

# Unmasking the ‘Elderly Mystique’: why it is time to make the personal political in ageing research

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## Abstract

This article uses feminist scholarship to investigate ‘the elderly mystique’ – which contends that the potential of old age is masked by a set of false beliefs about ageing (i.e. *ageism*) which permeate social, economic and political life (Cohen, 1988).

The article presents a theoretical model which explores the extent to which institutionalised ageism shapes the trajectory of life after 60.<sup>1</sup> The hypothesis underpinning the model is simple: *The challenge for ageing societies is not the average age of a given population but, rather, how age is used to structure economic, social and political life.* An inter-disciplinary framework is used to examine how biological facts about ageing are used to segregate older from younger people, giving older people the status of “other”; economically through retirement, politically through assumptions about ‘the grey vote’ and socially through ageist stereotyping in the media and through denial and ridicule of the sexuality of older people. Each domain is informed by the achievements of feminist theory and research on *sexism* and how its successes and failures can inform critical investigations of *ageism*.

The paper recognises the role of ageism in de-politicising the lived experience of ageing. The paper concludes that feminist scholarship, particularly work by feminists in their seventies, eighties and nineties has much to offer in terms of re-framing gerontology as an emancipatory project for current and future cohorts of older people.

**Keywords:** ageism, feminism, cultural gerontology, elderly mystique.

## Introduction

“Demographic change in Europe is seen as a challenge for many policy areas... As many of these areas involve a significant share of public finance expenditure, population ageing is also subject to examination from the perspective of fiscal sustainability” (European Commission, 2014:9).

This article calls for a capacity-based and culturally embedded knowledge base for ageing. The approach presented is ambitious as it involves challenging the dominance of bio-medical and cost-oriented approaches to research on ageing. The quotation from the European Commission at the opening, typifies the latter. The work builds on critical interventions such as Cole’s (1992) *Journey of Life* which delineated the transition of scholarship from concern with the meaning of age to the management of ageing: ‘...aging has been brought under the dominion of scientific management, which is primarily interested in *how* we age in order to explain and control the aging process’ (Cole, 1992: xx). Policy-makers focus on providing health and social care services for an older population, which, they assume, will become ever more dependent (National Institute of Aging, 2007; 1; European Commission, 2014). This perspective on ageing has intensified with the adoption of austerity policies in Europe and the US since the financial crisis of 2007-08 (Donald et. al., 2014; Phillipson, 2015).

Like gender, race and class, age is an important dimension of social and individual experience, but it has received much less attention from researchers and social activists (Laslett in Kertzer and Laslett, 1995: 4). The article presents a model proposing that: ‘*The challenge for ageing societies is not the average age of a given population but, rather, how age is used to structure economic, social and political life.*’ The focus of the article is ‘ageism’: defined as the institutionalised and endemic use of social norms and conventions which systematically disadvantage people on the basis of chronological age. The main implication of the model is that there is untapped potential in old age; if only its inhabitants were not subject to ageist social norms and contradictory social policies, ill-suited to ageing societies. For example, under austerity early retirement policies are commonplace, a practice which contradicts the need to delay retirement in response to greater longevity.

The article aims to address what leading critical gerontologist Phillipson (2013: 167) identifies as: ‘the biggest omission of the past 50 years... the failure to explore the potential gains of an ageing population.’ The article links women’s writing about the lived experience of ageing within the cultural gerontology frame to structural explanations of ageism from the political economy approach. As such, the article aims to make important connections between personal experiences of ageing, and institutional responses to longevity.

## The Elderly Mystique

The Elderly Mystique is analogous to Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, which is oft credited with providing the impetus for the women's liberation movement in the United States (Friedan, 1963). The *Feminine Mystique* refers to the 'strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform' (Friedan, 1963: 1). In his exposition of the *Elderly Mystique* Cohen (1988) refers to a similar gap between lived experience of old age and societal expectations of older people which are based on 'the detritus of gerontophobic views,' whose origins have been attributed, variously, to modernisation, demography and rising economic wealth. Cohen cites Rosenfelt's (1965 cited in Cohen, 1988: 24) articulation of the impact of such gerontophobia on one's self-perception and social status with advancing years:

'the participant in the elderly mystique knows society finds it hard to accept, let alone forgive, his existence. An unsubtle attitude of punishment and retaliation is endemic in modern life. The old person expects derogation in explicit terms.'

Gerontology has successfully demonstrated the problems of ageing. More recently, longitudinal studies such as the English Longitudinal Study on Ageing have provided quantitative evidence of age discrimination (Rippon et. al., 2014). Practitioners such as geriatric physician, Bill Thomas, argue that segregation of older people with dementia into care homes amounts to age-based apartheid, supported by social norms which relegate people with dementia a sub-human status (Thomas, 2015). Nursing scholars in the critical tradition have argued that older people with severe dementia experience an effective 'social death' (Brannelly, 2011).

In recent decades, scientific work has devised models to counter senescence (growing older conceived of as deterioration or decline (Palmore, 1990: 12) through 'successful ageing' (Rowe and Kahn, 1987). Active and/or successful ageing proposes that decline can be avoided through adopting a 'busy ethic.' Active ageing has now been critiqued as an over-simplification of old age, which served to homogenise the diversity of people's lived experience of ageing (Bülow and Söderqvist, 2014). Bülow and Söderqvist's (2014) eloquent and balanced historical review of 'successful ageing' speaks to a wider trend in the ascendancy of cultural conceptions of ageing. Even still, there have been few attempts to investigate whether institutionalised ageist social norms might influence these approaches (Liang and Luo, 2012). What is so wrong with getting older that we rarely study the developmental potential of old age; the adaptability or ingenuity of older people; or the opportunities presented by longevity?

One challenge in unmasking the elderly mystique is that ageing scholarship lacks the support of a counter-cultural political movement comparable with that provided by the women's movement for feminism. In their seminal work, Arber and Ginn (1991: 9) argue that 'Gerontology is not an action oriented perspective in the way that feminism is.' The absence of a link between scholarship and activism persists 40

years after Butler (1975) coined the term 'ageism' and 21 years after Friedan (1993) published *The Fountain of Age*. Arber and Ginn (1991: 28) admit that 'the parallels between feminism and anti-ageism are striking and numerous.' It seems there are also differences, and, until recently, these have seemed insurmountable.

Perhaps the demography of gerontologists as a population plays a role in its apolitical development? As retirement continues to be practiced, few gerontologists have adequate lived experience of ageing to make a knowledge claim on the basis of experience. Gerontology itself is rather youth-oriented; Friedan compares the analysis of ageing by gerontologists rather unfavourably with the experience of growing older as described by participants she was interviewing for her book, *The Fountain of Age*:

'Looking around the panelled room of my first Harvard meeting on "Ethical Issues in the Care of the Aged," I realized that, aside from my own, there was only one white head of hair. It belonged to a man who was a pioneer in the study of age and was about to retire (it seemed gerontologists must also retire at sixty-five). These bright young Turks of the new ageing field were mostly men who maybe started out in psychiatry, doing post-docs in 'geropsychiatry' (there was a lot of research money available for Alzheimer's syndrome studies), and a few women staking out new turf as legal-medical "ethicists." Listening to those experts on aging talk about "them" – the problems of those sick, helpless, senile, incontinent, childlike, dependent old people, all alone, or draining the finances of their families, a burden on Social Security system and the hospitals – I thought how different their concerns were from those women and men who had been telling me about the surprising changes in their own lives since they turned sixty, seventy, eighty' (Friedan, 1993: 21).

The gerontologists at the Harvard meeting were in a position to define the terms of which aspects of the ageing process merit investment by research funders and, consequently, scientific investigation. As mid-life medical or legal experts their only awareness of ageing is through the problems presented by older people who need help. As a result, they tend to see ageing as set of issues which can solidify into disabilities that ultimately lead to loss of what they see as the ideal - independence. As science and technology studies scholar, Sheila Jasanoff reminds us scientific knowledge is not a mirror of reality, but "it both embeds and is embedded in social practices, identities, norms, conventions, discourses, instruments, and institutions." (Jasanoff, 2004: 3). Expert knowledge around ageing reflects and creates wider social practices, institutional structures, and narratives. In effect, these experts were unconsciously constructing an elderly mystique. Certainly, some of our analysis of how older people choose to subvert ageing runs the risk of supporting the elderly mystique. Barrett and Naiman-Sessions (2015: 16) recent critique of one immensely popular site of resistance to ageism for older women, *The Red Hat Society* concludes that Red Hatters 'performance of girlhood accommodates ageism by reinforcing the valorisation of youth and devaluation of old age'. The authors'

conclusion begs the question: how do they know girlhood is not a valid performance of old age? Until we construct a theoretical framework, informed by the lived experience of pioneers of longevity, it is impossible to answer these questions, and to validate Barrett and Naiman-Sessions (2015) claims.

The accelerated nature of demographic ageing has led to 'a cultural lag, even of false consciousness, to some degree' (Laslett in Kertzer and Laslett, 1995: 4). While Laslett argues that ageing (and ageism) have a history dating back to long before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we will concentrate on a vibrant literature on ageism and age discrimination which developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first wave follows the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Butler, 1975) and is begun by Robert Butler's work in defining age discrimination:

'a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin colour and gender. Old people are categorized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old-fashioned in morality and skills' (Butler, 1975: 12).

In later waves we see developments in social gerontology on both sides of the Atlantic (Bytheway, 1995; Binstock, 2010). Riley (1987) identified the universal tendency of societies to engage in 'age stratification,' where age is used to allocate social and economic status. Palmore's (1990) seminal work identified both positive and negative ageism. There is a strong psychological literature on ageism (Neugarten, 1996). However, that work does not take account of how 'separately or together, ageism and age segregation mark sharp distinctions between self and other' (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005). There are promising developments from feminist writers and scholars such as Friedan (1993), Calasanti (2007), Segal (2013) and cultural critics such as King (2013). However, these studies, while pioneering, have not yet been sufficiently resourced to provide robust empirical evidence of the impact of age stratification on our capacity to uncover the potential of longevity. Not since Palmore has any study provided a verifiable account of ageism as a set of socially constructed assumptions. Even Palmore (1990) and similar work by Macnicol (2004) have not recognised that lived experience of old age might be a valid form of knowledge of ageing.

By using the feminist critique of sexism (*Friedan's Feminine Mystique*) to inform an analogous critique of ageism (*Cohen's Elderly Mystique*), the theoretical model outlined in this article establishes an emancipatory framework for research on ageing. Before outlining the model, it is necessary to trace the development of research on ageing since coming under scientific management in the 1980s.

## **The development of ageing research under scientific management**

Whatever the causes of unintentional ageism such as that discovered by Friedan (1993) in her Harvard meeting, the discrepancy between the lived experience of ageing and societal expectations of ageing persists, despite millions of dollars, euros and pounds invested in researching ageing since the early 1990s. The envelopment of ageing research into scientific management from the 1980s (Cole, 1992) leaves us with data and expert knowledge but fails to shift negative public perceptions towards ageing. Even, Börsch-Supan (2013: 3), architect of the pillar of research on ageing in Europe, (Survey of Health Ageing and Retirement in Europe, a longitudinal study of 85,000 Europeans in 20 countries) admits that public attitudes towards ageing are overwhelmingly and stubbornly negative, despite extensive research evidence to the contrary. The widely held public perceptions of ageing which he identifies as *myths* include:

1. 'Aging necessarily implies declining living standards.'
2. 'The economics of aging is about the old.'
3. 'Declining health limits the capacity to work at older ages.'
4. 'Retirement is bliss.'
5. 'Older workers are less productive.'
6. 'Keeping older workers creates unemployment for the young.'
7. 'Older societies have more intergenerational conflict' (Börsch-Supan, 2013: 4-14).

Börsch-Supan calls for greater awareness of linkages that exist (or fail to exist) between 'theory, evidence and political economy' (Börsch-Supan, 2013: 3). Despite this insight, he does not link the persistence of myths about ageing to institutionalised ageism. However, he does hint that some of the social norms around ageing and older people are 'politically incorrect.' In de-bunking the myth that higher rates of employment amongst older workers necessarily leads to youth unemployment he observes: 'While claiming that women crowd out men has become politically incorrect, the very same fallacy is still alive when it concerns foreign or older workers' (Börsch-Supan, 2013: 10). It would seem then, that ageism (in the sense defined by Butler, 1975) permeates current public perceptions of the implications of demographic ageing, despite research evidence to the contrary.

Next, we investigate the role of gerontology in allowing this situation to develop. Except Palmore (1990) and Bytheway (1995), few social scientists have made serious attempts to systematically research the social, political and economic implications of growing older in an ageist society. Why is this so? The answer may lie in the move towards marketization and capitalist ideologies which came to replace the post-war social contract in the embrace of neo-liberalism in the 1980s and 1990s. It is interesting to note that where serious progress has been made, such as Palmore's (1990) balanced and thorough assessment of positive and negative versions of ageism, senescence, (rather than potential), has become synonymous with research on ageing. This tendency has been compounded by global economic crisis of 2007-8. Palmore (1990: 181) predicted the resurgence of ageism were such conditions to develop: 'Many economists have painted gloomy scenarios in which

inflation becomes rampant on a worldwide basis, stock markets crash, banks and other investment institutions fail, and economies generally collapse. Such a catastrophe would mean the collapse of financial security for many or most elders... and encourage a resurgence of ageism.' Conflicting media reports on undeservedly 'rich pensioners' juxtaposed with 'mediscare' campaigns in the wake of 2008 would appear to vindicate this prophecy (see Table 1).

At the time that Friedan wrote *The Fountain of Age* (1993), even women's organisations were being co-opted into power sharing and collective bargaining structures which changed their status from 'outsiders' to 'insiders.' So, just at the juncture in history when mass longevity began to unfold, the political tools and language needed to tackle the inevitable arguments about ageing - respect, inclusion, rights and equality, began to fall into dis-use. In particular, in a market-oriented society, only those with a productive role in the public sphere have a measurable value; while, again in parallel with feminist critiques, any role in social reproduction at home was ignored.

Global capitalism, and particularly the enthusiastic endorsement of capital markets by governments, has made it difficult to argue for any social policy that might have *cost implications*. This has been accompanied by technological developments that have accelerated the exchange of ideas and products around the globe. Predictions about the accelerating needs of older people as consumers of health care and pension payments has allowed the idea of a demographic time bomb take hold in the minds of policy planners (Mullan, 2004). In this context, Walker (2012: 813) writes of *The New Ageism*: 'While there is nothing new about ageism, or age discrimination, and pessimism about the economic consequences of population ageing... the present political narrative on ageing is remarkable for its prevalence in the policy community and media and for its elevation to the status of self-evident truth.'

However, the writings of ageing feminists such as Segal (2013) and Lively (2013), in bearing witness to the lived experience of old age, suggest a renaissance for many of the arguments developed by Friedan (1993) in the *Fountain of Age*. Countering the official view that there are simply too many costly old people, Lively (2013: 16) offers an alternative perspective on ageing:

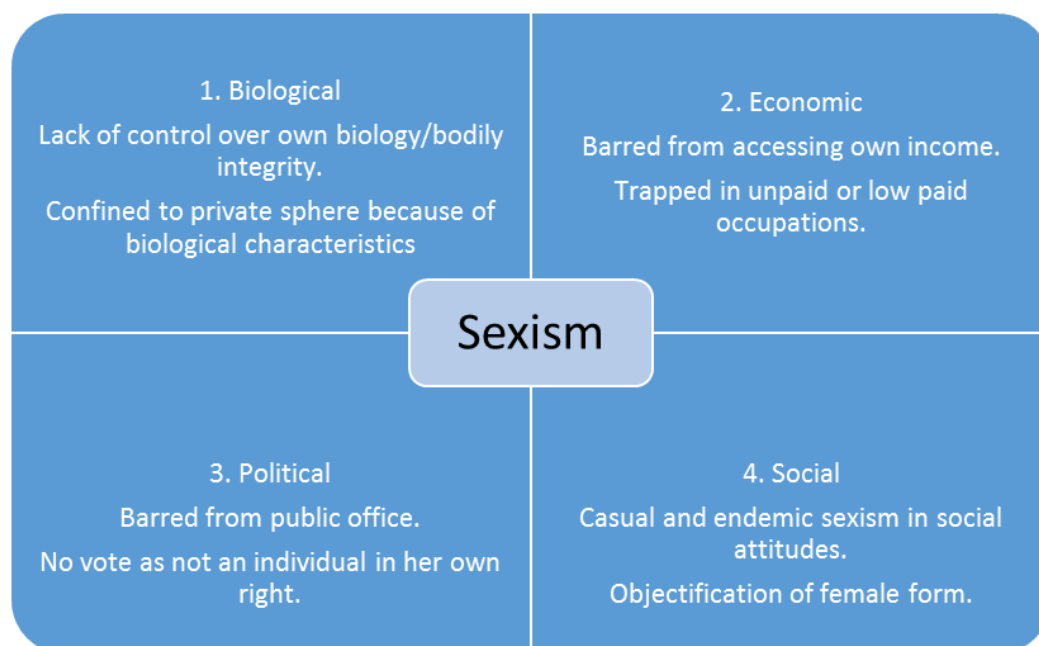
'the counter view to the administrators and the ageists, is that this is the human race adapting again, and how interesting. How significant, how challenging that there is now this new demographic, this hefty group of people who have notched up seven or eight decades and counting, many of whom are still in good nick, with all their marbles and able to savour life.'

There is still time to challenge ageism, to avoid it becoming further institutionalised as an 'elderly mystique' where body and soul are pitted against one another (Hepworth, 1991). That is the contribution of the theoretical model presented here; if we can first discover where social institutions and structures are *not* facilitating our oldest members, we can begin to unlock the potential of old age. The model is developed across four domains: 1) biological determinism and the ageing process, 2) alternatives to active ageing and the need to critically examine work and retirement; 3) the politics of ageing and the need for participatory analysis of age-based interest groups; 4) socialisation and ideologies of ageing.

### **First Sexism, Now Ageism: How biology is used to determine capacity as we age**

According to the model proposed, we argue that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century chronological age is used to socially construct old age as a barrier to economic, political and social participation in much the same way as sexism has served to restrict women. Women's oppression has been founded on four interlocking bases. First, women's biology has been viewed as problematic. Women's capacity for child bearing has been socially constructed as the basis on which they should be excluded from paid work, leading to their economic oppression. Women have been excluded from public office, a situation that persists in some countries. Confined to the domestic sphere, women have been encouraged to occupy narrow social roles. Diagram 1 outlines the four inter-locking bases on which sexism has been institutionalised, a system which has maintained women's oppression across four domains: economic, political, biological and social.

**Diagram 1:**



Sexism has affected women in seemingly unconnected spheres, but has the cumulative effect of inhibiting freedom and potential. To counter the institutionalisation of sexism, women began to argue that ‘the personal is political’: naming, identifying and objecting to their social, political and economic oppression. By politicising personal experiences of sex discrimination, feminism shifted the blame for women’s lower status from women themselves onto ‘sexism’ – the institutionalised and endemic social norms and conventions which systematically disadvantage women in the distribution of social, economic and political power and

resources. At least in secular, democratic societies, feminists' work has had a cumulative effect of emancipating some women to varying degrees across each domain. By asking whether ageism is institutionalised in a similar way to sexism, the theory presented in this article has the potential to demonstrate how 'the personal is political' for those aged over 60.

Once such an alternative epistemological basis is adopted, we believe the model will reveal that ageism is the root cause of ageing societies producing sub-optimal responses to population ageing (Börsch-Supan, 2013). This is not to ignore the complex inequalities that arise from the intersection of age, gender, race, and class. We are acutely aware of the limitations of ageing as a single analytical category. Much feminist scholarship has been done on intersectionality - examining the ways in which gender, race, class and other dimensions of identity combine to create intersecting social relations (McCall, 2001; McDowell 2008; Wright 2006). Thus, for many feminist scholars identities are theorized as diverse and historically and spatially situated. The multifaceted ways in which gender, race, and class intersect have received much attention, but ageing has received less attention. Yet, the interaction of ageing with race, class, and gender is crucially connected to questions about poverty, resources, unequal incomes, unequal treatment and status differences. Building on this work, we argue that the societal pervasiveness of ageism functions to structure our understanding and experience of ageing. Our message is simple; tackle ageism, and the dominant conception of ageing as primarily a problem, no longer holds sway.

Next, we present a theoretical model of ageism, which is used to frame a series of domains of investigation. Each domain aims to show how norms and institutions socially construct old age as a period of life to be cured, denied or feared (Weicht, 2013). In our explication of each domain of the model, we cite relevant literature which has contributed to knowledge of ageing and older people. We also highlight how future work, informed by the lived experience of growing older, could provide vital links between *The New Ageism* at the level of political economy (Walker, 2012) and the personal and individualised accounts of ageing emerging from cultural gerontology and through the writing of feminists now in old age.

### **Theoretical Model: making the personal political in ageing research**

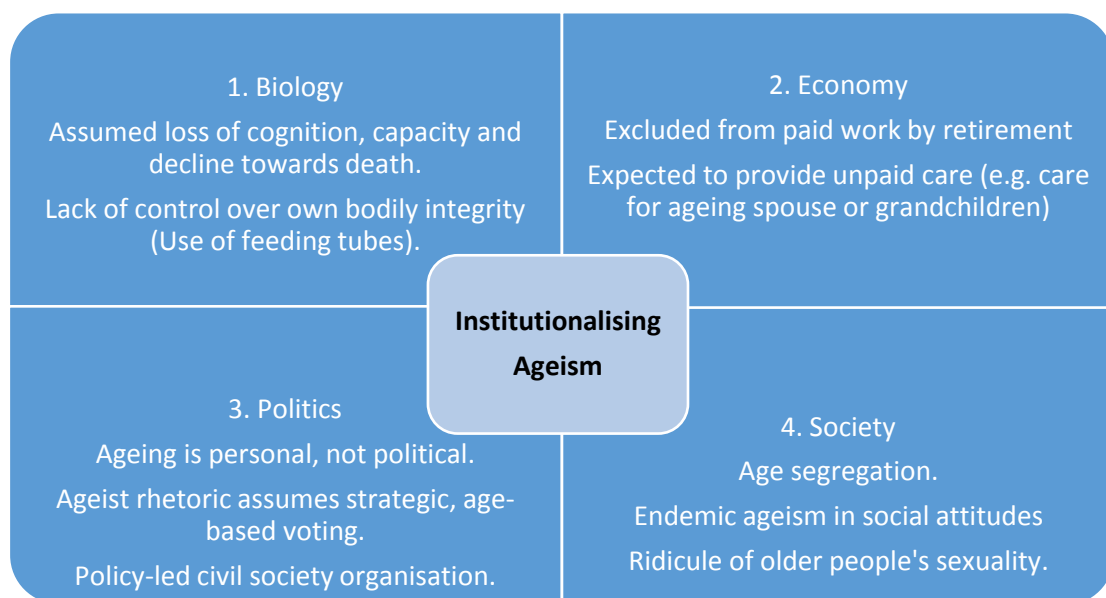
Many of us know older people who are competent, politically astute, learning new skills and making an important contribution to families, communities and societies. Those same people are viewed through the lens of old age, and as a result are 'aged by culture' (Gullette, 2011). Once past a certain age, people are, variously, dismissed as irrational on the basis of their age; obliged to provide unpaid caring work for younger relatives and/or expected to live on an income which is a fraction of the gross average industrial wage (Townsend, 1957; 1981; 2006). Viewed through a critical lens, informed by feminist writings on representation and oppression one is

convinced that ageism, like sexism, is a form of discrimination that is often ignored, diminished or denied because of the relative powerlessness of its victims in social, economic and political life. Evidence from the lived experience of ageing throws into question the standards of normal ageing (Woodward, 1991; Sontag, 1972), and causes us to question core beliefs about old age.

*Institutionalising Ageism: four interlocking bases of oppression, and four domains of investigation*

Biological ageing, particularly physical signs of biological ageing, are used to socially impose an inferior status on people as they age. The impact and severity of this inferior status is cumulative; older people with impairments, dementia, disability or few economic resources are among the lowest status in society. Ageism contributes to the oppression of older people as it is internalised, eventually impacting on the capacity of older people to speak for themselves (Townsend, 2006). Diagram 2 outlines the four interlocking bases on which ageism is institutionalised.

**Diagram 2:**



Each domain seeks to de-construct, question or critique scientific knowledge of ageing across four domains of investigation:

1. The origins of assumptions in biomedical research which view ageing as a series of 'downward sloping lines' (Minkler, 1990: 246);
2. The difference between retirement and under/precarious employment;
3. The political participation of older people via civil society organisations (e.g. AARP<sup>ii</sup>);
4. The impact of age based stereotyping in mainstream media on older people's identity, including sexuality.

The theoretical model is introduced in more detail in table 1.

**Table 1: *How Ageism Affects the Lived Experience of Ageing***

Ageing Affects...	How?	Why?	Example from Contemporary Public Debate
<b>1. Perceived and actual physical health (biological determinism):</b>	Biological determinism is used to predict risk of illness and, hence, capacity of older people to remain independent (Minkler, 1990).	Because bio-medical science dominates knowledge of ageing, which it views as inevitable physical and/or cognitive decline.	Experts accuse media of over-stating potential of Solanezumab in slowing progress of Alzheimers. Eli Lilly share prices soar following trial results (Andrews, BBC Radio 4, July 22, 2015).
<b>2. Economic Status</b>	<p>Retirees lose social and economic status that comes with having an occupation.</p> <p>Intra-cohort inequality means poverty and wealth sharply contour experience of ageing (Maes, 2013).</p>	In capitalist societies, labour market participation is valued as the primary means of contributing to human society.	'Rise of rich pensioner – How over 65s are better off than most of the population while young people see incomes tumble' (Daily Mail, 2014).
<b>3. Political Participation</b>	Older people are the most likely to vote, but the least likely to engage in political protest (Melo and Stockemer, 2014).	The cumulative effects of diminished social, economic and health status in old age, and 'senior only' social policies prompt older people to cluster into age-based interest groups (e.g. AARP).	Politicians often over-estimate the tendency of older voters to engage in bloc voting. Results in scare tactics to mobilise voters (e.g. Republican 'mediscare' campaign to mobilise older voters in 2010 US election) (Binstock, 2012).

<b>4. Social Status</b>	Old age is feared and stereotyped in popular culture (Bytheway, 2005).  Contribution of older people is articulated in the past tense (Townsend, 2006).	As youth is valorised, older people begin to believe their own obsolescence – the ‘elderly mystique’ (Cohen, 1988).	Catholic Pontiff is pilloried by feminists for referring to Europe as ‘a grandmother, no longer fertile or vibrant’ in a speech to the European parliament in November 2014 (Moorhead, 2014).
<b>5. How older people are viewed as a group</b>	Research on ageing has tended to neglect the consequences of certain assumptions about ageing for the lives of older people and social policy (Bülow and Söderqvist, 2014: 146).	The disparate aged population, including <i>healthy</i> variations makes it difficult to identify when social problems are caused by the effects of old age, or by other factors (Neugarten, 1996).	English Commission on Ageing and the Voluntary Sector critiques charities supporting older people for ‘peddling negative stereotypes’ such as ‘images of half-dead Ethel’ in an effort to increase funding (Berry, 2015).

For each domain, we offer an example of a publicly held myth about ageing which may impact on the lived experience of growing older. For each example offered in Table 1, it is the misrepresentation or over-simplification of the experience of ageing that is most likely to limit a person’s potential.

1. The obsession with fighting senescence leads to news reports which over-stating the impact of drugs such as *Solanezumab* on the progression of Alzheimer’s Disease (AD) when, in fact, trial results are preliminary. Allowing the market to find a cure for AD fits more neatly into the neo-liberal model, which expects the market to provide responses to society’s problems. In response, June Andrews, a University of Stirling researching how to live with dementia, argues that low tech modifications of homes and availability of support and information for sufferers and their families are the only available treatment (Andrews, 2015).
2. Negative stereotypes of ‘benefits scroungers’ have abounded in austerity Britain. Here the stereotype extends to pensioners who are seen rich in comparison with over-stretched ‘working families.’ In truth, some older people (like some women) are well off. The Daily Mail headline demonstrates how huge wealth disparities within the over 60s as a cohort are not part of public debate (Maes, 2011). Pensioner poverty is often persistent because it affects women. Its roots are the pernicious effects of ageing in a society that is both ageist and sexist, resulting in large numbers of women having no access to pensions (Arber and Ginn, 1991).
3. Older voters, living in European and US societies are misrepresented as a bloc of self-interested voters, intent on electing representatives who will

allocate resources in their favour. Before 2010, there was no evidence of age-based bloc voting. Even if elders do vote strategically, as a proportion of the electorate they are still too small to swing the vote (Binstock, 2012). Older voters only sin is to vote regularly and often. Perhaps our focus should be on increasing voter registration amongst younger cohorts rather than blaming older people for voting too often?

4. The diversity of experiences of ageing is lost in research which takes a 'social problems' approach to ageing which 'stereotypes the "elderly" in characteristics of the least capable, least healthy, and least alert of the elderly' (Palmore, 1990: 14). This is most evident from the example of 'half dead Ethel' provided to illustrate the misrepresentation of older people as a group in order to promote a particular organisation or product (Berry, 2015).
5. Generalisations about older people as a group ignore the fact that lived experience of growing older is a deeply gendered experience. The strength of the 'old Granny' stereotype is typified in Pope Francis' reference to Europe as an aged and decrepit, grandmother. His words would seem to support Sontag's (1972) claim that women are subjected to a double standard of ageing as they pass into post-reproductive biological phase. The fact that he is applying the standard sexist/ageist stereotype to a whole continent suggests that population ageing, particularly, where the majority of the older population is female, may lead to regressive norms being directed at whole countries as their populations age.

Next, we elaborate on how each domain operates as an area meriting further investigation, both in terms of what we know now, and what we could learn were a more action-oriented epistemology of ageing established in gerontology.

## **1. Biological Determinism and the Ageing Process**

Feminist philosopher, Donna Haraway (1984) has demonstrated that the construction of knowledge in biology is based primarily on premises that valorise masculine and discount feminine characteristics. An investigation of whether those who construct knowledge of the ageing process may be engaged in a similarly biased logic, but this time on the basis of age, is overdue. Certainly, there is evidence to suggest that theorists and empiricists assume that ageing equals senescence (Lloyd, 2012: 114). Research on ageing has focused on verifying the decline associated with increasing years. For instance, a search of web of science using the search terms "ageing population\* impact" on June 23, 2015 returns over 36,000 peer reviewed articles. A typical article title from the list is 'Forecasting the

burden of postmenopausal hip replacements' (Omsland and Magnus, 2014) or 'Visual impairment and depression among socially vulnerable older adults' (Giloyan et. al., 2015). While it is sensible that scientists wish to assess the implications of demographic ageing, the balance does seem to rest in favour of those interested in documenting the pathology of ageing (biomedical), the cost of pensions and healthcare (economics), the danger of a gerontocracy (politics) and the inevitability of loneliness and social isolation in old age (sociology).

However, in the past five years, there have been moves to question move the focus away from senescence. Lorraine Tyler leads a team of neuro-scientists at Cambridge University who, through their study of the cognitive functioning of people aged between 18 and 88 have found that 'older adults use neural and cognitive resources flexibly, recruiting novel neural regions and cognitive processes when necessary' (Shafto et al 2014: 1). Meanwhile, psychologists and bio-gerontologists such as Fry and Keyes (2013) find evidence of resilience 'in the face of disability or disease, and access to psychosocial and technological-ecological resources that may facilitate maintenance and improvement of physical and emotional health with age.' Another example is the Lothian Study. Gow et. al. (2011) discovered an archived set of test results of children born early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The children had taken a standard education test at the age of 11 in 1921 and 1936. The researchers tracked down these children (now in their 70s and 80s) asking them to take the same test, this time at ages 70, 79 and 87. Participants achieved roughly the same scores as they had with a much younger brain. That is, participants who scored highly in their youth, tended to score highly in older age, and vice versa.

Leading scholars have reached fascinating conclusions as to why the human species has evolved to produce a generation of grandparents, particularly adult females, who live well beyond child-bearing age (Herlofsan and Hagestad, 2012). Hawkes (2003) proposed the 'grandmother hypothesis' - that the capacity of grandmothers, now past their child-bearing age, but still capable of feeding newly weaned young of their daughters suggests 'that increased longevity in our genus is a legacy of the "reproductive" role of ancestral grandmothers' (Hawkes, 2003: 380). As the implications of population ageing unfold, we see gender operating in a co-deterministic way, constructing ageing as a problem that is 'predominantly female' (UNDESA, 2013: xiii). Less evident are the reasons why this is the case: why do women live longer than men? If men are disadvantaged in old age, why have masculinities been such a minor part of research? It is this question, of women's apparent resilience in old age which may be the key to unlocking the potential of longevity. The best starting point is to ask: what can we learn from feminist critiques of science?

Haraway's (1984) feminist critique of science offers many entry points for gerontologists wishing to move the focus away from senescence and onto potential. She argues that: 'science is politics by other means' (Haraway, 1984: 490). 'Many kinds of activities can restructure a narrative field, including practices for recording

data, publishing patterns, favoured animal models, a women's movement, development in adjoining sciences...' (Haraway, 1984: 492). If science is to maintain its credibility as the best means to produce evidence, we must be willing to find new, innovative and critical methods of understanding new frontiers such as population ageing. We must not forget the role of ontology, particularly as feminism has taught us that the lens we use will shape the findings of our research (Harding, 1991). Having matured in a society where women's views are seen as a legitimate contribution to public debate, women writers in their seventies and eighties have much to offer. Lively (2013), Gullette (2010) and Segal (2013), report from the coal face of old age, and resist pressure to engage in essentialist conceptions of old age. Segal (2013: 4) refers to her work as a quest to 'find just the right words, or perhaps any language at all, to express our own everyday time-travelling.' The writing of these women should be used to inform theoretical and empirical research on the (in)significance of physical changes in the lives of octagenarians.

## **2. Alternatives to Active Ageing : Critically examining work and retirement**

For many of us, work remains one of the fundamental markers of who we are – giving individuals' identity, control and meaning (Nyqvist et al. 2013). Given the importance of paid work, one of the critical junctures in many people's life course is leaving paid employment. In 2015, there is evidence that welfare state systems, in particular, pay as you go pension systems, will not be capable of providing a retirement income for a period of up to 30 years. Many scholars have argued that a more fluid and flexible border between work and retirement is needed if ageing populations are to successfully combine inevitable biological changes accompanying old age with expectations for activity, leisure and work (Cahill, et. al., 2013).

There is evidence to suggest that working beyond the age of 65 is increasingly popular (Fleischmann et al., 2013). This is true for both unpaid (volunteering and caring) and paid work. However, studies show that underemployment (where workers' skills are not utilised) often mark the post-65 work experience. Lain (2014) found that employees over 65 were disproportionately segregated into more precarious work: less desired occupations which were low paid, irregular, required few qualifications and part-time. Since the financial crisis of 2008, the necessity of 'bridge jobs' and 'do-it-yourself' financing of retirement, call into question the ideal of a work-free Third Age (Cahill et. al., 2013). Thus, paid employment for those over 65 may not provide the same level of status and income experienced during earlier periods of their working lives (Fleischmann et al. 2013). Nyqvist et al (2013) found that workers' social capital often decreases after leaving paid employment. We know that unpaid work for those over 65 (either volunteering or caring) can also be

accompanied by a severe reduction in income and status, although they may function to enhance social networks (Winterton and Warburton, 2013).

In fact, there is no conclusive evidence either way as regards the positive or negative impact of retirement on health (Hessel, 2014). In any case, this debate is rather circular, surely the point is to find ways of making additional decades of life after age 65 worth living, rather than to insist on treating work versus retirement as a binary category whereby age is used to decide whether a person is either 'in' or 'out'? Mass longevity should provide us with the opportunity to examine our relationship with the labour market throughout the life course. Gender must be used as a key variable in such studies. Men and women may have very different experiences of engagement in paid and unpaid work; so, what we define as 'meaningful human work' (Friedan, 1993) needs to be set against what governments identify as economic productivity. Critical studies which can differentiate between retirement and precarious/under-employment are urgently needed.

### **3. The Politics of Ageing and the Need for Participatory Analysis of Age-based Interest Groups**

Political gerontology (such as it is) has been concerned with researching the rising numbers of older voters, rather than undertaking critical investigation of how age determines allocation of power and resources between groups. Since the turn of the millennium, a number of scholars have investigated the possible implications of a change in the age profile of electorates for democratic politics (Binstock, 2012). Crucially, it has been suggested that in a system of majority rule, such as democracy, a rise in the proportion of older people could lead to a 'gerontocracy' or 'rule by the aged' (Post and Binstock, 2004). Discussions on the 'politics of a long-lived society' such as that offered by Post and Binstock (2004) outlines the many ways in which the perceived dangers of a gerontocracy (rule by the aged) can be avoided, most clearly through changing electoral rules. While there is evidence that older people are more likely to vote in democratic elections, we also know that they are less likely to take part in demonstrations or sign petitions (Melo and Stockemer, 2014). In truth, *older people as a group* are poorly understood. In part, this is due to the huge diversity of people, from a range of identities, classes, cultures and genders that can all be classed as 'older people.' Whether such a diverse range of people can be classed as a coherent interest group remains undiscovered.

While science lags behind, the politics of ageing in practice is developing along two extremes. At one end of the spectrum, there is evidence of a (growing) voiceless minority of the very old and frail, perhaps institutionalised (Townsend, 2006). At the other end of the spectrum, there are established lobby groups, such as the AARP. Does this mean we are heading towards a gerontocracy of middle class, healthy

retirees? Or, will we all ultimately end up voiceless and vulnerable to abuse once we develop an age-related chronic disease, such as dementia? In the US, Lynch's (2011) engaging case study of AARP concedes defeat in understanding the gap between perception and reality in terms of the potential of older people to form an effective voting bloc. Even following severe financial losses post-2008: 'the most striking finding about boomers' senior power potential is its absence. Why?' (Lynch, 2011: 195). Pioneering work by Goerres (2008: 175) and others in Europe comes to a similar conclusion: 'older people tend not to vote in their own interests.' Why not?

The answer to this question appears elusive. In the United States of America (USA) the (AARP) is identified as 'the de facto voice of aging Americans' though many do not spontaneously identify with the organisation (Lynch, 2011; 196). Meanwhile, in European countries such as Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK) pensioners' organisations are seen as relatively weak and disorganised (Carney, 2010; Fealy, 2011). In mature European welfare states such as Italy and Germany, (countries that also have the greatest proportion of people aged over 60), population ageing has been presented as a basis for inter-generational conflict; a sort of 'backlash' (Faludi, 1991) against pensioners. There is also the US-based inter-generational social movement called the Gray Panthers, which describes itself as an 'Age and Youth in Action' movement for social change (Sanjak, 2008: 249). Again, drawing on feminism, economist Nancy Folbre (1994) argues that most mainstream economic models are based on individuals maximising their own happiness, or utility. Folbre (1994) argues that we cannot understand family units and social reproduction with this model and introduces the economics of altruism. Understanding older peoples' voting patterns may also require a more developed notion of altruism as political acts may reflect concerns for larger family units, inter-generational and societal factors.

Research on ageing has not seriously engaged with the representation of age-based interests by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). While the Gerontological Society of America (GSA) may have a strong corporate relationship with AARP, and the British Society of Gerontology has a similar (though more modestly funded) relationship with AGE UK, we have not worked together in any sense that could be defined as political. The time has come to develop participatory action research to co-produce knowledge of how CSOs represent the interests of older people.

#### **4. Socialisation and ideologies of ageing (a.k.a. The Missing Person versus the Age-Defying Superhero)**

Despite the growing recognition that the social context of ageing has the power to strongly contour experience, we rarely consider how societal ageism may socialise us all to fear old age. Like the pro-active and independent women that were missing from Friedan's (1963) women's magazine, older people, particularly the very old have been identified as 'the missing person' in popular culture. Clarke (2006: 271) in

her analysis of the content of high circulation English language magazines for references to Alzheimer's disease found 'no profiles of individuals with Alzheimer's Disease from their own perspective' in a search that spanned a decade of publications. 'With respect to the magazine portrayal of Alzheimer's, the active voice... is always someone *other* than the diagnosed individual. It may be a caregiver, family member, medical expert, or scientist' (Clarke, 2006: 274). Only the latter stages of a slow, degenerative disease are described, and always in sensationalist, fear inducing language of demise and decline. Crucially, Clarke (2006: 274) notes the absence of a social context for the disease located in 'language, gender, culture, ethnicity and other components of the social structure and culture.' While there has been some progress in research since (Bartlett, 2014). In terms of public debate, Alzheimer's is feared.

The Missing Old Person is not the whole story. At the other end of the spectrum, researchers have found heroic representations of older people in the media. This time older people are idealised, presented as all knowing and wise (men) or age-defying (women) through their positive ageing and hard work. Dichotomous representations of ageing suggest that old age identity is objectified within the ageing body. Current conceptions of identity in old age, particularly, women's identity, leave little room for the individuality and independence of thought. In their investigation of textual and visual representations of men aged 50+ in men's magazines, Clarke, Bennett and Liu (2014; 26) found older men to be largely absent. When given magazine coverage, older men were presented within an idealised version of old age; the wise and powerful CEO. A third representation of older people is as wealthy retirees, or *Third Agers* (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000). This work suggests the stereotyping of older people into clearly defined groups: the needy, helpless and/or invisible (Clarke 2006), as greedy and lazy 'Third Agers' with surplus income and time (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000) and as the wise older man (Clarke et. al., 2014).

Critical investigations in this area of gerontology are exploring visual and other methods for revealing the taken for granted assumptions about old age (Richards, et. al, 2012). More research is needed to determine how negative stereotyping affects older people's self-esteem and identity. This research has not yet addressed the sexuality of older people. Sexuality and the sexual liberation of women was an important part of the feminist movement. Does sexuality continue to play an important role in the representation of men and women as they age? Do older people feel their sexuality is accurately reflected in mainstream media? Systematic and critical analysis of how the content of popular cultural productions (broadcast via TV, social media or in print) reproduce cultural stereotypes of ageing must become an integral part of critical gerontology. For example, despite presenting film footage of financially independent women experiencing sexual freedom in their 60s, 70s and 80s, producers of British Channel 4 documentary on older prostitutes felt compelled to cast those same women in the role of 'Granny.' (See: *My Granny the Escort*, broadcast January 2015 <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/my-granny-the->

escort). In a strict biological sense, these women are 'grannies,' however, that role is not their primary focus, and in two cases they had lost contact with grandchildren. Why, then, ascribe to them inaccurate, stereotypical, domesticated identities? By naming and identifying what is ageist, social researchers can help to establish an evidence base which challenges stereotypical views of ageing in public debate. One approach may be to investigate whether age segregation contributes to one's identification with other 'older people' and why some people may adopt behaviours that are deemed 'age inappropriate' as a form of resistance.

### **Discussion: ageing feminists make the personal political**

In recent decades we have experienced a hiatus in scholarship actively linked to political and social movements such as feminism and civil rights. Some forms of resistance have emerged (<http://redhatsociety.com>) have emerged from civil society. Within the academy, Ray (1999) identified a clear role for 'critical feminism in gerontology' where feminist activist researchers can express their intolerance for whatever is described as 'inevitable, immutable and natural' (Fine in Ray, 1999: 171).

Perhaps the most useful work has emerged from the humanities, most notably in women's writing. As feminists, these writers take a standpoint where personal experience is a valid basis on which knowledge claims can be made (Segal, 2013). The fact that the personal is political imbues their work. Segal (2013: 9) identifies how 'intrepid feminist avatar' Beauvoir successfully translated her theories of women's oppression by sexism onto her thinking on ageism: 'she (Beauvoir) explored the ways in which the old are positioned as culture's subordinated and negated other; just as twenty years earlier she had once described women as symbolically always in a secondary position to men and masculinity.' Writing in her ninth decade, novelist Penelope Lively (2013) provides a vivid description of her 'life in time' and her continued enjoyment and fulfilment in old age. Likewise, at 90 literary editor Diana Athill has reflected very publicly in her memoirs (2008) about aging, relationships and sexuality. Subscribing to the basic tenet of feminism - to 'link language, self and social action' (Ray, 1999: 172) – writers like Segal (2013) King (2013), Athill (2008) and Lively (2013), in writing from the standpoint of old age, are contributing to a new language of ageing which seeks to 'transgress' the boundaries of what is age appropriate.

The theoretical model presented in this article offers a means of connecting the rolling advances in cultural gerontology (led by feminist and women writers of a certain age) to the broader structural issues facing ageing societies. Cultural gerontology has shown us that ageing is about more than 'structured dependency'; individual agency allows us to 'disturb and destabilize our understanding of old age'

(Twigg and Martin, 2015: 353). We argue that the work of older women writers such as Segal (2013) goes further as it provides us with lessons on *how to live in old age*. By engaging with Lively (2013) Segal (2013) and others we can use the agency expressed and shared by a few pioneers of longevity to inform our understanding of how ageism is the root cause of many of the structural inequalities experienced by older people and discussed by scholars in the political economy tradition (see Estes, 1979). Given substantial gains made by the humanities in demonstrating the relevance of culture to the larger ageing project (Gullette, 2010), women's writing may well hold the key to re-orienting the future of ageing research.

Returning to the important contribution of political economy of ageing scholars such as Estes (1979), Phillipson (2013; 2015), the late Peter Townsend (1981; 2006) and Walker (1981; 2012), one can draw a progressive conclusion. Perhaps scholars from the political economy tradition are incorrect to assume that the typecasting of population ageing as a burden is set in stone (see Walker, 2012)? There is one important factor that has been overlooked. No one knows what the impact of realising that they are living in an ageist society may have on the consciousness of the baby boomer generation as they now reach retirement age (Lynch, 2011). Proponents of 'Inter-generational Equity' predict a self-interested political movement (Willems, 2010). Conversely, inventor of The Eden Alternative, Bill Thomas predicts major improvements in the treatment of older people will result from the *people power* the boomers possess (Thomas, 2015). These are the men and women who led liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Until we come to some understanding of the extent to which endemic ageism is internalised by older people themselves, the impact of the boomers will remain a matter of speculation.

Early indications from literature and women's writing suggest that the oft-criticised, homogenised and misrepresented baby boomer cohort is unlikely to accept unequal ageing with alacrity. The lived experience of those pioneers of mass longevity will offer us lessons in *how to live old age*. The challenge for scholars is to work out meaningful ways to research their experience. Undoubtedly, diversity in racial and ethnic terms, gender and inequalities will require gerontologists to provide new categories of analysis for ageing societies.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that gerontology needs to re-state the case that ageism is recognised as a significant element of the challenge of demographic change. The article lays out a theoretical model which explicates four interlocking bases on which ageism is institutionalised. While arguing for a more action-oriented approach to the study of ageing, the article also acknowledges the importance of lived experience in providing a standpoint epistemology of ageing (Stanley and Wise, 1993). In explicating the operation of ageism, on a basis analogous with sexism, the article

outlines how age is used to socially construct the over 60s as redundant, politically dangerous and socially irrelevant. Substantive examples from 50 years of research on ageing are offered to make this case. Under each domain, the relevance of feminist research and activism for ageing and older people is elaborated. We argue that the right to make knowledge claims based on lived experience, and to argue that individual oppression is indicative of injustice at societal level, (i.e. that 'the personal is political') are only beginning to be articulated in research and scholarship on ageing. The writing of aged feminists provides a fruitful pathway for the development of this work.

Making the personal political in ageing is a simple idea, but its potential impact is substantial. We offer a viewpoint on ageism which is analogous with the feminist view of sexism as the cause of women's oppression and the driver of bias in a patriarchal system of rule. Ageism contributes to inequality, poverty and cultural marginalisation of certain sub-sections of older people (particularly women), and is the driver for unfair practices in allocation of opportunities and resources in a youth-oriented culture. Realising the cultural and political impact of ageism is necessary if we are to avoid gerontology, and particularly social gerontology, becoming synonymous with apolitical accounts of the lives of 'older people' and their 'social problems' (Palmore, 1990). Making the personal political in our research is the first step in realising a more radical epistemology of ageing.

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<sup>i</sup> Throughout this article the term 'older people' refers to those aged over 60 years.

<sup>ii</sup> The AARP is a non-partisan organisation, with important roles in maintaining aging Americans access to free medicare and social security. It is no longer referred to as the American Association of Retired Persons as over half of its members are not retired (Lynch, 2011: 3)