

2nd Edition

KEY CONCEPTS

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GENDER STUDIES

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AGE/AGEING

In simple terms, ageing is a process of growing older, signalled in many cultures by the passing of birthdays. From a sociological perspective, however, age is more than merely how old a person is in numerical terms. It is understood as a complex interweaving of several processes, including physiological ageing and the socio-cultural significance attached to its effects on the appearance and capacities of our bodies and minds over time; social ageing, in terms of the life course and its stages (the culturally defined timetable of expected behaviours deemed as appropriate for individuals of particular ages within any one society); and cohort ageing, marked by the period of history an individual is born into and which thereafter affects their experiences, opportunities and their world-views (Pilcher, 1995). Scholarship on gender and the complex, multifarious processes of age and ageing is still in its relative infancy, but a growing number of critics (for example, Arber et al. 2003; Sargeant 2011) are asserting the significance of age as a category in intersectional thinking which requires further development to match more sophisticated accounts of the multi-modal impacts of oppression and exclusion.

Ageing is a continuous process that is worthy of further scrutiny at all stages of the life course, but attention has particularly focused on the later life course stages, of middle age and old age. Ageism is increasingly recognised as a cause of exclusion and marginalisation for both older men and older women in relation to the workplace, to health and in public policy (Nelson 2002). Yet, in fact, due to sex differences in life expectancies in Western societies which mean there are more older women than older men, it is true to say that later life is very much an issue for, and about, older women (Bernard and Meade 1993). In terms of material resources in later life, women are at a greater disadvantage than men. Women's more intermittent (and often part-time) employment histories due to motherhood and caring responsibilities during their earlier life course impact negatively upon access to pensions, savings and other financial resources (Sargeant 2011). This means that, in old age, women are at a much greater risk of poverty than men. In Western societies, given that a youthful appearance is increasingly valued, along with signs of victory against the 'war on ageing' in the form of cosmetic surgery, extreme dieting and fitness fads, growing physically and visibly older impacts negatively on both women and men. For women, though, ageism and sexism combine to mean that women are at a greater disadvantage than men as they visibly grow old (Arber, et al. 2003).

For feminists the key point where ageism raises its head is the period of a woman's life post-reproduction, where ideal-type notions of femininity no longer apply and there are few cultural scripts for ageing that are not accompanied by images of sickness, loss and decline (Sontag 1979). Positive images of older women that do not depend on the stereotypes of the granny or old hag are scarce in popular discourses (Arber and Ginn 1991). Self-expression is also policed by strong prejudices about what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour among women in the later stages of the life course. In protest, some older women have taken it upon themselves to deliberately behave 'badly' in order to remain in the public eye. Members of the US Red Hat Society (inspired by the poem 'Warning' by Jenny Joseph that begins 'When I am an old woman I shall wear purple, with a red hat that doesn't go, and doesn't suit me') choose these vibrant colours to wear and meet socially to celebrate a positive and hopeful outlook on ageing. Moreover, there are individuals like Helen Mirren or Meryl Streep, talented actors who have managed to continue to attract central, demanding roles aged in their sixties – even if their success only serves to underscore the rarity of such roles for women more generally.

Among feminist activists and scholars, age and ageing have tended not to be a core concern. Many of the young women who found voice in the women's movement of the late 1960s and 1970s would disappear from public view after childbirth or other commitments sapped their time and energy. A substantial number who remained, in politics or academia, would continue to invest time in reflecting on making a better and more equal society for the next generation of women, rather than reflecting on the challenges they experienced moving into middle and old age and the realm of increased invisibility for the older woman. There are a number of important feminists from the activist days of the second wave still writing, and though few dwell on the fact of their own age, or consider more broadly whether feminism is itself fundamentally ageist, there are some notable exceptions. Betty Friedan's *The Fountain of Age* (1993) focuses mainly on her experiences and those of white middle-class women, but does urge acceptance and celebration of ageing, counter to the popular cultural exhortations to fight the 'war' against it. For women more than men, age is not just a numerical figure, but denotes the passing from fertility to menopause, characterised most often as a period of loss and bereavement. For Germaine Greer, however, 'Many women only realize during the climacteric the extent to which their lives have been a matter of capitulation and how little of what has happened to them has actually been in their interest'; for Greer, then, the menopause 'marks the end of apologizing' (Greer 1991: 4; 440) and heralds a new era of self-definition and empowerment. For both these veteran feminists, age is part of life's journey to be celebrated and anticipated; yet relatively few works deal with this period of a woman's life or, if talking about discourses of age and ageing, move beyond its impact on women in their thirties and forties.

Lynne Segal's memoir *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing* (2013) considers the problem of representing ageing authentically even in the face of a growing ageing population in Western societies. As she notes,

feminism not only hoped to reach out to all women, but also strongly rejected the ways in which women are surveyed and defined in relation to their bodies, while often deploring the many hours of a day, of a lifetime, women spent trying, and sooner or later failing, to prove themselves desirable creatures in the world at large, the world of men. (Segal 2013: 11)

Margaret Morganroth Gullette, one of the foremost feminist critics on age writing today, proposes that we are ‘aged more by culture than by chromosomes’ (2004: 101), and goes on to explore how age is a category which more often medicalises and limits women’s potential than focuses on actual lives and experiences. More research is required on how, as Greer implies above, ageing for women might be liberation from stultifying expectations and conformity, and how feminists might further explore and critique the gendered pathways which consign women to being not fit to be looked at (literally unrepresented in culture) versus the attributes of wisdom and distinguished carriage often associated with ageing men.

It is, then, among the writings of some of the older cohorts of feminists, as they themselves experience later life, that we find reflections on the ageing process. Other aspects of the relationship between gender and age in terms of cohort processes have also drawn the attention of gender scholars. Feminist political movements have been dominated by the young: this is true of the student-heavy membership of the second-wave Women’s Liberation Movement as well as the more recent popular-culture savvy third-wave feminists. In the case of the response of third-wave to second-wave feminism, tension between the two movements has often been characterised in the form of ‘generational’ conflict, with earlier feminists depicted as disapproving ‘mothers’ of third-wave ‘daughters’ (Henry 2004). In fact, the ‘generational’ conflict is largely a result of cohort processes – in other words, the impact of the different socio-historical contexts in which each experienced their youth on subsequent experiences, opportunities and world-views. A study by Pilcher (1998) compared responses to and understandings of feminism by women belonging to three different cohorts. Younger cohorts were found to be more knowledgeable about and favourable toward gender issues like equality, abortion and feminism than older cohorts, and were more likely to describe themselves as feminists. Studies like those of Henry (2004) and Pilcher (1998) contribute to our understanding of the complex and important ways that age can be a source of diversity and difference among women. As Josephine Dolan and Estella Tincknell assert,

theories of race, sexuality, class, disability and childhood, as well as gender, have radically shifted our understanding of the body away from essentialist formulations predicated on biology, and have established identity as a product of discourse and culture. But the intersection with age remains underdeveloped and under-theorised. (Dolan and Tincknell 2010: viii)

See also: intersectionality, representation, waves of feminism

Further reading

Margaret Morganroth Gullette is a leading scholar in the field of age studies and *Aged by Culture* (2004) is a significant contribution to the field. Simone de Beauvoir (1970) reflected on later life and old age in her memoir of her own ageing. Dolan and Tincknell (2010) is one of a number of collections which look at how ageing is represented in culture today, whilst Calasanti and Slevin's (2006) edited volume urges a shift in how feminist scholars approach the study of inequalities by showing why and how age matters.