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Jönson, Håkan

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PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

TITLE PAGE

Title: We Will Be Different! Ageism and the Temporal Construction of Old Age

Author: Håkan Jönson, Ph.D.

Affiliation: School of Social Work, Lund University, Sweden

E-mail: hakan.jonson@soch.lu.se

Telephone: +46462221293

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Abstract

Ageism has been described as different from other forms of discrimination and paradoxical in the sense that “non-old” people discriminate against their “future selves.” The argument of this paper is that non-old people may uphold ideas about older people as “the other” by constructing their own future selves as *essentially different* from that of older people of the present. Using examples from care work, this paper shows how non-old care providers use temporal categorizations to justify treatment that they would/will not accept for themselves. Based on a review of literature, it is argued that a temporal construction of old age and older people as existing in the past, the present, and the future has been a prominent feature of the construction of old age and older people for many decades. A cohort of “new old” has repeatedly been described as active and self-conscious, in comparison to the passive, frail, and grateful older people of the past. Although these contrasts have been used to improve images of older people, they have also served to obstruct attempts to form identities as “older people” and made it possible for non-old people to justify ageist arrangements.

Keywords: Ageism, baby boomers, intergroup relations, out-group

We Will Be Different! Ageism and the Temporal Construction of Old Age

Introduction

During an interview in 2004, a manager at a Japanese nursing home told me that residents at his facility did not mind living with five other people in one room and would in fact feel lonely in private rooms. When I asked a Japanese colleague if this sharing of rooms was a cultural habit, she replied with sarcasm: “That man would certainly not like to share a room with others if he had to stay in a nursing home.” According to my colleague, the manager defended an arrangement that he would not accept for himself. This breach of the “golden rule” is a crucial aspect of ageism, as described by Robert Butler. Older people are regarded and treated as people with other, lesser needs. According to Butler (1975:12), “Ageism allows the younger generations to see older people as different from themselves; thus, they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings.” But is this kind of ageism not irrational and paradoxical? It is easy to invoke a future scenario where the perpetrator of ageism will belong in the victimized category. Are younger (non-old) people discriminating against their future selves? What kind of “us” and “them” are involved in the drama when members of the “in-group” can expect to transit into the “out-group”?

The argument of this paper is that non-old people may uphold ideas about older people as “the other” by constructing their own future selves as *essentially different* from that of older people of the present. In this paper, I will show how tools for such comparisons have been made available through a common way – described by gerontologists and popular writers on aging,

government investigations and, advertisers on the “gray market” and organizations within the seniors’ movement – of understanding old age and older people as existing in the past, the present, and the future. Claims that the baby boomer generation will reshape old age constitute the most recent version of this established way of understanding old age. The temporal construction of old age has served to obstruct attempts to form identities as “older people” and made it possible for non-old people to justify ageist arrangements.

Social identity theory provides a way understanding negative stereotyping and discrimination as a matter of *categorization, identification, and comparison* that members of in-groups use to enhance self-images and justify discrimination of out-groups (Tajfel, 1981; 1982). In this paper, I will use concepts developed within social identity theory in order to explore the construction of older people as “the other”, but the use of these concepts will not be limited to a study of feelings and attitudes among members of particular groups. Ageism is a cultural phenomenon, and, to a certain extent, a matter of how age is enacted and invoked as an explanation in different settings (Laz, 1998; Jönson & Siverskog, 2012). Age categorizations and comparisons between ages and generations are *cultural resources* that people use to construct identities, invoke norms, or justify particular arrangements (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Krekula, 2009). This raises the out-group paradox to the discursive level, where claims that older people are different and have lesser needs may be challenged by the argument that “older people are younger people who have grown old” (SOU 1994:30). This paper investigates the arguments that are available and are being used to deal with the out-group paradox of ageism.

Older People as an Out-group

The character of older people as an out-group has been debated. Research on ageism has highlighted intergroup relations, mechanisms, and discursive patterns that serve to portray older people as “the other”. Butler (1969) launched the concept of ageism as a parallel to other forms of discrimination, and relations between *non-old* and *old* have been discussed in terms of “us” and “them” (Bytheway, 1995). It has been suggested that older people are cast as “non-humans” and that a process of age segregation separates older people from the rest of society (Hazan, 1994; Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005). The *otherness* of older people appears in language that signifies difference, for example, as “dirty old men,” “hags,” “geezers,” and “fossils” (Nuessel, 1982), and in theories that cast older people as essentially different from younger people (Levin & Levin, 1980). While ageism has been described as similar to racism and sexism, it has also been suggested that intergroup relations are quite different (Bytheway, 1995). Individuals in any given age group are, as Riley (1985:391) notes, “not permanent residents in the stratum, but transients just passing through.” The transitory nature of age groups has led gerontologists such as Streib (1965) to conclude that it would be incorrect to regard older people as a *minority group*. Levin and Levin (1980) have later argued against this position, and suggested that older people should form collective identities as a minority group that is victimized by ageism.

The out-group paradox has to much extent been regarded as the result of a misconception about the nature of the life-course among the non-old. In a popular 1940s book titled “You are younger than you think,” Gumpert (1944:12) suggests that prejudice against old age is similar to

other forms of discrimination, but *irrational* since, “according to all human experience, we inevitably have to face it.” In another popular book on aging, Comfort (1976) argues that some kind of misunderstanding must be the cause of ageism: why else would we want to dispose of a percentage of the population that we will be part of in the future?

Researchers who use the age stratifications approach have suggested that the social and cultural separation between age groups assigns people at different stages of the life course to distinct segments of society (Riley, 1985; Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005). As a result, the present in-group is *misinterpreted* as stable in relation to out-groups of other ages (Riley, 1985). The political economy approach has directed attention to the way an age-based organization of society hides inequalities between classes and prohibits the formation of a “labor-senior coalition” (Powell, Williamson, & Branco, 1996:112). It has also been suggested that the dehumanization of older people that is present in ageism may serve the purpose of helping “younger generations,” to *deny* old age as their future self (Butler & Lewis, 1973; Greenberg, Schimel, & Mertens, 2004).

Solutions to the problem have consequently been framed in terms of strengthening intergroup solidarity and show non-old people that older people are “us” in the future (SOU 1994:30). But do people really use arguments indicating that they will not belong in the category of “older people” in order to justify ageist arrangements?

Denial of Sameness During Old Age

The suggestion of this paper is that *denial* of old age as a future self is not necessarily the solution non-old people use to deal with the out-group paradox. Other options are culturally available and are being used to construct older people as “the other”. The argument that a person is discriminating against his or her future self may be dismissed with reference to differences between *older people of the present* and *older people of the future*. This does not necessarily mean that non-old people actively identify with a specific cohort or generation, for example, “we aging baby boomers,” but, rather, that older people of the present are described as *incomparable* to the kind of older people that they will become in the future.

Below, I will show how non-old people who provide formal care construct older people of the present as a category with fewer needs than they themselves expect to have as care users of the future. The field of care work is of particular relevance for studies of intergroup relations, since care providers who belong in “not yet old” cohorts may be held *accountable* for care arrangements that breach the *golden rule*: one should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself.

When interviewing managers and care workers about care arrangements, Damberg (2010) noted that a paternalistic view on how to provide care was justified with reference to the particular character of “care users of today.” These care users were described as passive, dependent, lonely, and grateful. A perceived lack of agency and capacity to formulate demands about needs was regarded as the effect of their generational belonging: they were born in the 1920s and had grown up in a society that no longer existed. These characteristics *justified* an approach where care providers decided about care arrangements and prompted care users to

act according to their (superior) judgment. Damberg (2010:55) was also surprised to find that interviewees did not expect to endure similar arrangements as care users of today. Referring to people born after World War II, they portrayed “care users of the future” as a group that would be competent, demanding, and not in need of being prompted. Interviewees suggested that care users of the future “have started to think for themselves,” “are not stuck in any system,” and “phrase completely different demands in relation to authorities and service providers.” The use of the present tense in these comments indicates that although the people described did not yet belong in the category of care users, they were perceived to already exist as a cohort. This cohort would change the character of care work.

Would the Japanese nursing home manager, cited at the beginning of this paper, have referred to differences between care users of the present and the future if I had asked him to elaborate on the issue of shared rooms? I do not know, but what is clear from more recent interviews is the fact that such arguments are used by residential care managers in Japan. In a study by Jönson and Watanabe (forthcoming), some managers explained why they had rooms for 2–4 people by suggesting that older Japanese people (born before World War II) were different from younger people: “I don’t think that our residents have a sensitive feeling for combining people as compared to *our generation*.” One residential care manager suggested that the majority of care users at her facility were incapable of asserting autonomy since they were products of an older patriarchal culture that was prominent in Japan before World War II. In its context, the answer acted as a *justification* (Scott & Lyman, 1968) for not promoting the norm of self-determination: “They can’t decide anything themselves. That’s why we need to take care of them in a way that draws out their feelings and thoughts.”

In Damberg's (2010:72) study, care workers participating in a focus-group interview had no difficulty in picturing themselves as future care users, but the way they used categorizations and comparisons made it possible to avoid *identifying* with care users of the present.

Laura: Yes, well they are of course more ... they are more adaptable to the situation in comparison to how we will be, I think.

Nina: Many of the women have been housewives.

Laura: Yes, and nowadays women are independent. Now, we women manage by ourselves because we work for everything. Now we don't have to beg anymore.

Nina: But in the old days, it was the husband that ... and the woman was at home with the children and all that.

Laura: And this thing of having a shower once a week, we will never accept that. We who shower every day.

Therese: No, we will never accept that.

With the construction of two distinct groups, it was not a moral problem for these care workers to provide care users with services that they would not accept themselves. The "we" and "them" belonged to different societies; personalities, habits, and needs were fundamentally different. The fact that care users "accepted" problematic arrangements was discussed in terms of generational characteristics rather than organizational shortcomings. The victim of an ageist arrangement was blamed for being a victim (Levin & Levin, 1980). When the matter of a future self was carefully invoked by Damberg (2010), managers referred to their own generational

character—their upbringing, their education, and their material standard—to back up the argument that they would not encounter the kind of asymmetrical arrangements that care users of today had to endure.

The New Old and the Historical Temporality of Old Age

At present, the temporal construction of old age is focused on the aging baby boomer generation. This generation is suggested to change the lifestyle and image of old age as well as the quality of care arrangements (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002; SOU 2003:91; Hudson & Gonyea, 2012). As future users of care, they are described as well educated, well informed, and with a high level of consumption. This is in stark contrast to care users of today, who are associated with low levels of education, ignorance, low demands, and being grateful and content (Markström, 2010:14). Gilleard and Higgs (2002:376) claim that cohorts born before World War II were not socially, materially, and culturally set apart from earlier generations, but the baby boom generation “broke the mould of the modern life course.” This resembles the argument of care providers cited above, that older people born before and after the war constitute two distinct populations with little in common.

Not denying the special character of the baby boomers, I would like to draw the attention to a remarkable historical continuity. The *temporal construction* of old age and older people as existing in the past, the present, and the future has been a prominent feature of the construction of old age and older people since at least the 1940s.

The general understanding in science and popular writings has been, and is, that old age and old people of the present differ from those of the past and that old age and older people of the future will differ from those of the present. Explicitly, such beliefs are expressed in age stratification theory. Riley (1985:371) concludes: “the persons in the older age strata today are very different from older persons in the past or in the future.” In other cases, the temporal construction of age groups has been expressed in statistics and graphs that show and predict differences in life span, health, or welfare over time (Laslett, 1989) or in headings and titles such as “old age of today,” “old age of the future” (Comfort, 1965), and “older people in society—in the past, the present, and the future” (Odén, Svanborg, & Tornstam, 1993).

There is also continuity in the way older people of the past have been presented as different. When launching the theory of a *third age*, Peter Laslett (1989) referred to a woman of the late 1980s as a *new* type of person that had little in common with older cohorts of the same age stratum:

The experience, outlook, and assumptions of those older than themselves, of their grandparents in the 1920s and 1930s, of their parents in the 1940s and 1950s, were entirely inappropriate as a guide to what things would be for them in their turn.

Childhood memories of their elders taking life easy because they, their few survivors of their coevals, were convinced that they deserved to rest, are of no use in deciding what those at similar calendar ages should be doing in the 1980s and 1990s. Wearing black, looking submissive and regretful, being thankful that no new thing is to be expected of

them — these are not attitudes which a woman in the Third Age would now wish to adopt.

The development observed by Laslett confirms a prediction by Neugarten (1974) about the rise of the *young-old*. The point of Laslett's argument is that "older people" of the past and present are so different that they do not belong to the same category; therefore, there is a need to *recode* (Krekula, 2009) an age category by establishing the third age. It is notable that the very *attitudes*—being submissive and thankful—which a woman in the third age would not wish to adopt during the late 1980s are currently being used to mark differences toward older people born in the 1920s or before World War II: the period when the third-age woman in the example was likely to have been born.

Comparisons between past, present, and future are also easy to find outside gerontology, in popular writings, media, and advertising commenting on old age. When introducing her best-selling book titled "The dynamics of aging," Sabin Smith (1956) suggested that older people of "our time" could count on 20 years extra in comparison to their grandparents, and predicted that this process of being and feeling younger would continue to reshape the next generation of older people. In a review of the American aging discourse, Calhoun (1978) shows that the dependent, broken-down, and isolated older people from the late 1940s were contrasted with the "the new old" of the late 1960s. The new old of the 1960s (probably born at the turn of the century) were characterized by self-worth and positive lifestyles. Calhoun notes that presentations of the new old as different appeared among several arenas of American society after World War II. As is the case with the baby boomers of today, many image makers were

driven by self-interest. Advertisers pictured the future life of seniors in terms of the golden years in the 1960s, and policy makers acknowledged the appearance of “gray power” in the 1970s. During 1950–1975, the largest Swedish pensioners’ organization (PRO) used images of miserable older people of the past as a negative reference group when describing older people of the present as comparatively well off, but still struggling for status as equal citizens (Jönson, 2005). During the 1960s PRO argued that a cohort of affluent and self-conscious pensioners who expected to retire in the late 1960s would not accept the kind of pitying treatment that characterized old-age policies of the past. In 1964, PRO changed its name in order to make the “new pensioners” feel at home in the organization. Similar attempts to introduce a new old age have been prominent in magazines such as *Modern Maturity* (Loetterle, 1994).

There is, to conclude, strong evidence for the suggestion that ideas about a division into the past, present, and future has been pivotal for the understanding of the category of old age for many decades. Life span, health, welfare, lived experience, attitudes, and lifestyles are characteristics that are frequently used when constructing cohorts of older people as temporally different. In addition, the number of people above certain ages has been suggested to make the population of older people more visible and change power relations of the present and future (Neugarten, 1974; Calhoun, 1978; Laslett, 1989).

The Dubious Trump Card of Anti-Ageism

It is easy to understand why gerontologists, popular writers on aging, and organizations such as the AARP have participated in the temporal construction of old age and older people. From a

narrative perspective, such agents have gained legitimacy from “telling the truth” about older people to a society that is characterized by hostility and misconceptions (Green, 1993).

Seventy years ago, Gumpert (1944:vi) claimed that older people “look quite different” from older people a generation before, and “they will look younger and healthier still a generation from now.” The problem, Gumpert stated in 1944, is that society is slow to react to change. It fails to abandon superstitions and traditions that no longer correspond to reality. Gumpert’s book was quickly translated into several languages; in a review 1947 the magazine of the leading Swedish pensioners’ organization saluted his description of a “new” old age and expressed concerns about the effect of lagging images (*People’s Pensioner*, 1947). The problem described by Gumpert has later been referred to as a “cultural lag” or a “hangover from a previous era when such negative views of elders were more realistic” (Palmore, 1990:86). According to Calhoun (1978), the problem of lagging images was generally recognized among gerontologists during the 1950s. The revelation of the cultural lag has become a *trump card* within anti-ageism for the simple reason that it points to a credible cause and a positive solution to the problem: a misunderstanding that can be corrected with factual information. The health, mental abilities, financial security, social activity, and life satisfaction of older people has increased, but “most people have not heard the good news” (Palmore, 1995:86). The struggle to *update* images of old age has appeared in many arenas of society (Calhoun, 1978; SOU 2003:91).

Critical gerontologists such as Cohen (1988) and Minkler (1990) have noted that positive images of old age as a period of independence and self-fulfillment may free the healthy majority of

older people from the stigma of frailty, but at the cost of an increased stigma surrounding those who are truly dependent. The temporal construction of old age and older people has a similar capacity of creating dual images. In one version, present and future are brought together in categories such as “the new old,” and society is urged to adjust and prepare by immediately introducing improvements. Older people of the past are cast as the true out-group, as people who were indeed frail, dependent, passive, humbled, and were part of a past society. Such claims have probably improved images of older people, making “them” more like “us”.

In another version, older people of the present become representatives of a kind of a problematic “old age as it has been so far;” a population used as a negative reference group for the coming new old. A Swedish government investigation on old age policies (SOU 2003:91) uses the present (2003) situation to pose questions about the aging baby boomer generation: “Will they adopt the *pensioner's role* that has been shaped, or will they rather just have a pension and live their lives in opposition to expectations on how one should act after retirement? And is society ready to meet their new demands and initiatives?” Images of baby boomers as demanding are not entirely positive (Hudson & Gonyea, 2012). Still, it could be argued that questions like these attribute problem status to pensioners and care users of the past/present, associating them with a restricting role and a lack of capacity to take initiatives.

Implications

The aim of this paper was to provide an explanation for the out-group paradox of ageism, and my claim is that a temporal construction of old age and older people makes it possible for non-old people to “see older people as different from themselves” (Butler, 1975:12).

Below, I will relate the findings of this paper to a position on ageism, presented by Levin and Levin (1980). According to Levin and Levin, ageism manifests itself in the tendency to construct old age as the prime cause of older peoples’ problems. Therefore, there is a need to focus on the production and use of knowledge, relating to the way older people are constructed as different. The temporal construction of old age and older people is a case where this shift of focus is warranted. The lack of roles for older people has usually been regarded as a fact to cope with and overcome, but the issue needs to be studied as an established way of constructing and enacting old age (Laz, 1998; Krekula, 2009). Why is the latest stratum of seniors always “exploring virgin territory” (Loetterle, 1994:206)? The historical continuity of this claim indicates that the presence of “inappropriate” role models for older people of the future has become inherent to our understanding of old age. In 1980, Levin and Levin argued that older people should form collective identities from the position of being victims of ageism. Hudson and Gonyea (2012:1) have recently suggested that the perceived characteristics of the aging baby boomer generation may “result in the fracturing of elders’ longstanding singular political imagery.” This is a relevant warning, but it could be argued that the fracturing has been present for many decades. According to Levin and Levin (1980:127) people who reach 65 or 70 must begin to “regard themselves as sharing a common social status by virtue of their age (for example, old, aged, or elderly).” The temporal construction of old age and older people obstructs the development of age-conscious identities as “we older people,” and the

reoccurring promise that old age is being transformed into a new old age may serve to *govern* people through promises of a bright future (Powell, 2001). Success becomes a matter of *avoiding* “old age as it has been so far.”

A second implication concerns the need to detect and challenge out-group thinking in arenas where the golden rule is at stake. Policy makers and care providers need to be informed about the historical continuity of the claim that older people of the present are essentially different from (“us”) older people of the future. This is not to say that differences between cohorts/generations should be denied or that care providers should judge the needs of care users from their personal preferences. The issue to be addressed is the tendency to use proposed characteristics of a particular category to explain problems that members of this category encounter (Levin & Levin, 1980). Arrangements such as hoarding six people in one room, providing a shower once a week, or deciding not to take requests among care users seriously are justified with reference to generational characteristics during old age. Problems that may be a result of the status of older people or the organization of care are thus projected onto the population of “older care users of today.” This blaming of the out-group is central to ageism and it should be challenged through a greater awareness of the temporal construction of old age.

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