Age seems so ubiquitous that when teaching sociology of old age my students were often incredulous that there were many people in the world who do not know how old they are. When I asked them how they knew how old they were, the answer was easy, as they live in the West where birthdays are a major annual ritual. However, when we dug a little deeper, they would identify how they lived in a highly bureaucratised society in which they were registered at birth and had to certificate their age at many points to validate access to age regulated rights: legal rights such as voting, social rights such as marriage and economic rights such as minimum wages. Moreover, their educational careers had been structured around progression up an annual certification ladder within an age specific cohort. As many of these students were teenagers they were very aware of the transitions to adult identities with attendant rights and duties – who can drive, who can buy alcohol, who is a legal sexual partner. They were, of course, much less familiar with the bureaucratisation of age in later years which, as a recent retiree, I have a raised consciousness – pension entitlements, bus pass regulations, driving licence renewal at 70, end of jury service duties. In other societies with other cultures and in different times, people neither celebrated birthdays nor bureaucratised age in the way British people currently do. Hence, many could not have put a number to their years since birth. Age is not irrelevant in such societies, but people are differentiated from each other using different criteria, perhaps birth order or reference to key historical or life course events. They coalesce into categories and groups through other methods of marking ‘age’ than chronological time, most frequently through rituals of initiation and other symbolically marked transitions to new statuses such as spouse or elder (Vincent 2005, 2013).

This chapter will discuss the cultural and political aspects of age difference but will concentrate on examples of old age transitions and resistance rather than youth cultures and movements. The relevant social science conceptual frameworks and terminology – ‘age’, ‘historical generation’, ‘familial generation’, ‘cohort’, etc. – are not exclusive to old age. This could legitimately be seen as neglecting a whole area of literature and concern; there are fascinating histories of childhood and development of categories such as ‘teenager’ (Jenks 1996). Interestingly, there is very little literature on ‘middle age’. The dominant category is seldom self-reflective, while other categories tend to image themselves in opposition to, and thus articulate the taken for granted attributes of, the ‘prime of life’. In this chapter, while acknowledging the extent of ‘age’ in all its
social manifestations, I will concentrate on issues around difference and identity in people’s later years.

There are radically different approaches to the study of ageing within academia. So different are the premises, theories, methods and points of attention that there is no over-arching paradigm which integrates all the different kinds of knowledge. There are a variety of medical and biological sciences which see ageing as a biological process – the curse of creatures who have sexual reproduction (Arking 2006). There are those in psychology and allied disciplines who observe the impact of age on personalities and adaptive behaviour by individuals (Eriksen 1982). There are those who see age in cultural and societal terms – from the institutionalisation of age criteria to the cultural construction of the meanings of age (Gubrium and Holstein 2000; Vincent 1995). This essay takes this latter approach and sees the first two as primarily data that describe the way contemporary society has built on earlier cultural concepts and has come to formulate its understanding of the nature of ageing.

Appreciating that age is a socially constructed method of differentiating people can direct our attention to all the diverse possibilities afforded by the segmentation of time. These segments of time may be seen as fixed by calendars, clocks and ritual cycles. Alternatively they might be relational, as for example with relationships of older to younger – even twins, in some situations, differentiate themselves by birth order, or the ‘sandwich generation’ caring for both children and parents. Social and cultural science uses a number of concepts to articulate different kinds of collective experience as opposed to the perspective of the individual actor. For the individual, getting older can be experienced as a single undifferentiated process, although awareness is sparked by specific cues and experiences (Oberg 2003). However, when viewed from a societal perspective, ageing covers a number of very distinct processes. These are usually listed as ‘age’, ‘cohort’ and ‘history’ effects (Hardy 1997). ‘Age’ can refer to the passing of the years through the life course; we leave school, we gain experience of dealing with others, our hair grows grey (if we let it) and we can change the tick boxes we enter when being grouped into age categories by questionnaires. Thus social differentiation can take place based on ‘age’ groups and culturally derived attributes assigned to them.

In addition, being born at the same time as a set of other people has social effects, and social generations can be identified. For example, those who were teenagers in the 1960s often self-identify themselves as a specific generation with distinctive attitudes (Blaike 2006). Men born after 1939 in Britain avoided compulsory conscription and didn’t learn to march in step. Mannheim (1997) in his seminal exposition on generations uses the example of the group of people born about 1810 that experienced an awakening sense of German identity in opposition to Napoleon’s conquests. The term ‘generation’ is widely used but there is considerable debate about its meaning. It can mean a socially recognised group of people born in a particular historical era with common experience and cultural identifiers as a result. In a familial context generation refers to the succession of parents and children, but is used rhetorically in other contexts, for example as in ‘fathers of the nation’ or ‘future generations’. In other specific knowledge contexts the term can also be used to describe a succession of cohorts, for example different generations of computer programmes, hybrid crosses in seed propagation or questionnaire samples in a repeated wave survey.

Historical change also needs to be understood as a social variable distinguished from ‘age’. For example, the older people are, the less likely they are to have academic qualifications, but this is due to change in the education system through modern history not because they have got older or have a taste for particular forms of popular music. Less frequently discussed as a component of ‘age’ is the effect of duration on social relationships and group loyalties. While strictly independent of age as either chronology, history or generation, duration matters in social and
interpersonal contexts. Relationships that last sixty years are different from those that last six months. Older people can form new relationships but in the nature of things they are more likely to have very long-standing relationships than are younger people. These can be interpersonal relationships, but can also be meaningful attachments to (or indeed alienation from) such things as landscape, technology and institutions (Gubrium and Holstein 2000).

Age and identity

Having established that there is nothing simple or ‘commonsense’ about what ‘age’ means in social science, we can examine the social dynamics of how ‘age’ becomes relevant to social difference. By comparing how age differences are conceptualised in various ways within different historical and cultural contexts, we can illuminate contemporary practice (Cole 1992; Daatland and Biggs 2005). In the context of modern Western culture, science is the dominant knowledge creation institution. The ‘science of ageing’ proceeds as if its subject is a fundamental life process to be understood through biological analysis (Kirkwood 1999). This is the dominant mode for constructing the meaning of old age in contemporary society (Lafontaine 2008). From this perspective age is essentially a feature of the body and its mechanisms and thus potentially something which can be understood and manipulated by science (Estes and Binney 1989). This plays into social difference in a number of ways, not least within the social movement around ‘anti-ageing’ (Mykytyn 2006). Within this perspective there are at least four ways in which old age as a phenomenon can be understood; each of them can be articulated into social difference in a variety of ways (Vincent 2006a,b).

Age can be considered to be the appearance of the body – how old you look. Age is, in this context, a feature of the body’s surface. Enormous effort is put into manipulating the inscription of age on the body. It produces a form of metric as in ‘looking ten years younger’, and science is used to validate claims to cosmetic effectiveness of ‘rejuvenating’ procedures (Hurd Clarke 2011).

Age can be considered as part of the interior of the body (Moreira and Palladino 2008). Hence old age is seen as sickness and loss of vitality of different organs of the body. Metrics here suggest different organs age at different rates. There are popular quizzes and ratings which purport to rate biological age as opposed to chronological age. The brain, the heart, the bones, etc., are given indices of ‘age’; but in practice these numbers merely rehearse the normative distributions of medical or fitness data.

Age can be considered to be a biological process which happens to all living things (although this statement is more controversial for unicellular or small life forms), and is in essence a biochemical process located at the intra-cellular level. Modern genetic science and biochemistry have been able to analyse and shed light on these processes (Carey 2003). But there remains a range of competing theories as to the significance of the different processes and problems in understanding the complex interactions involved. What is clear is that there is no single gene, or set of genes, which is responsible for ageing. In the model species predominantly used in laboratory experiments on ageing (yeast, fruit-flies and mice) many gene associations with life span have been found. In humans, it remains the case that the biochemical elixir of life remains as elusive as any of the other techniques envisaged in the long history of attempts to avoid ageing and death (Boia 2004). There have been many attempts to create reliable bio-markers to indicate ‘age’, and such scientific endeavours continue. People are not usually differentiated by such bio-markers, but there are concerns that such tests could be used to allocate people to groups assessed on the basis of risk, with consequences for their social rights and obligations.
The meaning of ‘old age’ can also be constructed through its position as the life stage next to death, whereby its essential defining features stem from the recognition of the proximity of life’s end. This construction is manifest in the ideas of post-humanism and various attempts, with greater or lesser scientific validity, to enhance longevity to the point of immortality (Turner 2007). From the understanding of the body as merely a biological machine, its demise is failure and oblivion, with implied culpability from those who did not prevent it happening. This perspective poses many ethical dilemmas about the end of life with which medical staff and carers have to struggle (Gott and Ingleton 2011; Schermer and Pinxten 2013). Further, it places responsibility on individuals to discipline their bodies and avoid life threatening or ‘risky’ behaviours. Health and lifestyle thus become part of the age based construction of identity and difference (Dumas and Turner 2007; Rose 2007).

It is possible to take a sceptical approach to ‘age’ existing at all within an unreconstructed empiricist perspective. Bio-gerontology contains many, often incompatible, theories of ageing, often reflecting the high degree of specialisation and fragmentation of scientific endeavour. If by ‘age’ we mean some single fundamental force of nature open to scientific measurement – which is a popular conception of ‘age’ – then it proves very difficult to pin down (Hall 2003). Just as there is human genetic variability which has no relationship to the social category of race, so there is biological variability, including human variability, with the passage of time, but this has little or nothing to do with the social categorisation of people by ‘age’ (Jones and Higgs 2010). Years since birth are of course, along with class and gender, powerful predictors of social phenomena. But those effects are not the consequence of cell reproduction, accumulation of anti-oxidants or ‘antagonistic pleiotropy’, but rather of specific social and cultural processes (Lock and Farquhar 2007).

Life courses and historical change

Over the last two centuries the transition to old age in industrial societies has become related to employment and retirement. There are good historical accounts of how modern industrial society developed a three-fold life course of pre-work, work and post-work (Vincent 1995). The stability of this model is questioned by the post-modern view of the plasticity of roles in the contemporary world (Gilleard and Higgs 2000). Britain no longer has a legally enforceable retirement age (BIS 2011). Anthropology can offer alternative perspectives to British and Western understanding of ageing. For example, there is great interest in Asia in the impact the dramatic economic changes over the last 50 years have had on family structures and values, particularly focussing on the role and destiny of ‘filial piety’ (Mehta 1997), while work on globalisation has looked at the impact of migration, urbanisation and rural depopulation on age differentiation (Phillipson and Vincent 2007).

Even within the culture of the West there is enormous variation in the criteria for marking difference and the social mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Solomon (2013) explores the fascinating world of families where a child has a radically different identity to that of the parents. Differences explored included deafness, dwarfism, homosexuality, criminality, etc. He uses the conceptual device of horizontal, distinguished from vertical, identities. Vertical identities are those which come from or are inherited through family upbringing – ethnicity, religion, language, etc. Horizontal identities are seen as achieved or acquired, rather than ascribed, or at least as ones which the younger generation enter independently, and perhaps despite of, their family of origin. Age is neither vertical nor horizontal; rather, it differentiates those kinds of identity. Thus people can be differentiated into language groups but language usage can be different amongst different age groups (Coupland et al. 1991); people may share a religion but
cannot simultaneously be both an elder and a novice. Similarly, horizontal identities have different meanings for different age groups: homosexuality is different if you are 17 or 70 (Rosenfeld 1999), and criminality is treated differently by age (Wahidin and Cain 2006). So, although these identities are seen to represent some important essence of a person which fixes them into one social category as opposed to others, with age identity that fixity is tempered by the perceived inevitability of the march of time. Generations may acquire labels or stigma from involvement in historical events which in some sense are fixed through time. However, even the meaning of historical or generational social markers of difference change their salience with the passage of time (Blaike 2006).

Importantly, identities are not pre-existing slots into which people are simply ascribed – identities are forged, changed and respond in particular historical and political circumstances. So Solomon’s account of his growing up into a gay identity despite his family is specific to his context of New York at that historical moment. People actively engage in inclusion and exclusion activity and create and elaborate cultural categories.

The dynamics of age identity

‘Age’ clearly exists because people believe it to exist and act accordingly. Social constructionist approaches to age differentiation look at how such differences are represented in symbol, ritual and behaviour and made manifest in interaction and institutionalisation. These are frequently explored through language use – how different discourses image sameness or otherness. The English language has a plethora of aphorisms which can be used either to deny (‘we are only as old as we think we are’; ‘you are as old as you feel’) or affirm (‘the ravages of time’; ‘you have to grow older but you don’t have to grow up’), the salience of age as an identity marker. Younger people may strive to be treated as having adult status as part of growing up, even though the institutionalisation of full adult status is being pushed later by wage and benefit legislation. Older people can also struggle to maintain an adult identity, infantalisation is a problem in care settings; a respondent to an Exeter AgeUK questionnaire said of her advice and information interview, ‘I came away feeling like a human being not an old woman with a problem.’

A comparison of different identities can be made by asking how they are transformed or transgressed – become the opposite of, or supersede, the category. In terms of gender and sexuality, there is a whole literature about transgender, and some babies have ambiguous gender assignment. Racial passing is also documented in anthropology and literature; moving from one racial group to another is a historical reality. With age one can envisage some sort of passing – people attempt to appear younger on a daily basis (Gimlin 2002). Can you be any age, gender or race you wish to be? The key distinction with age is that you clearly can if you wait long enough; what is more problematic is going backwards – reversing the ageing process. Of course, many people attempt this and the anti-ageing movement is a strong cultural tide. However, it is possible to say of ‘age’, in contradistinction to the other major sources of social difference, that all humans will experience social transitions across the boundaries between age based identities.

Old age identities are constructed like other identities in opposition. Minorities define themselves against the majority. Youth cultures define themselves by not being of their parents’ culture. This creates interesting issues for old age; reaction against the authority and seriousness responsibility of middle age and parenthood: ‘recycled teenager spending the kids’ inheritance’; red-hat ladies subverting the gentility of the retired afternoon tea brigade; or raging grannies subverting images of passive acceptance and withdrawal by direct action and political activism (Vincent 1999; Vincent et al. 2001).
Ageing population and its meaning

The proportion of older people in the world's population is growing, and many, but not all, national population profiles are also changing in this way. There is a variety of reasons for this. Overwhelmingly it is to do with declines in fertility experienced across the world. It is also due to falls in infant mortality leading to longer average length of life. To some extent, and concentrated in the richest nations in the world, it is to do with increased life expectancy at age 60 or above (United Nations 2011).

These changing demographics are reflected in changes to people’s experience of the life course. People do not now expect their children to die in infancy; the experience of being a grandparent is more frequent, lasts longer and has a different character than previously. Many more older people are privileged to be great-grandparents like myself. This changing demographic structure provides the opportunity for new and more complex social solidarities. Family inclusion and exclusion and retirement migration are two areas where these new social dynamics are manifest (Vincent 2006a).

Strangely these changes have aroused many scare stories in the media, in political discourse and in academia about the consequences of an older population. These are based around fears about the cost of medical and social care to welfare states (seldom to family carers) and the cost to public pension provisions (Gee and Gutman 2000). The rising average age of the population has been used to suggest that public pension provision is unsustainable (World Bank 1994). Many governments have picked away at terms and conditions of pension rights. In particular, the UK has abolished the legal retirement age and is raising the age of eligibility for the state pension – from 65 for men and 60 for women to 67 for both.

Although it is sometimes acknowledged that increased life expectancy represents a success for modern society, more often it is discussed in terms of loss of working age population and economic dynamism, and even by some in geo-political terms as loss of military personnel and willingness to enter military confrontations (CIA 2001; World Bank 1994). The demography on which these discourses are conducted is often flawed, showing no appreciation of the ‘life expectancy’ as a statistical measure or the greater significance of fertility rates to the shape of age distribution pyramids (Bourdelais 1998). In terms of constructing social difference around age criteria, the significance of changing demography lies in the way that it is imaged and contextualised. The tropes used to characterise demographic change and the increasing proportion of older people in the population concentrate on negative stereotypes (Gee and Gutman 2000; Vincent 1996).

Ageing populations are frequently imaged in swarm, swamping and rising tide images and also in epidemic tropes. These metaphors position older people as a large growing undifferentiated mass which pose a threat to the wellbeing of ‘us’, taken for granted, normals. They reflect similar tropes used to characterise other kinds of difference and processes of social exclusion. There are similarities with the way in which issues of race and immigration are constructed using swamp and rising tides rhetoric. The increasing number of older people is also imaged as a growing wave of illness and disease and dependency. Similarly epidemic images, particularly around AIDS, have been used in the stigmatisation of some sexualities and play a part in demonising some ethnic and disability identities. The alienation of one demographic category from another can also be expressed in terms of generation; hence the literature on intergenerational equity and greedy baby-boomers (e.g. Williamson et al. 1999). However, the distinctive nature of age differentiation makes this trope ambiguous, as we all age and will become part of the stigmatised age category. Further, the dominant form of intergenerational social intercourse, that of the family, exerts a powerful rhetorical effect: exclusionary tactics are difficult to institutionalise when the
consequences are intra-familial. The key questions to ask are by whom and why are such tropes expounded. They clearly form an essential part of the arsenal of those who wish to favour private over public provision and emphasise individual responsibility over collective provision. They erroneously position the dismantling of public welfare as a demographic inevitability rather than a political choice.

There is a long history of political activism around old age issues and identities. Much of this has been centred around pensions (Macnicol 2006; Vincent et al. 2001). The establishment of national pension systems in the USA and in Britain was, at least in part, the consequence of mass publicly supported campaigns for state provision of financial support in old age – in the form of some scheme of national insurance. In the last third of the twentieth century there has also been the articulation of identity politics to mirror activism which sought to revalue racial, gender and sexual identities. Iconic among such movements were the Grey Panthers, but more broadly the ‘third age’ social movement has sought to re-evaluate post-retirement life (Laslett 1989). In recent times there have been pensioner activism, pensioner political parties seeking to prevent the roll-back of the welfare state and anti-ageing campaigns in health and employment.

In contemporary UK politics, age based parties or political movements are not absent but are less conspicuous than some other modern democracies (cf. Goerres 2009). Although there is much rhetoric about the older vote, there is a lack of articulation between age interests and political institutions, and old age is seen as a handicap to political leadership. Older people vote in higher proportions than younger people so are often seen as having political clout; the Conservative pledge at the 2009 UK general election not to take away universal age benefits such as a bus pass can be cited as an example (Chambers 2013). However, older people’s real interests in the NHS, pensions and annuities have not been protected. In Britain, charities such as AgeUK (2009), or even the specialist supplier of products for older people, Saga, take the voice of older people rather than single interest parties. There are significant differences between the UK and the US, where the American Association of Retired Persons is a powerful single interest lobby group. The issues of pension funds and how older people’s interests relate to the global financial crisis are scandalously under-researched areas (Blackburn 2002).

The politics of pensions is played out in part around the ambiguity of the term ‘generation’. As discussed above, generation can have a familial referent or mean a particular birth cohort. Thus those seeking to undermine universal and state provision seek to undermine its legitimacy by identifying pension recipients as a specific cohort, people who have benefitted at the expense of others, specifically the golden generation feather bedded by passing debts to their children; and worse, tainted by the link with the 1960s as a hedonistic generation into sex, drugs and rock and roll and therefore undeserving of such privileged status (Williamson et al. 1999). However, generation as the familial image of grandparents is a powerful political force – ‘compassionate ageism’ (Vincent et al. 2001). Those seeking to demonise welfare recipients struggle to include older people in the category ‘scroungers’ because it is the nature of the identity that we all should love our grandparents. The symbolic salience in the UK of the bus pass as a badge of old age presents a challenge to those who wish to end universal age based benefits.

Conclusion

There are a number of suggestions as to why ageism is so prevalent in contemporary society. Unlike racism or sexism, it is still socially acceptable to express ageist attitudes in public (AgeUK 2011; Macnicol 2006). There are psychological explanations which link fear of old age with fear of sickness and death – hence the tendencies to remove older people and their images from sight and mind (Elias 1985). There are class explanations which locate the need in capitalist society to
coerce or incentivise people to work to the detriment of the status and living standards of those at the post-work stage of life (Formosa and Higgs 2013; Vincent 1995). Of course, some older people live from capital. However, although pension funds are highly significant sources of capital in the modern economy, the nominal owners of rights in them have no significant control over them and so they may be better understood as deferred wages rather than return on capital (Clark 2000). Ageism has been associated with cultural values of the body and of individualism – values at the forefront of contemporary culture (Gagnier 2010; Tulle 2008). But simple single cause explanations do not do justice to the complex social dynamics and the contemporary social narrative by which ‘third age’ values contest with the marginalisation and exclusion of older people (Laslett 1989). C. Wright Mills (1970) suggests that one of the most powerful insights social science can offer is to link large scale societal change with individual personal experience. The range of emotions and feelings when, for the first time, I was proffered a seat on the London Underground by a young Chinese student, has to be understood in the context of a society which regards older people as different and the status of old age as undesirable, as well as my rucksack being heavy.

Notes

1 For example, from 1 January 2012 you have to be 35 or over to be entitled to housing benefit, which does not assume as a single person you are sharing your accommodation with others (DWP 2011).

2 Quotation from a respondent in an internal quality control report that the author co-produced as a Trustee of Exeter AgeUK.

References


