social solidarity which underpin the willingness to sustain social groups who do not have paid employment.

Consumerism, identity and old age are the subject of Chapter 5. This chapter tackles the issues that are raised by relative affluence for some older people and by the commercialisation of old age. It covers the topics of:

- The distinctive characteristics of older consumers.
- The meaning of consumption for older people.
- The institutions of consumption; how does the way consumption is organised affect older people?
- The problems and opportunities that the changing technology of consumption creates for older people.

Medical and biological conceptualisations of ageing have come to dominate the modern understanding of old age. Chapter 6 looks at old age, sickness, death and immortality. The concept of the 'third age' as a new time of life involving the prolongation of youth and a new post-work identity will be deconstructed and the problems of the 'fourth age' as the final part of the life course before death examined. The relationship between the medicalisation of old age and views of immortality are also examined and insights derived from the sociology of the body are applied to the ageing body. This chapter explores the significance for old age of 'death' debates – euthanasia and genetically postponed mortality. The Conclusion draws together the key points of the book and in particular contrasts optimistic and pessimistic visions for the future of old age.

1

THE EXPERIENCE OF OLD AGE

The Patriarch: *We came slowly up the track from Konjic, past the meadows sweeping back to the dark conifers which covered the mountains. Along past the old rustic poles fencing the paddocks and into a small group of wooden farm houses. We picked our way through the narrow cobbled alleys to ask for Mohammed Ibrahamivic. We were shown into the large kitchen-cum-living room and sat on the sofa. Strong coffee and black-currant juice was served and we explained our purpose – to ask him to tell us his life story. The large, busy, woman in the kitchen organised everything. He arrived and settled down opposite us and the tape recorder. In came three men of various ages, more women and many children. Mohammed was quiet but fit and strong, over 78 but firmly in charge. He told us how he was born and raised in a big family some kilometres away; how he survived the war by keeping his head down; about his marriage – joking at his small wife tucked in the corner of the crowded room. He detailed his family – including the twenty-four people in the room and the rest around about the village or in Germany. He listed with some help all his many grandchildren. He joked about old age, and made it clear he was still fit and still felt frisky when he saw a young maid. Here was a man who was able to present his old age to us as fulfilment.*

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF OLD AGE

When, where and how do people begin to think of themselves as old? The same questions may be asked about how others are identified as 'old'. This chapter is about the social construction of old age. If something is described as 'ageing', what is being denoted is an organisation of time; a sequence of stages. It refers to the timing and sequencing in some specified process. With human beings, it is ageing which gives the individual's life its rhythm, and links the duration, timing and sequence of stages in life. It is the social sequencing of the stages that creates the category 'old age' and gives the life course its meaning.

There are approaches to old age that concentrate on the individual experience of ageing. These perspectives seek an understanding of old age using as reference points one's own former (younger) self and in particular other people's reaction to the individual ageing persona we express. The 'mask of ageing' describes the experience whereby there is felt to be a distance between one's interior age and the externally manifest ageing appearance which is seen in the mirror and to which other people respond.[1] This chapter will start by looking at the social practices by which old age is constructed at the level of interpersonal interaction and then move on to the cultural significance attributed to old age. We can ask a very basic question: How do people know how old they are?

SOCIAL REGULATION OF AGE IN BRITAIN

People know their age from the way other people behave towards them. Most significantly people in Britain know because their family celebrate their birthday and have done so since they were born. Every year they mark the passing of another year with cards and presents, perhaps a party or other forms of celebration. Its importance is symbolically marked by ritual. Key birthdays, for example, the twenty-first or one-hundredth, are particularly ritualised. To have one's birthday forgotten is deeply hurtful and

to have no one who knows or cares when it is marks a nadir in social isolation. Thus it seems very odd for those raised in the British cultural tradition that some people do not know how old they are. It is hard to understand that in many cultures and societies it is not of significance and people simply have no reason to remember their exact chronological age. Birth dates, even if they are known, are not universally counted or celebrated. In the Slav tradition it is on one's 'Slava' – the day of one's saint – when one is expected to give presents to others. Social time is constructed ritually. These rituals create special moments which break up and pattern the uniform flow of time. They may be counted and used to mark transition from one life stage to another and indeed can be used to create a sense of historical identity and continuity.[2]

People in the West know their age because society regulates public life according to chronological age. Age is not only ritualised but it is also bureaucratised. There are legal rights and duties based on age. Institutions regulate access and prescribe and proscribe certain behaviours by age. As a consequence it becomes important for the state to officially register births and thus certificate age. Other institutions also certificate age; for example, bus companies issue passes to schoolchildren and to older people to regulate access to cheap fares. Public houses and licensing authorities introduce card schemes to regulate age-based restrictions on the purchase of alcohol. The institutional arrangements of modern society require us to be able to demonstrate our age to others.

The boundary between the roles of child and adult is linked to the acquisition of age-defined rights and duties. The age at which people have been considered to be adult and what is meant by being a child has changed through time. There are specific ages at which people are considered to be personally responsible for their actions. The law sets ages of criminal responsibility, to legally have sex or to drive a car. Other aspects of social responsibility – the legal right to leave home, obtain housing benefit, get married or leave school – are restricted by age. Civic