

## 5. A Genealogy of Ageing and Sexuality

### Overview

Ageing is both a bodily and a social process. In this topic, you will have the opportunity to understand the ways in which ageing, sexual and gender have changed over time. While genealogy is often seen as a family history, or record of lineage of an individual, family or group, Foucault developed a method of historical analysis which (following Nietzsche) he called genealogy (Foucault, 1984a). In his genealogical work, Foucault speaks about discursive and institutional practices, not what people thought or did in the past (Halperin, 1998), and this lecture will use Foucault's style of genealogy to explore the origins of discourses about ageing, sexuality and gender.

### Objectives

By the end of this topic you will have:

- Have gained an understanding about Foucauldian genealogy and its significance for understanding
- Have interpreted the implications of the origins of discourses about sexuality and ageing in contemporary social contexts
- Gained an understanding about the shifting nature of concepts about aging.
- Reflected on the implications of the topic for your own practice.

### Key Concepts

Social context; chronological, biological, personal, interpersonal concepts about ageing; Shifting concepts in gerontology: life cycle/life stages

### Reading

#### Required reading

Thane (2003). The Social History of Old Age and Aging, *Journal of Social History* 37

(1) p. 93 +

#### Further reading

Pain, R., Mowl, G., Talbot, C. (2000). Difference and the negotiation of 'old age'.

Environment and Planning D: *Society and Space* 18(3) 377–393

### Lecture Notes

#### ***Foucauldian Genealogy***

Foucault developed a form of critical history he called genealogy. He used this method of analysing the past in order to understand the origins of discourses – not essential beginnings, but how power operates to produce effects. While Foucault's project focused on sexuality, this kind of genealogy can provide a way of

understanding how power operates to produce effects in any field of study (Dyson, 2007). A genealogical approach can reveal the ways in which power has operated over time to produce contemporary 'truths' about older people.

Knowledge and power are related, and how they interact must be considered in a genealogical project. According to Foucault, power:

... is constructed and functions on the basis of particular powers, myriad issues, myriad effects of power. It is this complex domain that must be studied (Foucault, 1980, p.188).

Thus, Foucauldian genealogy critiques power/knowledge relations, and seeks to understand the ways in which discourses and domains of knowledge are produced. It involves an analysis of the historical limits that are placed on individuals; Foucault referred to this as an 'ontology of the present' (Foucault, 1984b, p.96).

In philosophy, ontology is the study of being or existence. Foucault argued that an ontology of the present is a project: "... in which the critique of what we are is at the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (Foucault, 1984c, p.50). In relation to this, Halperin (2002) suggested that: "A genealogical approach begins with an analysis of blind spots in current understanding, or with a problematisation of what passes as 'given' in contemporary thought" (p. 13). Sedgwick (1993) argued that although over time there have been different ways of categorising sexual behaviours, the old ways of defining sexual categories do not disappear or become obsolete, but continue to emerge within, and shape later definitions (Dyson, 2007).

### ***Ages and stages***

With the growth of the state industrialisation and surveillance medicine. The life course was subjected to greater surveillance control and normalisation with the result that we now see a much more extensive institutionalisation of the life course that is socially structured into orderly sequences of psychosocial growth and development (M Featherstone & Hepworth, 1991).

Constructions of ageing are often essentialist, and suggest that people pass through stages from childhood, to youth, to adulthood, to middle age, to old age. However, the meaning of old age varies over time and between cultures to the extent that it can only be conceptualised in relative rather than absolute terms (Bytheway, 1995). The idea of a changing life-course, rather than a life-cycle which can be associated with predictable changes in behaviour and perceptions, is gaining currency in social gerontology (Pain, Mowl, & Talbot, 1999). According to Pain et al (1999)

Rather than defining and employing old age as a chronological descriptor, many now argue that the socially and economically constructed aspects of old age have the most influence on the condition of older people's lives (p377).

Through this lens, it is possible to view cultural representations of old age as influencing and shaping individual imaginings of the life course and individual/collective action. In other words, if people are culturally conditioned to expect to be dependent in old age, they are more likely to become so (P. Thane, 2003).

A genealogy of ageing reveals that people do not always pass through these stages in a neat, sequential manner, and definitions of old age vary over time, between cultures and according to political and economic dictates. There is no coherent, definitional field that classifies old age, rather it consists of related, yet contradictory and conflictual forces (Halperin, 2002). It is more appropriate to pay attention to the residual force of historical understandings about ageing, that are plural, varied and contradictory.

Featherstone (1991) argued that the assumptions which underpin models of universal stages of life development are flawed and result in individual development being artificially isolated from its social context. As a consequence, the life course is not taken fully into account as a social institution that is interconnected with other parts of the social structure. Ageing is political; every culture uses age in a range of ways, and the experiences, roles, and status of individuals are often tied to age {Stetterson, 1997 #55}. According to Featherstone, the concept of life stages places heavy emphasis on age specific role transitions and scheduled identity development, whereas the shift to the concept of life course destabilises this emphasis.

### ***Population Health: a numbers game?***

According to Thane (2003) histories of old age have generally been preoccupied with demographics and material concerns – ‘facts’, such as numbers, geographical distribution, living arrangements, household structure, and family relationships, as well as welfare arrangements, medical provision, property transactions, work and retirement.

Old age can be defined chronologically, functionally or culturally. A fixed threshold of ‘chronological’ old age has long been a bureaucratic convenience, suitable for establishing age limits to rights and duties, such as access to pensions or eligibility for public service. This fixed threshold became more pervasive in the twentieth century, when societies became more rigidly stratified by chronology, especially in earlier and later life, as ages were fixed for attending and leaving school, for retirement and receipt of pensions.

‘Functional’ old age can be said to have been reached when an individual cannot perform the tasks expected of him or her, such as paid work. ‘Cultural’ old age occurs when an individual ‘looks old’, according to the norms of the community, and is treated as ‘old’. This combines aspects of the other modes of definition; it is an expression of the value system of the community and may define individuals as old according to codes of dress or other commonly accepted signifiers. There is immense variety in the pace and timing of human ageing, that people do not all age at the same rate or in the same ways. According to Thane (2003), physical condition has increasingly been detached from social and bureaucratic markers of ‘old age’ and. As a result, established age boundaries have become destabilized. To demonstrate the ways in which the concept of ageing has changed overtime, Thane (2003) identified how different western societies aged at different rates and with different gender balances.

**Journal work:** from your understanding of the required reading for this lecture, reflect on the following questions and write about your reflections in your journal

1. Have retirement ages remained consistent across and within different cultures? What factors have influenced retirement age? What factors are in play in the current social and political environment?
2. What discourses can you identify about government decisions about age of retirement from Thane's (2003) article
3. What have been the political effects of increased numbers of older people in the population over time?
4. How does cultural old age play out in a social environment where technology has made it possible to delay or mask the physical signs of old age?

### ***Representations of old age***

Representations of individuals who do not conform to stereotypes of 'old' are plentiful. For example, politicians and judges who are past conventional retirement age deny the need to slow down to rest to take the back seat, as others of a similar age might be expected. To retire or not is linked with economic resources, people without retirement savings are less likely to be able to stop work than those who have the prospect of generous pension income. As a 'new breed' of body maintenance experts claim to delay the physical signs of ageing through diet, exercise and other regimens to control biological age, discourses that discredit chronological age as an indicator of old age emerge, that suggest that how one feels should be a true indicator of age.

Featherstone (1999) argued that constantly stylised and re-stylised 'designer lives' make it possible for individuals to continue to achieve a pleasing effect, a playful, youthful and emotional exploratory approach to culture into their advanced years.

Rather than a life cycle with its inexorable progress from birth to death, and characterised by age appropriate life stages, Featherstone (1995) argued that post modern adult life can be seen as a process which need not involve a predetermined series of stages of growth. The stages or hurdles, which are placed in front of people can be shifted around and even discarded. Human beings share with other species and body, the existence inevitably involving birth, growth, maturation and death, the unavoidable biological aspects of existence (M. Featherstone & Wernick, 1995). Furthermore, study of the life course must allow for heterogeneity and discontinuity.

Using another point of view, According to Stetterson (1997) argued for the use of the concept of age structuring. He claimed that the concept of the life course refers to the ways in which social institutions shape and institutionalise individual lives in the interconnected domains of education, family and work. Measuring age chronologically is one of the most basic social and cultural categories, and usually operates interdependently with sex; in other words, sex and age are taken as universal categories. Stetterson (1997) pointed out that chronological age is most salient in modern, industrialised societies, these concepts are not even understood, for example, for the !Kung Bushmen questions about age make little sense.

**Journal work:** Life cycle, life stages, age structuring are all discourses about ageing.

- What messages and images emerge from each position? How do these effect older people as a group? as individuals? In what ways are they similar or different for women and men?
- Discourses about ageing and old age change over time and between cultures. Thane discusses some of these changes in the required reading for this lecture.
- Identify some of the social and political factors that have resulted in different attitudes and approaches to ageing in the past.
- Foucauldian genealogy how older discourses rarely disappear completely, but can re-emerge in different guises and continue to emerge within, and shape later definitions and representations.

Reflect on Thane's paper and think about how some of the historical discourses about ageing she identifies have re-emerged in contemporary discourses and approaches to ageing, and how other new ones have formed. In your journal, write about your reflections, using the following questions as a prompt.

- What influences shifting discourses about ageing?
- How might they affect or influence sexuality and gender?
- What are the implications of this for your work?