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The Age-Shift: psychodynamic observations on social policy, ageism and the reconstruction of the adult lifecourse.

### **Abstract.**

Through a critical engagement with policy trends, we ask how shifts in ideologies of ageing might influence the possibilities available to adults as they grow older. Of particular interest are the implications for how people are being encouraged to think about the adult lifecourse. We address these questions by looking at policy development, taking the 2000-2005 period in the UK, as a case example, and by comparing this period to wider regional and international trends. Finally, we assess the implications of contemporary policy, from a psychodynamic point of view, for the maintenance of a viable identity in later life and for intergenerational relationships.

## **Introduction.**

It has been argued, in the social science literature, that we are currently living through a shift in the definition of midlife and old age (Polikva, 2001; Longino and Powell, 2002). There are a number of factors contributing to this conclusion. A loosening of the traditional life course boundaries associated with retirement (Phillipson, 1998) is one trend that means that rather than having a 'point of no return' people are increasingly experimenting with part time work roles up to and beyond traditional retirement age. There may also be a shift in thinking about personal potential in later life (Biggs, 2001) where, rather than thinking of it as a period of inevitable decline, it is associated with the emergence of a more individuated 'mature imagination'. Further, a distinctive group of 'grey' consumers is emerging, giving rise to the proposition that today's older adults are creating new lifestyles to grow old by (Metz and Underwood, 2005; Gilleard and Higgs, 2005). The perception that the current generation is a healthier and potentially more productive group than its predecessors (Phillipson and Smith, 2005) has added to an 'age-shift' whereby adult ageing will be both more flexible and less threatening to the majority of the adult population.

Social Policy constitutes both a reflection and an attempt to influence this shift to new forms of age-experience. This occurs through the definition new forms of legitimacy and achieving a different balance between age-ascribed behaviours and the distribution of responsibilities between the state, its citizens and corporate interests. As policy develops, it is important to examine the re-construction of later life, as attempts are made to fix a new series of expectations around age. Within each Policy, there lie a series of assumptions about the everyday reality inhabited by individuals, groups and populations that it is aimed to influence. Sometimes these themes are explicitly identified in the text, and sometimes they are only tacitly available following detailed analysis and reflection. However visible these themes may be, they create a series of interdependent premises that, taken together, contribute to a sense of 'legitimate reality' through which one can identify with 'the grey consumer', become 'an older worker' or behave as a 'child of the sixties' is generally expected to in later life.

It has been suggested elsewhere (Biggs & Powell, 2001) that contemporary policies on adult ageing have shifted away from concern with particular social hazards and towards the engineering of a more global meaning surrounding 'how to age well'. They are, in other words, an attempt to shape a new sort of ageing citizen who is more in tune with changing population trends. This attempt has taken a number of forms, which would have seemed extraordinary only a decade ago. If recent developments in social policy constitute an attempt to fix a new set of behaviours and expectations for an ageing society, a critical assessment is needed of the forms taken by policy and any implications for what will become new standards to 'age well' by. As novel understandings of adult ageing develop, it is important to ask how they might influence the 'dynamics' of ageing and influence how people think about themselves and about inter-generational relationships.

## **The New Face of Ageing**

Events around the turn of the Millennium have crystallised a new version of ageing that is reflected in policy statements at national and international levels. These policies indicate a succession of moves that are increasingly explicit in formulating expectations of the second half of life that are markedly different to what had previously existed (Sidorenko and Walker, 2004).

Should anyone doubt the sea change that has occurred, they need only compare two statements, twenty years apart, which stand as attempts to summarise contemporary thinking on the nature of old age and the contribution of older people to wider society.

In 1982, the '*First World Assembly on Ageing*' was held in Vienna. The Vienna statement underlined three factors that will increasingly impinge upon population structures by 2025. These include: a marked increase in the numbers of people over 60 and over 80 years old, of which the largest proportion will be women, that both developed and developing nations will be effected and that policy will have to change significantly 'during the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'. The Assembly concluded that:

'Measures for the optimum utilisation of the wisdom and expertise of elderly individuals will be considered' ... 'the human race is characterised by a long childhood and by a long old age. Throughout history this has enabled older persons to educate the younger and pass on values to them, this role has ensured man's survival and progress'... 'A longer life provides humans with an opportunity to examine their lives in retrospect, to correct some of their mistakes, to get closer to the truth and to achieve a different understanding of the sense and value of their actions' (1982:1.B)

Vienna's final statement may be seen in retrospect to illustrate a relatively gentle view of ageing, with an emphasis on reflection, wisdom, a sense of summing up and benign disengagement. It is typical of that historical period and echoes the work of Erik Erikson (1982) among others in focussing on a generative relationship to younger age-groups and the transmission of life experience. It also recognises that there may be significant differences that mark out the priorities of this from other parts of the adult lifecourse.

While the demographic projections of 1982 are undisputed, in 2002 a '*Second World Assembly on Ageing*' (this time held in Madrid) shows how a very different vision of later life had taken hold, best exemplified by Article 10. Here:

'the potential of older persons is a powerful basis for future development. This enables society to rely increasingly on the skills, experience and wisdom of older persons, not only to take the lead in their own betterment but also to participate actively in that of society as a whole' (2002:2).

Article 12 identifies 'satisfying and productive work' as a key element in this new route to empowerment.

The form of social inclusion envisaged by the two statements is therefore very different. One appears as a personal task looking backwards via a sifting of accrued experience, the second privileges the application of particular skills in the here and now, as a springboard for future aspirations, based around continued work-activities.

By 2002, there appear to be significantly fewer qualities that are distinctive to later life and significantly greater similarity between adult age groups.

Social Gerontologists, such as Gilleard and Higgs (2000, 2005), have highlighted changes arising as the majority of retired people become increasingly better off both absolutely and relative to the working population. These changes are thought to be a result of private and occupational pension schemes, which have both increased inequality within the ageing population (so that it reflects the same patterns of inequality evident in wider society), and have fuelled an extraordinary growth of lifestyle consumerism amongst approximately two thirds of older people. The net result, they argue, is that there are now fewer differences between working and retired populations. In the words of Andrew Blaikie, from Aberdeen University:

“Older citizens are encouraged not just to dress ‘young’ and look youthful, but to exercise, have sex, take holidays, socialise in ways indistinguishable from those of their children’s generation. There are no rules now, only choices”. (Blaikie, 1999:104).

How to age successfully has become associated, as Featherstone and Hepworth (1983) identified early on in this debate, with the indefinite maintenance of ‘Midlife-styles’ fuelled by a continuing engagement with consumer society. Anything that threatens that ability to consume therefore becomes a threat to maintaining a mature identity, very much as the inability to work had for earlier generations.

Rightly or wrongly, popular culture has come to associate these changes with a new sort of adult lifecourse, marked by an unwillingness to ‘grow old’, identification with more youthful cohorts, the avoidance of bodily ageing, culminating in a much announced blurring of life-stages (Biggs 2005). Nobody, it seems; in the sense of dependency, withdrawal from society, plus a limited ability to both produce and consume; is old anymore.

### **Redefining the Adult Lifecourse through ‘Opportunity Age’**

The trends identified above, that older people are richer, fitter and more similar to the rest of the adult population than ever before, has been picked up by the UK Government. This is most noticeable in the ‘joined-up’ strategy document on ageing entitled *Opportunity Age* (DWP, 2005). Opportunity Age is important because it tries to summarise and draw together thinking and policy across Government departments and thereby create a standard picture of adult ageing for the nation state. Here one finds a series of important changes in the scope and qualities associated with mid and older adulthood.

Three themes can be identified within UK policy discourse, which constitute an attempt to re-engineer a shift to a new ‘reality’ of ageing. First the use of the label ‘older people’ has become much more imprecise, so that it can include the very different lifecourse circumstances of people in their fifties as well as those in their eighties. Second, older people are becoming re-defined as being little different to other age groups. Third, and perhaps most extra-ordinarily, it is claimed that differences based on age are a result of wrong attitudes.

#### **1. A Drift to ‘fifty plus’ and inclusion through work.**

A striking characteristic of contemporary UK policy is a consistent attempt to drive down the age at which parts of the population are considered 'older', in a move to cast the debate in terms of a '50 plus' life-course. This also helps blur the distinction between parts of the lifecourse spent in work and in leisure. As UK policy has been marked by trends that push down the age of people affected by policies for 'older people' such that it effectively includes everyone over the age of fifty, an 'age-drift' has taken place. Mid-life adults are now categorised as 'older' and the 'baby boomer' cohort who to paraphrase Roger Daltrey of The Who 'hoped they die before they grew old', now find themselves aged by policy. Indeed since 2000, 'Life begins at 50' (Department of Social Security), 'Action on Age' (Department of Education & Employment), 'Our present for the Future' and the Prime Minister's Cabinet Office's own 'Winning the Generation Game' (WtGG) have all taken 50 years and above as their benchmark. So, by 2005 and an attempt to pull disparate policies together in the shape of 'Opportunity Age', 'Fifty plus' rather than state retirement age, had become the gold standard for an ageing society. Opportunity Age is significant, because, it's target age-range consistently refers to of '50 upwards', 'after age 50' and 'people over 50', and the focus of the document is to emphasise the possibility that this new richer and fitter generation can, and it is claimed want to, carry on working.

'In the years after 50 we all want three main things: the opportunity to continue our career, or the choice of starting a new one that better suits our family circumstances; to play a full and active role in society, with an adequate income and decent housing; and later to keep independence and control over our lives as we grow older, even if we are constrained by the health problems that sometimes affect the final years' (Opportunity Age, Ch1: 31.3).

Leaving aside for the moment the use of 'we' by policy-makers of an unspecified age, the route to social inclusion is mapped out so as to encourage work and work-like activities, such as volunteering. In so doing, the 'burden' of too many pensioners and too few workers is turned into a virtuous circle of greater numbers of older tax paying workers and fewer pensions claimants.

## **2. The erasure of generational difference.**

'Opportunity Age' is explicit in wanting to:

'Effect real change in society as a whole ...(and )... to secure the wider cultural changes', such that 'It is time to ask whether society needs to rethink attitudes to the last third of life that are rooted in the limited horizons of previous generations'. (PM's Forward P.1-2)

The development of a new culture of ageing is underpinned by a series of claims about the erasure of difference between adults of different ages. Affluence, for example, is at first linked to general health, and then used to mark a growing similarity of patterns across different age-groups:

“ They are healthier; they are making an economic contribution – there are around 1 million workers over State Pension Age; and they are breaking with the notion that old age and poverty are synonymous –pensioners are no longer any more likely to be poor than younger people”.(PMs Forward p2)

And while the explicit message is political such that:

Today's older people are better off than preceding generations, and our policies over the last eight years have broken the longstanding link between being a pensioner and being in poverty. (2005,Ch1:1)

On the question of affluence, these statements appear to have an affinity with gerontological research. However, the relationship is fleeting. For the record: evidence indicates that the distribution of wealth and poverty between retired and non-retired parts of the population is becoming similar, and that therefore divisions of affluence and poverty are no longer related to age (Gilleard and Higgs, 2005). There is little in that conclusion to indicate that all adults are now all affluent, it simply shows that you are as likely to be poor or rich whether you are young or old. Other research, shows that considerable numbers of older people are socially excluded because they live in poor neighbourhoods and on low incomes (Scharf et al 2004, Age Concern, 2005). The assertion that age is no longer associated with poverty and that in terms of wealth and disposable income retired and working populations share the same profiles is presented as an achievement, but perhaps it also reflects a much more familiar interpretation: the persistence of inequalities into later life. This approach to the question of an ageing population is curiously negligent of cumulative inequality engendered by the conditions experienced during working life (see Dannefer, 2003). In this last regard, the claim not only erases differences between age groups, it ignores the effects of lifecourse experience.

The economic discourse outlined above also contributes to a more subtle process of erasing distinctions between generations and can be added to a number of other statements about intergenerational similarity that arise in different forms, including the need for health and social care. In terms of care provision, the curious claim is made that

‘When 40 per cent of the population is aged 50 or more – as will soon be the case – the distinction between services for older people and services for everyone loses significance. (2005:10).

This statement arises from the view that older people are becoming more healthy as a group, and that the balance between younger and older adults is changing, yet is extraordinary in homogenizing the health care needs of people of widely different ages.

Taken together, these statements suggest an infatuation with a 'blurring' of the lifecourse, which may typify a particular form of midlife-style thinking (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1989). It can also seriously undermines a recognition that capacity changes with age and that as Smith and Baltes (2002) have warned, support a cultural unwillingness to recognise the presence of a 'fourth' age in which physical and mental decline takes place.

### **3. Age is in the mind.**

In the PM's introduction to 'Opportunity Age' we are told that:

‘ For government, the challenge is to change attitudes and preconceptions about what an ageing society means ... we must explode the myth that ageing is a barrier to a positive contribution to the economy and society, through

work and through active engagement in the community.....‘ For all of us, dealing successfully with demographic change means shedding outdated stereotypes and changing mindsets about retirement and the process of growing older’. (2005:1)

Unfortunately, it is but a short step from seeing age as a matter of culture and a solution in combating ageism, to seeing age itself as a problem of attitude, and eventually as simply a state of mind.

In Chapter One the reader is told that with so much more of life being lived after age 50, people from all walks of life ‘need to adjust perspectives conditioned by old-fashioned views’. And by the time we have reached Vol 2 on ‘Evidence’, it is possible to find a seemingly extraordinary claim that:

‘Perceptions of ageing and old age depend on where you stand. To a teenager, a person in his or her 30s is old. But many people even in their 70s and 80s do not regard themselves as old and reject being labelled according to their chronological age. Many people would agree, therefore, that old age is a state of mind rather than a fixed chronological point. (2005 Vol 2:1).

The task of ‘transforming cultural stereotypes’ is now seen to be ‘including those among older people themselves’ (Executive Summary, 2005:10). even though ‘today’s older people are already challenging old preconceptions’

So, ‘old fashioned’ views and ‘old preconceptions’ and the ‘limited horizons of previous generations’ must not be allowed to stand in the way of the forward march of an ageless culture, even when they may not fit with the beliefs of older people themselves. Extending the agenda from emancipation to combating illusions held by older people themselves- opens door to discrediting distinctive age characteristics and for personal narratives and experience to conform to the policy ideal. We are suffering, then, from a poverty of attitudes rather than of disposable wealth, or a failing body. And, rather like that well worn simplification of psychoanalysis: if you disagree you are probably simply unconscious of your own erroneous attitude.

### **A Shift Toward Generational Sameness**

It appears from the above reading of ‘Opportunity Age’, that while demographic change heralds a new period in the lifecourse with more complex transitions, for example between work, leisure and poverty, the policy response has been to close down options in the sense of stressing work and production over leisure and consumption. Shifting the age associated with the term ‘older people’ and minimising the differences between generations, support a definition of legitimate social inclusion through work. Dressed in the rhetoric of ‘independence, opportunity and choice’ that ‘should be achievable at all ages of life’, these latter-day rebels are not, however, without a cause. The new flexibility of ‘midlifestyle’ has become fixed again, and everyone, it appears, is heading off to work.

Taken together these changes reflect a desire to manage a situation in which age differences are becoming increasingly blurred and that within-age diversity is as great at that between ages. There is also the rather disturbing political claim, at least in UK policy, that late-life poverty has been pretty much abolished. Generational blurring and assumed fiscal solvency are not the same, yet both feed into an agenda that shifts

generations away from distinctiveness and toward similarity. This tendency to collapse social engagement and personal meaning into work activity assumes no tension between personal development and social engagement, nor between social engagement and productive age roles. They are all rolled into one. As such, work entrenches its established disciplinary role ever more deeply into the lifecourse and in so doing is provoking a denial of difference between generations. Policy on ageing has become a mechanism for bringing multiple selves under control, allowing the prioritising of competing roles and demands, and conferring legitimacy on some activities and not others, few of which are related to distinctive experiences of ageing.

### **Simple Generational States of Mind, Ageism and Intergenerational Relations.**

In terms of the dynamics of ageing, what is striking about the current policy position is that: First, rather than recognizing difference, the position taken appears to wish to deny age-based diversity. Second this denial takes the form of avoiding recognition of the less palatable challenges that old age can bring. Third, it appears that they are being replaced by the priorities mid life adulthood. And fourth, the claim that any residual differences are the result of a 'state of mind'.

Of course, states of mind are the staple of any critical psychodynamic approach and something that psychodynamic thinking should have a view on. Chris Bollas (1992), in his analysis of the distinction between simple and complex states of mind observes that:

‘The simple experiencing self and the complex reflecting self enable the person to process life according to different, yet interdependent modes of engagement; one immersive the other reflective’. (1992:15)

According to Bollas, the complex self reflectively objectifies parts of itself within its own mind and thereby allows a certain critical distance and control over interpersonal activity. Simple self-states are caught up in immediate experience, instinct and feeling. As such, simple states are ones in which social definitions are accepted at face value and are obscured in so far as they are assumed to be held in common. Whilst in a complex state, however, the self is observed as an object and engagement with 'deep experiencing' can take place. This distinction is relevant to an ability to recognize and tolerate difference and in making a bridge between generations. We are lucky that Bollas continues by discussing the sophistication with which the self is managed in later life, and the capacity to put oneself in the place of another, elaborated in the

context of generational belonging. The tension between simple and complex states of mind is particularly acute, and therefore sensitised to psychological processes of avoidance and denial, when new generational definitions are experienced. When a generation emerges, it carries its members along in an unreflective collective process—a time for the simple self. However, in the course of generational progression, Bollas argues that individuals become less immersed in social culture, and increasingly inclined to see the self and others more clearly. While the policy positions that have been analysed above are dealing with transition and redefinition of generational consciousness, it is instructive to note a tendency to eclipse the experience of alternative generational positions.

If imbalances in power between generations are also taken into account, the simple immersive state of mind can be seen to be an expression of generational dominance, in so far as there is little perceived need to look beyond the requirements of the generationally more powerful group. Rather than reducing forms of age-prejudice through sameness, the way is opened, however, for a new type of social ageism based on the avoidance of difference between adult age groups. There are dangers in a policy shift that appears to so value the activities traditionally associated with one part of the lifecourse and denies the priorities of others. Rather than freeing older adults from age discrimination, the ‘new ageing’ associated with these policies, may reproduce a form of age-imperialism through ‘the imposition of the goals, aims, priorities and agendas of one age group onto and into the lives of other age groups’ (Biggs 2004: 103).

If the dominant ideology wishes us to see older adults as all the same, then rather than seeing difference as the source of ageism, it is important to interrogate this assumption of similarity and ask what we are missing and how this inhibits recognition of the special qualities of a different generational experience. Most notable here would be experiences based on special existential needs in later life and topics that run against new social norms that legitimate only certain forms of ageing. The current trend certainly reflects the qualities associated with this phenomenon, which can appear as simple common sense to the dominant age group, fuelled by political or economic expediency. The danger being that if older adults end up on the wrong side of this equation, life is lived according to principles that are out of step with their emerging life priorities. Seeing differences between generations as a ‘state

of mind' may itself be part of a wider pattern of avoiding complexity and the need to tolerate age-based distinctiveness.

This approach to generational relations, then, also obscures a second core issue arising from psychoanalytic thinking: the rivalry between generations and how this can be resolved. In terms of intergenerational relations, a superficial assumption of sameness would significantly underplay the impact of intergenerational conflict in circumstances where different generational groups are being expected to increasingly compete on the same turf. In terms of generational relations, the current discourse appears to be un-conversant with the risks associated with denying differences between age-groups. Gullete (2004) outlines these risks as including an erosion of 'seniority' at work and the expectation that different generations compete under the same ground rules, both of which significantly erode workplace benefits for workers as they grow older. She claims that reducing generational differences at work actually increases competition between generations and reduces inter-generational solidarity.

Unfortunately, in current historical circumstances, this dovetails neatly with cultural fantasies of never growing old. In policy terms, a picture is painted of a sameness of quality and aspiration across different age-groups, a tendency to assume that adults of different ages desire the same forms of social participation and self-development, plus, a levelling down of the diversity of social experience to the workplace. Rather than freeing older adults from age discrimination, this new life-plan, may reproduce a new form in which the imposition of the goals, aims, priorities and agendas of one age group are extended onto and into the lives of other age groups with little consideration is being given to differences in aspiration associated with particular age-cohorts or parts of the adult lifecourse and to an avoidance of the physical realities of later life.

### **Conclusions.**

Contemporary societies find themselves at a turning point in what it means to become old. The much hoped for fluidity of new cultures of ageing is becoming fixed again, as successive waves of policy discourse legitimise a new definition of the social value of later life. While at some levels this may reduce the differential treatment of people based on age, it also constitutes a denial of the special qualities of later life. An

understanding of psychodynamic processes might help explain some of the effects of new social policies that are aimed at changing the way adult ageing is generally perceived. In particular, making a distinction between simple and complex generational states of mind and re-discovering the possibility of intergenerational rivalry may lead to a new understanding of the processes of social ageism, adapted to new ideological circumstances.