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Conceptual frameworks and emancipatory research in social gerontology

Forum

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ABSTRACT
It is argued that conflicts arise in social gerontology because conceptual frameworks are not sufficiently developed. Taking a broad definition of conceptual frameworks that includes political awareness, I argue that the theoretical works of Anne Phillips and Nancy Fraser have much to offer when applied to social gerontology. It is, however, essential first to theorise later life in terms of difference and diversity and the potential for conflict between concepts. The main argument is that when researching a devalued group such as elders, the political aspects of research cannot be ignored even when researchers aim to be 'apolitical', and that research will be helped by considering the politics of equality under the headings of: universalism and particularism; convergence and recognition; cultural valorisation and redistribution; and redress and transformation. These categories are not completely separate and may overlap. Just as aspects of disadvantage are complex and interact, so are the remedies or theorisations that can be deployed.

Introduction

This contribution to Forum follows on from recent debates in *Ageing and Society* (Andrews 1999; Andrews 2000; Bytheway 2000; Gibson 2000) on ageism and the ways that social gerontologists conceptualise later life. The basic argument that I present is that old age exists as a definite life stage, even though it has fluid boundaries and is a many-faceted and dynamic concept. The second argument is that, as long as ageism exists, research on later life is inevitably political and good research will

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recognise this, either explicitly or implicitly. As social gerontologists, the way we think about ageing will affect the research we do, the results we report and the way we expect them to be used.

I present three sets of arguments: first, that conceptual frameworks in social gerontology research are frequently under-developed, and that this can lead to problems; secondly, that it is difficult to make sense of old age without moving from essentialist theories of later life to a more fluid and dynamic approach that takes difference and diversity on board; thirdly, that the political aspects of research cannot be ignored even when research aims to be apolitical. I borrow the term emancipatory research from feminism to look in more detail at aspects of disadvantage in later life and the ways that they may be remedied. This discussion is placed under the headings of: universalism and particularism, convergence and recognition, cultural valorisation and redistribution and redress and transformation. I have no intention of prescribing or prioritising one way forward over another, but wish only to point out that all conceptual frameworks should include an implicit or explicit recognition of power relations.

I recognise that not all gerontologists are particularly concerned with the social condition of those they study. They may simply assume that old age is a time of poverty, decay and discrimination. However, for most of us there is some truth in an early view from Reinharz: 'What feminism and gerontology have in common is an attempt to create social consciousness, social theory and social policy that will improve the life chances of a specific group' (Reinharz 1997: 74; first published in 1986). Both feminists and gerontologists are concerned with groups that suffer from multiple inequalities. Many gerontologists, however, would be shocked to find themselves bracketed with feminists, and this is why conceptual frameworks are important.

Conceptual frameworks

The term conceptual framework can be used quite narrowly to produce diagrams that indicate what is to be measured in a study and how the variables are believed to relate to one another (see, for example, Campbell and Martin Matthews 2000). It may also take the form of a wider theoretical and value stance going beyond simple measurement of variables (see, for example, Lynch and Minkler 1998, who include an overt political economy approach in their theoretical framework). At its broadest, as used here, the idea of a conceptual framework includes beliefs about the nature of knowledge as well as conscious and

unconscious values and assumptions, and feelings, experience and knowledge of the literature.

In value terms, conceptual frameworks for emancipatory research aim to reduce existing injustice, in contrast to non-emancipatory frameworks that accept the status quo. As Bowles and Duelli-Klein (1983) might have put it, one of the aims of the emancipatory researcher is to move from research *on* elders to research *for* elders. Research *by* elders is a further emancipatory development but, as yet, is barely relevant to most social gerontologists. At the extremes, one framework acknowledges social commitment and makes its values explicit while the other aims to be unbiased and 'scientific', and 'value-neutral' if not 'value-free'. Most research in social gerontology falls somewhere between these two extremes. However, values can be quite separate from beliefs about the nature of knowledge. It is, for example, possible to do emancipatory research on older women using large-scale data sets that are deemed to be 'value-neutral' (but see the quotations from Scott 1990 and Mukherjee and Wuyts 1998 below). In such cases it is reasonable for researchers to remain silent on their values and motivations. It is also possible to support the status quo while doing qualitative research, but it is harder to argue that values should remain hidden or that such research should be 'neutral'. My argument is that, whatever the research paradigm, a full conceptual framework would acknowledge the political stances implied by values, assumptions, implicit motivations, hidden biases and areas of silence.

When research is silent on important aspects of conceptualisation, two sets of problems can arise. The first relates to data and data collection and the second to theory. Data that are used or collected according to mainstream research methods are liable to be viewed uncritically as 'objective' and, hence, 'good', particularly if they are quantitative. This conceptual framework ignores the fact that administrative records (including statistics) are:

… shaped by the political context in which they are produced and by the cultural and ideological assumptions that lie behind it. They are most obviously shaped by general cultural assumptions with specific manifestations in such ideas as 'individual responsibility' and 'the sanctity of life', and widely accepted sexist, patriarchal and racist values. (Scott 1990: 60)

Scott might also have added ageist values, as with the 2001 UK census. Here the planners saw no reason to ask people over 75 about their educational level or their paid work. While such information might justifiably be left out of a sample survey on the grounds that few people over 75 are highly educated and very few are in the labour market, the failure to collect such information in a census is a missed opportunity.

In the first place we would like to know whether the better educated are healthier and live longer. In the second, with OECD governments currently attempting to get elders to remain in the labour force for longer (OECD 1998), it is important to establish a baseline that sets a profile for changes in paid work activity in later life.

A conceptual framework that ignores the implicitly value-laden nature of much survey data:

… often leads researchers who work with secondary data and who are mostly consumers (rather than producers) of these data, to see them as hard facts because a lot of the variability and uncertainty within such data have been carefully removed. … Not uncommonly, therefore, these researchers (macro-economists, sociologists working with survey data or demographers) tend to be more affirmative in their views of reality, and see their conclusions as being more objective than those of researchers involved in field work. … All data are partial records that yield selective visibility. (Mukherjee and Wuyts 1998: 248)

A full understanding of data on later life must include flaws and biases, and, I would argue, an ability to deconstruct the power relations that produced them, even if this is not part of the published output.

The second difficulty with incomplete conceptualisation lies in the way that knowledge is theorised. It would seem helpful for more social gerontologists to take on board new developments, very loosely described as post-structural or postmodern (see O'Brien and Penna 1998), or what Stuart Hall has called the destabilisation of the centre (Hall 1991). We can no longer be certain of 'the truth' and must recognise that all knowledge is partial and subject to change. For the vast majority of us, this does not mean taking up extreme positions against positivist research, only that we recognise that most aspects of knowledge are subject to different perspectives. For example, we might manage to agree on a definition of old age, but it will be understood very differently by, for example, a 30-year-old researcher, a 60-year-old woman and a 90-year-old man. Such approaches place dominant 'scientific' or 'objective' beliefs about knowledge under threat. The traditional 'value-neutral' scientist was aiming for the dispassionate gaze of the outsider, whether studying atoms, apes or elders. The paradigm has long been criticised by sociologists using the concept of reflexivity. Feminists have followed and developed aspects of eman-cipatory research that can be applied by those who study any devalued group.

Conceptualisations of later life

Well-defined categories with clear boundaries are needed for many research projects, so we should not ask 'where does old age begin?' (an essentialising concept, see below) but 'what are the characteristics and boundaries of old age that are relevant in this theoretical context, or for this set of measurements?' Such data and analyses are always going to be selective and to present partial pictures of later life (to echo Mukherjee and Wuyts, see above). In many cases the researchers will then need to ask how the categories chosen bias the research, and empower or disempower the groups involved. Such approaches move away from theorising later life in ways that are dichotomous, and essentialising. Dichotomies represent opposing categories that are often assumed to be both internally homogeneous and clearly differentiated from each other (see Rutherford 1990, for example). In this paradigm, the identity 'old' has meaning in relation to an opposite, 'young'. It implies that the not-old know what they mean when they say 'old', and that they are indicating a state or a stage in the lifecourse that is clearly defined, bounded and more or less similar in all people called old, and identifiably different from 'young'.

Even definitions that are not as polarised as young versus old can be essentialised or over-simplified. The weakness of essentialisation is that it exaggerates the importance of one or two characteristics of a group and so distorts our perceptions. Pension age, for example, is often taken as the boundary of later life. This, however, produces a group of such diversity that it is almost completely useless in understanding anything other than the cost of pensions today and projections for the future (and even then only on the assumption that nothing in the economy changes). This does not prevent the media, and even some academics, from consistently misrepresenting the cost of pensioners as a threat to society with the implication that all elders are a burden on the young. This is being challenged, for example by Marmor and de Jong (1998) and *Gerontology*, *Aging*, *Health and Society* at McMaster University (SEDAP): a range of papers indicating that population ageing is manageable.

The other problem with essentialist approaches is that they fail to recognise that definitions in emotive areas of life are not as objective as they seem. For example, the category 'old' defined by calendar age, also implies other more frightening markers such as retirement – a drop in status (especially for men), low income, low educational level and a definite sex ratio (few men). Sometimes it also implies:

… a certain distribution in geographical space (which is never socially neutral) and a whole set of subsidiary characteristics which may function, in the form of tacit requirements, as real principles of selection or exclusion without ever being formally stated. (Bourdieu 1984: 102)

For example, old people left behind in inner cities or isolated in rural areas are 'a problem'. These extras that are implied by the essentialising term 'old' are implicit in everyday speech and in everyday discourses on old age (see Billig 1998, for a parallel analysis).

Finally, dichotomous or essentialising definitions of identity in later life tend to be static. In OECD countries at least, where pensions have enabled very large numbers of people to retire on incomes that are above the poverty line, the experience of ageing is changing rapidly, and diversity among pensioners is growing (Irwin 1999). Such changes can be simply recorded as facts, but they can also be theorised in terms of the concept of performativity. This has the advantage of stressing the dynamic nature of identities in later life. The daily lives of older men and women can be seen as sets of day-to-day processes 'doing old age', processes that may be taken for granted, or subject to conscious choice by individuals or groups. They may be building their own identities or labelling others, on a conscious or unconscious basis: that is, identities are performative (Fraser 1997).

A shift to theorising identities as dynamic makes it possible to see that even in later life people have many identities, some at the same time and some in sequence (Phillips 1999; Fraser 1997, 2000). Identities may be chosen or imposed. So it is possible to see oneself, or be seen, as 'an older woman', 'a mother', 'a grandmother', 'a pioneering traveller' and 'a pillar of the local gardening club', either simultaneously, or as occasion demands.

The same is true of group identities. Members remain diverse even though they share certain group characteristics. So they may define themselves as 'Greek elders' or 'older Greek widows', but these will not be their only identities. As voters they may identify primarily as members of a minority ethnic group, with age an irrelevance. In devalued groups, it can be argued that processes of identification as 'the other' or as different and of less worth, are dominant, but this can underestimate the capacity for resistance in devalued individuals or groups (Tulle-Winton 1999; Minichiello *et al.* 2000). A non-essentialising theoretical framework can recognise that older men and women are not passive victims of ageism. They have some control over the formation of identities and some capacity to resist ageism and other sources of disempowerment.

Boundaries of later life

It follows from the above theorisation of later life that no boundary can be relevant for all older people all the time. Multiple identities imply multiple boundaries. Men or women can feel old in some contexts but young in others. Theorising boundaries in this way avoids the problem signalled by Bytheway: 'No matter how scientific we try to be, the criteria we might settle on will be essentially "arbitrary"'(Bytheway 2000: 783). Careful definition will allow us to say what the chosen boundaries are for, and why they have been chosen. Older men and women may contest the boundaries they are given (see Gibson 2000), or accept them.

   Fraser (1997) theorised three different approaches to boundaries. First, they can be used as aids to recognition, implying that defined groups or individuals are respected, and participate in society as equals. This is hardly a feature of old age in most Western societies where old age does not bring higher status, though it is not entirely absent. Second, boundaries can exist largely unnoticed, in which case they will have different results depending on issues of power. In cases where universalism can be relied on (see below) the absence of a marked boundary where one could potentially be drawn, may help to secure individual or group rights or respect. As Townsend pointed out long ago, older men and women may be devalued as old by society but, within their family or community, the boundary of age may be absent, in which case 'they are simply regarded as people, relatives or friends and valued as such' (Townsend 1981; Matthews 1979). Finally, the boundaries that most concern us here are used, especially by outsiders, as aids to ageism (misrecognition, in Fraser's terms). Their effects or manifestations are related to social institutions and the ways that social interaction is regulated. They are evident as sites and processes of misrecognition, for example, in the ways in which ageism or different aspects of structural dependency are institutionalised (Estes 1979; Townsend 1981; Phillipson 1982; Walker 1981).

Political awareness

Whether we like it or not, our research is political. We may be supporting (explicitly or, more likely, implicitly) the current social position of older men and women, or we may be producing research which is directly or indirectly aimed at change. Theorising old age and its boundaries on the lines set out above allows greater freedom for

emancipatory researchers. There is a need for the political aspects of conceptual frameworks in gerontology to be developed. As Fraser says:

'Differences and identities are performatively created through cultural processes of being claimed and elaborated: *they do not pre-exist such processes. They could always be otherwise.* Thus, existing differences and identities can be performatively undone or altered by being dis-claimed or differently elaborated.' (Fraser 1997: 182, my emphasis)

This quotation, with its stress on culture and the process of being old as subject to change, and on the idea of action or agency, has radical implications. Just as aspects of disadvantage are complex and interact, so do the remedies or theorisations that can be deployed. At the highest level, there is a possible conflict between universalism and particularism: do we wish to approach emancipatory research via the idea that 'a non-ageist gerontology should abandon a presumption that old age exists' (Bytheway 2000: 781), or do we recognise that old age exists, however problematic it may be, as a classification for individuals or groups. I suggest that Bytheway's version of universalism can be useful in a campaigning or political context, but it is a logical non-starter in research terms, because anything that is studied is forced into existence by the gaze of those that study it (in this case, by the gaze of gerontologists).

If we recognise that old age exists and that it is frequently accompanied by ageism and disadvantage, we need to question our assumptions about remedies. Should there be special compensations aimed at older men and women (particularism) and should the old become more like the young (convergence), or should we recognise that elders are a distinct and special group (recognition). If elders in general are members of a disadvantaged group, can their disadvantage be remedied by greater respect for their way of life or will some form of redistribution from 'haves' to 'have-nots' be essential? Finally, if redistribution is deemed necessary, should it be in the form of redress or as a process that leads to transformation of the disadvantage into something better? Each of these positions has fluid and possibly overlapping boundaries. They can be further subdivided in terms of policy and conceptualisation. Also, they have the potential for conflict with each other, and each alone can only bring about a partial improvement in the status of older men and women.

Universalism and particularism

Universalism implies equality for all. It is perfectly possible to argue that older men and women should have the same rights and the same

respect and recognition as other members of society, and that we should conduct research with this in mind. Few people, however, now think that universalism, in the form of equal treatment for disadvantaged groups, be they women, minorities or elders, is likely to result in equality. We may find it hard to quarrel with the idea of universal rights and equality for elders, but it is equally hard to see how they might be put into effect. However, the fact that *equality* is not going to happen overnight or indeed ever, is no reason for not reducing *current inequalities*. The question is how. Will groups or even individuals who are seen as unequal be made more equal by being treated in the same way as the members of more privileged groups, or do they need to be treated differently in order to 'catch up'? In terms of politics, the distinction is fairly clear: do we campaign for elders to be treated in the same way as all other citizens, or do we say they are disadvantaged and need special assistance? Many elders and their supporters are resolutely opposed to anything that labels older people as different because of 'need'.

We also have to ask: who defines what is universal. Common attributes that are deemed to be universal are likely to be reflections of the existing power structure. They are supported because they barely threaten the status quo and may even defuse more obvious demands for change based on difference. Many appeals to unity are made by dominant groups and are liable to be expressed in hegemonic terms. Billig (1995), for example, quotes the WASP who laments the rise of hyphenated Americans (such as Mexican-Americans or Ukrainian-Americans) as opposed to the days of her youth when people were 'simply glad to call themselves American'. When midlife is seen as the universal ideal, older people risk being valued as human beings only because, or as long as, they are recognisably 'like us'. If they keep active and remain 'young' they will be valued, but not otherwise. Such an approach is not emancipatory, as Gibson (2000) so clearly states.

All these objections do not mean that universalism should be written off. It may be useless as a single strategy for equality but, as an intellectual stance and a goal that is worth aiming for, using a range of methods or campaigns, it can be widely supported. However, when inequalities are socially structured, equal treatment will not result in equal outcomes. When physical change is added to social structures (for example, in gaining access to health care), what passes for equal treatment is likely to result in very unequal outcomes (Age Concern/ NOP 2000). For example, it may be agreed that equal access across age groups to kidney dialysis or cancer treatment is essential, but unless equal access is joined by a recognition that ageing bodies take longer

to rehabilitate, often suffer from multiple pathologies, and may need more care services to assist with daily living, equal access will not result in equal outcomes. The ageing body highlights the need for particular measures to implement equality in certain circumstances. In other words older men and women must be treated differently from younger men and women and, as needed, from each other if they are to move in the direction of greater equality.

Convergence and recognition

Once it is accepted that old age is different from youth and that older men and women are frequently socially disadvantaged, there are conceptual questions about how the situation can be changed. Do we envisage discrimination fading as 'they' become more like 'us' (convergence or assimilation), or is old age an irredeemably separate life stage that needs to be recognised as 'equal but different'? Both these standpoints are popular, though convergence appears to be the favourite at present. Phillips (1999) takes the view that the lifestyles and economic rewards of the privileged and underprivileged have to converge to some degree, if equal respect is to be a possibility. Discourses supporting convergence are found among older men and women who make particular efforts to be 'not old' and to 'stay young' and connected with society. The implication is that older men and women should continue to behave much as they have done in earlier life. Convergence could also mean that active elders will remain in paid work. Even greater inequalities in old age will then result between those who can keep good jobs (mainly men), those who take the 'expenses only' or low-paid jobs that midlife men and women do not want to do, and those who retire completely. All groups may save large amounts of public expenditure by caring for grandchildren, older relatives and frail partners.

The aims of 'active ageing', 'living well' and similar campaigns to keep elders fit, young, participant and generally 'not old', are in line with dominant British views on successful ageing. Jerrome (1992) mentions the fighting stance associated with being 'not old' as the desired norm in the groups she studied. The influence of convergence can also be seen in some of the more individualised branches of identity theory that imply a concept of continuity that is closely linked to convergence in terms of being 'not old'. Biggs (1997), for example, sees early versions of the 'mask of ageing' as being about maintaining youthfulness or more youthful consumption styles, even though his own approach is more developmental, and allows for old age as a stage.

The problem with any version of convergence is that it has its limits and the ageing body can let down the most youthful, active and connected elder. If progress towards group or individual equality comes to be associated with activity, the outcome for older, weaker or more disabled elders may be worse than before. According to Katz (2000), they may even be forced into opposing convergence. The French conceptualisation of Third and Fourth Ages is a good example of a theorisation that provides greater respect for active elders at the expense of greater denigration of others (Guillemard 1972; Laslett 1996). Given that women experience more disability in later life than men (Victor 1991), a conceptual framework that aims at convergence is discriminatory against older women as a group, and more so against older working class women who generally have poorer health than middle class women. Convergence alone therefore can be disempowering for some.

We might agree with Phillips that convergence in income levels is essential if elders are to be treated with anything like equal respect. However, convergence in lifestyle should be a matter of choice. Emancipatory researchers are not aiming to save the government money through elder volunteering or to impose a tyranny of activity on older men and women. Those who want to stay active should be helped to do so, and higher incomes are an important tool. But it is just as important that those who wish to withdraw from the labour force and lead quiet lives can do so without being stigmatised as 'old' or 'ageing unsuccessfully'. We might even wish to agree that those who want to comment on events from the perspective of their experience are repositories of wisdom, not simply out of date and 'living in the past'.

The simple alternative to convergence is to stress the differences between later and earlier stages of life, so that old age can be recognised as genuinely separate. The differences can be described in terms of disadvantage, or in terms of the development of new and more exciting lifestyles and consumption patterns. In the first case, the researcher is open to the charge of being part of the 'aging enterprise' (Estes 1979), and of denigrating older men and women by documenting their disadvantages. In the second, there are alternative and conflicting versions. Recognition and celebration of a new lifestage (Gibson 2000) is not the same as seeing cultures of ageing in terms of their *resistance to old age* (Gilleard and Higgs 2000: 4, their emphasis). Gibson wants 'elders to be proud of their many years that have conferred experience, wisdom and freedom from the follies of their younger years' (Gibson 2000: 778). In contrast, the new culture theory of ageing includes aspects of convergence in relegating old age to 'a future that most

people would choose to avoid' (Gilleard and Higgs 2000: 4), even though it stresses the importance of new choices and consumption patterns. Conceptual frameworks that can theorise old age as a time of difference and diversity will have no trouble accommodating the idea that some older men and women experiment with new lifestyles, others follow new fashions or respond to advertising, while others, through choice or constraint, behave conservatively.

In political terms recognition raises the question of whether older men and women are to unite and fight for respect and equality, in the same way as women and ethnic minorities. As Gibson (2000) says, to stand up and be counted as 'old' means first acknowledging old age, and many still refuse to call themselves old in a public context. Older men and women have shown that they can unite in large numbers to fight on single issues like pensions (Gifford 1990; Wilson 2000), but genuine old age rights movements have not yet emerged in Europe. In other struggles for emancipation, diversity has been a problem that is now largely acknowledged by the relevant movements – women are not all the same and minority ethnic groups may have conflicting interests. Elders comprise all the diversity of both these groups and then have age, lifecourse and gender differences on top. Recognition has a place as a research tool for understanding new lifestyles and movements, even though the political aspects still seem problematic.

Cultural valorisation and redistribution

At all levels of social science it is possible to identify a cultural turn that overlays concern with economic inequality. As a result of globalisation and the accompanying triumph of free-market ideologies, even mildly progressive taxation, let alone full-blown redistribution, has been put out of fashion (Phillips 1999). So, at global level, Halliday (2000: 124) notes that 'an emphasis on cultural diversity may mask the power of more material forms of difference. … most obviously differences of economic interest'. In political science, Phillips (1999) opposes the tendency to concentrate on cultural inequalities (what Fraser calls misrecognition) rather than economic inequality. In social gerontology, Gilleard and Higgs support the cultural turn:

What is important is not whether or not the state is best placed to provide pensions and security in retirement or at what level, but rather the multiplicity of sources that provide the texts and shape the practices by which older people are expected to construct their lives. (Gilleard and Higgs 2000: 22)

Viewing older people, by definition, as victims of poverty and poor housing can indeed be demeaning, and a revamping of the theoretical

framework to include older men and women as consumers is to be welcomed. As with recognition, one standard model for emancipatory researchers and campaigners dealing with cultural inequalities, is to revalue the source of disrespect. A research model that celebrates the ageing consumer is therefore needed, but only if its material limitations are recognised.

One difficulty in recognising elders as equal citizens is that the process of recognition can easily become normative in its own right, and coercive as far as elders are concerned, as with convergence above. Insistence on equal partnership or equal participation by men and women in later life, ignores gender differences, the need for disengagement and the problems of physical frailty. Even the most active elder can sometimes wish to withdraw from certain activities to make way for younger members, or simply from boredom. They need not buy into the more functionalist aspects of Cumming and Henry's theory of disengagement (1961) to want to spend more time on leisure and less on committee work. The cultural validation approach has worked well for some ethnic minorities and for some feminist groups, but it seems possible that older men and women are very strongly aware of the problems thrown up by identity or recognition politics. They do not want to be simply labelled as old with the accompanying 'false stereotype' (Gibson 2000). One single identity is not enough and, even within an identity such as 'older activist', there may be power relations that favour some and disadvantage others: women, for example (Andrews 1991).

The big question is whether a concentration on culture and the need for recognition of the lifestyles of older people is a justification for giving material equality a lower priority. Both Fraser and Phillips, writing mainly about the disadvantages of (mid-life) women, want to maintain an emphasis on material conditions. Phillips takes the view that groups that are seen as poor will not be granted equal recognition:

the problem with economic inequality is not just that it constrains the exercise of political rights but that it shapes (and damages) perceptions of fellow citizens. (Phillips 1999: 82)

Fraser is more concerned with culture and misrecognition: the systematic downgrading of groups in esteem and status. Were they to examine later life, they would undoubtedly see even more mis-recognition but they might recognise that material inequality is still more important among older women. A majority of pensioners in European Union countries thought that pensions were too low in 1992 (Walker 1993) and this suggests that older men and women themselves

are more concerned about material conditions than cultural recognition.

Redress and transformation

Despite the cultural turn mentioned above, a concern with redistribution appears inevitable, but redistribution can be a matter of redress or transformation. Redress aims to make amends for past or present failures in equality. Redress is essential if elders are to achieve any form of material or cultural equality, but it is also potentially pernicious. Small rises in pension, or even large winter fuel bonuses, may be welcome for many, but they are the result of campaigns that constantly present pensioners as 'hard done by', in poverty, or even 'unable to make ends meet'. The old appear in the media as a deserving group, but the deserving tend not to be our equals. They are disadvantaged people who are the subject of campaigns, rather than people with rights like ourselves. Redress is therefore best justified as part of a move towards measures that bring about lasting transformation of status.

   The alternative formulation is redistribution that genuinely transforms the sources of ageism. A complete restructuring of the pension system to produce adequate citizen incomes for all, would be one approach to transformation. It might not end ageism but it would help. It might also have a greater effect on the status of older women who are now more likely to be poor than older men. In health, equal access to treatment for all age groups combined with performance indicators that measured final health improvement for the patient, rather than bed throughput would also attack the status of older patients as 'bed-blockers'. Private pensions in the UK have been much less than universal, but still transformative for those who have benefitted. They mean that many young retired people in the UK make up an important market, and they are valued accordingly in the media and advertising (see Gilleard 1996; Gilleard and Higgs 2000). Similarly, we have reached a point in most western European countries where older voters make up a critical proportion of the local or national electorates and policies to revalue elders are beginning to appear.

Conclusion

Those who feel that research should not be in any way political, and that it should leave current power structures unthreatened, may be

unsympathetic to conceptual frameworks that include political aware-ness, let alone political goals. Emancipatory researchers, however, must by definition be concerned about the political outcome of their work. My argument is not that researchers should follow any one line or adhere to one set of values, but that an awareness of the issues raised above is essential for good research. In this context 'good' means that researchers are aware of the biases in their data and the implicit and explicit values that they bring to their theorisation, data collection and analysis. They should also, ideally, be aware of how their findings can be used for and against older men or women. Progress will, however, be very limited unless social gerontology further develops different ways of theorising old age and its boundaries. Concepts of difference and diversity, and of multiple and fluid identities and boundaries are essential. Commonly used markers like chronological age or being a pensioner, have their uses but they are only partial identities. If used uncritically, they result in essentialisation and bias in research outputs.

Fluidity over political approaches and more exact ways of separating and contextualising different sources of disadvantage and different remedies fits well with new ways of theorising old age. Conceptual frameworks for emancipatory research can usefully separate out the linked concepts of universal and particular, convergence and diversity, recognition and redistribution, and redress and transformation, even though in practice they may overlap. The aim is to identify and disentangle roots of disadvantage and to identify conceptual and, where relevant, practical remedies. Unless this is done, research findings may appear to conflict and the results may lead to academic controversy, rather than increased knowledge (Fraser 2000; Andrews 1999; Irwin 1999; Phillips 1997, 1999). In practice, researchers may, for intellectual, emotional or political reasons, wish to focus on one aspect of the available approaches to injustice (for example, universalism or transformation), but it will still be helpful if they are aware of other approaches to the reduction of inequalities. Fraser's words may be applied to old age as well as to women: old age is a 'dilemmatic mode of collectivity … bivalent, implicated simul-taneously in both the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition' (Fraser 2000). Emancipatory research will therefore formulate conceptual frameworks that support political and economic remedies to the problems of ageism, at the same time as allowing for cultural revaluations of later life.

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