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Minding the gap: The construction of old age and oldness amongst peers

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Abstract: While ‘oldness’ is a state of being that people in Western cultures agree exists, and ‘old age’ is a category which is readily used in daily discourse and upon which decisions are made in daily life, what old age is and who is old nevertheless remain problematic categories. Social scientists have acknowledged such complexity and sought ways of framing old age that are flexible enough to take the heterogeneity of ageing into account. What has not been considered as closely however are intragenerational dynamics in the construction of old age. Based on ethnographic research on the experiences of ageing and selfhood in the north of England, and using a processual and interactive approach to self-making, I explore here criteria older people employ to monitor and adjudicate on the manifestation of oldness in their peers, as well as the distinctions they make between ‘normal’ ageing and ‘real’ old age.

Keywords: cultural construction of ageing, intragenerational relations, monitoring, self

Introduction

How to determine who is ‘old’ and what the Western category of ‘old age’ actually means is a topic worthy of the critical attention it has provoked. As compared to other parts of the life course, the social category of ‘old age’ is a remarkably broad term. While childhood alone can contain the stages of “preemies” “infants”, “toddlers”, “terrible-twos” and “preschool”, there is a relative absence of distinction within the social category of old age hood (Hockey and James 1993), and the category is left to cover a wide range of heterogeneous experiences and changes without distinguishing amongst them.

Since so few terms exist in everyday English to evoke the wide range of experiences encapsulated in the category of old age, social scientists researching ageing have had to stumble their way through denoting differences which are believed to exist but whose boundaries are contested and blurred. This uncertainty is reflected in the difficult task faced by researchers of delineating and describing which segment of the ageing population they are working with. Some attempts to distinguish different categories of oldness include the “old old” versus the “young old” (Myerhoff 1984:307); the “disabled elderly” (Ikels 1997); “the third age...[which is]...the adolescence of old age” (Hazan 1996:33); “deep old age” (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989); “advanced old age” (Heikkinen 2004); the “frail elderly” (Kayser-Jones 1981:ix); “the oldest old - persons over eighty five years of age” (Suzman et al
“the ‘young old’ and the ‘old old’...contemporarily used to distinguish between those who are over and under 75” (Hockey and James 1993:87); “the very old - those in their eighties” (Cumming and Henry 1961:201); and “the very old...85 years and older” (Clark and Anderson 1967:33). Emerging from these examples is the persistent problem of who can be said to be old, and how to describe the heterogeneity of the experience of old age. Furthermore, even once terms that seek to do this such as ‘old old’ and ‘young old’ come into regular use by specialists, there seems to be little consensus as to what these categories encode either objectively or subjectively.

The problems inherent in distinguishing these different categories of ageing are also evident in the terms that such definitions at times resort to. Many of the examples mentioned above circle implicitly around the same basic question: Is chronological age a clearer indicator of the difference in categories of old age (“over eighty five years of age”, “under 75”) or is physical ability (“disabled”, “frail”) a more reliable frame of reference? A further complication facing attempts to delineate what old age is and who is old comes from ethnographic record. Generally, people designated as elderly by the wider society do not self-identify as old (Hunt 1978:9; see also Itzin 1990; Kaufman 1986; Matthews 1979:30; Thompson 1992; Thompson, Itzin, and Abendstern 1990; although see Heikkinen 2004 for a qualifying position). This body of literature has built up important insights into older people’s self-perceptions of the meaning of old age and examined the strategies older people employ in a continuing “search for meaning and fulfilment in later life” (Thompson 1992:28) as well as against negative and limiting stereotypes of old age which do not match their lived experiences of growing older. Indeed, it is this incongruence between personal experiences and negative social stereotypes that mean that few people self-identify as old (Itzin 1990).

Emerging from the literature then is an intriguing disjunctur between, on the one hand, the cultural assertion or knowledge that old age exists as a category and, on the other hand, how the category is applied in actual practice to oneself and to others. One aspect of this dynamic that has not been examined is the ways in which what old ‘means’ and how it is measured is not just constructed by younger people and laid like a blanket onto older people, but is indeed also constructed by older people themselves. This is an important distinction, as it unintentionally perpetuates a troubling vision of older people as agentless victims, as less than fully socialised human beings. I propose instead that what old age is and who is old is also constructed in a myriad of small, everyday moments and interactions that include those amongst older people themselves, and I investigate here how intragenerational relationships play a part in the making of old age as a social category.
While it is not my desire to pin down once and for all categories and definitions of old age, I seek instead to examine the implications for everyday experience in the lives of older people that they represent. As such, this paper explores the gap between epistemological categories of old age and oldness (‘knowing’ that old age exists) and the pragmatics of implementing these same categories (discerning when the label of oldness should, culturally speaking, be applied to which individuals). I shall demonstrate how this gap between epistemological categories and pragmatics reveals the extent to which oldness is a relational concept rather than one that can be measured by physical or chronological markers. Influenced by Foucault’s work on discipline and power (1979), I develop a theory of monitoring to explain how mental acuity and social comportment are used as markers of oldness amongst peers in a village in the north of England. I examine the ways in which oldness is constructed intra-generationally and how older people themselves strategically negotiate the discourse of oldness in everyday interactions and experience.

**Categories of old age and oldness in everyday experiences of older people**

In refocusing attention on old age as a category, it may at first appear that I am taking a retrograde step. Authors such as Maria Vesperi have challenged social scientists to break away from traditional assumptions of old age as a category. Vesperi argues:

> that the old form a discrete social category - identified by custom - is an assumption social scientists share with the rest of American society. It is my belief, however, that attention must be shifted from the category “old age” to the context of aging, and that old age itself is not a discrete social or even physical caste. The cultural construction of old age is a process; it is the concretization of abstract, unexamined assumptions within the context of everyday interaction (Vesperi 1985:24).

Vesperi alludes here to the difficulty that social scientific research on old age has had in identifying how the cultural construction of old age is forged and in turn how old age is experienced by older people themselves. Remedying this is an interest that she and I share. While I agree with her that the category of old age is a cultural construction that needs to be problematised, I am also interested in how the disjuncture between the epistemological and
pragmatic categories of old age itself informs the lived experience and subjectivity of older people. That is to say I believe that there is not an even mapping between the epistemology of the category of old age - the socially accepted and agreed knowledge that ‘old age exists’ - with the pragmatics of actually acting on this knowledge in everyday life - knowing what counts as ‘old age’ and who counts as ‘old’. Asking questions about this gap is relevant because it permits a re-insertion of the category of old age into a theoretical framework which queries the contexts of ageing within everyday life experiences and the subjectivity of older people themselves. It also permits a closer examination of how old age is made intragenerationally and not just between members of different generations.

A central premise of this work is that the self is forged in multiple social registers and multiple contexts. I draw on a theoretical framework that argues for a processual perspective in research (Bruner 1984; Turner and Bruner 1986; Turner 1985; White and Kirkpatrick 1985). In this way, the focus becomes how “personal experience and behaviour are seen to be relevant to the culturally constructed concerns of persons and communities” (Kirkpatrick and White 1985:4) and how the self is forged through experience and action in a social world. This perspective resists systems-based analysis (which perceives social action and behaviour to be dictated by rules and norms) and perceives life and culture to be more disordered than predictable. Processual perspectives consider people as social actors who are actively engaged in shaping “the conditions of their existence”, and yet who are equally shaped by the cultural, social, and historical context in which they live (R. Rosaldo 1993:92-103; c.f. Bourdieu 1977). Within this paradigm, culture is processual because it emerges in interaction and is forged through an endless series of negotiations amongst social actors (Turner 1985:153-4). This is a framework that, as Turner succinctly noted, is concerned less with being and more with becoming. Adopting a processual approach to the ageing self permits me to take into consideration the perpetual motion and intersubjective negotiation of the self in old age. An ethnographic approach has been particularly well-suited to exploring these dynamics as it permits long-term observation and participation in social life in a variety of contexts and with a variety of social actors.

Taking further inspiration from authors such as De Certeau (1984) and Jackson (1996), I emphasise conversational detail, narrative accounts, and fine threads of meaning which play out at the level of everyday life, the banal, the revelatory and what is in-between. Such an approach also allows me to look at the affective component of the disparity between the subjective experience of the self in old age and the social stereotypes of what old age ‘is’. This permits a closer consideration of the gap between pragmatics and
epistemology in the way old age is conceptualised and experienced by older people. While
the larger research project from which this paper stems takes into consideration both
intrigenerational and intergenerational relationships in the construction of the ageing self
(Degnen 2003), due to space limitations in this paper I focus only on the former. In
particular, I examine here one aspect of the process of cultural construction of old age: how
the boundaries of old age are delineated by older people about their peers.

The research setting

The research upon which this paper is based was conducted in a South Yorkshire village in
Britain called Dodworth with a population of approximately 4,500. This region was heavily
industrialised by the coal and steel industries for nearly two centuries, and until 15 years ago
Dodworth, like most of the villages in the area, was a coal-mining village with its own pit
which had been in operation since the 1850s. The industry was a main employer in
Dodworth for decades, ending abruptly in the turmoil of the mid-1980s when the Thatcher
government entered a pitched battle with the miners’ union and eventually succeeded in a
mass closure of coal mines across the country.

Over a period of 14 months, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on ageing,
selfhood, social transformation and social memory in Dodworth. Due to my interest in the
everyday experience of ageing and of self, I intentionally chose to situate this research in a
non-institutional setting and worked instead at the community level. I based my collection of
data on three intersecting activities: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and
archival research on local and regional social histories. Because old age is a perception that is
constructed in different contexts and between different social actors, part of my research
was to see what the markers of old age are and how they vary. Attending to how these
markers were negotiated and used became an important part of the fieldwork.

My fieldwork progressed in stages, with initial months spent attending public
meeting places for older people in the village. A distinctive feature of Dodworth stems from
a peculiarly British post-war vision of a social democratic welfare state whereby during the
1950s and 60s the local council embarked on a large scale building program and constructed
a number of new family sized houses, called council houses. Part of this building program in
Dodworth included purpose-built accommodation for older people. Built in seven clusters of
20 to 50 bungalows and sprinkled throughout the village, the bungalows are integrated in
amongst the other housing stock and are not isolated compounds or retirement villages. In
addition, the council built a community centre next to each bungalow cluster with the intention that village residents could use the space for social gatherings, particularly the older tenants. These community centres are still lively meeting places for older villagers and featured importantly in my research. Of course, not all older people in Dodworth live in council houses and many live in privately owned homes, but this does not exclude them from using the community centres. Attending weekly events in public gathering places for older people brought me into regular contact with over 100 people. In addition to the community centres, I also attended a local luncheon club, the local Senior Citizen’s Association, and Monday night bingo held at the Dodworth Social Club. At the three community centres I attended, activities included bingo, whist, jumble sales and teas. Most of these meetings occurred in the evenings and would last between two and three hours. The centres and clubs were a highly rewarding fieldwork experience in that they permitted me the chance to meet a large number of older village residents, and for them to get to know me, in a relaxed setting. Later stages of research became increasingly based with individuals in their homes and by accompanying them in their everyday activities. This participant-observation was further balanced by in-depth, taped interviews with 27 people and with multiple interviews over the course of fieldwork with ten of these individuals.

For a number of members, attending the centres on a weekly basis is a source of continuity in their personal lives, and a source of continuity in their own personal histories, both on the individual and collective levels. Although centre memberships fluctuate, a good number of centre members have been attending for many years, and some for decades. Furthermore, many of the members of the various groups are long-term Dodworth residents. An important consequence of this is that members can recall intimate details about each others’ lives and evoke them in conversation. This is particularly true at the centres where more than seventy percent of the members have lived in Dodworth for more than half their life-times, but also the case albeit to a lesser degree at the luncheon club and the Senior Citizen’s Association. Such details include personal memories of other people’s siblings, children, parents and sometimes even each others’ grandparents; tragic events in individuals’ lives; and which part of the village who was born in and lived in, often down to the specific house. There is also a strong sense of collective memory shared and talked about in the centres, with details about iconic village characters, village history, and the changes in the village figuring largely (Degnen 2005). Much more than old age itself, which is not often explicitly discussed, these collective social landmarks are integral components of everyday talk at the public meeting places, and outside them as well.
The prosperity from coal that permitted such exuberant public building as the community centres has now disappeared, and the erasure of the coal mining industry in Dodworth has deeply marked the socio-economic contours of the village. Although not everyone in Dodworth worked in the coal industry, and not everyone in the village nor in my research population was directly affected by the demise of mining, the closure of the pits signals a central moment in the village’s history. The disappearance of this major source of employment and identity has transformed Dodworth and South Yorkshire beyond recognition on both experiential and practical levels. Within a decade, the area has gone from being modestly prosperous to being labelled by the European Union as one of the “most deprived” areas of Europe (Hetherington 1998). Long-time Dodworth residents universally lament the ruptures in the social and economic fabric of the village brought about by de-industrialisation. What becomes the anchoring points for social life in the face of these transformations was a key back grounding issue of this research and an important contextualising concern for the experiences of the older people I spent my time with. The individual experience of transformation via ageing for this generation is thus deeply embedded in broader macro-level collective social transformation, a dual overlapping negotiation of change.

The next section of this paper presents an extended narrative account from my ethnographic data that unfolded over a period of months. This approach, premised on the notion of ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973), demonstrates how the social category of old age is constructed, used, perceived, negotiated and experienced by older people themselves, both as individuals and as members of groups. In particular, I pay close attention to the experiences of two women at one of the centres, Ella and Mrs. Atherton. Through a series of events involving both women, I explore how oldness is relational and the extremely complex ways in which people negotiate the discourse of oldness in the centres and outside of them.

Ella and Mrs. Atherton: The situational construction of old age

Ella, Anne, Evelyn and I often sat together during weekly bingo and tea at one of the centres. Ella had missed the past two centre meetings because of a trip to respite care, and on this particular afternoon, her first one back, she was telling us about some randy “Casanova” who had been pestering her and propositioning her during her stay at the respite centre. Evelyn and Anne were listening to her with a sort of bemused “Yes, dear” indulgence to her stories, but as always, they gave off signals that distanced themselves
from Ella. These included tones of disbelief in their murmured responses, occasional rolling of eyes when Ella was not looking, and collusive smiles to me and to each other about Ella’s stories. Although sounding malicious when recounted, such gestures were not meant in a mean way, but rather had become part of the collective way members interacted with Ella at the centre. This is in part due to how her stories and narrative style are often partial or fragmented. Although she speaks sensibly, the listener has to work to situate what she is saying. In other words, the listener has to write in or bridge tiny gaps in her narrative that speakers usually include in order to contextualise what they are saying, but which she does not. Most of the time however, Anne and Evelyn do not attempt to bridge these gaps and instead will listen for only so long before changing the topic, and often before it is conventionally polite to do so.

Ella’s linguistic behaviour is interpreted by members as a sign that she “isn’t all there”, an interpretation that is unfortunately reinforced by a second, physical characteristic. Due to Parkinson’s disease, Ella also experiences involuntary trembling. This ailment causes her hands to shake uncontrollably, motions which make even drinking tea or putting sugar and milk into her tea cup difficult. Although one of the youngest centre members chronologically speaking, since Ella manifests both markedly negative linguistic and physical behaviours, she has become slightly marginalised by the group. Indeed before this particular afternoon, while I had been aware of the gaps in Ella’s stories and confused by them, I had also been taking my social cues from Anne, Evelyn and the other members in my assessment of Ella. I came to realise that until that afternoon, three months into my fieldwork, Ella had barely registered on my social radar as someone I should take seriously and pay attention to despite seeing her every week at the centre. This was because she is ever so slightly and yet markedly treated and interacted with differently than other members, signals that I had internalised before inspecting. These signals were largely that Ella was mentally confused and they were signals that I readily accepted, unconsciously unwilling to alienate other members by overly associating with a marginal member. As I became more aware of this dynamic and also more established as a member in my own right, I was increasingly able to extract myself from this pattern and interact with her in a more balanced fashion. The prevailing attitude to Ella is not voiced and was only ever implicit but the vagueness in her speech patterns in conjunction with the highly visible impairment of her motor skill functions are interpreted by other members as markers of oldness, overt characteristics which make other members uncomfortable. On the other hand, while she is kept at arm’s length by some members, she is not completely
marginalised because in all other respects such as appearance, comportment, manners, alertness, and timeliness she meets the group’s expectations for membership.

One series of events two months later was particularly revealing about Ella’s own relative oldness. All was transpiring as usual that day at the centre. Tea had been served and finished, and bingo recommenced. Then, with only two houses of bingo left, something extraordinary began to happen. There was a bit of a commotion at the entrance to the centre and then a woman in a wheelchair made her way into the room. She was visibly disgruntled and Karen, a younger woman employed by the council and responsible for running the centre, called out to her: “What’re you doing?”, implying that the woman should not be out and about. The woman, whom I had never seen before during five months of fieldwork, started saying how no-one had come to get her and that she’d never before missed the beginning of bingo at the centre and she wouldn’t have missed it today, either, except that no-one had come to fetch her from her house. She continued, saying that it was a good thing she had made it here before the end of the first house of bingo. Karen scoffed at this, pointing out to the rest of us how we were well beyond the first house of the afternoon, whilst also helping the newly arrived woman get set up with a bingo card and marker. Once the new arrival was settled, the bingo caller started to begin again, but the new woman was annoyed because the bingo marker would not mark properly. This was because she was holding it upside down, although she did not realise it. One of the members seated near me called out to her to turn it around, whereupon it began working, and bingo started again.

It was a complete mystery to me what was transpiring, and I thought perhaps that the woman was Karen’s auntie or mother. At the end of bingo, Karen asked me if I would push the woman, called Mrs. Atherton, home in her wheelchair. She lived nearby and was not a relative of Karen’s but a local resident. In order to get to the centre, she had wheeled herself out, pushing the wheelchair with her walking sticks, using them like barge poles. Ella had at this point gone over to chat with Mrs. Atherton, one of the few members to do so. After Karen explained to Mrs. Atherton who I was and that I was going to take her home, I sat and waited for Ella and Mrs. Atherton to finish their chat. Loudly, disrupting this moment of calm, one of the members raised the alarm of “Where are her keys??!!” and that we must find them before I could bring her home. This was directed at Mrs. Atherton but said in the third person. Four members (all women) at once descended upon Mrs. Atherton, going through her pocketbook, her lap, and her coat pockets, fumbling, prying, looking for the missing keys. It was maddening for me to watch since it seemed so invasive. Yet at the same
time, these actions were business-like and no-nonsense on the part of the members involved, giving the sense that this had all happened before on previous occasions. Whilst being rifled, Mrs. Atherton continuously proclaimed that she did not know where her keys had gotten to, but she thought “they might be in my pocket?” The keys were nowhere to be found. One woman twice whispered to me ‘confidentially’ but within everyone’s hearing how Mrs. Atherton’s door was probably unlocked anyway because she is “always leaving it unlocked”. I got the clear impression from these few minutes that Mrs. Atherton was well-known by the members but was not perceived as an equal.

Despite no-one being able to find the keys, we set off anyway. Ella decided to come along, still chatting to Mrs. Atherton. While waiting for Ella to get her coat on, Mrs. Atherton asked me three times in as many minutes what day it was, and again insisted that she always comes to the centre and is never late. As we left the centre and Ella and Mrs. Atherton continued their conversation, I realised that a profound transformation in Ella had taken place from when she began talking to Mrs. Atherton and was continuing whilst we walked. Ella’s art of conversation and her social composure had entirely returned. It seemed that faced with someone who was even more marginalised than herself, even more clearly otherised, Ella’s own grasp of social linguistic norms clicked back into place. This momentum of her re-possession of self continued as she gave Mrs. Atherton a kiss goodbye and said “It’s Ella Norris, do you remember me?” as we were leaving. Mrs. Atherton said yes, and then also complimented Ella on her pleated skirt and the way it hung and the way it moved, which pleased Ella enormously. Ella replied using normal conversational conventions, something I had never seen her do so effortlessly and seamlessly before in the five months I had known her.

Mrs. Atherton also demonstrated her own moments of perfect clarity when we arrived at her door. After I tried it and found that it was indeed locked, she produced the ‘missing’ keys in seconds. Despite the best efforts of four people clucking over her in the centre looking for her keys, she had been holding them in her hands inside her mittens where no-one had been able to check. Whether or not this was intentional on her part was not clear, but at the very least it demonstrates that she is far more capable of looking after herself than her peers gave her credit for. Her front door was locked while she was out of the house, she had not lost her keys, and she was perfectly capable of re-entering her home with or without my presence.

From the shift in Ella’s comportment, to the group descent upon Mrs. Atherton to locate her keys, to her having them in her hands all along, the entire thirty minutes had been
an extraordinary series of revelations about these two women who are treated by their peers as little more than children. On the one hand, free to interact outside of the centre context with someone she knew and had previously been neighbours with, Ella transformed from a socially marginalised person who acted and was treated as old to a social equal who was just as capable of holding a conversation and maintaining social norms. In addition to already knowing Mrs. Atherton and being outside the centre context with its ingrained patterns of interaction and collective assumptions about Ella’s state of being, a further potential contributing factor to Ella’s transformation could be the relative degrees of marginalisation these two women lived with. In comparison to Ella’s partial marginalisation, Mrs. Atherton (as I explain below) was resoundingly marginalised by the other members for the attributes of oldness that she manifested. Ella, as part of the group, would be aware of these social messages. It is possible that in this small example Ella became temporarily liberated from the label of ‘old woman’ in contrast with someone manifesting more extreme and less socially accepted markers of old age than she herself does, namely Mrs. Atherton. Thus while old is a powerfully stigmatising label, it is also a contextually dependent one that can at times ebb and flow with the attribution of oldness shifting in relation to others.

**Building social consensus**

In spite of Mrs. Atherton’s moments of clarity, such as protecting her keys, the group consensus at the centre about her was resoundingly negative. In following months, the topic of Mrs. Atherton arose on more than one occasion in her absence at the centre, and she was always referred to as ‘old’, language seldom used about anyone else involved with the centre. A prime example of this came during a tea break at the centre two months later when a group discussion began about Mrs. Atherton. Such communal discussions are rare in the centres and this one highlighted the strength of people’s feeling on the topic. Members were recounting how she had made an appearance again in the middle of bingo last week when I had not been present. Apparently the episode had started when Mrs. Atherton wheeled herself to the centre door but was not able to open it so instead pounded on the door with her walking sticks to attract assistance. However, as one of the members said, “We just ignored her”. Her disruptive behaviour was attributed to a variety of terms, with Edna starting the conversation by saying how Mrs. Atherton “is old”. Evelyn said instead that “It’s her age” which makes her act like this, while Karen said that “It’s an illness, she’s ill”. Unlike definitions of old age which have emerged from other research that privileges ability
and functionality as markers of oldness, being old in this context had much more to do with what is deemed to be proper social comportment, conventions that Mrs. Atherton was not respecting.

Not only had Mrs. Atherton come late to bingo, this time once she finally gained entrance she was angry, with members reporting that she was again saying that no-one came for her to bring her to the centre and declaring that she never misses a centre meeting. According to the members who had been there, Mrs. Atherton had been irritated in particular with Edna, her neighbour, and was blaming her for being forgotten although according to Edna, no arrangement existed between them. Then Edna said that she knows that Mrs. Atherton is lonely, but that

We all know what it’s like to be lonely [addressing the other centre members in the room], but she’s not like us, she can’t get out to go to [into town] or go visiting like we can and to be honest, I think she’d be better off in a home because at least she’d have some company there.

During this conversation, a group catharsis of discomfort about Mrs. Atherton occurred. Feelings about how she disturbs centre patterns as well as individual members’ sense of well being were aired. Through this process and ones earlier, both between individuals and as a group, consensus is reaffirmed about Mrs. Atherton, who is stigmatised as a marginal figure, worthy of ostracisation (“We just ignored her”) due to her unacceptably high levels of oldness.

Importantly though, this ostracisation is not attributed to her personality, such as meanspiritedness or being a troublemaker, but is rather perceived and discussed by the group as being due specifically to old age. Unlike the other members, Mrs. Atherton is perceived as old because she is disruptive, because she is temporally confused (about which day it is, about how often she attends bingo, about what time the bingo starts), because she “can’t get out”, because “she’s not like us”, because she repeats herself, and because she forgets answers she has been given to questions and asks them again. Members elaborate on her oldness by talking about Mrs. Atherton in terms of “her mind is starting to go” and that “she forgets herself sometimes”. Consequently, Mrs. Atherton is now perceived and constructed as someone who is truly old by the centre members, in distinction from themselves who may be experiencing some normal ageing, but who are not really old, distinctions I discuss in more detail below. Furthermore, this shift in definition also promotes
a systematic exclusion of Mrs. Atherton from the category of full adult. Mrs. Atherton is made old and is ostracised because of her behaviour (onto which oldness is read by her peers) and in turn is subjected to treatment such as speaking about her in the third person in her presence and searching her person without her consent for her keys that would not be acceptable with other adults.

While these are extremely sensitive topics to broach and difficult ones to obtain Ella’s or Mrs. Atherton’s own perspectives on, one day Mrs. Atherton brought them up herself with me. In the late autumn towards the end of my fieldwork, I ended up helping her home in her wheelchair again after one of her infrequent trips to the centre. As we went towards her bungalow, she told me that earlier in the day, before bingo, she had been planning to come to the centre but that she had not been sure if she should since she did not feel well and since people did not want her there. Although sadly this was largely true, I was surprised to hear her say so since she usually seemed so oblivious to the other members’ coolness and animosity. I asked her why she thought what she had said. She replied that it is not fair of her to come if she’s not well because “it puts on people” and that “once you get to be nearly one hundred, you can’t expect much”. In this way, Mrs. Atherton attributes her difficulties at the centre to issues of health (not feeling well) and sociality (not feeling wanted). However, despite these vocalised pressures and the sheer exertion of wheeling herself to the centre, Mrs. Atherton still tries to attend. I believe that this is because although she categorises herself as “nearly one hundred” and not in a position to “expect much”, unlike her peers she does not conceptualise herself as an old woman. As such, she perceives the avenues of participation as still open to her, despite the other members’ best efforts to exclude her. Mrs. Atherton’s situation makes all too evident the rupturing gap between epistemology and pragmatics in terms of the everyday experiences of ageing, selfhood, and subjectivity.

Monitoring

John Percival (2000) has written about the paradoxes of gossip amongst older people living in sheltered housing in inner London and who attend community centres similar to those in Dodworth. His exploration of the social role of gossip and the close social surveillance by one’s peers that it represents mirrors in some ways the dynamics I have been describing here. As with Percival’s descriptions of gossip and the maintenance of social norms, the building of consensus about Ella and Mrs. Atherton by centre members is able to
simultaneously forge closeness and social distance amongst members (Percival 2000). Where our work differs however is that Percival does not examine whether gossip contributes to the ways in which oldness is attributed amongst peers. Although gossip as social practice did figure in my research experiences, more relevant to the attribution of oldness described above is what I call ‘monitoring’.

Monitoring is an unorganised, informal activity that I observed and indeed participated in during my time in the centres, such as the examples of Ella and Mrs. Atherton. While ostensibly a meeting place in which to play bingo and whist, centre meetings are also centrally important sites for socialising and offer a chance to catch up on the week’s events in the village and on each other’s lives. An important aspect of catching up on an individual as well as on a collective basis also includes keeping track of the state of being of members and of other village peers. This includes a great deal of attention in public meeting places being paid to how people, including me, appeared physically and mentally. This included pallor of skin, manner of walking, relative ease or unease of movement, tiredness, alertness, decision making ability, consistency in narrative, believability of narrative, ability to remember, ability to concentrate, maintaining good social skills and social comportment. Monitoring is thus the practice of paying keen attention to and of discussing in detail other people’s physical and mental states. Although everyone was potentially subject to low-grade monitoring, each centre and the luncheon club had figures around which monitoring was particularly focused and intense. Any perceived decline in others then becomes public property for the gossip circuit, passed by word of mouth from group to group, circulating through individuals, sometimes becoming part of the accepted community code about a particular person, and at other times not making a lasting impression.

In several respects, my analysis of monitoring is indebted to Foucault’s notions of discipline and power (1979). His work on the panopticon and the self-disciplining behaviours people consequently devise to evade the unseen observer are particularly relevant to monitoring. Self-disciplining is evident in the centres and in Dodworth in terms of pressure to demonstrate ongoing competence in the required fields, such as ‘appropriate’ social comportment. Foucault’s work also elucidates how power is often exercised in indirect forms that silently permeate everyday lives and constrain the ways in which we act. Monitoring is very much akin to this sort of Foucauldian analysis of power. It is a set of practices that reaffirms narrow models of behaviour as normal and appropriate and censures others. Furthermore, it is based not on an authoritative source of power but rather
a diffuse and circulating form as the social message becomes so internalised that people come to regulate their own behaviour for fear of being labelled as ‘old’.

Where my analysis diverges from a Foucauldian perspective however is his emphasis on the inescapability of internalised social control and the extent to which people are utterly powerless or trapped by social rules and norms. I would argue instead that the experiences within the centres and in village life more broadly for older people in Dodworth are more complex, and at times more unpredictable, than this. For example, monitoring is not an evenly distributed practice. Some individuals did more of it than others and more frequently, and some days there was more monitoring going on than others. It is important to bear in mind as well that monitoring amongst peers happens over a period of time and also in multiple locales of interaction: people run into each other outside the centre in their daily lives, and there is also a circuit of information that operates and maintains a flow of status reports about one another of the old Dodworthers throughout the village. As an overall pattern in the centres however, monitoring was a widely pursued practice and is one of the building blocks of making and assigning old age.

Monitoring is a sensitive subject because the construction of where old age begins seems to hinge implicitly on the extent to which individuals are perceived by the people around them to be physically able and mentally cohesive. By asking people who were members to talk to me one-on-one about these cultural constructions and about other members, I was making the implicit explicit. Doing this with such a loaded label of oldness often provoked deep unease, and I found I had to tread very lightly when discussing this with people who took part in this research. This is because of the social stigma of being labelled or perceived as ‘old’ and the shift in power relations that often occur once this re-assignment occurs. As such, I generally avoided explicitly asking about other individuals in these terms. Whenever possible, I did ask for their reflections on these topics but found it much more useful to pay close attention to what was said and implied in spontaneous circumstances and how situations developed over time amongst members at the centres.

Furthermore, an emphasis on monitoring could be misconstrued as meaning that the people I worked with all manifest the negative characteristics of decline that they watch for in each other and stigmatise once identified. This is not the case, and I wish to iterate here that the participants in this research rarely manifested forms of stereotyped old age behaviour that circulate freely in cultural constructions of old age. The people who partook in my research are not senile, overwhelmingly ill, forgetful, mentally slower, and withdrawn, but instead, like younger adults, manifest varying degrees of vivacity, quick-wittedness,
perception and activity depending on their individual personalities and situational context. What does transpire however is a social current of attention to and remarking negatively upon other individual’s mental acuity and bodily characteristics if they appear to change or are perceived to transgress a certain threshold. This threshold is the one that represents the frontier between what is described as “slowing down” or normal ageing and “getting past it” or real old age, a much more threatening prospect. Thus, through the practices of monitoring, centre members were policing the changes in their peers that could signal the manifestation of old age, a shift that had socially damaging ramifications if identified for the person concerned. Monitoring then is one way the gap between epistemology and pragmatics becomes bridged in everyday experience.

Making and breaking norms of ageing

The practice of monitoring and adjudication that it entails also reveals a distinction made by older people in the centres between ‘normal ageing’ and ‘real old age’. The accepted parameters of normal ageing as constructed by older people in the centres allow for and indeed anticipate a certain amount of physical and mental changes due to the ageing process. These include the possible onset of things such as arthritis, diabetes, difficulties in walking and breathing, changes in vision, and memory blanks. Some of these characteristics do not manifest themselves consistently within individuals but fluctuate over time, nor do they manifest consistently across my research population although they are widespread. Such conditions are openly discussed and commiserated over by the older people I came to know, and are not perceived as threatening the integrity of the individual nor as signalling the arrival of old age. While often a topic of discussion between individuals and within groups, such ailments are ultimately attributed to the inevitable ageing process and were often summarised with statements such as “Well, what can you do? It’s just old age”.

Far more threatening however are sharp declines in mental acuity and associated shifts in social comportment. These are the conditions subject to the closest monitoring and suspicion and mark the onset of real old age in the perception of the older people I worked with. In group settings, members monitor each other closely for continuity in narrative accounts, for personal comportment, for ability to concentrate and perform tasks such as playing cards or keeping the record books properly, and for respecting social conventions. Maintaining norms in these areas are signs of continuing good mental condition. The reason this becomes so critical is that full personhood and full adulthood is assigned to those
individuals who meet the acceptable criteria of physical, social and mental performance. Variations from the norm are tolerated to different degrees in group settings depending on the individual’s behaviour and the individual’s role in the group, but if consensus builds that someone is “getting past it” into real old age, small but significant shifts in how that person is interacted with start to accumulate within the group. Those who are perceived to be “getting past it” or manifesting real old age are interacted with in different ways, and no longer seen fully as equals. This is in part due to the pressures of maintaining a consistent sense of self as well as group stability in an environment where the mind and body are under uncontrollable and unpredictable pressures due to the ageing process. The practice of monitoring that I describe within the centres is not limited to these sites in Dodworth, but mirrors wider social practices that transpire throughout village networks and call to mind Foucault’s evocative description of the panopticon. Negotiating these pressures, both inside and outside of the centres, are some of the most demanding experiences of growing older. The protective measures put in place to guard one’s self-hood are vital, and demonstrate what is at stake in the practices of monitoring that I describe.

A further factor in this process is that although some centre members are relative newcomers to the area, importantly a significant majority has lived in Dodworth for decades and many members have known each other over a long period of time. As such, they have long-standing notions and memories of how someone ‘is’ as well as how they fit into the wider social landscape. Monitoring often occurs within the context of longstanding knowledge of one another and their place in the village, their personal and family histories, past grievances, and long standing relationships. In this way, the ramifications of monitoring are perhaps more severe and potentially threatening in a locale like Dodworth than in a setting with higher levels of residential mobility and less stable residence patterns, where transgressions of the boundaries of old age may not be as easily remarked upon. In a setting such as Dodworth however, monitoring becomes another key element in the way old age and oldness are assigned intragenerationally.

Conclusions

In an attempt to move away from the problematic terminology in the social scientific literature on demarcating when old age begins or who can be said to be old that has tended to focus implicitly on chronological age or physical ability, I have turned my attention in this paper to ethnographic examples of how old age is forged through processes of social
interaction amongst peers. While ‘oldness’ is a state of being that people in Western cultures agree exists, and ‘old age’ is a category which is readily used in daily discourse and living, what old age is and who is old nevertheless resists anchoring. Despite this, the boundaries of old age are codified according to deeply negative attributes, all of which threaten the integrity of the self, and ageing is perceived as “an unwelcome movement out of personhood, as something to be hidden or disguised” (Hockey and James 1993:87). It is because of these negative connotations that no-one feels as if they personally are old (Itzin 1990), and why the radical disjuncture between how old age is defined by the dominant society and how it is actually experienced is deeply alienating for older people (Vesperi 1985).

This paper has demonstrated that attending to this gap as it plays out in daily life reveals important insights into what is at stake for the ageing self, a selfhood that is at times made exceedingly vulnerable through negative social pressures. In this paper I have examined the complicated ways in which oldness is a relational concept, and how the social category of old age is constructed, used and negotiated by older people themselves. While old age is culturally constructed, it is not something that is simply ‘made’ by younger adults and ‘read onto’ older people. Old age is also a social category which older people themselves, as socialised members of society, are engaged in making. This is not intentionally malicious behaviour but is rather what De Certeau identifies as everyday practices that usually reside in the “obscure background of social activity” (1984:xii). By attending explicitly to the everyday of intragenerational relationships, I seek to bring the obscure into closer focus and to demonstrate some of the ways in which oldness is attributed by older people themselves about their peers in everyday life. This is not an exercise in placing blame. Rather, I wish to highlight the complicated and multi-directional ways in which oldness is made in order to better understand the processes at work in the cultural construction of old age.

One key point that emerges from this scrutiny is that although oldness is stigmatised as much by older people as it is by younger adults, older people use different criteria to demarcate old age and oldness. Where old age begins is not a linear frontier, not an imaginary line that before being stepped over one is ‘not yet old’ and after stepping over the same person is irrevocably ‘elderly’. It is instead a complicated mixture of comportment, attitude, and acuity, adjudicated on by other people in one’s life. Old age as a culturally assigned category is created within the dialectics of interpersonal interactions and varies a great deal depending on one’s own relative position. This research has demonstrated that
the older people I worked with made far more distinctions about who is old and what
oldness is than most younger people would ever make or have a vocabulary to distinguish
amongst. Furthermore, unlike the many attempts at categorising where old age begins and
the different levels of it that I begin this paper with, older people in Dodworth do not
emphasise oldness, chronological age nor physical ability but instead weigh mental acuity
and social comportment more heavily in their assessment of their peers.

The intragenerational relationships recounted in this paper, the symbolic positions
occupied by Mrs. Atherton and Ella at the centre, the concrete practices people engage in
with them, and the language used to describe them demonstrate the culturally imagined
boundaries of old age for older people themselves in one community in the north of
England. These portraits show how oldness comes to be attributed to individuals by their
peers and written onto them through interpretations of their behaviour, comportment,
speech, and appearance. Importantly however, these portraits also demonstrate how the
process of attribution of oldness is not a fixed one. It can change given different social
dynamics, such as in Ella’s case, and it is not necessarily a label that is internalised evenly, as
in the case of Mrs. Atherton.

The practice of monitoring is a second key point this paper develops. While a gap
may exist between epistemology and pragmatics in the application of the category of old
age, older people in my research population watch for signs of oldness in their peers. I have
demonstrated how monitoring becomes a critical element of how oldness is adjudicated on
by one’s peers and the extent to which relationships with peers play a role in the
construction of old age. Monitoring also reveals the distinctions made by older people
themselves about the boundaries and distinctions between ‘real’ and ‘normal’ old age.
While a great deal of physical change and a certain amount of shifts in mental states are
accommodated in older people’s notions of normal ageing, the most important gauge of the
onset of real old age is a decline in mental acuity and related shifts in comportment.
Monitoring is thus not a neutral practice but one with salient and often deeply negative
social ramifications, and figures prominently in the everyday ways in which oldness is made
assigned, and experienced amongst peers.
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Notes

i Old age is a problematic term and hence my use of inverted commas, but for the sake of ease of reading, I will not continue to use inverted commas throughout the paper. Ultimately however I wish to argue that terms like ‘old age’ and ‘the elderly’ must be problematised as cultural constructions that do not necessarily correlate with any physical reality. This does not mean that I deny the existence of change that happens as people age, but that I am interested in the cultural parameters that are put around the ageing person. Like the difference between ‘disease’ (bodily experience of ill health) and ‘illness’ (the social experience of ill health), there is also a difference between the physical (and sometimes mental) agents that can unpredictably affect people at different rates and in different ways as they age and the social category that is read onto people as they age. The social category of old age also has attendant social roles expected of the ‘old’ person and which are embraced to a greater or lesser extent at different moments.

ii And yet, processual analysis does not completely reject these paradigms of structure. Indeed, as Turner points out, "process is intimately bound up with structure and...an adequate analysis of social life necessitates a rigorous consideration of the relation between them" (Turner 1985:156).

iii Rather, old age is talked around. People who partook in my research will often speak about the effects of ageing but seldom apply the label to themselves except in a detached, third person sort of way such as “what can you do...it’s old age” rather than saying “I’m getting old”.

iv All names used in this paper are pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of the people who partook in this research.

v More typical is the saying that someone is or has “a big age” (e.g. “Well, she’s a big age now”) or that someone is “getting on now”. While a way of acknowledging a person’s chronological age, these phrases do not stigmatise in the same way that saying someone is “getting past it” or “old” does.
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