

Introduction: towards knowledge of old age

Human experience is shaped by human constructs. Through a complex set of social arrangements, cultural codes are deciphered, negotiated and sustained as conceptual devices for interpreting situations, values and norms. These devices inform a structure of social knowledge which extends throughout all areas of life and permeates the products, tangible and intangible, of human consciousness. Actions and interactions, thoughts and utterances, artefacts and works of art are the language in which such social knowledge is articulated. Concepts, therefore, are not merely abstract reflections but are deeply embedded in both the form and content of everything human.¹

Social knowledge is formulated and acquired through the structural language of distinctions (Bourdieu 1984). By setting up contrasting conceptual categories we bring a sense of order to otherwise unfathomable experience. The cultural language pertaining to the old is one instance of such categorization. In modern secular society, the encounter with the elderly is experienced as tangential to the inevitable encounter with the boundary between life and death. Unlike class, ethnic, racial or even gender-based distinctions, the boundary between life and death is a perennial human preoccupation. Ageing, as one of the major markers of that fine existential line, calls for constant clarification and reclassification.

Knowledge about ageing is peculiar; alongside matters of life and death it embraces notions about dependency and autonomy, body and soul, and paradoxes emanating from irreconcilable tensions between images of the old, their own will and desires, and the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44748-5 - Old Age: Constructions and Deconstructions

Haim Hazan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Old age: constructions and deconstructions*

facilities offered to them. The world of the aged is supposedly rendered intelligible by means of widely available information, and through the professional interpretive expertise of welfare workers, doctors, nurses, psychologists, and social policy makers this information is transformed into know-how – the measures designed to handle the problems ascribed to the aged and used to plan old-age homes, day centres, welfare facilities and financial benefits on their behalf. This marriage between information and know-how is, however, rarely informed by knowledge of the matter at hand. The socio-cultural construction of knowledge of ageing disguises an undercurrent of fear and anxiety.

Knowledge rests on understanding² of social boundaries and systems of accountability; it constitutes and reflects the world we witness and experience and the sets of rules, codes and obligations with which we were aligned (Douglas 1973). Information, know-how and knowledge are usually mutually reinforcing. For example, conceptions of the relationship between adults and their children and the desirable position of the latter within society provide the basis for a cultural code regarding childhood according to which certain information about children is given prominence and frameworks are established for socializing them into their milieu (Ariès 1965). Again, the management of disease rests on symbolic (albeit culturally variable) distinctions between health and illness; images of warfare underpin the 'fight' against the invader of the body, and disease and death are portrayed in terms of military defeat (Sontag 1989). In both these instances, there is a relative congruence between information, know-how, and knowledge. In the case of ageing this is not the case.

Generally speaking, knowledge, rather than consisting of the data at our disposal, is shaped by perceptions, beliefs, rationalizations and other non-rational forms of imagery. When we speak of knowledge, then, what we have in mind is in effect images of knowledge. In the case of old age, information about the aged is used, wittingly or otherwise, to sustain the social position it reflects. Thus, age structure, income, housing and epidemiology are all constructs of know-how that seek to establish linkages between the aged and the facilities, budgets and resources allocated to them. The cultural and existential origins of knowledge concerning the old,

Introduction

however, are often implicit. Communication about ageing does not necessarily rely on communication with the ageing, much less communication amongst the aged. Most of the professional literature on ageing is aimed at the know-how-oriented reader, whose interest is in information about the state of the elderly as an object. Only a smattering of research is dedicated to deciphering the world of old people as subjects, and even less of this work attempts to understand the ways in which knowledge about ageing is produced and reproduced. This book is one such endeavour.

The acquisition and construction of shared knowledge about so charged and ambiguous a domain of human experience are confounded by the double-bind of two conflicting modes of reference to ageing. On the one hand, a host of socio-psychological forces operate to remove aged people from the rest of society and to assign them to a symbolic and physical enclave. On the other hand, the awareness that most of us will eventually occupy that enclave is ever-present. The sense of continuity of self is betrayed by the fear of 'being there', and the perception of the indivisibility of the self is challenged by the awareness of finitude. Hence, the existential origins of knowledge about ageing engender a multifaceted corpus of conceptions, beliefs and attitudes, the kaleidoscopic character of which reflects ever-changing personal and social needs. Social scientists intent on disentangling this complex must not only be held accountable for deciphering socio-cultural models of ageing but must also be prepared to examine the academic analysis itself.

The attempt to elicit specific social knowledge is inevitably self-subversive. The necessary high degree of generalization, verging on simplification, may lead to loss of details of the texture and design of social life. Self-awareness and reflexivity produce the springboard from which to make the quantum leap from the particular to the general. Philosophy, literature, music, the fine arts and popular culture furnish the social sciences with insights into the concepts they set out to understand and develop. Ethnicity, family, role, tribe and tradition, projected onto reality and given ontological status, become analytic devices. These concepts, straddling the worlds of researcher and research subjects, fieldworkers and field, are a uniquely intriguing property of the social sciences.

Any attempt to formulate a model of ageing is further confounded

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44748-5 - Old Age: Constructions and Deconstructions

Haim Hazan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Old age: constructions and deconstructions*

by the poverty of reflective material on the subject, the tendentiousness of the body of research on ageing, and, above all, the multivocal and even demonic role played by ageing in our consciousness. Caught between empathy and awe, intellectual attraction and social barriers, students of later life face major difficulties in gaining access to knowledge. The myriad personal, ethical, existential and cultural issues involved in this quest may provoke a radical rethinking of social categories, symbolic boundaries and taken-for-granted reality.

The possible ways of acquiring such knowledge may be placed along a continuum, at one end of which lie attempts to approach the assumed unique universe of the aged by tapping the personal experience of being old. In this approach, in-depth interviewing, diaries, and verbal accounts of the aged are taken as windows into their inner world. Titles such as *The View in Winter* (Blythe 1979) and *Number Our Days* (Myerhoff 1978a), indicate a desire to remove social masks and reach the unadulterated self-awareness of the aged. At the other end of the continuum, the quest for knowledge about old age rejects direct accounts of personal meaning in favour of recognized analytic concepts. In this approach, titles such as *Socialization to Old Age* (Rosow 1974), *The Cultural Context of Ageing* (Sokolovsky 1990), and *Dimensions: Aging, Culture, and Health* (Fry 1981) are stripped of emotive, critical, or tendentious connotations. The distinction between these two approaches may be described as 'experience-near', 'experience-distant' (Geertz 1979): while the former draws on the language of the people under study, the latter develops a detached terminology which endows the work with an aura of objectivity. Both perspectives have pitfalls: while reported experience fails to achieve objective validity, 'value-free' terms of reference lack credibility.

This book explores the relationship between the experience of the old and the concepts developed to explain it, and proposes a metalanguage capable of reflecting upon both. Moving from a critical comparison of experience-near with experience-distant approaches, I shall identify a set of constructs which are intentionally not experience-oriented but structural and acontextual. The assumption underlying this approach is that the two separate ways of constructing old age as an object of knowledge – old age as a form of self-awareness and the social (including analytic) conception of

Introduction

old age – may be attributed to differences in perspective on the boundary between life and death, as construed respectively by those on its verge and those desperate to avoid it.

Since the subject at hand is variegated, any endeavour to understand it must employ a variety of discourses. Whereas research in the socio-cultural domain usually involves commitment to a particular theoretical approach, the case of ageing does not lend itself to any such commitment. On the contrary, the sharp disjunctions between levels of discussion produce incongruent perspectives on ageing and call for an interpretive model appropriate to its intricacies. Rather than being subjected to arbitrarily selected conceptual models, the production of a metalanguage about ageing will draw upon the dialogue engendered by competing explanatory models. Though much comparative evidence will be drawn from pre-industrial societies, the discourse on ageing developed herein is drawn from the experience of modern or post-modern living.

Because the socio-cultural construction of ageing is shaped by cultural ideologies as well as by socio-economic concerns, the temptation to interpret it in terms of its socio-cultural context is strong. The holistic approach of anthropological inquiry is based on the (common-sense) notion of context as a locus of unity, converging perspectives, complementariness and order. A commitment to context is inappropriate, however, for addressing the highly fragmented conditions of growing and being old in our society. The multiple realities inhabited by the individual and the diversity of available socio-cultural life-styles make any use of a unified context irrelevant and even misleading. Furthermore, while most socio-anthropological discourse assumes a necessary link between self and observed behaviour, amongst the aged separate domains of existence – personal experience and social constructions of old age – may co-exist. Because these two domains do not necessarily inform each other, they do not produce a recognizable, unified context. Some of the forces that shape the lives of elderly people – for example, accumulated life experience and existential problems stemming from the natural process of deterioration coupled with socially induced losses – do not in fact originate in their immediate context at all. The combination of these factors weighs heavily on the lives of the aged, and their highly divergent nature serves to

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44748-5 - Old Age: Constructions and Deconstructions

Haim Hazan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Old age: constructions and deconstructions*

weaken the determining role of common socio-cultural features. The relative irrelevance of context in the lives of the old is further reinforced by the perception of the social category of the old as a 'problem' for which 'solutions' are to be sought in the engineering of specially designed environments that ignore differences among the elderly inhabitants and efface their past. The irrelevance of context makes it difficult to understand ageing, the more so because it is debatable whether understanding can be expected from phenomenological and psychological perspectives. What is needed is a socio-cultural paradigm concerning the 'intersubjective' construction of experience and particularly of the self-contradictory construct of old age.

Underlying this book is the conviction that old age is a unique case study in the hermeneutic process whereby the social codes used in the construction of a conceptual category are the subject of study of social sciences that are themselves built upon those very codes. Eschewing context, on the one hand, and subjectivity, on the other, the study of ageing as a social entity must focus on the interstices between various spheres of knowledge. The particular kind of knowledge that arises out of the gaps, inconsistencies, and incongruities intrinsic to the cultural perception of the old, requires an appropriate language, one which addresses differences and contradictions rather than coherence and compatibility.

This book, therefore, can be read in two ways. First, it can be regarded as a construction, providing a critical overview and a practical guide to the theoretical field generally known as the sociology of ageing. Secondly, and as a logical consequence of both its ethnographic evidence and its critical diagnosis, it can be seen as a deconstruction, an alternative to these sociological theories. Structurally it consists of two contrasting parts, respectively referring to old age as a socio-cultural object among the non-old and to the ways in which the old construct their own world. Part I presents four ways of representing old age. Chapter 1 describes knowledge of old age as embedded in common linguistic usage and demonstrates how such locutions express social segregation and erect barriers of ignorance. It goes on to describe the various ways in which societies handle the presence within them of the category of the old. Chapter 2 maps the symbolic codes generated to reflect and sustain the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44748-5 - Old Age: Constructions and Deconstructions

Haim Hazan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

ambivalences and ambiguities inherent in the cultural position of the old. Chapter 3 turns to the incumbents of the category of the old and unravels some of the stratagems engaged in by the elderly, as individuals and in groups, to sustain a 'roleless' social role and to survive a self-subversive existence. Chapter 4 examines abortive attempts on the part of scholars of old age to formulate acontextual, universal theories of ageing. Abandoning these four discourses, Part II develops a foundation for an alternative model of old age. Chapter 5 discusses social control as it is manifested in the organization of the life cycle, and Chapter 6 describes the structures of meaning entailed in the intricate symbolization of life and death. The complex relations between control and meaning in old age set the socio-cultural scene for an understanding of the unique universe of the old. Chapter 7 studies the contours of this universe through its unique construction of time, space and the self, arguing that the central problem confronted by elderly persons is that they exist in a world of disordered time, a world in which time is fragmented, anomic, and unruly. Understanding this phenomenon may enable us to comprehend ageing in a new way. The book concludes with some reflections on the emergent sociological properties of this proposal and some suggestions for an old-age-based self-knowledge for the non-old.

Contemporary culture consists of a *mélange* of symbolic spheres and semantic areas whose interlinkages are contingent upon assumptions about inconsistent meanings and deconstructed identities. Each of the discourses contained in this book constructs a self-sufficient vocabulary pertaining to a given area of socio-cultural knowledge. Underlying the transition to the concluding chapter is the shift from taken-for-granted sociological and social references to ageing and the old to a full-fledged reflective awareness of the subject. Viewing old age in terms of its epistemological properties, the argument returns to experience-based first-order language on ageing by way of its fundamental guiding principles rather than through personally slanted contents and culturally imprinted attitudes.

The scope and nature of this book cannot do justice to the rapidly growing corpus of socio-anthropological research on ageing. The empirical interjections that appear at four points in the course of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44748-5 - Old Age: Constructions and Deconstructions

Haim Hazan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Old age: constructions and deconstructions*

discussion are designed to provide an ethnographic reflection on the theoretical ideas previously presented. Apart from the material that follows this introduction, all the data are from my own studies (see, e.g., 1980a, 1981, 1984, 1985, 1990). The first of these ethnographic reflections offers contrasting examples of the production of ageing-related knowledge, one a first-hand account of the experience of being old, and the other an academically phrased presentation of old age. The second ethnographic reflection, which follows the third chapter, is a case study of life in an old-age home in which some aspects of the social construction of old age are apparent. The second part of the book is illustrated by a further case study which attests to the differences in temporal perspectives, spatial organization, and types of selfhood between the two objects of knowledge of old age. The conclusions are illuminated by two products of the construction of old age – a cultural configuration and a document produced by elderly people themselves. The contrast between these two texts well illustrates that the split between the world of the elderly and conceptions about old age remains fundamentally unbridgeable.

ETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTION: TOUCHING UPON EXPERIENCE

The English poet, writer, and literary critic, Ronald Blythe, has undertaken to discover the country of the aged, and in *The View in Winter* (1979) he presents adaptations of life stories told him by the people he has met. Quoting 'the schoolmaster', aged 84, he writes (pp. 226–8):

Old age doesn't necessarily mean that one is entirely old – *all* old, if you follow me. It doesn't mean that for many people, which is why it is so very difficult. It is complicated by the retention of a lot of one's youth in an old body. I tend to look upon other men as *old men* – and not include myself. It is not vanity; it is just that it is still natural for me to be young in some respects. What is generally assumed to have happened to a man in his eighties has not happened to me. The generalizations which go with my age don't apply. Yet I resent it all in some ways, this being very old, yes, I resent it. I have lost most of my physical strength, and once I was strong and loved doing physical work. I am not used to the loss of strength, and I object when many

Introduction

tasks show that they are now beyond me. I cannot quite believe that I can't carry this or turn, or hold the other. This old part of me worries the young part of me. It could be that it would be better to be all old. I think that De La Mare's got the confusion in a nutshell. His poem, 'A Portrait', says it all. I read it often now and find that the cap fits.

... King Lear said, 'When the mind's free the body's delicate', and that is true. My mind is very free now but it isn't wandering. It is definite and active in all directions. I feel so alive but my muscles tell me otherwise. I resent it a little and it's no good pretending that I don't. There has been a great loss of confidence. I'm not certain about anything now. There are great losses and small gains. I don't think that you grow in wisdom when you're old but I do think that, in some respects, you do grow in understanding. The very old are often as tolerant as the young. The young haven't yet adopted certain formal codes and the very old have seen through them or no longer need them. I used to think this and believe that but I don't now. I circumscribe my wants. Few are as important as they once were and they tend to lie quiet unless disturbed. They disturb me when I go out of my way to stimulate them – only then.

While the writer here introduces the narrator in terms of his age and profession, the narrator identifies himself through an articulation of his own grappings with these two rough signifiers. His subtle rendition of the components of age and identity, coupled with his literary informed pursuit of self-knowledge, turns the schoolmaster's testimony into a dialogue with the writer and his readers. Emerging from first-hand experience, the text reflects a multitude of personal universes of meaning, ranging from physical sensations to the sublime domains of philosophy and literature.

In contrast, the table of contents of a volume entitled *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences* (Binstock and Shanas 1985) is a fine example of the attempt to preserve the distance of so-called scientific language from the categories enunciated by the subject of its study:

Part One: The Social Aspects of Aging

1. Scope, Concepts, and Methods in the Study of Aging
2. Age and the Life Course

Part Two: Aging and Social Structure

3. Aging and World-Wide Population Change
4. Societal Development and Aging

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44748-5 - Old Age: Constructions and Deconstructions

Haim Hazan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Old age: constructions and deconstructions

5. Aging in Nonindustrial Societies
6. Generations and Intergenerational Relations: Perspectives on Age Groups and Social Change
7. Social Stratification and Aging

Part Three: Aging and Social Systems

8. Age Strata in Social Systems
9. The Family Life of Old People
10. Housing and Living Environments of Older People
11. The Economy and the Aged
12. Work and Retirement
13. Leisure and Lives: Personal Expressivity across the Life Span
14. Aging and the Law
15. Political Systems and Aging

Part Four: Aging and Interpersonal Behavior

16. Personal Characteristics and Social Behavior: Theory and Method
17. Social Networks and Isolation
18. Status and Role-Change through the Life Span
19. Death and Dying in a Social Context

Part Five: Aging and Social Intervention

20. The Political Dilemmas of Intervention Policies
21. Strategies of Design and Research for Intervention
22. Income Distribution and the Aging
23. Aging, Health, and the Organization of Health Resources
24. Aging and the Social Services
25. The Future of Social Intervention

The calculated vocabulary is evident. Areas which cannot be addressed without resorting to the language of experience, such as interpersonal relationships, change, and death, are either phrased in highly formal terms such as 'dyadic relationship', and 'non-institutionalized roles' or expressed in terms of disciplines that traditionally handle matters of the soul and spirit. Terms such as 'caring', 'denial' and 'fear' serve as intermediary concepts for transposing human experience into detached analysis and vice versa.