

A. Introduction

1. As we have seen, ideas such as "childhood" and "old age" are good examples of the relative nature of many of the concepts used in Sociology.

- It is easy to show how such concepts are clearly social constructions. Biologically, with the passage of time, we will all become old - but the simple empirical statement of this fact hides a wider and more-complex set of ideas.
- Whilst people will experience various biological phases in their physical development, two basic points are clear:
 - a. There is not a precise definition of concepts like "old age".
 - b. The social significance of such concepts changes in relation to the social context within which they are created and specified.

2. We can start to **understand** and **apply** these concepts in terms of **labelling theory**: Thus, in very simple terms:

- Based upon the perception of biological changes we create labels to describe what we believe to be phases in human physical development.
- Each label we impose creates a category ("Child", "Adult", "Elderly" and so forth).
- Each category is assigned a set of social characteristics which may, or may not, be valid for everyone in that category.
- These characteristics are stereotypes and we use our stereotypical knowledge about expected forms of behaviour within each biological category in order to:
 - a. Understand the behaviour of people placed in this category.
 - b. Orientate our behaviour to such people in order to behave appropriately to them (in terms of the norms associated with the social category).

3. In the above, therefore, two things are evident:

- a. The biological fact of human physical development is a significant factor in our understanding of the way social attributions are made on the basis of categories such as age.
- b. To understand the concept sociologically we have to examine not just the categories themselves (the elderly, etc.), but also the social significance that people attribute to differences based around the concept of age.

4. **Historically** and **comparatively** societies attribute different ideas to similar human forms of human development. We need to explore the nature of the process whereby categorizations, interpretations and attributions are socially constructed (which places us squarely in the realm of Interactionist sociology).

5. Sociologists categorise physical development in terms of things like childhood, youth, adulthood and old age, because these are familiar biological labels widely recognised in our society. The interpretation of the significance and meaning of such categories, however, depends on the nature of the society in which they are created.

- Attributing social characteristics to these categories is dependent on the nature of the society in which such categories are created. Not all societies give the same characteristics to these biological categories. In addition, the process of categorization is relatively arbitrary (at what age does a person become old, for example; do all societies share the same beliefs about what it means to be "old"?). We need, therefore, to say something about both the idea of - and social process involved in - such categorization.

6. The concept of a "**biological life-cycle**" (in basic terms, the progression from birth to death) is one that can be empirically demonstrated. Physically at least, a young baby is different to a fourteen year old; both are different to a fully-grown adult. However, simply because we can demonstrate something empirically, it doesn't necessarily mean that it is easy to understand either:

- a. **Empirical** boundaries between "stages" in the life-cycle.
- b. The **social significance** of these "stages".

However, since these are **social categories** that are in common use in our society (we learn them through the general socialisation process) we can say that:

- a. There will be some broad level of agreement about the categories.
 - This should not be surprising given that people have grown-up in the same society and will have experienced similar levels of cultural socialisation.
- b. There will be similarities and differences over the range of **empirical evidence** that can be used to support the various categorizations.
- c. **Empirical evidence** will probably be social, rather than physical / biological.
 - For example, the idea that adulthood begins at the age of 18 or 21. If you think about it, this is true for our society but there is no hard-and-fast reason why adulthood should / should not begin at this age.

7. The above demonstrates two main things:

- a. Societies develop ideological frameworks about age categories / life-cycle phases. These frameworks help us to interpret not only age differences, but also concepts of "age appropriate" behaviour (for example, it may be considered appropriate for a male child to cry if it burns its hand, but inappropriate for an adult male in this situation).
- b. The evidence we use in relation to the creation and labelling of such categories is **subjective** (but none the less socially significant for being so).

B. The Social Construction of Old Age.

1. There are two basic things we need to analyse in this section:
 - a. Do people have different conceptions about what constitutes old age?
 - b. Do sociologists agree / disagree about conceptions of old age?
- This is an important question to consider because through an overview of social scientific conceptions of old age we can answer the first of these questions; that of whether or not major changes have taken place in relation to the way the old have been treated in both:
 - a. The past (the **historical dimension**) and
 - b. Between different cultures (the **comparative dimension**).

C . Theoretical Perspectives on Old Age

1. We can begin by noting some general ideas about the idea of old age in our society.
- Firstly, the category of **old age** has a **relatively precise definition** in terms of when it begins (at 65 for men and 60 for women). These are the ages when people are officially made to "retire from paid employment".
 - a. Although these figures are precise, it doesn't mean they are not **arbitrary**. There is no absolute reason why old age should begin at 60, nor why there should be different definitions for men and women.
 - b. The age at which old age officially begins has changed - and continues to change - throughout the historical development of our society (currently, for example, the government is proposing that the retirement age for women should be increased to 65).
- Secondly, the category "old age" hides a complex set of **different experiences**, mainly because at present it covers a huge age range (for example, between the ages of 60 and 100). It is by no means certain that a woman of 60 years has very much in common with a man of 90 years.

We could sub-divide the broad category of old age into a number of smaller categories (the "young old", the "old" and so forth), but it is sufficient for our purposes that you simply recognise the idea that old age is not necessarily an homogenous biological and social category (by which is meant that old people are not all the same and neither do they experience old age in the same way).

- In 1991 of people aged 60+ in Britain:

Married = 57.3%
 Widowed = 30.6%
 Single (never married) = 8.2%
 Divorced = 3.7%

40% said they had a "limiting long-term illness"

37% of households contained one or more aged 60+

- In 1991, of people aged 65+ in Britain:

38% lived alone
 6% lived with a son or daughter

47% had access to a car (59% of men, as opposed to 38% of women had access to a car).

Less than 1% of those aged 60 - 74 were in care.
 5% of those aged 75 - 84 were in care
 21% of those aged 85+ were in care.

- Thirdly, **Britain**, in **demographic** terms, has an **ageing population**. For example:

In 1901 under 5% of the population were over 65.
 By 1991, 16% of the population were over 65.

In 1901, 1.7 million of the population were over 65.
 By 1991, 10 million of the population were over retirement age.

- Two points can be noted in relation to the above demographic changes:
 - a. Our society has a **lower fertility rate** now than in the past (therefore, the elderly are a statistically greater percentage of the population).
 - b. People have a **longer life expectancy** - they are living much longer now.
 - For example, between 1945 and 1991, the percentage of the population aged 80 and over increased from 2% to 3.7%.
- Although the elderly are an increasingly large and significant proportion of the population in modern Britain, this does not mean that attitudes about the elderly are particularly positive or changing rapidly. If we think about the various characteristics associated with the label of old age it is evident that the ideology surrounding old age (that is, the framework of stereotypical ideas through which we are encouraged to view and interpret old age) tends to be resolutely negative.

- You can examine some of your own **preconceptions** about the elderly by considering the following questions:

1. How similar are old people?
2. Does health automatically deteriorate with age?
3. Is senility inevitable in the old?
4. Does personality change with age?
5. Are the elderly isolated and lonely?
6. Are the old necessarily unhappy and unloved?
7. Are the elderly economically unproductive (a "burden on society")?

- Another aspect to the **labelling process** involved in old age is the **language** used to **describe** the elderly. Many of the ways the old are described in everyday language are **negative**. This is not something confined to the elderly, of course, but language does reflect the way people perceive and interpret the process of growing old.
- Sociologists call the above ideology "**ageism**" - imposing negative stereotypes on people simply because of their age. This concept is similar to the use of **sexist** and **racist** stereotypes as part of negative labelling processes in our society.
- The concept of ageism is not, of course, confined to simple stereotypes produced through the use of language. It extends into many areas of social life:
 - Compulsory retirement from work.
 - Age barriers in the work place.
 - Special concessions for people who have retired (bus passes etc.).
 - Withdrawal of medical treatment from the old.

Each of the above, it could be argued, are aspects of **social differentiation** and **inequality** in our society. As a class exercise, you might like to debate the pros-and-cons of each of the above **forms of discrimination** (and any others you can think of, come to that).

- Thompson** ("I Don't Feel Old: Understanding the Experience of Later Life", 1991) argues that one of the qualities of ageism is not simply discrimination. It also involves the elderly dissociating themselves from the label "old". Thus:

"...whatever their chronological age, whatever their appearance, whatever their health and physical ability, and whatever their awareness of all these aspects of themselves, they almost unanimously did not think of themselves as old".

- As the writer **J.B.Priestly** famously observed when asked about his experience of being old, he said that, as far as he was concerned, he still had the same mind and personality he had when he was 18. All that had changed was his body had aged...

D. Sociological Theories.

- We can look at a number of sociological theories that seek to explain the reasons for the apparent marginalization and negative stereotyping of the elderly.

1. Disengagement Theory:

- This is a generally functionalist theory (developed by writers such as **Cumming and Henry** ("Growing Old", 1961) where the emphasis is on explaining how the process of growing old is functional for society.
- This theory involves the idea that the progressive withdrawal of the elderly from all aspects of social life reflects the onset of their **ultimate disengagement** from society: **death**. The **ageing process**, as it is socially expressed and enforced, represents a **functional** "coming to terms" with the biological fact of death - something that is **functional** to both the **individual** and **society** as a whole.
- Disengagement is a **two-way process**. The **individual** progressively disengages from their general involvement with society (retirement and so forth) and **society**, in turn, starts to disengage from the individual (people interact socially with the elderly on fewer and fewer occasions).
- This process is functional to society because it is the means whereby the ultimate death of the individual does not unduly disrupt the general functioning society.
- **Criticisms** of this theory that we could note here are that:

a. Disengagement is not a progressive, inevitable, consequence of growing old (few people are always actively engaged in the society to which they belong, for example).

On this basis we could **justify** discriminatory measures against, for example, the unemployed, on the basis that they have disengaged themselves from a normal, central, activity in society.

b. Secondly, as the unemployment example shows, disengagement is not simply a matter of choice - the old have disengagement forced upon them. This theory ignores the role of cultural values and economic structures in the active creation of disengagement.

c. It is a variation on the idea of "**blaming the victim**" for the fact they are discriminated against. In basic terms, if people weren't old they wouldn't suffer discrimination...(and if this seems to make sense to you, try replacing "old" with "black" or "male" - does it still make sense?).

2. Political Economy Theory:

- This is a **Marxist**-based theory that relates the position of the elderly in our society to the requirements of **Capitalism**. Peter **Townsend** ("Ageism and Social Policy", 1986) is representative of this general theoretical perspective.
- This theory argues that the (Capitalist) requirement to continually "renew" the workforce (the young can be made more productive than the old and hence become a source of greater profit) means that the **elderly** are **denied access** to the **social resources** on which **status** depends (income from work, for example). A form of **structured dependency** is (artificially) created and becomes a central plank around which an **ideology of ageism** develops:

The old are dependent because they are denied access to social resources.
The denial of access to social resources creates dependency.

- **Institutionalised dependency** (retirement and so forth) is seen to benefit the ruling class by removing relatively unproductive workers from the economy, thereby creating space for new, relatively more-productive, workers.

3. Exchange Theory:

- **Turner** ("Ageing, Status Politics and Sociological Theory", 1989) is **critical** of the **above theories**. He argues that the position is more complex. Economic factors alone do not satisfactorily explain the **marginalization** and **disengagement** of the old. **Turner** argues that the **elderly** are **stigmatised** because their **status** falls when they are unable to control **any form of social resources** (not just economic ones) that can be exchanged for status.
- **Hockey and James** ("Growing up and growing old", 1993) argue that, in general, one of the most important social resources in our society is economic activity (work). Those who are actively involved in "work society" achieve a higher social status than those who are not actively involved.

4. Social Generational Theory.

- This theory explains the elderly as different to the rest of society on the basis of their biological age. **Dowd** ("The Old Person as Stranger", 1986), for example, describes the old as,

"Immigrants in time" and "Strangers in their own land".

- The old are different because their life experiences are rooted in the values, norms and customs of the **past**. As society moves on, the old remain trapped in the **identity** conferred by their past experiences (both in their own eyes and those of others). **Cultural separation** occurs and this is mirrored by a **social distance** between those "from the past" and "those in the present". In turn, social distance reinforces cultural differences.

5. Activity Theory.

- Finally, another **Functionalist theory** takes a different line to those outlined above. Although it focuses upon such things as how the elderly learn to **play the role of "being old"** - and hence their adaptation to the social concept of "being old" - it tends to do so in a **positive** way.
- This theory suggests that although the old do **disengage** in many ways from wider social relationships (through choice or necessity), they also **engage in new forms of social relationships**. That is, they become **active participants** in the creation of a **new social identity**, albeit one that is based around the acceptance of their "elderly status".
- This theory is important because it sees the experience of old age in a **positive** rather than a wholly negative light. It suggests that the experience of growing old is not necessarily one in which the elderly are doomed to living out their years in misery and seclusion.

E. Old Age: A Historical Dimension.

1. **Historical comparison** is a useful **method** for understanding the nature of present forms of social life. We can use the **past** as a **resource** for the **understanding** of the **stable** and **changing** features of social life and, through a **comparative methodology** come to understand the various social processes that influence and possibly shape the present.

- One of the main differences between **sociological** and **non-sociological** (or common sense) forms of thought (**methodology**) is that **sociologists** encourage a **critical** view of the **past**.
- **Commonsense** knowledge, on the other hand, frequently uses an **uncritical** view of the **past** ("the good old days", for example) as a means of **criticising** the **present**. We find this thinking in all areas of social life (education, deviance, family life and so forth) and we must, therefore, be careful to avoid seeing the historical dimension to old age in terms that portray it as either:
 - a. A golden age where the old were respected and revered.
 - b. A terrible time when the elderly were neglected and abused.
- Both of these views are wrong, albeit for different reasons.

2. One **problem** we have with **historical comparisons**, is that unless we look at historical records (contemporary accounts of social activity as it was experienced in the past) our ideological preconceptions - selective memories about how we would like or imagine the past to have been - will cloud our analysis and judgements.

- While we must treat historical documents **critically** (such accounts may be written from a **particular ideological perspective**, designed to prove a particular, self-interested, point), from our knowledge of **family life in Britain in the past**, a number of things relating to old age are evident

- In **pre-industrial Britain**, as writers such as **Parsons** have argued, **family and working life** were much more **closely integrated** (there was **little institutional differentiation** between family and work - the workplace was frequently the family home). The implication of this is that the elderly were less likely in the past to suffer economic and social segregation from the rest of the family group.
- A **lower life expectancy** (especially amongst the **poor**) meant old age was rarely experienced by the lower classes. Few amongst the peasantry, for example, lived long enough to enter old age. On the other hand, this did mean that people tended to be **economically active** for the majority of their life; again, this must have contributed to a **closer integration** of the "elderly" into the general structure of family and social life.

In our **present-day society**, for example, although people of all social classes live longer (the upper and middle classes do, on average, still live longest of all however - one more reason for studying hard and getting those A-level qualifications that will get you a professional, middle-class, job...), people may not be economically active for the majority of their lifetime. If you think that, on average, people start full-time economic activity around the age of 18, work for 45-odd years and, on average, live into their late-70's, the difference between economically-active and economically-inactive time is not that great...

- As we have seen with the concept of childhood, pre-industrial Britain was less likely to categorise various aspects of people's life-cycle in the way that we do today. We could over-simplify the situation by arguing that the life-cycle, for the majority of people in pre-industrial society, consisted of two stages:
 - a. Pre-adulthood (up to the age of 6 or 7 perhaps).
 - b. Adulthood (with some differentiation into "young and old")..
- In addition, without institutions such as the Welfare State, the concept of retirement was largely unknown - people stopped working either through illness or death (although where elderly people existed their passage into their elderly status was probably marked by less arduous work).
- The old, in this type of society tended not to be defined chronologically (in terms of a particular age). Rather, they were defined in terms of their relative helplessness and dependency upon others. Old age, therefore, was a relatively **fluid concept** applied to a state of physical health and activity, rather than a specific age.
- We have to be aware that clear **class differences** emerge when looking at the position of the elderly in pre-industrial Britain. Life expectancy amongst the aristocracy, for example, was far greater than amongst the peasantry.
- Old age was a more meaningful concept amongst this class and they controlled a level of social resources that would help to provide for an extended life span.

- Attitudes towards the elderly tended to be mixed in pre-industrial society. The elderly were **not necessarily** treated with dignity and respect. **Thompson** ("I Don't Feel Old", 1991) argues that where the **elderly** possessed **valuable social resources** (wealth, knowledge, technical skills and so forth) they were treated with respect and dignity. He argues that a **gerontocracy** frequently developed (that is, **social leadership on the basis of age**), whereby most of the important parish and public figures were relatively old. They were important because of their age.
 - In **art and literature**, however, the elderly were frequently portrayed in a different light - as being at a stage in the life cycle that was not undesirable. This difference suggests that the way the elderly were viewed in pre-industrial society was **not homogenous** (either with great respect or as a burden). Two points can be noted:
 - a. The position of the elderly was rather **ambivalent** and
 - b. The level of **respect** afforded to the elderly was probably based more upon **class factors** (wealth, land ownership and so forth) than upon age itself.
 - We can **conclude** that where the elderly were treated with deference and dignity it was because they were **powerful figures** in pre-industrial society rather than because they were "old and wise". **Featherstone and Hepworth** ("Ageing and the Old", 1990) argue that **old age itself** was **not a source of respect**. Those who had been unable to make provision for old age tended to be despised and neglected.
3. The idea that, in the past, the elderly were treated with more respect and given greater social status tends, sociologically, to be associated with **modernisation theory**.
- This theory argues that one of the main consequences of the **social and economic modernisation** brought about by the process of **industrialisation** was the **undermining of traditional forms of respect** for the old. There are many reasons for this, but they mainly focus upon the fact that:
 - a. The skills acquired by the elderly throughout their life time became less of a social resource once they could be passed on by other means.
 - b. Geographic mobility tended to separate the elderly from their (extended) family, leading to both economic and social isolation.
 - Although the validity of this theory is debatable, it is clear that the industrialisation process and its after-effects did have the consequence of creating a separate life cycle stage within the general population.

For **example**, in the 20th century, as life expectancy has grown longer, the **elderly** have started to resemble a **sub-cultural group**, shaped by both their own desires and the actions of the State. The gradual introduction of old age pensions, for example, (beginning in 1908 with the Old Age Pension Act and consolidated after the Second World War with the establishment of a system of National Insurance) marks the **elderly** off as a **distinct social group** in both our own and most other industrial societies.

- Jane **Pilcher** ("Age and Generation in Modern Britain", 1995) argues that,

"The institutionalization of retirement can be recognised as one of the key factors in the social construction of old age as a distinct stage in the modern life course."

- As she further notes, statistically:

In 1890-91: 60% -70% of men over 65 were economically active.
By 1951: 30% of men over 65 were economically active.
By 1992: 7% of men over 65 were economically active.

- **Arber and Ginn** ("Gender and Later Life", 1991) observe that only 3% of women over the age of 65 were economically active in the late 1980's.

F. Old Age: A Comparative Dimension.

1. **Cross-cultural comparisons** of the status of the elderly show a reasonable **disparity** between various societies. The differences are most marked when comparing **modern industrial societies** with **pre-modern or non-industrialised societies**, but it is also clear that even when comparing societies such as the UK and USA there are differences in the relationship between the elderly and other sections of society.

- When comparing different societies (especially complex societies such as our own with smaller-scale societies) the **experience** of old age is not always the same. Within the former type of society, for example, class differences play a part in determining the nature of the way different groups of the elderly are generally viewed in society.

2. Differences in cultural perceptions do exist and we can note a number of these:

- **Kagan** ("Activity and Ageing in a Colombian Peasant Village", 1980) observed that the old tended to remain socially and economically active, as far as physically possible, throughout old age. They did **not** constitute a **gerontocracy**, but were nevertheless seen as **valued and respected** members of their communities. This is similar to the position of at least some of the elderly in pre-industrial Britain.
- Every society creates definitions of "old people". **Victor** ("Old Age In Modern Society") suggests that the status of the elderly depends upon a number of factors:

a. **Social organisation.** In **nomadic societies**, the elderly are a **burden** to the rest of society when they are unable to follow the nomadic lifestyle. In these societies, the old are frequently neglected or even killed once they start to become a hindrance.

In more settled societies, the knowledge and skills of the elderly tend to be treated differently; they may be valued for the contribution they can make to the family group and society as a whole.

b. The **exclusivity of knowledge**. In societies where the knowledge and skills possessed by the elderly are a valuable social resource, their status is **higher** than in societies where these skills are not exclusive to the old. In many **American Indian tribes** elderly males have tended to be valued for their skills of leadership and intimate knowledge of tribal folk-lore and ceremony.

c. **Control of economic resources**. In societies where the elderly control economic resources, their status is higher. This is especially true if younger members of society depend on the elderly for access to economic resources.

d. **Cultural attitudes to the Afterlife**. In some societies old age is valued because the old are closer to death and the spiritual afterlife. The greater the age, the more positive the light in which their age is seen. Amongst the **Sherbro of Sierra Leone**, the more incoherent an elderly person becomes the greater their level of status because they are believed to be passing through a stage whereby they are communicating directly with their ancestors.

- In other societies, the signs of old age are welcomed because they symbolise the fact that the elderly will soon begin their "real life" after death. In such cultures where life is seen as a preparation for the next world, the status of the elderly consequently increases as they grow older.
- To **conclude**, therefore, **cross cultural evidence** tends to confirm the idea that the **experience of old age** is **not** somehow **fixed and absolute** - a quality of human biology and the passage of time. On the contrary, both historical and cross-cultural evidence reveals to us the **richness and disparity** of different people's **experience** of old age.