

# Book Review: Unmasking Age: The Significance of Age for Social Research by Bill Bytheway

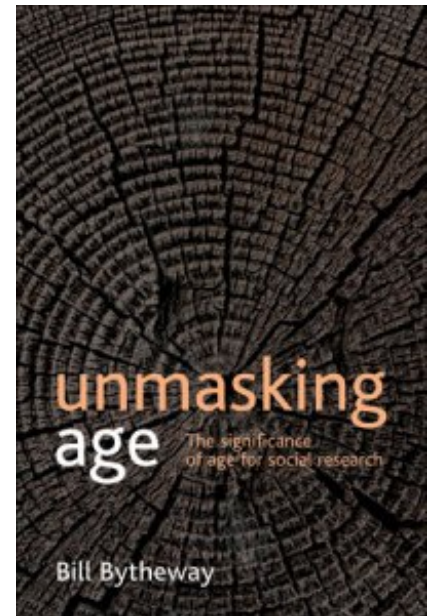
Jan 22 2012

*Bill Bytheway gives us a valuable overview of the importance of age for social research in Unmasking Age, finds Alice Hunter. A timely release against a backdrop of concerns over the economic implications of global the ageing population, which focuses on the everyday experiences of old age.*



**Unmasking Age: The Significance of Age for Social Research. Bill Bytheway. Policy Press. June 2011.**

*Unmasking Age* brings together ideas and theories based on author [Bill Bytheway](#)'s 43 years of gerontological research and studies. His work on projects such as *Retirement through Redundancy*, *The Oldest Generation (TOG)*, and *Research on Age Discrimination (RoAD)* has been hugely influential in the study of age, and Bytheway draws on these studies and more to provide a comprehensive view on the importance of age for social research.



Gerontology is a comparatively small but ever-increasing field of research and this latest offering from Bytheway seems a timely release against a backdrop of public sector pension cuts, increased retirement age and concerns over care for the 'elderly' in the UK. Concerns are also being raised over the [economic implications](#) of the 'ageing population' in the UK and globally. However, it is Bytheway's focus on the 'everyday' experience of 'old' age that sets this book apart from the sometimes distant and distanced view of 'old' people as the 'other.'

The initial chapter introduces the concept of age and the research that Bytheway uses throughout the rest of the book. For anyone who has not read much about gerontology, it provides a clear and concise introduction to many of the issues raised with researching and talking about 'old' age, as well as highlighting the current state of how 'old' age is viewed by society and individuals.

Bytheway then looks at some of the ways that age can be theorised, examined and explained, both on a personal and more academic level. Bytheway considers how age and time are measured through birthdays and routines. His work on the impact of weather and seasons on 'old' people – how they can affect daily life, increase illness and isolation, and even cause death – is something that many people would see as common sense but is a welcome recognition of an under-theorised subject.

'Representations of Age', the fourth chapter, covers a vast amount of work and I feel that it suffers from being squeezed into a limited number of pages. I would have liked to have seen more examination of [media representation](#) – arguably one of the most readily available mediums of representation in current times.

Chapter five, six and seven go on to look more closely at the actual lived experience of ageing and being 'old', including personal accounts of living to a 'great age.' Drawing heavily on the RoAD and TOG projects (where 'elderly' people and those close to them were interviewed and/or asked to

keep diaries), these chapters provide some unique and detailed personal insights into the 'everyday' experience of being 'old' and the alterations in life patterns, daily routines and views on self and future. The account of May Nilewska's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday party provides a highly-readable account of this important occasion. Bytheway presents to us extracts from accounts by both Mrs Nilewska and her niece on the preparations, emotions and concerns surrounding the day itself.

The final chapter summarises what it seems the purpose of the book has been – 'Getting real' about age. It looks at how 'old' age is talked about, researched and lived, and how people react to their own ageing bodies and minds, and those of others.

This book provides an excellent overview for anyone looking for an introduction to age studies, or an interesting re-examination and drawing together of past research for those already familiar with the work of Bytheway and other gerontologists. However, it does feel that some parts are lacking enough detail – perhaps because of the large amount of research contained in this single slim volume. Those parts that are written in great detail are in my opinion the book's strong points, and it is the accounts of real people's lives that really make this book a worthwhile read, as well as the important consideration of whether an 'ageing population' is really something to panic about. The subtitle of the book, *The Significance of Age for Social Research*, is nicely summarised by the author on the final page: "It is the simple fact that we are all growing older all the time that makes the study of age and ageing so important." [p. 216] Despite being at the end of the book, I feel this represents the whole content – 'old' age is something that society must pay attention to, and if people don't like what they see then they must begin to find ways to create an alternative way of life for those who reach great age.

**Unmasking Age: The Significance of Age for Social Research. Bill Bytheway. Policy Press. June 2011.**

Find this book: [Google Books](#) [Amazon](#) [LSE Library](#)



You may also be interested in the following posts (automatically generated):

1. [As tackling civil unrest remains pertinent to the Coalition's political agenda, new research provides insights into the success of Labour's social exclusion programme on disadvantaged families](#)
2. [From Scottish devolution to the smoking ban and the national minimum wage, academic research has influenced successful policy across government](#)
3. [Book Review: Living in the Endless City](#)
4. [Book Review: Work, Worklessness and the Political Economy of Health](#)

