Beyond Appearances: Perspectives on Identity in Later Life and Some Implications for Method

Simon Biggs

King’s College, London, UK.

Two areas of controversy are examined in this article, arising from contemporary debate on identity in later life. The first centers on whether adults are essentially similar regardless of age or whether different stages of life confer different life priorities. The second addresses the management of self in later life, with special attention being given to alternative interpretations of the relationship between interior and exterior experience. An increasing awareness of diversity in life-course patterns suggests that issues concerning uniformity, distinctiveness, and the uses of masquerade in intergenerational contexts should be revisited. Here, the influence of simple and complex states of mind is examined as a factor in intergenerational power, and the expression of agency in later life is discussed. These issues not only propel us forward in our understanding of gerontological phenomena, they also point to potential sources of research bias associated with specifically intergenerational contexts. Finally, suggestions are made with respect to research training.

It is difficult, both globally and locally, not to be aware that the identities offered to older adults are becoming more diverse. A tendency to redescribe aging as a time of activity, social engagement, and productivity rather than of decline and dependency has influenced thinking, nationally, regionally, and globally, and is reflected in the United Nations declaration of the Second World Assembly on Ageing (2002). Stereotypes that may have held 20 years ago are becoming increasingly unstable and, like the statues of so many 20th-century dictators, are liable to imminent collapse.

If a new world of aging is emerging, however, it is taking place in a climate of considerable cultural confusion. A brief excursion into contemporary media, for example, reveals the following: “Trading Places” TV shows that have extended their reach from helping librarians pass as security guards and junior doctors as pole dancers to makeovers for 25-year-olds who want to experience “what it’s like to be old” and midlifers who do not. The author’s local newspaper, the East London Enquirer, covered in the October 25, 2004, weekly edition biker grannies (“one in a million”), a feature on increasing abuse rates, older people’s protests for compensation, and exhortations to take on a new career in later life or move into a leisurely yet active retirement community. The September 2004 issue of Saga Magazine included an invitation to meet the new old who dress and party like teenagers and Kim Basinger, who is “Flirty at Fifty.” Meanwhile, the AARP (formerly the American Association for Retired Persons) debated whether to drop the word “retired,” and Elderhostel invited age-unspecified “road scholars” to join its ranks. Linguistic amalgams that would previously have been thought of as antinomies (“middlescents,” “young fogies,” life-long learners, and age pioneers) have reflected a changing yet dissociated attitude to contemporary encounters with later life, fragmenting, as Gilleard and Higgs (2000) suggest, into multiple “cultures of ageing.” If there is an exchange of new aging identities for old, the alternatives may as equally arouse uncertainty about maturity, ambivalence as well as a reveling in the ambiguity that had been promised by postmodern identities and consumer choice (Featherstone, 1996). Expected behaviors associated with aging can no longer be taken for granted as elders struggle to discover themselves. It is unclear whether the priorities of later life are becoming pretty much indistinguishable from other parts of the life course or have particular qualities of their own. Further, as previous certainties fall, the alternatives appear curiously negligent of social location, inequality, and power dynamics between generations. Taken together, the freedoms and risks associated with contemporary aging mean that older adults may increasingly experience multiple pressures on identities that were previously considered stable and predictable.

The thesis that current conditions allow greater choice in the roles open to older people proposes greater agency in self-definition, increased fluidity between age characteristics, and the blurring of previously fixed age stages (Blakie, 1998; Featherstone & Hepworth, 1989; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). These views co-exist in the literature with an exploration of themes that are specific to later life and arise from an admixture of increased personal integration, bodily and social challenges, plus a growing sense of personal finitude (Cole, 1992; Hendricks, 2003; Timmer, Bode, & Dittman-Kohli, 2003). Tension between these two positions has emerged in a debate on the degree of flexibility that exists between psychological, social, and biological aging and whether priorities vary across the adult life course or stay essentially the same (Polikva, 2001; Powell & Longino, 2002; Westerhoff, Dittman-Kohli, & Bode, 2003). A common thread exists in an argument that contemporary identities are increasingly managed identities (Bauman, 1995; Giddens, 1991) and that as traditional expectations of adult aging are eroded, the aging self is as equally subject to this trend as other phases of the life course even though the contradictions that arise take age-specific forms (Biggs, 1997; Katz, 2000; Ruth & Coleman, 1997). Here, self-perception has become closely associated with strategies for identity management in so far as the performance of an age identity requires a degree of self-conscious agency. As fixed identities cease to be ascribed to age, they require a self-regarding compromise between intention, external pressures, and one’s own interior world.

That self-perception in later life is not straightforward, has been noted from the earliest days of gerontology (Furstenberg, 1996). That self-perception in later life is not straightforward, has been noted from the earliest days of gerontology (Furstenberg, 1996).
PERSPECTIVE ON IDENTITY IN LATER LIFE

2002; Katz, 1996), with older people reporting differences from the values attributed to chronologic age. More recently, a number of researchers have attested to the multidimensional experience of adult aging (Smith & Gerstorf, 2004; Thompson, Itzen, & Abendstern, 1991) and contributed to the development of instruments that access different internal representations of aging, including how old individuals might feel, look, and desire themselves to be (Kaufman & Elder, 2002; Oberg & Tornstam, 1999). Agency is expressed in negotiation between factors such as private intuition and public discourse (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000), perceived choice and necessity (Jolanki, Jylha, & Hervonen, 2000), life categories created as part of intergenerational talk (Nikander, 2002), and the interplay of personal, social, and institutional demands (Powell & Biggs, 2003). How one appears to others and to oneself and why one presents a certain face to the world while keeping other parts hidden are now seen to be key elements contributing to the active strategizing of age. This increased awareness of the complexity involved in keeping age identities going has provoked a restatement of certain gerontologic questions that had once seemed unproblematic.

This article will be used to examine two such controversies. The first centers on how far age-related differences are an important part of contemporary life-course categorization, which shades into the related problem of the degree to which one is able to step beyond a personal age perspective. The second addresses the management of self in later life, with special attention to alternative interpretations of the relationship between interior and exterior experience and the effects of simple and complex states of mind. These questions hold implications for inquiry in intergenerational settings, research questions, practice, and training. Each will be critically examined in the following sections.

One consequence of studying a phenomenon that is in flux is that existing labels lose their specificity. Contemporary literature on adult aging includes distinctions between the first and second halves of life, third and fourth ages, and a variety of subcategories for the latter years. Social definitions of generation and cohort contain considerable variation, whereas formal policy definitions of old age vary from 50 to 70 years, depending on topic and geography (Biggs, 2004). Descriptors, then, are rarely coterminous, and making distinctions may itself become a contentious activity. Reflecting the imperfect nature of current terminology, “later life,” “older people,” and “adult aging” will be used here to indicate period, persons, and process.

**How Far Are Adults the Same Regardless of Age and How Far Does Later Life Have Its Own Distinctive Qualities?**

**Life-Course Uniformity and Distinctiveness**

The argument that life-course categories are becoming increasingly indistinct was initiated in a series of articles by Featherstone and Hepworth (1983, 1989, 1991, 1995) and has been followed through in the cultural sociology of Gillette and Higgs (2000, 2002, 2004). Trends of postmodernity, for example, “gray” life-style consumerism, technologic advance, and the possibility of virtual identities, have, it is maintained, multiplied the options open to older people, such that they are no longer bound by strict social and biological reference points. The result is a homogenizing of aspirations in later life to what Featherstone and Hepworth (1983) identified early on in the debate as “mid-lifestyles” that are maintained for as long as possible, deep into old age. In life-course terms, it is implied that there is little that is now intrinsic to later life, and as McAdams (1993) points out, “We must figure it out on our own” once age stages have been removed as guides to age-appropriate behavior. It is perhaps paradoxical that, in so far as blurring results in continuity, these conceptual developments reflect the earlier and distinctively modernist view that searching for continuity enhances healthy late-life identity (Atchley, 1989) and the observation that within-population diversity might be greater than that found between adult age groups (Neugarten, 1968). The current debate takes the argument one step further. Although increasing diversity is implied by new patterns or cultures of aging, the outcome is growing uniformity of priority between different age groups, making later life indistinguishable from and continuous with other parts of the life course. At least when it comes to agency and life priorities, this cultural turn in gerontology could be considered “uniformist” because age itself ceases to distinguish one group from another.

By contrast, “distinctivist” trends can be identified in the work of authors (e.g., Cole, 1992; Dittmann-Kohli, 1991; Tornstam, 1996) who have argued that discernible differences occur between later life and other parts of the adult life course. Although opinion varies as to whether these patterns are primarily socially determined or arise from the processes of maturation as the life course progresses, differences in experiential knowledge and life priorities are said to radically dislocate the priorities of later life from preceding stages. The distinctiveness of later life is supported by enduring theoretical positions such as Jung’s (1934) analytic psychology and Erikson’s (1986) ego psychology, each of which identifies specific challenges and existential questions associated with that part of the life course, while maintaining that those who cling to the priorities of one stage of life while entering another will suffer psychological dysfunction.

On first encounter, this debate between life-course uniformity and distinctiveness might appear something of a spat between postmodern and modernist approaches; however, its implications are considerable. If, for example, adult aging is becoming increasingly homogeneous, soon there may be little reason to study late life separately from other parts of the life course at all. If, however, later life is increasingly subject to its own specific priorities, then the ability to put oneself in the place of another age group becomes questionable.

**On the Possibility of Stepping Beyond One’s Own Perspective**

The issue is made more complex by the philosopher David Norton (1976), who maintains that whereas adult aging does, indeed, consist of distinctive stages, it appears to be experienced as uniform. The trick, according to Norton, is to recognize that while the illumination that one is living a distinctively different life stage is instantaneous and irreversible, its implications are slow and continuous, proceeding by degrees. It may, for example, not be acted upon or go unrecognized by acquaintances who treat the older person in the same way as before, thus reinforcing existing behavior. Further, Norton maintains that “retrospection perceives only continuity,” acknowledging the
MANAGING AGE AND POWER: THE AGELESS, YOUTHFUL, OR MATURE SELF IN LATER LIFE?

Identity Management and Imbalances in Power Between Age Groups

The view that power is distributed unequally and to the disadvantage of older people is so widespread, with ageism as its defining feature (Butler, 1975; Bytheway, 1994), as to be a premise for most critical gerontologic thought (Estes, Biggs, & Phillipson, 2003). At an interpersonal level, De Beauvoir (1970) seminally observed an ambivalence toward older adults, verging on “biological repugnance.” She maintained that intergenerational exchanges are marked by duplicity, with formal deference traveling hand in hand with resentment, depreciation, and manipulation of the older person. Reviews by Coupland, Coupland, and Giles (1991) and Williams and Nussbaum (2001) point to a recurring finding that younger adults base their talk to older people on simplifications centering on failing physical and cognitive capabilities, a trend that increased linearly with the age of their conversational partner. Both younger and older respondents judged the other age group’s communication styles negatively. However, if youth appears brutish in this research, age responds as the wily fox. Reviews of older people’s communication skills indicate higher levels of turn taking, conversational organization, and strategic variety than those of younger adults (Pratt & Norris, 1994). Older adults were more able to accommodate to the conversationalal and life-stage needs of younger adults, with intergenerational under-accommodation being most marked in midlife (Williams & Giles, 1996). Fostering underaccommodation, keeping to safe topics, focusing on the needs of the other, and avoiding negative intergenerational social comparison may all be used to protect and allow some control by older interactants (Coupland et al., 1991; Giles, Fox, & Smith, 1993; Jarowski & Stephens, 1998).

If these data suggest that younger adults fail to step beyond age stereotypes, reducing the need for more complex forms of thought, they also highlight the way in which older adults actively adapt to this unrewarding state of affairs. The question of how and why older adults manage the tensions generated by adult aging has become a key element in taking these observations forward. Specifically, managing the relationship between the interior experience of adult aging and its exterior reception has generated a series of alternative models, which will now be examined in some detail.

Three Models for Managing the Relationship Between Interior and External Worlds in Later Life

All social exchange is divided into what social actors wish to disclose or to keep to themselves, and in later life, this relationship may take particular forms. At least three versions can be found within social gerontology.

The first appears in the work of Jung (1934), McAdams (1993), and Kaufman (1995) and can be referred to as the notion of an “ageless self.” Jung (1934) describes later life as a time when social conformity, in the shape of the “persona” or social mask, is replaced by an individuated or authentic self. As the “false wrappings” of the persona are shed and a more developed state of psychological integration takes shape, the self becomes, paradoxically, “ageless.” McAdams (1993) also sees later life as a time of “selling” in which personal identity can be performed in more authentic ways. Kaufman (1995) argues that later life is not something that has intrinsic meaning and that older people rarely see themselves as old. Rather, the inner sense of self is ageless, and continuity of identity is stressed despite the physical and social changes associated with adult aging. However, “agelessness” arguably underestimates social barriers to self-expression in later life. Andrews (1999) identifies the cultural dominance of appeals to agelessness as an attempt to deny processes of adult aging that are erroneously formulated around the experience of illness. She nevertheless corroborates the observation often reported in this literature (Thompson et al., 1991) that older people “don’t feel old.”

Second, although Featherstone and Hepworth (1989, 1995) champion the blurring of distinctive life stages, they do not deny that identity in later life requires management. According to their “mask of aging” hypothesis, age provokes a lack of fit between what the observer imputes, based on physical appearance, and the experience of self. Bodily aging increasingly represents the
older adult to others, who progressively fail to see beyond appearances. The dilemma that has to be managed is that of a youthful self that finds itself trapped in an aging body. They thus pick up the theme of “not feeling old” and place it in the context of social perceptions. Others judge by appearances and no longer connect to the younger self that is becoming hidden from view. The aging body becomes the source of a series of barriers that prohibit engagement with consumer society and the multiplicity of life styles that it offers. Here, the core contradiction for an aging identity is conceptualized as how to express the youthful inner self, trapped in and at war with bodily aging.

Third, Woodward (1991, 1995) and Biggs (1997, 1999) both draw on the notion of masquerade to explicate the tension between the interior and external logics of adult aging. Woodward’s interest in masquerade highlights the ambiguity and ambivalence surrounding aging. Drawing on Riviere’s (1929) work on “womanliness,” she sees identity as a performance that supports identity in a hostile environment and an attempt to preserve the self by submission to dominant social codes, while at the same time resisting them. Here it is youthfulness that is the outer surface and age the inner experience. And just as Purman’s (1997) patrons of the beauty salon are acutely aware of the ironies of self-presentation, Woodward’s aging self conceals and presents the very conditions of its concealment, and while others are rarely unaware of the older woman’s presentation of a younger self, they go along with the disguise. Biggs’s work picks up the persona motif used by Jung (1934) but notes that if increased self-awareness cannot be safely expressed owing to age prejudice, it has to be protected by continued but more nuanced forms of social masking, reflecting the greater sophistication gained in later life. It is not dropped, then, but protects the boundary between interior and external worlds. A mature imagination exists within this inner space until facilitative social environments are found that do not force it undercover.

Although the contents of these conceptualizations vary, there are processual and structural similarities. Self-management arises from the specific conditions of later life, driven by tension between appearance and deeper, possibly more authentic experiences, be it attributable to false wrappings, bodily aging, or social prejudice. The process for managing identity remains strikingly similar, in so far as it consists of the interplay of layers of experience. An interior self requires, but may face challenges to, expression, with active agency in the degree of disclosure allowed between oneself and other people.

Nagel (1998) notes that the boundary between what people reveal and what they do not and some control over that boundary are among the most important attributes of our humanity, and we learn to progressively keep many thoughts and feelings to ourselves. This performs the function of maintaining civil relations with other people. Reticence is not dishonest because the conventions that govern it are generally understood. “One has to keep a firm grip,” he claims, “on the fact that the social self that others present to us is not the whole of their personality either, and that this is not a form of deception because it is meant to be understood by everyone. Everyone knows that there is much more going on than what enters the public domain but the smooth functioning of that domain depends on a general non-acknowledgement of what everyone knows” (p. 3).

This arrangement allows the freedom to lead one’s inner life as if it were invisible. The preliminary scholarship outlined above indicates that there are conceptual and empirical reasons to explore the gerontology of such relations further.

ON SIMPLE AND COMPLEX STATES OF MIND

A discussion of the sophistication with which the self is managed in later life and the effect of power imbalance on the capacity to put oneself in the place of another in specifically life-course terms is reminiscent of Bollas’s (1992) analysis of the distinction between simple and complex states of mind. He states: “The simple experiencing self and the complex reflecting self enable the person to process life according to different, yet interdependent modes of engagement; one immersive the other reflective” (p. 15).

This distinction is relevant to both questions of an apperception of difference and similarity between age stages and the use of strategies that bridge appearance, interior logic, and social attitudes. If age-related dominance exacerbates differences in the ability to step outside a particular generational perspective (Biggs, 2004), the relationship between complex reflection and simple immersion may help considerably in untangling the relationship between uniformity, distinctiveness, and self-management in age-sensitized settings.

According to Bollas (1992), the complex self reflectively objectifies parts of itself within its own mind and thereby allows a certain critical distance and control over interpersonal activity. Simple self-states are caught up in immediate experience, instinct, and feeling. As such, simple states are rather like Berger and Luckman’s (1966) descriptions of “commonsense reality” in which social conditions are accepted at face value and are obscured in so far as they are assumed: held in common as a basis for interaction. In a complex state, the self is observed as an object and engagement with “deep experiencing” can take place. Bollas elaborates that the experience of generational belonging, and particularly as new generations emerge, carries its members along in an unreflective collective process—a time for the simple self. However, in the course of generational progression, individuals become less immersed in this process and increasingly inclined to see the self and others more clearly. The emergence of a more sustained complex state may help to explain Williams and Nussbaum’s (2001) observation that in conflict negotiation, older people were more likely to deploy cooperative tactics and take multiple perspectives into account than were younger adults and that older people were also more practiced at presenting themselves to interviewers in socially acceptable ways.

If there are a number of options open to older people in negotiating the relationship between bodily aging, increased personal integration, and social prejudice, then the degree of agency that can be expressed through their deployment may depend upon the development of a complex state of mind. The adoption of an ageless self, a struggle with the mask of aging, or the protection of a mature internal world would depend upon social location and context. Part of this context concerns age dominance, evoking simple and complex states of mind in different protagonists, depending upon their need to take the perspective of the other into account or not. If not, they might ignore Nagel’s warnings on reticence and respect and engage in strategies of underaccommodation as identified by Coupland,
Giles, and associates. They would, in other words, see no need to step beyond their own age-dependent perspective, taking it to be universally valid. This is intergenerationally significant in settings where age status is highlighted, perceived to be imbalanced, or presents some form of threat to participants. In particular, it will impinge on the readiness to recognize distinctiveness or assume similarity with one’s own age group. The emergent tensions may help us see how we might do better research, provoke novel subjects for empirical study, and suggest methodologic innovation.

**Implications for Gerontologic Research: Questions, Practices, and Training**

**Research Questions**

Many of the issues that have been examined above are conceptual, rather than being empirically based, and may not have, as yet, been given due attention as testable phenomena. They nevertheless promise fascinating research questions and points at issue that are underdeveloped or suggest the re-examination of existing data. The contours of some such questions are briefly outlined below.

First, the contention that adults at different ages either see the world differently or are becoming increasingly similar requires testing. Currently, these debates appear to be taking place in parallel discourses, characterized most easily by a separation of cultural sociology and the study of psychosocial development in later life. Is there, then, something special about later life, and, if so, how can we tell? When might a process of personal integration or complexity begin, what triggers it, how can it be measured, and what are the degree and desirability of uniformity and distinctiveness in later life?

Empirical research might include the need to delineate not only the structural factors affecting continuity and discontinuity but also the processes that lead to the self-perception of uniform and distinctive experience. Conditions that promote the expression of identity, the uses of life style, aspects of the human condition that are “unbuckable” and simply cannot be changed, plus factors influencing our room to maneuver all require further investigation. A rigorous re-examination would be required of the degree of overlap between, for example, the experience of midlife, later life, and deep old age. More needs to be known about the social locations that facilitate greater personal integration and interpersonal sophistication and the degree to which race, gender, and class interact with age, affecting power relations between different groups. The effects of dominance and subjective and objective difference on intergenerational relationships and patterns of communication need more nuanced examination. Each of these questions raises important policy issues concerning the nature of decision making, the ability of one age group to plan for another, and the degree to which each age is trapped within its own age-specific logic.

Second, questions raised for empirical investigation by “the masking debate” include a comparison of the interior and external logics of adult aging and an examination of the performance of identity in different settings. The three positions of increasing agelessness, bodily preoccupation, and maturity require empirical comparison to evaluate which best characterizes the relationship between the inner and outer logic of adult aging. They may be salient at different times, having a reciprocal relationship with complex states of mind. The distinction between the younger self and mature integration may have different implications for patterns of uniformity or diversity in later life. When, for example, does Featherstone and Hepworth’s (1989) internalized “young self” cease to age, and what might this tell us about the contemporary value given to different ages? The degree to which a battle with one’s own body characterizes later-life identity would have implications for the impact of virtual identities, anti-aging pharmacology, and longevity research. Identity strategies may also be expected to vary with social locations such as gender, age, and class. Again, the policy implications of these positions vary markedly. The “mask of aging” would indicate a need to combat physical aging, for example, whereas questions of persona and masquerade would emphasize reducing age prejudice and promoting facilitative social environments.

Third, questions of authenticity, of whether there is a guiding principle that gives later life coherence and meaning, are raised, however unfashionable this is in current social scientific thinking. Authenticity might be approached through demystification and a critique of existing social, political, and cultural conditions—even when these are presented as cultures of choice and participation. It includes a process of achieving a more integrated sense of self, a more complex and less simple state of mind. It may approximate the questions older people would ask themselves about life’s purpose and the journey from knowledge about aging to understanding. If Nagel (1998) is correct in identifying the importance of reticence in protecting the interior world, then questions of authenticity also impinge upon an understanding of research ethics and the guiding principles of research practice. On the one hand, the good researcher might quest authenticity like an investigative journalist and, on the other, follow the techniques of the counselor sensitized to omissions that intimate the limits of legitimate inquiry. The legitimacy of challenging reticence, when placed in the specific intergenerational context of simple and complex states of mind and capacities for empathy, requires further ethical consideration.

In sum, the relationship between public and private experiences of aging provides considerable opportunity for otherwise “pure” gerontologic research to inform wider public debate on policy, decision making, intergenerational relations, and the role of older people in contemporary society.

**Research Practices**

To increase an understanding of the human condition, research calls for a specific form of engagement with the world, including the critical examination of everyday assumptions, the creation of data to make sets of circumstances intelligible, and, on occasion, the reflexive use of findings to illuminate research practice itself.

In the light of the work of Norton (1976) and Bollas (1992), it is instructive that Denzin and Lincoln have identified the use of self as key to researchers who “seek to examine the major public and private issues and personal troubles that define a particular historical moment.” In particular, “new-paradigm” qualitative researchers should “self-consciously draw upon their own experience as a resource in such inquiries” (2000, p. 367). However, with the possible exception of Gubrium and Holstein’s (2000) theoretical analysis of interpretive practice,
Gerontologic research thus brings together generic questions for critical methodology where age is not usually considered and specific dilemmas arising from the study of aging that reflect back on the processes of doing aging research. These crystallize around a danger of being seduced by simplified states of generational awareness and the value of reflexively applying findings on intergenerational communication to gerontologic research. Objectifying such a position is likely to be contingent on recognizing and accommodating for age-generated states of mind. As gerontologic research is for the most part an intergenerational endeavor, the interplay of life-course distinctiveness and uniformity and the management of age-based and layered identities will have implications for the way research is conducted and the possibility of using personal experience as a bridge to understanding. First, it is not at all clear how easy it is to understand different age positions from one’s own, especially if the researcher is a member of an age-dominant group. Second, the active strategizing that takes place in the performance of the older self may affect the likelihood that age-related issues are made open to disclosure. Viewed together, both points question the extent to which researchers can assume common ground between themselves and older respondents.

A preliminary sketch has been made below of three research phenomena that require more complex generational states of mind: the possibility of false-positive recognition, forgetting to look beyond the mask, and the possibilities for shared meanings between generations and same-age research.

On false-positive recognition.—The potential of false-positive recognition of age experience arises from assumptions of sameness, or uniformity, across different parts of the life course. Gerontologic research takes place against a backdrop of wider social assumptions, particularly exhortations to “age well” in specified and restricted ways. However, if it is the case that the priorities, interiors, and exteriors of later life differ markedly from those of other phases of the adult life course, and this happens in an environment where there is an imbalance of power in favor of those other phases, then the degree to which responses reflect dominant generational understandings and the production of official knowledge must always be a factor when considering gerontologic data. Under such circumstances, it is relatively easy to mistakenly recognize similarity and underplay age-specific difference.

Moody (2001) has observed that a core message conveyed by, for example, aging in contemporary social policy is to “make us like ’em,” an observation that would resonate with controversies arising from the Second World Assembly on Ageing (Baltes & Smith, 2000; Sidorenko & Walker, 2004) mentioned at the beginning of this article. The phrase has two meanings: to allow older people to be liked and valued by more powerful groups in society and also to ensure that older adults have the same attitudes, values, and aspirations as those groups, most notably adults younger than themselves. The price of the first meaning is made explicit by the second: In order to be accepted, older people must see later life as more of the same and not being subject to age-specific priorities.

The possibilities for misrecognition are considerable in such a situation. To be seen to be aging well, the appearance is given, for example, of active productivity, this being the dominant contemporary model for social inclusion as applied to later life (Daatland & Biggs, 2004; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, & Sheraden, 2001). This is what other adults expect, especially if their thought processes on aging are dominated by the common sense of youth and simple states of mind. Alternative visions of aging, based perhaps on gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 1996) or spirituality (Coleman & Mills, 2001), are less likely to be recognized, and Katz’s (2000) search for resistance to these dominant versions of age is cited only at the margins of inquiry. The practical consequences of misrecognition can be considerable. According to Baltes and Smith (2002), for example, the priorities of a third age of activity may be blocking awareness of the needs of a fourth age of vulnerability, the product of a set of priorities drawn from a different part of the life course. Tendencies to simple generational thinking may become institutionally embedded and exert a powerful influence over the thinking of helping professionals and even older people themselves.

It has been argued persuasively by Briggs (2003) that power imbalances suffuse the scope and nature of research questions and determine the legitimacy of the knowledge produced. Indeed, the interview may have become something of a standard medium through which individuals perform a public version of the self (Silverman, 1993). As Nagel (1998) has pointed out, intimacy must be rationed if public exposure causes the inner life to wither or would require too much distortion. In areas subject to cultural instability, as is arguably the case for contemporary aging, the public–private boundary needs to be managed by those party to exchanges across it. One should expect, then, that age identity will be managed as much in research situations as in any other. Older adults may fear the implications if responses have negative consequences for relationships on which they depend, such as in institutional care (Townsend, 1981), or may be attempting to conform to public notions of success in aging (Powell & Biggs, 2003), for example. Questions may be answered in the way respondents think the researcher wants them to (Gubrium & Wallace, 1991) to maintain self-respect against the backdrop of a failing body (Grenier, 2003) or as a result of the wish to spare the feelings of a younger researcher’s naïveté about the experience of aging (Manheimer, 1999). In each case, the identity presented to the researcher may only partially reflect the experience of aging or the perspective of the older adult.

Under these conditions, younger researchers should be sensitized to the dangers, warned by Norton (1976) and Bollas (1992), of assuming continuity of purpose across the adult life course, which may simply be a reflected image of their own age-specific priorities. If we do not actively challenge our own generational states of mind, older informants may not only be misrepresented if their public accounts are taken too literally; we are in danger of being seduced into seeing what we expect to and are not provoked into stepping beyond that assumptive reality.
On forgetting to look beyond the mask.—Forgetting to look beyond the mask would imply an underestimation of the degree to which age identities are managed and thereby consist of layers, some of which are more visible than others.

If intergenerational interaction exacerbates differences between interior and exterior logic and their disclosure, it is no longer possible simply to ask a question and get a single definitive answer. Neither can one rely on the adage that interviews are simply “conversations with a purpose” or at least with purposes that are exclusively defined by the researcher (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). Imbalances in generational power may mean that younger researchers cannot assume their questions will be perceived as neutral and that they are protected by a research persona, placing the intergenerational nature of the encounter in brackets. Older people talking with or about older people may generate different data from young people talking with or about older people and vice versa.

Quantitative and qualitative approaches can be liable, from this perspective, to a forgetfulness of layered responding, a sort of amnesia toward this type of distinction. An example of quantitative amnesia can be seen in an acceptance of the often superficial nature of questionnaire survey responses. The possibility of presenting an idealized version of the aging self is considerably enhanced by such a method, although the nature of the idealization might be in terms of what the respondent thinks the questions are about. When dealing with the power of social discourse, it is unfortunately not enough to rely upon the strategy that if enough people reply, the answer must be right, as a more refined access may simply be gained to an idealized and rhetorical truth. Qualitative amnesia might congregate around an overre draft for the presenting surface of what the respondent says. “Allowing the data to speak” in the manner suggested by Glaser (1992) runs the risk of simultaneously avoiding a researcher’s own critical responsibility. Similarly, it is not at all clear how tacit assumptions about age, which can inhabit the gap between the generation of data and the emergence of concepts, might be identified (see, e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1990). If the different “realities” of different age groups are not seen as problematic, then simple generational states of mind are not challenged and communications imbued with intergenerational power are taken at face value. Further checking back on whether the response reflects what the respondent intended to say would simply allow an ironing out of the script or appearance and a more perfect adjustment of the persona. From a “layered” perspective, however, because someone did not mean to say something is not a reason to discount it as it may provide an important insight into the relationship between interior and exterior worlds.

Both of these examples could be criticized for setting up something of a straw researcher to make a point. However, they do provide basic illustrations of an aspect of the research relationship that is both subtle and easily overlooked: an amnesia toward the presented self. A critical interrogation of depth and surface responding would need to ask which layer a particular method gains access to and, by making discontinuities visible, step beyond appearances. The continued development of mixed method research would be key here, including the integration of narrative and quantitative evidence (Rowles & Schoenberg, 2002), but extended to examine how particular approaches interact with the layering of age identity implied by the management of interior and exterior experience. A certain circling around an issue, methodologically speaking, would be required, elaborating approaches that can address different layers of inner and outer experience. Respondents might be asked, for example, to reflect on what they meant by certain responses or, to paraphrase Frankel (1969), be asked how they would behave if presented with the same situation for a second time. Leads into different layers of responding could usefully be taken by revisiting the preliminary work of Laing, Phillipson, and Lee (1966) on spirals of interpersonal perception and Lawrence’s (1979) approach to social dreaming in organizational cultures.

On same-age research and the creation of “shared meanings”.—Questions of how to engage with authentic experiences of aging, placed in the context of intergenerational inequity, can be seen in a turn toward elder participation in research processes and the view that the creation of meaning is shared in research settings. Both address the problem of finding common ground between generations.

Including older people as active participants in the collection of information is becoming increasingly popular as a means of incorporating aspects of participative inquiry (Reason, 1994) into mainstream research. In the United Kingdom, for example, there is now considerable impetus toward elder and other targeted groups’ participation in policy and service development (Better Government for Older People, 2000; National Health Service, 2003). Similar initiatives are being attempted in research (Peace, 2002), driven by a history of resistance to professional hegemony (Beresford, 2003), an attempt to develop participative research processes (Bernard, Bartlam, Biggs, & Simm, 2004), a need to train older people in research methods (Davies & James, 2003) and employ them as researchers (Clough, Leamy, & Vince, 2001). It is argued that the use of older researchers to research older people may go some way to reduce biases associated with the unequal distribution of power between researchers sponsored by state organizations and those who use their services. By implication, older people are believed to have direct insight into the effects of services and that this supplies evidence to policy makers unmediated by professional interests. The power exerted by sponsors to shape the original questions is, however, rarely addressed, a departure from participative action’s original radical intent (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Reason, 1994). One attempt to engage older participants in the conception and execution of research can be found in an initiative by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, where in addition to stating the importance of involvement in assuring the durability of findings, it is reported: “You cannot tell at 40 what life is going to be like at 60. And you can’t tell at 60 what life is going to be like at 80” (Older People’s Steering Group, 2004, p. 29).

The observation encapsulates a position tacit within this literature of suspicion toward cross-generational research and that the search for common ground is certainly difficult and probably illusory. It raises the question of whether research should be undertaken only by persons of the age group studied. Perhaps, then, all researchers should start from where they are at in life-course terms, with midlife researchers researching midlife issues and researchers in their twenties confining themselves to the study of younger adults’ attitudes. Such initiatives raise
a new set of issues, including the degree to which same-age respondents and researchers would be willing to share their conclusions with other age groups and the danger of collusive avoidance of issues based on age that are mutually disconcerting. There are also taboo topics for this form of participation, including questioning whether older adults really do have privileged awareness of the contradictions and competing definitions of late-life experience, by virtue of being old themselves. Both Woodward (1991) and Pratt and Norris (1994) point out, for example, that older people are liable to misrepresent themselves to themselves and to disparage other elders, and Beaumont and Kenealy (2004) refer to “downward” contrasts in this context. An uncritical acceptance of the views of older people simply because they are old may indicate an abdication of responsibility by the researcher or policy maker, indicating disrespect for those views, if they are not subjected to the same interrogation that would be reserved for any other data-gathering exercise. In other words, the deployment of complex states of thinking at the boundary between age groups requires further critical analysis of the dynamics of peer as well as age difference in research settings. And although embracing same-age research holds considerable democratic potential, it may not fully solve the problems of authenticity.

Policy and service evaluation differ from more nuanced research into self-perception and intergenerational relations, where the focus of inquiry moves from statements of need to the processes of communication. Gubrium and Holstein (2003) remind us that similar social processes to those affecting the perception of age difference are making the relationship between researcher and researched more flexible. This role flexibility places more weight on the interpretation of research phenomena and the degree to which meaning is created between nominated respondents and researchers (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 2001). As such, it offers a reinterpretation of the question of generational uniformity and difference through the medium of shared meanings. As intergenerational meaning would be thought of as generated between social actors, rather than existing within any one person’s head, the approach appears to solve the difficulty of achieving intergenerational understanding and also dissolves the problem of authenticity.

Whereas an increased flexibility of research roles addresses the problem of meaning generation, it is, however, less persuasive in identifying the sources of the meaning emerging. There is little to ensure that particular instances of shared meaning making are distinguishable from wider assumptive realities of age dominance. Further, to the extent that shared meaning involves being immersed in direct experience, it contains the danger of simple states of mind, exacerbating the possibility of false-positive recognition.

It follows that research participants should actually resist any tendency to merge perspectives because explanations based on shared meaning do not solve the problems of difference in perspective where dominance is at issue. Attention needs to be given to the perspectives that participants bring to the research situation as well as the ones they generate in that context. Recognizing the value of difference in standpoint is a valuable antidote to such problems, so long as it does not exclude complex states of intergenerational collaboration.

An alliance between older and younger participants in research practice might require recognition of the particular expertise that different age-based perspectives bring to the issues at hand. The younger researcher may be able to see exterior relationships and offer interpretations unattainable, at least at first, through direct experience of later life. The older research partner has privileged access to interiorities, unavailable to an external observer. If there is an answer to the problem of understanding age difference, it is perhaps through maintaining a distinction between research partnership and simple self or shared statements, so that the value of sharing meaning lies in understanding the shared rules of engagement but not extending to uniformity of perspective.

Research Training

What hope, then, of success in gaining research access to the experiences of later life and increasing understanding between younger and older participants in gerontologic research? The common coin of such encounters is likelihood: the degree to which research is perceived as a safe place for disclosure and that concerns about self-protection and face saving can give way to the search for understanding. Previous experience of being interviewed, other institutional encounters, and specifically intergenerational expectations will influence how far others should be allowed a glimpse beyond the masquerade. Recognizing these factors would be key to the formation of facilitated environments for gerontologic research. If some contexts facilitate direct self-expression and others not, the characteristics of those situations require further examination. This work of intelligibility requires movement from a reliance on fixed knowledge and design toward techniques of personal and social understanding. We need, then, techniques by which to know ourselves and the contexts in which we work, in addition to the correct application of research methodology, if we are to challenge biases nascent in intergenerational settings in their wider form and also within the context of the production of gerontologic knowledge. This would include the explicit exploration of the states of mind induced by gerontologic issues, the critical implications of debates on life-course uniformity or distinctiveness, and the management of aging identities and how to engage with their effects on research processes and practices.

One implication for research training would be to evoke complex states of mind, which allow interrogation of our own motivations for engaging in gerontologic research as well as applying them through interpretation of gerontologic data. It might even be perceived as an act of hubris to assume we are immune from simple generational thinking solely because we adopt the label “gerontologist.” Research training in self-scrutiny would be extended to a critical understanding of the interactions between age perspectives and visions of old age. There are a series of emotionally charged associations that will influence the collection and interpretation of intergenerationally generated data including both fears of personal aging and issues arising from the researchers’ relationship with their own parents and grandparents (Knight, 1996). Rather than seeing these phenomena as noise to be screened out, they should be used as rich sources of data in themselves. We need to get better, perhaps, at recognizing what we desire, wish to avoid, fix, and change with respect to personal, social, and interpersonal aspects of later life and intergenerational exchange. This would
not only imply ageism awareness but, as Norton (1976) put it, “participatory enactment” to recognize the other as a potential alternative identity within ourselves, thus making the other imaginatively available, however “fallible and groping” this process might be. Putting oneself into the shoes of an older other will always run the danger of accessing what, for example, a 25- or 45-year-old thinks later life might be like. However, identifying multiple sources of empathic understanding such as similar life events and attending to biography, oral history, and testimonia may be used to enhance a will to understand. The problems of false-positive recognition, amnesia of depth, indicative of a seduction by simple states of mind, plus their undertow, the avoidance of personal anxieties associated with age, point to a need for enhanced self-reflection of this type.

A second implication is that the distinctiveness of particular age positions should not be ignored or eliminated but be explicitly used to deepen gerontologic understanding. Todres (2004) argues that the need to understand arises from encountering unfamiliarity and that an awareness of self is contingent upon an awareness of a distinctive otherness. Thus, the search for empathic understanding should co-exist with a respect for the specific perspectives that different age positions bring. One needs to know the ground on which one stands, gerontologically speaking, in order to approach the gerontologic other. It is also important, here, to recognize that movement toward understanding can bear more fruitful results than proximity alone (Lewis, 1960). It could be argued, for example, that the preoccupations of midlife are more like those of old age than those of younger adults. However, closeness can inhibit willingness to empathize if issues are being avoided or ignored because they are too close to home and therefore result in underaccommodation. That Lewis was talking about the relative proximity of humans and angels to God, the former traveling toward salvation, the latter fixed in their celestial spheres, should not deter us. The point is that the will to approach the other is as important as closeness in age, given openness to complexity, difference, and empathic understanding.

Third, it follows that research would need to be undertaken in a spirit of partnership such that both parties interrogate aging from their particular perspective and the reciprocal skills and aptitudes of each party are made recognizable. Growing interest in the role of older people in social research requires a detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of different age groups as researchers, with no party playing servant to the other. Implications for training would include refining skills in boundary management, skill transfer, and critical awareness of a variation of communication styles with age, which would be of importance for each party. If the presentation of self in later life is managed in a particular way and both younger and older people have different degrees of self-awareness and willingness to disclose their thoughts and feelings in age-sensitized contexts, then it is not unreasonable to include the negotiation of these issues in future training.

Fourth, a critical examination of power relations requires a genealogy of research culture, in other words, an interrogation of research process in terms of the age and identity of the sponsor, researcher, respondent, interpreter, audience, and context of initiatives and findings. Intergenerational dominance and its association with simple states of mind raise an additional series of questions about the processes of decision making, assumptive realities associated with age position, and the age perspective from which are decisions made. If health and welfare professionals and policy makers sponsor research, and they are as often as not in middle adulthood, their view of what old age is may be driven by fears or by unrealistic expectations based on what they think they want in old age. This may or may not bear any relation to the existential priorities of later life. Researchers would need to adopt an attitude of critical reflexivity toward the social construction of old age and how it might influence research processes, as even omissions are expressive acts. Research training should equip gerontologic researchers with the tools to critically trace the processes that generate certain research questions and not others.

In sum, the destabilization of twentieth-century edifices defining identity in later life has led to debate over the degree of uniformity and distinctiveness within the adult life course. The erosion of firm guidelines for age-appropriate behavior and the uncertainties of contemporary aging have also led to identities in later life that are in need of self-conscious management. If the life course is becoming more complex, we as researchers are also becoming more aware of complexity in terms of power, patterns of communication, and self-awareness within the spaces of gerontologic inquiry. It has been argued that the ease with which one can put oneself into another’s age experience and the possibility of being immersed in generational assumptions are specifically at issue, with both holding implications for research within and beyond the study of aging. The difficulties inherent in generating complex states of mind not only point to sources of research bias with a specifically intergenerational quality, they also propel us forward in our understanding of gerontologic phenomena. To the extent that this is the case, new questions and a re-examination of existing data would be called for, revisiting practice and training, especially when research takes place in contexts where power is unequally distributed by age.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Chris Phillipson, Jason Powell, Ariela Lowenstein, Stephen Katz, Amanda Grenier, Irja Haapala, and Guy Biggs for their support and the editor and anonymous reviewers of the Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences for their helpful criticisms on earlier drafts of this article.

Address correspondence to Simon Biggs, Institute of Gerontology, King’s College, London, Franklin-Wilkins Bldg., Waterloo Road, London, SE1 9NH, UK. E-mail: simon.biggs@kcl.ac.uk

REFERENCES


Grenier, A. (2003). Diverse older women: Narratives negotiating frailty. Doctoral dissertation, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.


