There are two broadly contradictory images of ageing that circulate widely in contemporary Western societies. On the one hand are portrayals of age-associated physical decline, risk and impending dependency. Rife with warnings to individuals of the necessity of planning and self-care to mitigate the risks of ageing, these images often accompany—or illustrate—alarmist demographic pronouncements of a ‘tsunami of geezers that’s about to crash on our shores and suck the wealth of future generations out to sea’ (Wente, 2012). On the other hand, there are increasing portrayals of those ‘geezers’ as health-conscious, fit, sexy and adventurous consumers, who take good care of themselves and control a significant proportion of disposable income. This more optimistic vision of ageing posits a ‘new, anti-ageist, positive senior . . . who bridges middle age and old age without suffering from time-bound constraints of either’ (Katz and Marshall, 2003: 5). These alternative and conflicting ‘bipolar’ (McHugh, 2003) images of ageing shape the context through which many older people negotiate their social identities.

This chapter reviews debates about the shifting bases for identity formation in mid- and late-life as these have been shaped by larger theoretical questions related to the cultural landscape of contemporary Western societies. These have framed new ways of thinking about ageing and age-based identities, as conventional chronological distinctions and life course identities have become blurred in relation to a host of social, demographic and cultural shifts. Against this backdrop, the chapter surveys work that has explored the cultural sites and resources for identity construction in mid- to late-life, especially those that highlight the increasingly embodied, individualistic and consumption-based anchors of identity in contemporary Western societies. The contemporary—and impossible—goal of ‘growing older without ageing’ (Katz, 2005) shapes a contradiction-laden discourse of anti-ageing in tension with anti-ageism—what might be termed ‘post-ageist ageism’.

Ageing identities and ‘late’ modernity

A substantial body of theoretical literature has mapped out the contours of what has been called ‘late’ (Giddens, 1991), ‘second’ (Beck, 1992), ‘liquid’ (Bauman, 2000) or ‘post’ (Featherstone, 2007) modernity. While differing on the fine points, there is agreement that the traditional anchors of identity—including those linked to life course transitions—have eroded, giving way
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to a diversity of life courses and contexts for identity formation. Beck refers to this as the ‘deinstitutionalization of the life course’ where ‘the life course, like one’s lifestyle, should be regarded as less a question of fate and more a matter of individual responsibility’ (1992: 277). An emphasis on reflexivity and self-fashioning of identities is linked to the expansion of consumer culture and the general aestheticization of everyday life (Featherstone, 2007, Hennessy, 2000) and to a focus on ‘lifestyles’ that ‘give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity’ (Giddens, 1991: 81).

Drawing on this theoretical oeuvre, Gilleard and Higgs’s Cultures of Ageing (2000) was instrumental in opening up questions of ageing and identity in late modern societies. Prodding social gerontology to move beyond its focus on themes of ‘loss and lack’ as shaping later life, it set the agenda for the emerging ‘cultural turn’ in social gerontology. This turn importantly located ageing in relation to those key theoretical tropes that were shaping research in other domains of contemporary social life—especially those exploring fragmentation, individualization, differentiation and reflexivity in the construction of self and identity. In doing so, they provided an important critique of biologically-foundationalist approaches that invoked the inevitability of physical ageing with their implicit assumption that ‘the very hardware resources to sustain, let alone fashion, an identity in later life will eventually give out’, thus blunting the capacity for individual agency in later life (2000: 40). The ‘deinstitutionalization’ of life courses means that those qualities identified as defining the late modern subject—reflexivity, agency, flexibility, mobility, responsibility, individuality—have now been extended to older adults, transforming the contexts and resources for later-life identities. New questions about the malleability of age-related identities have emerged as these become increasingly detached from chronological age (Katz, 2010, Öberg and Tornstam, 2001).

This malleability is particularly evident in studies of the Third Age. Introduced by British historian Peter Laslett in 1987, the term ‘Third Age’ reflected economic and demographic shifts in wealthy Western nations, where a cohort of relatively healthy and financially secure older people were entering ‘the age of personal achievement and fulfillment’ (Laslett, 1987:135). Laslett’s concept of the Third Age had affinities with the category of the ‘young old’ previously posed by American gerontologist Bernice Neugarten (1974). Like Laslett, she identified the need for new terminology capable of capturing diversity in ageing, and acknowledging positive and productive ageing experiences and identities. The conceptual apparatus of the Third Age has been stimulating to cultural gerontology, informing a range of research on mid- and later-life activity, agency, representations and identities, and has prompted critical debates about inequality, social policy and commercialization. It has also been subject to critical commentary for the varying and sometimes contradictory ways in which it has been used (Carr and Komp, 2011).

Gilleard and Higgs’s (2011a) elaboration of the Third Age as a ‘cultural field’ is a productive point of departure. On their account, the Third Age is not simply another name for a stage of life, a cohort or a generation; nor is it merely clever postmodern jargon that risks depoliticizing gerontology or masking real issues of inequality and need in later life, as some critiques have suggested (Holstein, 2011). Linked to, though not defined by, the ‘baby boomers’ whose ‘generational habitus’ has been shaped by expectations of consumption, individuality, self-expression and the erosion of traditional anchors of identity such as work and family, it is conceptualized as an arena of practice.

Viewing the Third Age as a cultural field is not so much about focusing upon the chronological age of the participants or players as it is about mapping the social space within which they participate, the new logics that are driving such participation, and the new sets of possibilities that are realized within the field.

(Gilleard and Higgs, 2011a: 36)
A central ‘logic’ of this cultural space is its construction in opposition to ‘old’ age, with its connotations of impairment, social immobility and non-participation in autonomous, self-fashioning consumer lifestyles. Gilleard and Higgs conceptualize this agency-less Fourth Age as ‘a kind of social or cultural “black hole” that exercises a powerful gravitational pull upon the surrounding field of ageing’ (2010: 121–2). Third Age culture thus promotes the ‘liberation of ageing from old age’ (Gilleard and Higgs, 2005: 161)—in other words, it valorizes the ultimately impossible goal of ‘growing older without ageing’ (Katz, 2005: 188). It is on these grounds that images of ‘positive’ Third Age identities and lifestyles purporting to be anti-ageist are viewed by critics as underpinning more subtle, yet equally compelling forms of anti-ageing (Holstein, 2011, Öberg and Tornstam, 2001). For example, McHugh (2003) finds in his study of the imagery of contemporary retirement communities clear evidence of ‘bipolar’ ageism—a dualism of negative/positive images of ageing—which, as Cole (1992) notes, has existed for centuries—underpinning anti-ageing culture’s message of agelessness. As he summarizes it, ‘positive stereotypes centred on anti-ageing, agelessness and successful ageing stand in dialectic relation with enduring negative stereotypes of old age as dependence, decay and disease’ (McHugh, 2003: 180). Richards and colleagues (2011) note the difficulties of producing images that transcend this existing dualism of ‘heroes of ageing’ versus bodily decline, even when a project sets out with this intent. All of this suggests that there is no clear answer to the question ‘Anti-aging—are you for it or against it?’ as rhetorically posed by Cole and Thompson (2001–2).

Anti-ageism/anti-ageing and midlife identities

Gullette (1997) has argued that the paradoxical effect of anti-ageing discourse is to shift anxiety about ageing forward, into midlife, which has become the ‘entry point’ into cultural decline narratives, and an increasingly critical phase for constructing ageing identities. This is exacerbated by an even further expansion of the ‘mature’ market—the long ‘midlife’ now imagined by marketers. Katz noted in 2005 that the ‘so-called “ageless” seniors market’ (190) was usually pegged at 55+; today there is evidence that those in their 40s are now included, as planning for one’s personal health and welfare in later life and the work of not becoming (or at least appearing or acting) old intensifies. The masthead of Canada’s Zoomer magazine, for example, hails those in their ‘40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s and beyond’. The women’s magazine More, based in the USA, self-identifies as ‘a celebration of women over 40’. There is certainly some irony in the simultaneous extension of lifespans and earlier identification as ‘ageing’. As Mike Hepworth notes (1995: 177) the ‘accelerated age-consciousness’ that accompanies discourses of positive ageing permits ‘the fear of ageing into old age to predominate’.

Hepworth and Featherstone’s Surviving Middle Age was important in carving out midlife as a critical cultural space, drawing attention to the role of popular media in generating new images of ageing and promoting the value of ‘looking good’ and ‘ageing slowly’ to a mass audience (1982: 69). Their analysis of Retirement Choice magazine identified a critical shift in the mid-1970’s when the magazine became commercial, changed its name to Choice, went from monochrome to glossy, and featured for the first time close-ups of celebrities on the cover—‘all of whom presented an anti-ageist image in the crucial areas of personal appearance and lifestyle’ (1995: 35). Blaikie (1999: 101) notes that many print magazines targeted at older adults have since shifted their approach to this ‘pro-active Third Age awareness’. Subsequent research on media products directed at the Third Age market has confirmed this, highlighting in particular the focus on appearance, activity and celebrity in the construction of ‘successful’—and aspirational—ageing identities (Kitch, 2003, Lumme-Sandt, 2011, Marshall and Rahman, 2014, Smirnova, 2012, Ylänne, 2012). As Twigg (2011: 1049) notes, this ‘aspirational dynamic is at the
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heart of consumption’, and underscores the importance of attention to broader cultural economies in understanding ageing experiences.

Consistent with the individualization of lifestyles and aestheticization of everyday life in consumer capitalism, working on the body has emerged as a key aspect of fashioning the self in later life, particularly as ‘healthy ageing’ policies have been increasingly focused on prevention of age-related physical decline through various forms of lifestyle management, including exercise, diet and monitoring of ‘risk factors’ (Cardona, 2008, Moreira, 2010). Katz and Marshall (2004) argue that the emphasis on fitness is grounded in a biopolitical valorization of enablement and ‘functionality’, forging new ‘bio-identities’ ranked by lifestyle and health status, and linked to neo-liberal mandates of activity, responsibility, self-care and independence.

Sexual fitness, incorporating the ‘re-sexing’ of ageing bodies (Marshall and Katz, 2002, 2006), is also a central aspect of body-focused anti-ageing projects, whether biomedical or cosmetic in nature.

Doing age is, as much research has noted, complexly embodied (Calasanti, 2005, Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko, 2011, Gillear and Higgs, 2013, Laz, 2003, Marshall and Katz, 2012, Tulle, 2003). The management of appearance figures centrally, encompassing a range of practices including hair colouring, dieting, working out, use of cosmetics, and a range of medical treatments aimed at masking, reversing or forestalling the signs of bodily ageing. These practices are often couched in the language of reducing the discord between external appearance and one’s ‘authentic’ younger, more vital identity—what Featherstone and Hepworth identified as the ‘mask of ageing’ (1991). Marketers eagerly capitalized on demographically expanding markets, pitching anti-ageing products as part of the modern mature consumer’s kitbag. While ‘rejuvenative interventions’ are still more commonly undertaken by white populations in affluent, multi-ethnic Western societies, recent research by Gillear and Higgs (2013) suggests that this is changing as visible minorities also take up the ‘new somatic technologies of self-improvement that have flourished in second modernity’ (66). Twigg (2011, 2007) notes that the inclusion of self-realization and consumption in the remit of the social space of the Third Age makes fashion a potentially important site for the shaping of late-life identities. And while there is still a double standard observable in anti-ageing culture, with women particularly subject to scrutiny and pressure to retain a youthful appearance (Hurd Clarke, 2011, Richards et al., 2011), there is evidence that men, too, are feeling the pressure (Slevin, 2008, Spector-Mersel, 2006, Szymczak and Conrad, 2006, Ward and Holland, 2011).

Post-ageist ageism

As noted earlier, the discourse and imagery of the ‘Third Age’ has been criticized for grounding new forms of ageism. Martha Holstein, for example, argues that the proliferation of images of ‘busy, apparently happy, fit-looking, even sexy older people’ reinforces rather than challenges ageism, by continuing to enforce a dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ ageing (2011: 235).

While Holstein is correct to identify the extent to which celebratory representations of the Third Age depend on continued vilification of the presumed dependency and decrepitude of the Fourth Age, this is more complex than simply old, ageist wine in new, Third Age bottles. Certainly the late modern reflexive project of the self is, in its contemporary representations, ageist, in that youthful standards continue to ground successful ageing identities. However, it is not just an unproblematic emulation of youth. As Lumme-Sandt suggests in her analysis of a Finnish magazine aimed at a 50+ market, ‘a sort of praise for the charisma of ageing’ can also be identified (2011: 50). Garnham’s (2013) analysis of older men and women engaging in anti-ageing cosmetic surgery suggests that for many participants it was understood as
a ‘redesigning’ rather than a denial of ageing. A space is thus created for the development of contradiction-laden aspirational identities for ageing, where conventional (and traditionally stigmatized) signifiers of old age may be resignified. As Gilleard and Higgs (2011b: 138) summarize: ‘There now exists the opportunity to contrast the evident activity of aged social actors with the visible signs of their agedness—exemplified in such descriptions as gray panthers, silver surfers, wrinkly rockers and so forth’.

Caution is warranted, however, in embracing an unbridled optimism towards the opening up of the life course to new forms of self-making in later life. As a number of critics have argued, the individuals posited by theories of reflexive modernity belie their class, race and gendered positioning (Adkins, 2002, McNay, 2000, Savage, 2000, Skeggs, 2004). Increased capacities for reflexivity and self-fashioning of identities are not evenly distributed—they are dependent on particular forms of economic, social and physical capital, inequalities of which may increase with age. No less than with other types of social relations, and usually compounding them, individuals are constrained by the social relations of age that continue to privilege youth (or the performance of youth) over age, and some forms of ageing over others (Calasanti, 2003). Furthermore, the very discourses of personal choice and self-improvement may, as feminist critiques have argued, be rife with regulative aspects and closely connected to neo-liberal political agendas (Gill and Scharff, 2011). Furthermore, the conceptual apparatus of ‘positive ageing’ has been charged with ethnocentrism and of being shot through with values specific to Western societies (Wray, 2003: 515). Even for those marginalized and generally excluded from the suggested practices of self-making, revised cultural standards of ‘successful aging reconstruct life courses in such a way as to set new expectations and create new ways of “failing” to meet them’ (Ranzjin, 2010). Finally, while the conflation of positive ageing with anti-ageing that underlies the remaking of later-life identities has the potential to become a global phenomenon, local contexts will always shape the ways that successful ageing is discussed, sold and practised (see for example Erol and Özbay, 2012, Wentzell, 2012).

Drawing from analyses of post-feminism (Gill, 2007, Wearing, 2007), the term ‘post-ageist ageism’ perhaps captures the complex and contradictory ground on which new cultural identities of mid and later life are being shaped. Gill argues that a post-feminist sensibility is distinctive in that ‘feminist ideas are both articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed’ (2007: 163). In a similar fashion, post-ageist ageism embraces anti-ageist sentiments at the same time as old age is constructed as something to be resisted. Gill’s observations about women in post-feminist culture—on the one hand presented as ‘active, desiring social subjects’, but on the other hand ‘subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance that has no historical precedent’ (2007: 163)—might just as easily be made of older people in post-ageist cultures. Post-ageist ageism can only make sense in a culture where consumption and lifestyle choice frame age-based identities, and where ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ ageing identities are ‘socially constructed moral categories reflecting the prevailing social preference for individualised consumerism, voluntarism and decentralisation’ (Hepworth, 1995: 176).

**Conclusion**

A growing body of literature suggests that social transformations related to risk, individualization, reflexivity and consumption are reflected in shifting social and cultural resources for the construction of ageing identities. However, ‘anti-ageing’ culture, which has reimagined the life course in non-chronological terms, has not so much released ageing individuals from restrictive identities as re-located them in a reconfigured landscape of continuing fitness, fashionableness, functionality and flexibility. Building on critiques of post-feminism, this emergent narrative of
the continuing dualism of positive and negative images of aging is described as ‘post-ageist ageism’. The self-reliant, healthy, sexy, active ‘Third Ager’ is an important subject-position that has been at the centre of these narratives and—like all identities—is dynamic, situated and dependent on cultural resources.

This chapter has not broached what is perhaps one of the more pressing questions—how do we internalize, in ways that may take up, refuse or modify them, these resources for identity formation in later life? As Gill (2008: 433) remarks, ‘we know almost nothing about how the social or cultural “gets inside” and transforms and reshapes our relationships to ourselves and others’. Mapping the cultural resources that frame identity construction is a useful exercise, but there is still much to learn about how anti-ageing culture reshapes identities from the inside-out, making its ideals feel like one’s own.

Finally, while there is convincing evidence that contemporary consumer capitalism and neoliberal political agendas shape anti-ageing culture in such a way as to circumscribe the cultural resources available for fashioning late-life identities, it cannot be concluded that new, ‘positive’ ageing identities are produced simply through duping the masses. While anti-ageing culture and technologies cannot make good on their promise to transcend human ageing, neither are they masking some ‘authentic’ foundation for later-life identities. If agency is to be recognized in later life, and identity construction seen as a life-long process, then more complex and contradictory narratives must be acknowledged.

References


