

1 Analysing ageism and age discrimination

Introduction: the importance of age

At every stage in our lives, we are confronted by the inevitability of our own ageing. As we progress through the ‘journey of life’,¹ we are acutely conscious of the ageing process as it affects our bodies, our attitudes, the environment we create for ourselves and our interactions with other people of different ages.² In personal relationships, we tend to choose friends and partners from those proximate in age – most ‘lonely hearts’ advertisements stipulate age – and the fact is that most people are still fascinated or even horrified by intimate relationships that span wide age-gaps: Joan Collins’s marriage in early 2002, to a man thirty-three years her junior, was newsworthy precisely because it broke such unwritten, but powerful, rules.³ Most of us are intensely aware of the precise social demarcations based upon age, and feel uncomfortable if we stray into an age-inappropriate social setting (a nightclub for the twenty-somethings on the one hand, a summer evening game of bowls on the other). Our everyday social judgements are frequently age-based, even if we consciously deny it: for example, most of us, on meeting a new person, will try to guess their age and will make assumptions about them as a result.

Explaining the collective behaviour and social characteristics of a population sub-group by reference to its average age is still relatively uncommon, perhaps because social scientists are wary of age stereotyping, demographic determinism and gerontophobia: the idea that ageing societies are inevitably societies in decline – with diminishing stocks of collective energy, enterprise and innovation – has a long and undistinguished pedigree, going back at least to the 1930s.⁴ A basic truism in gerontology is that

¹ Thomas R. Cole, *The Journey of Life: a Cultural History of Aging in America* (1992).

² There is, of course, a debate in gerontology over how far the ‘inner self’ remains young as the body ages.

³ It also contravened the gender double standards, in that the Michael Douglas/Catherine Zeta Jones marriage aroused less comment.

⁴ John Macnicol, *The Politics of Retirement in Britain 1878–1948* (1998), pp. 259–64.

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age per se is meaningless: it is always mediated through social processes and cultural attitudes.

Yet the average age of a population *does* in part determine its social characteristics. One effective counter to the apocalyptic, pessimistic jeremiads associated with population ageing is to point out that a youthful population carries considerable social costs: youth correlates with high levels of crime, single parenthood, unemployment, suicides, homicides, drug abuse, traumatic deaths of all kinds, motor vehicle accidents, high health and education expenditure, and so on.⁵ Elizabethan England suffered considerable problems of vagrancy, crime and social disorder because it had a relatively youthful age structure. Likewise, it has been suggested that the social problems of northern urban ghettos in the United States of America are exacerbated by their relatively large proportions of young people, caused by high birth rates and continued in-migration. Differences of income between age-groups in the USA are greater than those between ethnic groups, and the average age of ethnic groups in part explains their varying educational, occupational and economic levels.⁶ As William Julius Wilson has observed, ‘the higher the median age of a group, the greater its representation in higher income categories and professional positions’.⁷ In most Western societies, recorded crime shows a pronounced age and gender bias, with young males around the age of twenty having high rates of offending; the rate of offending then falls rapidly, until by the age of thirty British men are nearly four times less likely to commit a crime.⁸ Some speculative work has also been conducted on the possible link between the age of political leaders and the style, and effectiveness, of their leadership.⁹ Clearly, the analysis of society ‘according to age’ is still in its infancy, but it could be an interesting field of study.

Age distinctions, age stratifications, age judgements and ‘age-appropriate behaviours’ are subtly woven into our patterns of thinking, as a way of making sense of the world. When we are children, for example, we are always reminded of age divisions and their importance in the hierarchies of power that surround us. We long to be older, and frequently feel ourselves to be the ‘wrong’ age. Likewise, as adults we judge our own achievements by reference to some notion of ‘normal’ stages of life. Commonly-used

⁵ For an interesting exploration, see Fred C. Pampel and John B. Williamson, ‘Age Patterns of Suicide and Homicide Mortality Rates in High-Income Nations’, *Social Forces*, vol. 80, no. 1, Sept. 2001, pp. 251–82.

⁶ Thomas Sowell, *Markets and Minorities* (1981), pp. 10–13.

⁷ William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: the Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy* (1987), pp. 36–9.

⁸ Office for National Statistics, *Social Focus on Men* (2001), p. 78.

⁹ Angus McIntyre (ed.), *Aging and Political Leadership* (1988).

phrases, such as ‘act your age’, ‘at my time of life’, ‘when I was young’, ‘I’m too old for that’ or ‘twenty things to do before you are thirty’, testify to this. It is a regrettable but undeniable fact that most people like to be told that they look younger than they really are, and the goal of staying ‘forever youthful’ has become something of a fetish in modern societies: the popularity of Botox, Viagra, facelifts, anti-ageing potions and other modern elixirs of youth testify to that. In the last few years, social gerontologists have moved away from the idea of the ‘lifecycle’ (a series of discrete stages), preferring the term ‘lifecourse’ (denoting ageing as a continuous process). The latter is held to be less ageist, in that it does not impose rigid norms and expectations, and hence prejudicial stereotypes, via discrete categories like ‘childhood’, ‘youth’, ‘adolescence’, ‘middle age’, and so on.¹⁰ Yet it is possible to argue that the notion of a lifecycle did not grow up as a repressive concept: it may instead be part of the process of convenient labelling, whereby we construct markers of time and view the ageing of ourselves and others as a series of recognisable ‘stages’. Interestingly, Thomas Cole has criticised the way that, since the 1960s, the attack upon ageism has become something of an ‘enlightened prejudice’, resting upon assumptions that have been insufficiently explored. Gently defending the use of ‘stages’ of life, he argues that ‘Stereotypes are a universal means of coping with anxieties created by our inability to control the world ... Stereotypes are embedded in larger archetypes, ideals, or myths that societies use to infuse experience with shared meaning and coherence.’¹¹

Social gerontologists often distinguish between different meanings of age – for example, chronological, social and physiological age. Of these, social age is the most intriguing, since it refers to socially ascribed age norms, age-appropriate behaviours and age as a social construct.¹² The idea of social age has been very well explored by the distinguished social gerontologist Bernice Neugarten, who has confronted some of gerontology’s central dilemmas. Neugarten argues that, in all societies, age ‘is one of the bases for the ascription of status and one of the underlying dimensions by which social interaction is regulated’: we all construct norms and expectations, based upon ‘social clocks’, regarding such landmarks as the ‘right’ time to marry, have children, start working, retire, and so on, which are manifested in everyday linguistic expression. (Of course, the time

¹⁰ For a succinct exploration, see John Vincent, *Inequality and Old Age* (1995), esp. ch. 3.

¹¹ Cole, *Journey*, pp. 228, 230.

¹² For a useful exploration, see Jay Ginn and Sara Arber, ‘“Only Connect”: Gender Relations and Ageing’, in Sara Arber and Jay Ginn (eds.), *Connecting Gender and Ageing. A Sociological Approach* (1995).

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shown by such ‘clocks’ will vary generation by generation: for example, average ages of marriage have risen in the Western world over the past fifty years.) In all societies, observes Neugarten, rights, rewards and responsibilities are differentially distributed by age, and she perceptively concludes that ‘all societies rationalise the passage of life time, divide life time into socially relevant units, and thus transform biological time into social time’.¹³

Yet age is also a powerful discriminator in modern societies. Along with class, gender and race, age is one of the four key components of structured inequality, and no serious social analysis can be adequate unless it takes all four components into account. Of these, age is arguably the most virulent, since it is the least acknowledged and most likely to be accepted as ‘normal’ or ‘inevitable’. It is significant that, in Britain, legislation to prevent discrimination on grounds of gender, race and disability is well established, but it has taken a recent European Union Council Directive (November 2000) to force the British government to act in the case of age. However, it may be that age discrimination is the most complex and difficult of all the discriminations that affect modern societies, and therefore is very problematic to define, quantify and counter. These difficulties will be explored in the pages that follow.

Defining ageism and age discrimination

As an analytical starting-point, it is useful to make a distinction between ageism (in social relations and attitudes) and age discrimination (in employment) – although the two are often used interchangeably. Like all discriminations, ageism can essentially be thought of as the application of assumed age-based group characteristics to an individual, regardless of that individual’s actual personal characteristics. By contrast, age discrimination in employment refers to the use of crude ‘age proxies’ in personnel decisions relating to hiring, firing, promotion, re-training and, most notably, mandatory retirement. In practice, of course, ageism and age discrimination may be closely intertwined: for example, the negative prejudices of employers (deriving, say, from a fear of their own ageing and decrepitude) may profoundly influence their personnel policies towards their older employees.

¹³ Bernice L. Neugarten, Joan W. Moore and John C. Lowe, ‘Age Norms, Age Constraints, and Adult Socialisation’, and Bernice L. Neugarten, ‘Age Distinctions and Their Social Functions’, in Dail A. Neugarten (ed.), *The Meanings of Age: Selected Papers of Bernice L. Neugarten* (1996), pp. 24–5, 59–60.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the original meaning of the verb ‘to discriminate’ was a neutral one – ‘to divide, separate, distinguish’ and ‘to make or constitute a difference in or between; to distinguish, differentiate’. The idea of negative discrimination (‘to discriminate against’ or ‘to make an adverse distinction with regard to’) appears to have entered popular usage towards the end of the nineteenth century, especially with regard to race.¹⁴ By the mid twentieth century, discrimination was being defined as the ‘unequal treatment of equals’.¹⁵

There has been a debate over age discrimination in employment since at least the 1920s and 1930s in both Britain and the USA; but the concept of ageism in social relations and attitudes has more recent origins. The actual term ‘ageism’ seems to have been first coined by the eminent American gerontologist Robert Butler in 1969, while he was chair of the District of Columbia Advisory Committee on Aging and was involved in setting up public housing for older people. First in a report in the *Washington Post* of 7 March,¹⁶ and then in an article in *The Gerontologist* later in 1969, Butler described the irrational hostility displayed by a group of middle-aged, middle-class white citizens against a proposal to build special housing for older, poor black people: it was the ‘complex interweaving of class, color and age discrimination’ that he found so striking, and he acknowledged that ageism could operate against any age-group.¹⁷ Developing his classic definition, Butler concluded that ageism was ‘a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin color and gender. Older people are characterised as senile, rigid in thought and manner, and old-fashioned in morality and skills.’ He argued that ageism derives partly from ignorance – stereotyping and myths surrounding old age are explicable ‘by a lack of knowledge and insufficient contact with a wide variety of older people’ – and partly from ‘a deep and profound dread of growing old’. But he maintained that ageism by the young and middle-aged against the old often serves a rational purpose, in that it favours the former and excludes the latter in the sharing-out of societal resources. Ageism thus manifests itself in

stereotypes and myths, outright disdain and dislike, or simply subtle avoidance of contact; discriminatory practices in housing, employment and services of all kinds;

¹⁴ ‘Discriminate’ and ‘Discrimination’, *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989 edn), pp. 757–8.

¹⁵ Frank H. Hankins, ‘Social Discrimination’, in Edwin R. A. Seligman and Alvin Johnson (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 14 (1934), p. 131.

¹⁶ ‘Ageism’, *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989 edn), p. 247.

¹⁷ Robert N. Butler, ‘Age-Is: Another Form of Bigotry’, *The Gerontologist*, vol. 9, no. 4, pt. 1, Winter 1969, pp. 243–6.

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epithets, cartoons and jokes. At times ageism becomes an expedient method by which society promotes viewpoints about the aged in order to relieve itself from the responsibility toward them, and at other times ageism serves a highly personal objective, protecting younger (usually middle-aged) individuals – often at high emotional cost – from thinking about things they fear (aging, illness and death).¹⁸

Such closure by the non-old against the old, it is argued, must ultimately be irrational since we will all become old one day – if lucky enough. Our ageism thus over-rides our long-term rational self-interest,¹⁹ and can be seen as a kind of ‘self-hatred’ or ‘cognitive dissonance’²⁰ whereby, puzzlingly, we view the old as ‘somehow different from our present and future selves and therefore not subject to the same desires, concerns or fears.’²¹ As Catherine Itzin observes: ‘Ageism is a system in which nobody can be seen to benefit because everyone is, or once was, a child, and everyone (who survives) will eventually be an old person. And yet the system – in which adults have rights and privileges which are denied to young people and old people – continues to the detriment of everyone.’²²

Ageism usually involves the ascription of negative qualities to one particular age-group. As Thomas McGowan puts it, it constitutes ‘a social psychological process by which personal attributes are ignored and individuals are labeled according to negative stereotypes based on group affiliation. In American society elders are stereotyped as rigid, physically unattractive, senile, unproductive, sickly, cranky, impoverished and sexless.’²³ When directed against the old, it can be disguised by patronising, false praise via ‘a paternalistic breed of prejudice’ whereby old people are ‘pitied but not respected.’²⁴ Thus Erdman Palmore warns us against lapsing into ‘pseudopositive’ attitudes towards older people, characterised by insincere admiration: describing an old person as ‘beautiful’, for example,

¹⁸ Robert N. Butler, ‘Ageism’, in George L. Maddox (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Aging* (1995 edn), p. 35. See also, Robert N. Butler, *Why Survive? Being Old in America* (1975).

¹⁹ Andrew Blaikie and John Macnicol, ‘Ageing and Social Policy: a Twentieth Century Dilemma’, in Anthony M. Warnes (ed.), *Human Ageing and Later Life: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (1989), p. 79; Todd D. Nelson, ‘Preface’, in Nelson (ed.), *Ageism. Stereotyping and Prejudice Against Older Persons* (2002), p. x.

²⁰ Molly Andrews, ‘The Seductiveness of Agelessness’, *Ageing and Society*, vol. 19, pt. 3, May 1999, pp. 302–3.

²¹ John Hendricks and C. Davis Hendricks, ‘Ageism and Common Stereotypes’, in Vida Carver and Penny Liddiard (eds.), *An Ageing Population. A Reader and Sourcebook* (1978), p. 60.

²² Catherine Itzin, ‘Ageism Awareness Training: a Model for Group Work’, in Chris Phillipson, Miriam Bernard and Patricia Strang (eds.), *Dependency and Interdependency in Old Age: Theoretical Perspectives and Policy Alternatives* (1986), pp. 114–15.

²³ Thomas G. McGowan, ‘Ageism and Discrimination’, in James E. Birren (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Gerontology. Age, Aging, and the Aged, Vol. I* (1996), p. 71.

²⁴ Amy J.C. Cuddy and Susan T. Fiske, ‘Doddering But Dear: Process, Content, and Function in Stereotyping of Older Persons’, in Nelson, *Ageism*, p. 17.

can only be on the basis of a different standard of beauty from that applied to the young.²⁵

Ageism is embedded in patterns of thinking (thus frequently manifesting itself in covert and subtle ways) and in unspoken assumptions, enduring myths, stereotypes, popular imagery and iconography, and societal acceptance of age-based decline as inevitable. This is ‘implicit ageism’ – feelings towards old people ‘that exist and operate without conscious awareness, intention or control’.²⁶ It operates on both an interpersonal (micro) level (through internalised attitudes), and an institutional (macro) level (in legal, medical, welfare, educational, political and other systems).²⁷ The latter form of discrimination, it is argued, cannot be easily demonstrated, since it is often accompanied by strenuous denials of any intent to discriminate. Thus Eric Midwinter sees ageism as endemic in all social relations: there is, he argues, a bias against older people as consumers in fashion and design, in marketing strategies (which constantly perpetuate ‘negative’ images of ageing), in civic life (via age barriers to jury service, for example) and in politics and the media.²⁸ Likewise, Bill Bytheway has offered an entertaining and stimulating analysis of the virulence of negative images of ageing: ‘humorous’ ageist birthday cards; sexual innuendos of impotence or, paradoxically, excessive libido; the ‘double standard of ageing’ or ‘double jeopardy’ by gender; and so on.²⁹

The origins of ageism

Where does ageism originate? A variety of answers have been offered, placed somewhere on a spectrum. At one end are psychological explanations: ageism derives from deep-rooted, irrational, subconscious fears of our own ageing, and our apprehension at the prospect of impending physical and mental decay. It has been suggested that, as death is increasingly postponed to later ages in modern societies, so old people have become ever more visible reminders of our own mortality: they represent ‘the face of the future’.³⁰ Hence Butler declares that ‘Age-ism reflects a deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged – a

²⁵ Erdman B. Palmore, *Ageism. Negative and Positive* (1990), pp. 34–5.

²⁶ Becca R. Levy and Mahzarin R. Banaji, ‘Implicit Ageism’, in Nelson, *Ageism*, p. 51.

²⁷ Itzin, ‘Ageism Awareness’, p. 114; McGowan, ‘Ageism and Discrimination’, p. 71.

²⁸ Eric Midwinter, *Citizenship: From Ageism to Participation* (1992).

²⁹ Bill Bytheway, *Ageism* (1995).

³⁰ Jeff Greenberg, Jeff Schimel and Andy Martens, ‘Ageism: Denying the Face of the Future’, in Nelson, *Ageism*, pp. 29–30.

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personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease and disability; and fear of powerlessness, “uselessness”, and death.³¹

Such a definition raises the question of whether these deep-rooted fears can be eradicated by reason alone. Steve Scrutton doubts this: ‘Ageism surrounds us, but it passes largely unnoticed and unchallenged. Moreover, just like racism and sexism, it is so engrained within the structure of social life that it is unlikely to be challenged effectively by rational argument or appeals to the more philanthropic side of human nature.’³² Others, however, believe that education, persuasion (perhaps involving ‘ageism awareness’ training)³³ and even resistance can achieve much. As Alex Comfort comments,

Ageism is the notion that people cease to be people, cease to be the same people or become people of a distinct and inferior kind, by virtue of having lived a specified number of years . . . Like racism, which it resembles, ageism is based upon fear, folklore and the hang-ups of a few unlovable people who propagate these. Like racism, it needs to be met by information, contradiction and, when necessary, confrontation. And the people who are being victimised have to stand up for themselves in order to put it down.³⁴

In similar vein is Robert Butler’s call to arms:

It is increasingly within our power to intervene directly in the processes of aging, with prevention, treatment and rehabilitation. It is also within our power to intervene in social, cultural, economic and personal environments, influencing individual lives as well as those of older persons *en masse*. If, however, we fail to alter present negative imagery, stereotypes, myths and distortions concerning aging and the aged in society, our ability to exercise these new possibilities will remain sharply curtailed. Fortunately, we can treat the disease I call ‘ageism’ – those negative attitudes and practices that lead to discrimination against the aged.³⁵

At the other end of the spectrum are broadly economic explanations: modern capitalist economies have marginalised older people into enforced retirement and idleness, involving a lowering of economic and social status.³⁶ From this has arisen the blanket assumption that the average male worker becomes unproductive around the age of 65. Such age

³¹ Butler, ‘Age-Is’m’, p. 243.

³² Steve Scrutton, ‘Ageism: the Foundations of Age Discrimination’, in Evelyn McEwen (ed.), *Age: the Unrecognised Discrimination* (1990), p. 25.

³³ For an interesting account, see Itzin, ‘Ageism Awareness’, pp. 114–26.

³⁴ Alex Comfort, *A Good Age* (1976), p. 35.

³⁵ Robert N. Butler, ‘Dispelling Ageism: the Cross-Cutting Intervention’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 503, May 1989, p. 143.

³⁶ See, for example: William Graebner, *A History of Retirement. The Meaning and Function of an American Institution, 1885–1978* (1980); Judith C. Hushbeck, *Old and Obsolete. Age Discrimination and the American Worker, 1860–1920* (1989).

proxies can be viewed as discriminatory, in that they lump together a wide range of abilities. This, it is argued, was always manifestly unfair, in that heterogeneity in health status, cognitive ability and working capacity increases as one moves up the age range; and it becomes even more unfair as each cohort of old people are – presumably – healthier than their predecessors. However, age proxies can also be seen as cheap, convenient and quick methods of decision-making, based upon judgements about working capacity which are fundamentally correct in the aggregate, even if their use may involve individual cases of injustice. Much depends upon the broad accuracy of the age proxy.³⁷ What appears to be age discrimination in employment may therefore be essentially rational decision-making in matters of personnel management. Ageism thus has complex origins – as Andrew Blaikie observes, ‘the reasons behind discrimination are frequently economic, but the capacity to maintain oppression is primarily psychological’³⁸ – and manifests itself in diverse, often contradictory ways.

The ageism debate

Many who are involved with social gerontology argue that ageism is rampant in modern Western societies. Certainly, there is powerful anecdotal and impressionistic evidence of this. Old people are subject to the kind of casual, gratuitous ageism that is deeply woven into our culture and is manifest in linguistic expression – contemptuous epithets like ‘wrinkly’, ‘old codger’, ‘old git’, ‘grannie’, ‘old biddy’, ‘mutton dressed as lamb’, and so on. Even ‘pensioner’ is often used as a term of abuse in Britain: as Eric Midwinter drily comments, it has that dire sense ‘of withdrawal, of taking a back seat, of being the pit-pony turned out to pasture for a brief, valedictory spell’.³⁹ With some honourable exceptions, many newspapers persist in putting a person’s age in brackets after their name, as if this offered an instant ‘explanation’ of their behaviour. The perniciousness of latent ageism has been exposed by researchers who, disguising themselves as an old person, have encountered hostility, prejudice, contempt and patronising sympathy.⁴⁰ In short, we live in a culture that worships youth and beauty; so many prevailing images depict old age as a time of decrepitude and social marginality. ‘Youthism’ dominates.

³⁷ Neugarten, ‘Age Distinctions’, p. 66.

³⁸ Andrew Blaikie, *Ageing and Popular Culture* (1999), p. 17.

³⁹ Eric Midwinter, *The British Gas Report on Attitudes to Ageing 1991* (1991), p. 12.

⁴⁰ For example, Sheila Green, ‘A Two-Faced Society’, *Nursing Times*, vol. 87, no. 33, 14 Aug. 1991, pp. 26–9.

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In human terms, age discrimination appears all too evident to those who have suffered it. The unemployed ‘fifty-somethings’, spending their days at home completing job applications in an exercise they know will be futile, can testify eloquently and bitterly to the difficulties faced by older job-seekers. Whether or not their plight arises principally from age discrimination – an issue to be explored later in this book – there is no doubt that they *feel* substantially discriminated against on grounds of age. Despite the efforts of old age activists to construct models of ‘positive’ or ‘successful’ ageing, replicated at populist level by brave slogans like ‘fifty is the new forty’, ‘you are only as old as you feel’ or the delightfully whimsical ‘age doesn’t matter unless you’re a cheese’, most older citizens are painfully aware of the subtle cruelties of ageism. In the last ten years in Britain, the press has been full of stories of workers thrown on the employment scrap-heap at a time of life when they feel themselves to be in their prime. One example will suffice:

I am fifty, a graduate with a postgraduate qualification. I’ve worked all my life and earned a reasonable salary, but I was made redundant in 1993 and now find myself in dire poverty and debt. The only reason I can think of is ageism. I’ve had periods of signing on and doing voluntary work and part-time teaching. I have been told by my local Employment Service that my job search strategy and CV are ‘exemplary’. But it’s been five years now and I feel powerless and angry, and as if I am in a downward spiral. This is manifesting itself in increasing dependence on prescription drugs and alcohol, loss of confidence, a three-stone increase in weight and poor self-image. The thought of carrying on like this until I’m sixty is humiliating, depressing and frightening. I am also terrified at the prospect of having no pension apart from a state pension.⁴¹

Pressure groups such as Age Concern or Help the Aged (via its Third Age Employment Network) are inundated with complaints from those who believe themselves to be victims of ageism at work, and during its ‘Age Discrimination Week’ in early February 1998 Age Concern even set up a special hotline for such complaints. Other areas of everyday life are also affected: after the age of 65, obtaining a mortgage or financial credit can be more difficult, and travel or private medical insurance premiums are often higher.⁴² In 1999, Age Concern found that one in twenty people aged 65+ had been refused treatment by the National Health Service (NHS), despite such treatment being a right.⁴³

‘Age is an increasingly unreliable sign of someone’s needs and ambitions’, declares a recent government publication, going on to add that ‘the blurring of the various stages in our lifecycle means that older people are as

⁴¹ ‘Private Lives’, *Guardian*, 23 Nov. 1998.

⁴² ‘Job to Combat an Age Old Problem’, *Guardian*, 31 Jan. 1998.

⁴³ Age Concern, *Turning Your Back on Us. Older People and the NHS* (1999), p. 7.