

## The seductiveness of agelessness

MOLLY ANDREWS\*

### **ABSTRACT**

In recent years, many researchers in the study of ageing have adopted a terminology of ‘agelessness’. They argue that old age is nothing more than a social construct and that until it is eliminated as a conceptual category, ageism will continue to flourish. This article challenges this view, stating that the current tendency towards ‘agelessness’ is itself a form of ageism, depriving the old of one of their most hard-earned resources: their age. Specific theories of ageing (successful ageing, mask of ageing, continuity theory) are assessed in this light, and original data are presented as evidence of old age as a unique phase of the lifecycle replete with continued developmental possibilities.

**KEY WORDS** – old age, ageism, agelessness, life-span development.

### **Introduction**

Recently when someone asked me what I was currently working on, I paused for a moment and replied: ‘you are not only as old as you feel, you are also as old as you are’. What I meant by this truism was both obvious and not. One of the more successful and subtle mechanisms through which ageism operates in our culture is in our redefinition of certain – desirable – types of old age as ‘young’. Rather than regarding the internal and external aspects of ourselves as inextricably bound together, part of an integrated whole which comprises our being, we compartmentalise them, imposing upon them a false dualism. We conceptualise the ageing process as one in which there is an increasing conflict between two camps: on the one side, our corpus, which drags us inevitably into our dreaded old age, and on the other, our spirit, which remains forever young. We then tell ourselves that if our bodies must grow old – an issue to which science is still attending – we can at least retain our youthful spirit. Thus, old age disappears. But this is an artificial dissection, and one which causes us to cut ourselves off from ourselves. ‘I am (only) as old as I feel’ allows us to believe we can transcend age; indeed it is the product of a society which tells us that age – old age – is something to be transcended, if at all possible.

\* Department of Human Relations, University of East London.

**The elimination of old age: 'passing' in the academy**

The last 20 years have seen a dramatic increase in research on ageing. Many different explanations for this revived interest have been offered, most of which relate to the creation of needs brought about by demographic changes. Moreover, it is projected that the demographic shifting that has already begun will only accelerate: by 2025, the proportion of British people aged between 75 and 84 is forecast to increase by 50 per cent (Radford 1998). One response to this demographic change has been a movement in studies on ageing towards 'agelessness'. Age as a category in itself, it is argued, is obsolete; old age is thus merely a psychological state. While all the stages of the lifecycle are socially and culturally constructed (Harevan 1995), there is not much serious discussion about eliminating infancy, adolescence or adulthood from the developmental landscape. It is only old age which comes under the scalpel. Why? Why is this such an appealing strategy to so many?

Bytheway (1995) makes the case for eliminating the category of old age, concluding his book *Ageism* with a chapter entitled *No more 'elderly', no more old age*. It is, he states, 'indisputable that a rethinking of ageism cannot be based upon the presumption that old age exists' (1995: 115). Old age is 'a cultural concept, a construction that has a certain popular utility in sustaining ageism within societies that need scapegoats' (1995: 119). Surely, old age is not only this (though it is also this). Will eliminating the category simultaneously eliminate the dynamics of the oppression? We do not fight sexism or racism solely by challenging the existence of the categories of sex and race (though these, too, are social constructs, and as such remain contested territory). Bytheway challenges the analogy between ageism on the one side and racism and sexism on the other (made by Butler in his original definition of ageism). Bytheway addresses this issue in the following way: 'the equivalence is no basis for a definition. As soon as that is agreed...' (1995: 117). He asserts his view while offering no substantive discussion of it. But the point he makes is not self-evident and requires argument if it is to be sustainable. While there are admittedly ways in which ageism, sexism and racism are distinct, there are also similarities between them, most importantly, though not only, the power dynamic which Butler identified.

Perhaps what sets ageism apart from sexism and racism is its potent element of self-hatred. People who behave in a racist or sexist manner will probably never be members of the group which is the target of their discrimination. The categories of race and sex are relatively constant,

though sex changes and skin pigmentation operations do exist. Ageism is unique in that those who practice it will one day join the group they presently discriminate against, if longevity is granted them. People regularly do all sorts of things to prolong their lives, though they hope and perhaps at some level believe that that extended life will not encompass old age. How can these thoughts co-exist in the same person? Why do they not experience any cognitive dissonance? Fighting against ageism would on the face of it seem to be in every person's self-interest, or at least every person who hopes to live a long life. Why is this not so? The key lies in the ability of people to see old people not as an extension of their future (or even present) selves, but rather as totally apart from themselves.

Simone de Beauvoir writes passionately about the cost of this cutting off of ourselves from ourselves:

When we look at the image of our own future provided by the old we do not believe it: an absurd inner voice whispers that *that* will never happen to us – when *that* happens it will no longer be ourselves that it happens to. [...]

We must stop cheating: the whole meaning of our life is in question in the future that is waiting for us. If we do not know what we are going to be, we cannot know what we are: let us recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman. It must be done if we are to take upon ourselves the entirety of our human state. (1970: 11–12)

De Beauvoir's plea against the entrenched 'us' and 'them' age distinctions is an important one. She is not arguing, as Bytheway does, that old age does not exist, but rather that there is a continuity of being between ages. Bytheway states that old age does not exist as anything other than a social construct because it lacks a clearly identifiable beginning and end. This distinction, however, seems arbitrary and inappropriate. Anything which involves a transformation – of which ageing is the epitome – does not, by definition, have clearly distinct beginnings and endings. A caterpillar becomes a butterfly, but we do not challenge the existence of the category of caterpillar or butterfly simply because of the gradual nature of the transformation. And why should we? What is to be gained by it? Bytheway argues against the existence of old age because he believes it is the cornerstone upon which ageism is propped, but this is to confuse the target of discrimination with the discrimination itself. The pretence that old age does not exist, the belief that we can somehow wish it away, is the ultimate seductiveness of agelessness, but it comes at a great cost, as de Beauvoir reminds us, for it strips us of our own future.

If old age is, stereotypically, a time of social withdrawal often accompanied by depression, then 'successful ageing' – a term which

appears time and again in the literature on ageing – is its antidote. While, statistically, older people do not suffer from depression any more or less than other age cohorts (Murphy 1993: 94), they are often perceived as doing so. Not surprisingly, then, a strategy often advocated for combatting this supposed ailment, is to stay active. The central premise of ‘successful ageing’ theories does not differ substantially from that of its ancestor, activity theory: stay active and keep impending depression at bay. The covers of two books, both entitled *Successful Aging* (Gingold 1992; Neuhaus and Neuhaus 1982) are revealing. In the first there is a picture of a tanned, fit couple, one of whom is holding a tennis racket. In the second, there is a picture of a couple both with bicycles, he holding two books and she with lilacs in her bike basket. The message is clear: if you are active and fit, you will remain happy, not to mention romantically fulfilled, all your years. Gingold identifies the purpose of his book: ‘to encourage success in all aspects of later life’ (1992: 2) and he organises his discussion under headings such as ‘improved health and fitness’, ‘mental soundness’, ‘social satisfaction’, ‘general feeling of well-being’ and ‘satisfaction with life’. Surely this is a rather tall order to fill. Imagine reading a book which claimed to ‘encourage success in all aspects of life’: mission amorphous, mission impossible. The only reason Gingold’s stated purpose is palatable, inasmuch as it is, is because its prescriptions are limited to ‘later life’ – that never never land for which we do not have the same expectations as we do for the other phases of life which are, collectively, taken as the norm. Neuhaus and Neuhaus state that successful ageing depends largely on ‘attention to healthy attitudes and activities in later life’ (1982: 234) and describe general well-being in terms of ‘happiness, morale, life satisfaction, success’ (1982: 233). Again, isn’t this a rather tall order? Haim Hazan, who refers to successful ageing as ‘the patronizing instruction of aged persons for better and fuller lives’ (1994: 15), comments ‘Though it is doubtful whether one can meaningfully speak of general satisfaction, in the case of the aged it is considered appropriate to pose such questions and to expect reasonable and valid answers’ (1994: 21). Various studies have shown that the very language which people use to speak with those they consider to be elderly is different from that which they use amongst the not-old (Coupland *et al.* 1991: 16). Care-givers and volunteers with older people, for instance, tend to use more questions and repetitions, and to employ simpler syntax in their conversation with old people, arguably indicating an assessment of lower intellectual abilities (Ashburn and Gordon 1981; Rubin and Brown 1975). Similarly, researchers can ask questions of old people which, if applied to their own lives, they would

find incomprehensible only because the psychological chasm between 'us' and 'them' is so fully entrenched.

Successful ageing is based upon the concept of adaptation, whereby an individual's progress is measured by the extent to which he/she conforms to the needs of the existing society. This, in turn, is in part a reflection of how adequately the individual can fill his or her expected role in society. Such a concept is, then, wholly devoid of social structural critique. An individual is judged as making it or not according to his or her ability to conform. Hazan argues that it is this measurement of adaptation which lies at the core of constructions of 'life satisfaction'.

The unspecified but clearly preferred method of successful ageing is, by most accounts, not to age at all, or at least to minimise the extent to which it is apparent that one is ageing, both internally and externally. The 'mask of ageing' theory rests on the assumption that there exists 'a distance or tension ... between the external appearance of the face and body and their functional capacities, and the internal or subjective sense or experience of personal identity which is likely to become more prominent in our consciousness as we grow older' (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989: 151). The mask which is referred to is, obviously, the one which life gives us as we age, the material signs of our physical ageing. The concept of the mask only works if one presumes a dichotomy between what is shown and what lies beneath the skin. Hepworth (1991) refers to 'an experiential difference between the physical processes of ageing, as reflected in outward appearance, and the inner or subjective "real self" which paradoxically remains young' (1991: 93). The argument here is implicitly a defence of the Cartesian mind/body split, a construction which has come under severe attack in many areas of study – but not that of old age. Despite being cloaked in the jargon of postmodernism, this theory appeals to the common-sense notion that many old people say they 'feel young inside'. But if and when they do say this, what exactly does it mean? To argue that there is a 'youthful self trapped beneath an ageing mask' (Biggs 1997: 566) is a manifestation of the very splitting Simone de Beauvoir identified: '*that* will never happen to us – when *that* happens it will no longer be ourselves that it happens to'. Although I may *look* like someone that *that* has happened to, in fact I am not, for though you cannot see it, inside I am still young. It is a Catch 22 situation: depressed, disengaged old people are described as old, while those who defy this stereotype, who retain a passion for life, are considered young, if only in spirit. This splitting operates on two axes: it is between people, separating those who are really old from those who merely look

it, and it is within people, imposing a schism between the inner and outer self. This second split, between external and internal age, is the basis of the mask of ageing theory.

*I Don't Feel Old: the Experience of Later Life*, the very title of which reflects this splitting, purports to be about 'later life from the inside' (Thompson *et al.* 1990: 1). The study attempts to confront stereotypes about ageing as 'an unavoidable process of retreat, of withdrawal into passivity'. In short, it challenges the theory of disengagement. The good news that it comes up with is that ageing, that awful process of deterioration, doesn't happen to us on the inside. The argument goes something like this: ageing is a state of mind, these people don't feel old, so at some level they are not old. The resistance to being called old is perceived, not as a form of self-hatred, but as an indicator of a positive self-identity in the context of the ageist environment in which they live:

Given that the stereotypes and associations are largely negative, dissociation of oneself from the category of old age might be a very reasonable position to adopt: for who would want to be associated with negative attitudes or prejudice, especially if one knew they were not true of one's own self or life? ... [Rather,] a degree of pretence, denial, dissociation, and disconnection ... could even be regarded as a commendable form of resistance to the pressures and injustices of the prejudices against the old. (Thompson *et al.* 1990: 122)

While the authors identify pervasive negative social attitudes towards ageing, they do not challenge them. It is hardly surprising that, as products of an ageist society, many old people are themselves ageist. Upon reaching old age, they try to distance themselves from this group: a desperate plea for personal exceptionalism which challenges, not the ageist stereotype, but rather its application to themselves. The authors remark upon a tendency amongst their respondents 'to think of "old people" as "other" than themselves, someone else at some other age, never oneself at whatever age one might be' (1990: 128). People who themselves are old by conventional standards, often refer to 'the old folks', clearly indicating a group to which the speakers do not perceive themselves as belonging. The authors of the study conclude that their respondents 'almost unanimously did not think of themselves as old' (1990: 108). The key to understanding this tendency is to decipher precisely what the respondents mean by the word 'old'. Unfortunately this is not a subject which receives much attention in this study, though the authors do comment that by the term 'old age' respondents seem to mean 'a combination of incapacity, inability and ill-health' (1990: 128). Other research has also suggested that elderly people tend to assimilate society's devalued appraisals of old people (Bengston *et al.* 1985). Is it really any wonder, then, that respondents say they do not

identify themselves with this category? What rational, non-depressive person would? Seen in this light, the findings of the study are less illuminating than they might appear at first.

Internalisation of self-hatred – in this case the ageism of the old – is a response commonly adopted by members of an oppressed group, and it is this which leads people to try to pass as being of another group. ‘They separate themselves from those “others”, the old people. They are youthful’ (Healey 1994: 82). But this strategy is limited because it is built on pretence: one is required to deny who and what one is, which is ultimately disempowering. Moreover, while such a strategy may in a limited sense be affirming for the person who employs it, fundamentally it is at the expense of others. At best, one has made an exception for oneself which is based on an illusion, and which leaves fully intact the larger structure of oppression:

For all people who try to pass the price is high. In passing you are saying that who you are at 60, 70, 80 is *not* o.k. You are o.k. only to the degree that you are like someone else, someone younger, who has more value in the eyes of others. (Healey 1994: 82)

Trying to ‘pass’ is ultimately ‘participating in your own “erasure”’ (Healey 1994: 83). With ‘passing’ it is not the existence of the category which is being contested, but rather one’s inclusion in it. One embraces the dominant group in the desperate, and usually futile, hope that one can be considered amongst its ranks. But one will never belong there, can never belong there. The dignity of the self is replaced by a secret self-loathing.

‘Passing’ as young is particularly tempting in a culture in which youth itself appears to be for purchase. Indeed, the entire multimillion dollar ‘beauty industry’ – \$50 billion annual expenditure on cosmetics and dieting in the U.S. alone (Wolf 1990) – is built upon this principle. Betty Friedan comments:

How long, and how well, can we really live by trying to pass as young? By the fourth face-lift (or third?) we begin to look grotesque, no longer human. Obsessed with stopping age, passing as young... Seeing age only as decline from youth, we make age itself the problem – and never face the real problems that keep us from evolving and leading continually useful, vital, and productive lives. Accepting that dire mystique of age for others, even as we deny it for ourselves, we ultimately create or reinforce the conditions of our own dependence, powerlessness, isolation, even senility. (1993: 25–26)

In the end, our desperate attempts at passing are always bound to fail, for they are targeted at ourselves. We physically transform ourselves until we are unrecognisable, and still we do not win the elusive battle.



We cannot win it, for as we wage this war, we destroy ourselves. Oblivious to the sources of our strength in age and to the possibility of self-renewal, we blindly create and sustain the conditions of our own self-censorship, and ultimately of our own defeat.

Our youth-oriented society has taught us that as we age, there is an ever-increasing chasm between what we look like on the outside and what we feel like on the inside. One ageing woman describes her experience of going to a plastic surgeon.

He told me he would make me less strange to myself. I would look more like I felt! I became frightened by the whole process. Who was I then? This face? What I felt like inside? How come the two images were not connected? (Healey 1994: 81)

Indeed, why aren't the two images connected? The entire cosmetics industry is founded on the principle that there is a disparity between body and soul and that, with time, the distance between the two only grows. We do what we can to cling to that part of ourselves which remains 'young', fearful of our own ageing, fearful of our own selves and of what we are becoming. In the description above, one senses a woman who is torn within herself, who suffers the pain of a socially induced schizophrenia. She can neither stay the same as she has been, for physical ageing is inevitable, nor, having internalised the values of an ageist culture, can she move forward and embrace her future as an old person. The battle between body and soul is full blown, and she does not know which of these two selves is genuine. Such a predicament is impossible, and can only be resolved by a complete restructuring of 'the problem'. If we are to move beyond this paralytic state, we must battle against the Cartesian split, and embrace in its stead a new way of thinking about ageing, one which is founded upon the premise of an integrated body and mind which co-exist in one and the same being.

John Cage, the celebrated modern composer, explains that ageing has given him a new appreciation for the interrelationship between body and mind:

... I now see that the body is part and parcel of the whole being. There isn't a split between the mind and the body; they both belong together. When I was younger, I mistreated the body because I thought the mind was what I was really dealing with. But as I get older I see that I'm dealing quite straightforwardly with the body and that I must keep it in good working order as long as I can. (Berman and Goldman 1992: 31)

Cage realises that he cannot continue to produce his music if his body does not function. He must take care of the one to protect the other, it is as simple as that. The belief in the myth of the chasm between body



and mind is an indulgence which the old cannot afford, except at great price. And this, for Cage at least, is the lesson of age: we are embodied selves.

### **Against agelessness**

Betty Friedan, in *The Fountain of Age* (1993), describes the pain of the journey she took to accepting her own ageing. She began, as many people do, deeply embedded in an ageist ideology, but ultimately she moved to a very different position. ‘Now that I could honestly think about “them” as “us”, I came to realize that the fountain of age didn’t mean, *can’t* mean, the absence of physiological, emotional, or situational change’ (1993: xxviii). Throughout the lifecycle, change and continuity weave an intricate web. As we meet the new challenges, both physical and psychological, with which our lives confront us, so then we are changed, even as we remain the same. Old age is no different from the other stages of life in this regard. The changes are many and real; to deny them, as some do in an attempt to counter ageism, is folly.

Why is it that so often attempts to speak about ageing in a positive light result in a denial of ageing? While difference is celebrated in axes such as race, gender, religion and nationality, the same is not true for age. In pathetic attempts, aimed, one might suppose, at establishing acceptability of their subjects, researchers plea for a blindness to difference:

old people are in fact young people inhabiting old bodies... Old people are people who have lived a certain number of years, and *that is all* (Alex Comfort cited in Thompson, *et al.* 1990: 108).

Old people are in fact young people? Really? What happens to all the years they have lived, the things they have learned, the selves they have evolved from and the selves they are becoming? Years are not empty containers: important things happen in that time. Why must these years be trivialised? They are the stuff of which people’s lives are made.

In Western culture, ‘ageing well’ is often code for minimalisation of the ageing process. Being told that one does not look one’s age is meant, and is usually taken, as a compliment not an erasure of one’s personal history. However, Maggie Kuhn, the founder of the Grey Panthers in the United States, explained that ‘when people say to me that I’m “eighty-six years young” I’m a bit offended ... [because that] is to deny my history and all the things I’ve done and changes I’ve seen’ (Berman and Goldman 1992: 128). Old age is often constructed as the absence

of youth, and the former is only given value inasmuch as the latter can be detected within it. But if development is the project of a lifetime (which I shall argue here it is) then surely in a fundamental sense age is an accomplishment, something one has worked long and hard at. Why then do we not want it to be acknowledged? Betty Friedan argues against agelessness: age cannot mean the absence of change, she tells us. Old age is something different – and far from being problematic, it contains within itself its own distinct possibilities as well as its own challenges.

In the context of Western culture, it is not surprising that the discipline of developmental psychology – which is quintessentially youth-centred – both reflects and reproduces this ageist ideology. Although physical changes might be both more uniform and dramatic in the early years than at any other time in the lifecycle, one cannot assume that change – either physical or psychological – is restricted to this time. As the study of developmental psychology devotes virtually no attention to the adult years, the assumption is that development has ceased by this time. Even Erik Erikson's model of so-called life-span developmental psychology devotes only two of his eight stages to life beyond the adolescent years. But this construction of the lifecourse is one which is worth challenging. Thomae (1979) writes: 'the "mature" person who remains changeless and motionless in the face of the different challenges, threats, and increasing opportunities of the adult years is a stereotype, having no psychological reality' (1979: 294). That change and growth in the later years are not accounted for in the literature of developmental psychology is a reflection of the society of which that literature is a product – nothing more and nothing less. People develop as a response to the new challenges with which they are confronted in their daily lives. It is evident that some of the most fundamental of these challenges come in the adult years. Indeed, one could argue that the difficulties of late life are the very thing which make this phase of life ripe with opportunity for development. Friedan (1993: 49) speaks of the '*developmental possibilities* of age as a unique period of human life' and of the qualities 'that may emerge in people who continue to develop after 65'. She refers to these as 'the uncharted terrain' in studies of human ageing and asks if there are capacities 'that actually improve or emerge with age' and what might cause or prevent their emergence.

Why are the qualities uncharted? The answers which we come up with reflect the questions we ask. If we are only interested in how the later years might better resemble early years, then it is not surprising that we are oblivious to the developmental opportunities which they

offer. We live our lives as a play which is stripped of its final act. Perhaps when we stop embracing agelessness at the exclusion of old age, when we celebrate age for what it is, we shall be able to see in this time opportunities for ‘continued human development’ (Friedan 1993: 51).

How and what we name in our lives are ultimately political questions. By denying our old their rightful category we do not remedy the problems perpetrated by an ageist society, but rather help perpetuate them. We must be able to call our old people old, acknowledge all the challenge and the possibility that their advanced years embody. This acknowledgement of the power of age is epitomised by the description of an old woman offered by her husband:

She is not just an old woman, you know. She wears old age like a bunch of fresh-cut flowers. She is old, advanced in years, *vieja*, but in Spanish we have another word for her – a word that tells you that she has grown with all those years. I think that is something one ought to hope for and pray for and work for all during life: to grow, to become not only older but a bigger person. She is old, all right, *vieja*, but I will dare say this in front of her: she is *una anciana*. With that, I declare my respect... (Coles 1991: 90–91)

Old age can be, and with some people is, a growing into ourselves. We are still the same people who we always have been, but we are more deeply so. This is not agelessness, but a radical reconstruction of successful ageing.

The continuity theory of ageing embodies some of these principles. Atchley (1993) explains the essence of the theory:

Continuity theory is *evolutionary*. It assumes that the patterns of ideas and skills, which people use to adapt and act, develop and persist over time; that a course of developmental direction can usually be identified; and that the individual’s orientation is not to remain personally unchanged but rather consistent with the individual’s past... (1993: 5–6)

Continuity is perceived of in terms of two dimensions: internal – ‘the development and persistence over time of mental constructs about who we are, what we are capable of, and what is satisfying to us’ (1993: 15) – and external, demarcated by the activities in which we engage. Critically, continuity theory points to old age as a time of ongoing personhood, neither the retardation or complete cessation of development, nor a radical transformation of self from ‘us’ to ‘them’. Old age is a continuation of the life which has been lived up until that point, as J. B. Priestly explained ‘the previous life of the old people ... acts as a background and context for their expectations and experience of old age’ (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989: 155).

When old people talk about themselves, an expression of a continuity of self is often misapprehended as a statement of agelessness, but the two are not the same. When the respondents in *I Don't Feel Old* reject the category of old age for themselves, they are not necessarily denying the importance of age in their self-perceptions as much as they are distancing themselves from a stultifying stereotype. When Friedan first embarked upon her journey of reconciliation with age, she asked herself 'why there was no image of age with which I could identify the *person* I am today ... I asked myself how this dread of age fitted or distorted reality, making age so terrifying that we have to deny its very existence ...' (1993: 8–9). The reconstruction of old age as a time of agelessness is the epitome of such denial.

Yet the lens of agelessness remains a seductive one. Sharon Kaufman's *The Ageless Self: Sources of Meaning in Late Life* (1986) is a case in point. For Kaufman, expression of a continuity of self is synonymous with agelessness. Old people, she says, '*do not speak of being old as meaningful in itself...* [Rather] they express a sense of self that is ageless – an identity that maintains continuity despite the physical and social changes that come with old age' (1986: 7). The book is replete with stories of old people who continue to engage passionately with the world around them, ongoing people with ongoing lives. Their key to constructing 'current and viable' identities is 'integration' – a word also favoured by Friedan. This, Kaufman argues, is 'the heart of the creative, symbolic process of self-formulation in late life' (1986: 188), a process which allows us to appreciate 'the complexity of human aging and the ultimate reality of coming to terms with one's whole life' (1986: 188). Many of her respondents, like those in *I Don't Feel Old*, reject old age as a category of any significance to their own sense of self. But once again, this distancing is left unanalysed, as if it were unproblematic rather than an expression of personal resistance to an oppressive mould. She writes:

Contrary to popular conceptions of old age, which tend to define it as a distinct period in life, old people themselves emphasize the continuity of the ageless self amid changes across the life span. Old people do not perceive meaning in aging itself, so much as they perceive meaning in being themselves in old age. (1986: 13–14)

That the old people with whom Kaufman spoke 'perceive meaning in being themselves in old age' is evidence against the agelessness for which she argues. Of course age in and of itself means nothing – and this is true of all phases in the lifecycle. It is rather the opportunity for the transformation of the self which accompanies the new age which is of significance. In the opening lines of his poem 'The Layers', Stanley

Kunitz identifies the important interplay between change and continuity of self in the ageing process:

I have walked through many lives  
some of them my own,  
and I am not who I was,  
though some principle of being  
abides, from which I struggle not to stray.

(Fowler and McCutcheon 1991: 18)

In old age, we remain in part the selves we have always been, even while we are transformed: 'I am not who I was, though some principle of being abides'.

This presents researchers of ageing with a particular challenge: they must find a way to locate and represent both the transformation and the continuity of the identity of the old people they study. Thus, rather than establishing a false binary between the positions 'you're only as old as you feel' (continuity) and 'you're as old as you are' (change), there is a grey area in which these positions exist simultaneously. Many old people feel that they are the same person deep inside as they have ever been (and might, therefore, express this in terms of 'not feeling old'). At the same time, they are changed by the years they have lived, not only physically, but psychologically. Thus, old people's readings of their social world, and their positionings of themselves within it, are very nuanced, and it is the complexity of this perspective, complete with its apparent self-contradictions, which researchers must try to keep hold of as they proceed in their investigations.

In my own work with old people (Andrews 1991), it is precisely this tension between change and continuity which lies at the core of my respondents' self-identifications. The women and men I interviewed – British lifetime socialists who had been politically active for 50 years or longer – were between the ages of 70 and 90. As they described themselves in old age, it was clear that their self-identities were both durable and dynamic. The lives which they were leading in old age were a direct outgrowth of the whole of their lives leading up to that point. As such, they experienced their old age as being full of purpose and meaning; for them it was the culminating chapter of a lifetime's work. One respondent, Eileen, quotes Einstein, saying 'the only constant is change'. She sees in herself a progressive change, a deepening of her understanding of Marxism, but not a change which involves a rejection of the political ideas she embraced in her youth. She explains: 'If you have a philosophy like mine that is a political one ... it obviously gets modified, but I think your basic beliefs stay the same ... I still believe in progress, I still have my Marxism'. She

describes how she sees change in her own life. She recalls going to see the Walt Disney film *Fantasia*, and listening to a Bach fugue which corresponded to her perception of life.

That it was, the interchanging and the movements, and how changes occur. What I was telling you about my own life, that it heaps up and suddenly it moves into something else and it weaves intricately and it gets lost and it gets stronger and finally there's a change. (Andrews 1991: 174)

One understanding grows out of another, earlier perspectives are enhanced, not replaced. Another respondent, Edward, identifies a similar interplay between change and continuity: 'I develop in understanding, but basically I don't think I've changed all that much'. Later he asserts 'I've a more realistic way of trying to work for socialism than I had earlier on. I think I've got a deeper understanding... they're the same values [as held earlier in life] but I hope I've grown in understanding how to work for them'.

Christopher's description is more expansive than those offered by the others:

I said just now that I believed politically speaking... I'd arrived... I don't mean that I've arrived at some sort of plateau or summit of knowledge and understanding from which no further advance is possible. That's an absurd notion, it's something not given to humans... I simply mean that I think my general orientation is right, that I have before me the possibility of travelling intelligently... All we can do, as humans, is travel, and if I say 'I've arrived' I only mean I've arrived at... 'a path with heart'... a path which one can follow with the consent of all one's being. (Andrews 1991: 175)

Christopher's development is a dynamic one, which involves the whole of himself. It is not a casting off of a past self, but rather the expansion of a present one. One respondent, Jack, echoes the sentiment expressed earlier by Maggie Kuhn. He says: 'to get to 80 years without experience would be useless. It would be a waste of 80 years'. These are not the words of someone who wishes to appear 'ageless'; rather he regards his 80 years – a phrase which he repeats for effect – as a sign of his experience. They are his history. Similarly, Rose speaks of 'getting wiser through experience'. The years of their lives mark more than the mere passage of time; through these years they have become who they are. In some sense, the years belong to them. They cannot, and they must not, be taken away from them.

Participants in my study had remained committed to socialist principles for at least 50 years; in the words of Kunitz quoted earlier, their lives are characterised by an abiding 'principle of being'. And yet, also like Kunitz, they do not claim to be the exact same person they have always been. In Jack's words 'that would be a waste of 80 years'.

Eileen explains the relationship between change and continuity in her own life using the metaphor of a spiral, analogous to Kunitz's living in 'the layers'. 'You don't come back, it isn't the wheel has come full circle. You come in a spiral ... Life doesn't go back to where it began, it comes up a bit further, and that's where you see progress.' Development for these men and women consists of their unfolding, a deepening of who they already were; it is the 'integration' identified by Friedan and Kaufman.

For my respondents, age represented both change and continuity. Moreover, it is through the passage of time that they gain a perspective not only of who they are, but of who they have been. Elizabeth eloquently describes this process:

when you look back, you see the path or paths that you've taken. The path would obviously not be so clear when you're groping up and finding it, would it? I mean it's rather like going up a mountain, you're sort of looking that way and that track and it looks too steep and you're going round another one. Whereas when you're high up you can look back and see and it sort of stands out much more clearly, things you didn't realize at the time. (Andrews 1991: 176–7)

Age has given to Elizabeth the opportunity to be 'high up' where she can look back over her life with a new ability to see and to understand, a depth of perspective not available to her in her earlier years, when she was 'groping' to find her way. Perhaps it is this deepening of the self which is the real gift of age, one of the 'capacities that actually improve or emerge with age' (1993: 49) which Friedan was seeking.

### **Shifting the centre**

Andersen and Collins (1995) make a strong case for what they call 'shifting the center' or 'putting at the center of our thinking the experiences of groups who have formerly been excluded' (1995: 2). Oppressed or marginalised groups of people are often judged by the experiences of their oppressor:

rather than being understood on their own terms; this establishes a false norm through which all groups are judged ... Shifting the center is a shift in stance that illuminates the experiences of not only the oppressed groups but also of those in the dominant culture. (1995: 2)

The youth-orientation of our culture hinders us from perceiving value in age; ageing is successful inasmuch as it is 'youthful'. Friedan's plea for a 'revolutionary paradigm shift' (1993: 51) seems well-founded. A deep understanding of the ageing process will only be



possible when we start and end our investigations with an acceptance of age. We must fight for a study of ageing which has not only old people but old age at its centre. So long as investigators build their safe fences between 'us' and 'them' our understanding of the selves who we are in the process of becoming will always be limited. Time and again old people say they experience the ageing process as a continuation of being themselves: their lives are ongoing. But this is not 'agelessness'. People see value in the years they have lived; without them they have no history, they have no genuine self.

Haim Hazan writes:

The inaccessibility of the experience of being old, coupled with the inadequacy of available conceptual frameworks, calls for an entirely different kind of approach to the acquisition of knowledge about ageing ... The importance of gerontology is not in its substantive contribution to the understanding of the nature of old age but in its allusion to the limits of our knowledge of the essence of human existence. The main instructive value of seeking knowledge of ageing is the potential it offers for facilitating an untried and vanguard experiment in unlearning and debunking. (1994: 94)

We need a different way to think and learn about ageing. What will it take for us to 'recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman' (de Beauvoir 1970: 12)? Can we not move beyond the 'us and them' distinction, or is our ability to know invariably limited to that which we have experienced? The 'unlearning' and 'debunking' which Hazan argues for is the crucial first step in this process, without which there can be no progress. We must ask ourselves hard questions: what does our culture teach us about the meaning, or the lack of meaning, of ageing? How can we learn about the selves we will become? We must listen to what the old have to say about being themselves in old age, in all of its complexity. The implications for the study of ageing are clear; the problems are real but not insurmountable. The challenge and the promise of this work are summarised by Lawrence Kohlberg:

... if an aging person has developed some wisdom we do not have, it is hard for younger researchers to detect it ... If some aging persons do attain a greater wisdom, then among the most important things a student of aging could do is to clarify and communicate that wisdom to others. This means that the student of aging needs to be not only a psychologist and a sociologist but also a philosopher. (Kohlberg and Shulik 1981: 72)

Researchers of ageing must learn to resist the temptation of agelessness. Ironically, this denial of difference, the erasure of the years lived, further entrenches the barrier between us and them, as it strips the old of their history and leaves them with nothing to offer but a mimicry of their youth. Thus, the cycle continues: the young are

divided from the old, and the old are divided within themselves, pitting body and soul against each other as if they were not part of one whole. But it is not old age which is thus conquered, but our very selves.

## References

- Andersen, M. L. and Collins, P. H. (eds). 1995. *Race, Class and Gender: an Anthology, 2nd Edition*. Wadsworth Publishing Company, New York.
- Andrews, M. 1991. *Lifetimes of Commitment: Aging: Politics, Psychology*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Ashburn, G. and Gordon, A. 1981. Features of a simplified register in speech to elderly conversationalists. *International Journal of Psycholinguistics*, **8**, 7–31.
- Atchley, R. C. 1993. Continuity theory and the evolution of activity in later adulthood. In Kelly, J. R. (ed). *Activity and Aging: Staying Involved in Later Life*. Sage, London.
- Bengston, V. L., Reedy, M. N. and Gordon, C. 1985. Aging and self-conceptions, personality processes and social contexts. In Birren, J. E. and Warner Schaie, K. (eds). *Handbook of Psychology and Aging*. Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York.
- Berman, P. and Goldman, C., (eds). 1992. *The Ageless Spirit*. Ballantine Books, New York.
- Biggs, S. 1997. Choosing not to be old? Masks, bodies and identity management in later life. *Ageing and Society*, **17**, 553–70.
- Bytheway, B. 1995. *Ageism*. Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Coles, R. 1991. Una Anciana. In Fowler, M. and McCutcheon, P. (eds). 1991. *Songs of Experience: an Anthology of Literature on Growing Old*. Ballantine, New York.
- Coupland, N., Coupland, J. and Giles, H. 1991. *Language, Society and the Elderly: Discourse, Identity and Ageing*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- de Beauvoir, S. 1970. *Old Age*. Penguin, Middlesex.
- Featherstone, M. and Hepworth, M. 1989. Ageing and old age: reflections on the postmodern life course. In Bytheway, B., Keil, T., Allatt, P. and Bryman, A. (eds). *Becoming and Being Old: Sociological Approaches to Later Life*. Sage, London.
- Friedan, B. 1993. *The Fountain of Age*. Jonathan Cape, London.
- Gingold, R. 1992. *Successful Aging*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Harevan, T. 1995. Changing images of aging and the social construction of the life course. In Featherstone, M. and Wernick, A. (eds). *Images of Ageing: Cultural Representations of Later Life*. Routledge, London.
- Hazan, H. 1994. *Old Age: Constructions and Deconstructions*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Healey, S. 1994. Growing to be an old woman: aging and ageism. In Stoller, E. and Gibson, R. (eds). *Worlds of Difference: Inequality in the Aging Experience*. Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Hepworth, M. 1991. Positive ageing and the mask of age. *Journal of Educational Gerontology*, **6**, 2, 93–101.
- Kaufman, S. 1986. *The Ageless Self: Sources of Meaning in Late Life*. Meridian, New York.
- Kohlberg, L. and Shulik, R. 1981. The aging person as philosopher: moral development in the adult years. Center for Moral Education, Cambridge, MA. Harvard Graduate School of Education. Mimeo.
- Murphy, E. 1993. Depression in later life. In Johnson, J. S. and Slater, R. (eds). *Ageing and Later Life*. Sage, London.
- Neuhaus, R. and Neuhaus, R. 1982. *Successful Aging*. John Wiley and Sons, New York.

- Radford, T. January 25, 1998. Unravelling the secrets of ageing. *Guardian Weekly*.
- Rubin, K. H. and Brown, J. 1975. A life-span look at person perception and its relationship to communicative interaction. *Journal of Gerontology*, **30**, 461–8.
- Thomae, H. 1979. The concept of development and life-span developmental psychology. In Baltes, P. and Brim, O. (eds). *Life-Span Development and Behaviour*. Vol. 2. Academic Press, London.
- Thompson, P., Itzin, C. and Abendstern, M. 1990. *I Don't Feel Old: the Experience of Later Life*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Wolf, N. 1990. *The Beauty Myth: how Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. Morrow, New York.

*Accepted 10 July 1998*

*Address for correspondence:*

Molly Andrews, University of East London, Department of Human Relations, Longbridge Road, Dagenham, Essex, RM8 2AS  
e-mail: M.Andrews@uel.ac.uk