Unequal Ageing

Briefing 5: Identity
Introduction

The steady rise in the numbers of older people in the United Kingdom has now become part of the public consciousness, but the exact extent of the recent demographic changes may still come as a surprise to many.

There are nearly 12 million pensioners, almost 1 in 5 of the UK’s total population. For the first time, the UK has more pensioners than children under 16. There are 20.7 million people aged 50 and over, making up more than a third of the total UK population. Nearly 1.3 million people are aged 85 or over.

Nor is the predicted rise in the future older population fully recognised. The number of people aged 65 years and over is expected to increase by over 60 per cent in the next 25 years to almost 15.8 million in 2031, meaning that the percentage of the total population that is over 65 is projected to rise from 16 per cent to over 22 per cent in 2031 and nearly 26 per cent in 2071. The number of people over 85 in the UK is expected to double in the next 25 years and to treble in the next 35. It has been estimated that one in five children born today can expect to live to 100.

Older people as a group

In the light of these fundamental demographic changes, is it meaningful to talk about older people as a group at all?

In its recent study for Help the Aged on the ‘voice’ of older people, the International Longevity Centre (ILC) said:

‘Every individual experiences old age differently. The process of ageing is itself complex and multifaceted with wide variations in its effect on older people.’

With social and economic differences within the older population currently so wide, can we still make generalised statements about the identity of older people?

The older population is certainly diverse, in age as well as other respects: ‘older people’ as commonly defined range from those in their 60s to those over 100. Many kinds of diversity – and inequality – have been considered in the other Unequal Ageing briefings: older people have different levels of health and income, and they experience ageing differently through the places they live in and the opportunities they have. And there are other differences to consider that shape people’s identity in older age.

The older population is diverse, for instance, in its ethnic composition and identity. In 2001, the size of the black and minority ethnic (BME) population of the UK was 4.6 million, or 7.9 per cent of the population as a whole. At the time of the last Census, only 5.1 per cent of the BME population of Great Britain were aged 65+, as opposed to 17 per cent of the population who described themselves as White British. Numbers and proportions of BME people of pensionable age are expected to have grown since 2001 and to continue growing significantly in the near future.

Sexuality is another factor that affects people’s experience, but very little good research evidence exists on the numbers or experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) older people. A recent Canadian study found that concealment of relationships amongst GLB older people is common, while a qualitative study for Help the Aged reported that older gay and lesbian people felt their sexuality was invisible to the world in general. However, with changing attitudes in society as a whole, this may change.

Are there, on the other hand, characteristics and circumstances relating to the older population which such a large and diverse group have in common? Having pointed out the physical, mental and psychological aspects of ageing, the ILC report goes on to say:

‘Despite wide variations, these different components of ageing are experienced in some form by the majority of older people, and ultimately have an effect across their lives, including their voice as citizens.’

However, a feeling of common cause and common experience is only possible if individuals see themselves as a part of a group. There is little evidence in the ILC report or elsewhere that the
perception of the older population as an entity is shared by older people themselves. As can be seen from a recent Age Concern report (see figure 1), there is no clear public conception of where old age starts.

**Figure 1  Perceptions of when old age starts and youth ends, by age band**

When do people think old age starts and youth ends?

In fact, the Age Concern report prefaces these findings with the familiar quote: ‘To me old age is always 15 years older than I am.”

**What do older people think of themselves?**

A great deal has been written, particularly in the United States, about ‘baby boomers’ and perceived and expected changes in attitudes within this group. The birth rates in the USA rose sharply in the immediate post-war years and continued at a raised level until the mid-1960s, creating a ‘bulge’ of people currently starting to reach the age of 60. England and Wales followed a similar rise in birth rates, although there are two identifiable ‘peaks’: a sharp rise at the end of the Second World War and a more sustained increase in the 1960s (see figure 2).

Whether as a result of the increased birth rate or because of improved health care and consequent life expectancy (or a combination of the two), there is a significant rise in the number of people approaching older age in the UK (see figure 3 below, which shows the male and female population in each age group).

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**Figure 2  Live births 1938–2004, England and Wales**

**Figure 3  Population pyramid for UK, 2008**

But does this demographic change lead necessarily to changes in the attitudes of this group to themselves and the rest of society? Are the changes and the attendant challenges to society, brought
about by the next generation’s entering into old age (as outlined by Huber and Skidmore for Demos) more attitudinal than demographic in nature?  

‘At every stage of their lives, the baby boomers have been at the forefront of radical social, economic and political change: within the family, within the education system, within the labour market, and beyond. The way that members of this age group, the most influential generation in recent social history, choose to adapt to their changing circumstances will have a similarly dramatic impact in their later life.’

Or will the effects of changing attitudes in mid-life within these cohorts be outweighed by other effects, such as increasing conservatism or even fatalism, that have been observable in previous ageing generations?

There is certainly evidence that changes in employment and training, financial resources, housing, health and care will be brought about by this demographic shift, but attitudinal changes are harder to pin down. Evidence from an AARP study certainly charts a shift in attitudes within the baby boomer generation between 1970 and 2002 in the USA, but, despite general assumptions, there is less evidence that this group’s attitudes in older age are very different from those of previous older cohorts, either in the USA or the UK.

What evidence there is tends to be based on research on the likely consumer needs of the baby boomer generation, which point to a trend towards more demanding older customers, with higher expectations than those of their counterparts in previous generations.

A recent publication on American baby boomers and their parents contrasts attitudes between the two older generations and highlights the fears of the US baby boomer generation about growing older and in particular about looking old.

What does society think of older people?

Portrayal of older people in the media

What evidence exists about the way in which older people are represented in the media suggests a generally negative portrayal. A 2004 survey conducted by TNS for Age Concern reveals a perception among a majority of adults (58 per cent of those aged 16 and over) in Great Britain that newspapers and television portray older people in a predominantly negative way.

Overtly ageist sentiments in the media are harder to find and document. In 2001, as part of a wider advertising campaign, the bookmakers Paddy Power published a poster which showed two older women crossing a road on a zebra crossing; one woman was hunched over a walking frame, the other was pushing a shopping trolley. A truck with bull-bars, apparently being driven down the middle of the road towards the crossing, was in the background. One of two red circles, which stated ‘2/1’ and ‘EVENS’, was superimposed next to each of the women and a caption stated ‘Let’s make things more interesting’. The complainants, including Age Concern, who believed that the betting odds referred to each woman’s chances of either being knocked down by the truck or reaching the other side of the road safely, objected that the poster was ‘ageist and offensive’ because it demeaned older people, an opinion upheld by the court in banning the advertisement.

A 2007 study conducted by the Open University for Help the Aged looked at perceptions of age discrimination among the older population and found that 53 per cent agreed with the statement that businesses and retailers had little interest in older people’s consumer needs; 45 per cent agreed that films and advertisements portray older people as figures of fun.

The Age Concern study of the portrayal of older people in the media appears to bear this out, with
half of adults agreeing that marketing people take no notice of older people in advertisements and other literature.

**Figure 5  Perceptions of how marketing people regard older people**[^33]

Agree with the statement ‘Marketing people (adverts, sales and literature) take no notice of older people’

![Perception Chart]

An earlier Help the Aged report[^26] brought forward evidence of the ‘invisibility’ of older people in the media. A survey of older people (aged 60+) in 2002 found that 75 per cent thought the views of their age group were ignored by the media, while 71 per cent of people aged 55 and over felt that advertising images did not reflect their lives.

Another 2002 UK study[^37] produced qualitative evidence both of older people’s perceptions that their age group was significantly under-represented on television, and also that what portrayals there were of older people were ‘marginal’ or stereotypical. The UK research followed the lead and confirmed the main findings of earlier American studies on the portrayal of older people in advertising[^38], media stereotyping[^39] and the relative ‘invisibility’ of older people in consumer advertising on television[^40] and in the print media[^41].

**Perceptions of older people in society**

**General attitudes**

The Open University/Help the Aged Research on Age Discrimination (RoAD) project found in its final report[^42] substantial evidence that people perceived negative attitudes in the general population to older members of society. Among other findings, the RoAD survey found that, of its 1,070 respondents aged 16+ in Great Britain:

- 70 per cent agreed that older people who try to look or dress young are seen as a joke
- 40 per cent believed that health professionals see older people as a nuisance
- 58 per cent agreed that once you reach very old age, families assume you cannot make decisions for yourself
- 68 per cent agreed that once you reach very old age, people tend to treat you as a child
- 47 per cent agreed that society discourages older people from expressing themselves sexually, and
- 76 per cent think that care home residents tend to be forgotten by society.

The RoAD research also gives examples through its qualitative research of older people who have felt themselves excluded from mainstream activities in society, who felt that younger people discriminated against their elders in a variety of situations and who cited examples of derogatory attitudes and language such as ‘mutton dressed as lamb’.

Age Concern’s report *How Ageist is Britain?* charted stereotypical attitudes in society towards older people and contrasted this with attitudes towards younger people (see figure 6), showing that people over 70 are viewed by many in stereotypical ways, but that they are not alone in this.

**Figure 6  Perceptions of older people/younger people**[^33]

Perceived stereotypes of older and younger people

*Data Table:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>People over 70</th>
<th>People under 30</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With pity</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>27%</td>
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<tr>
<td>As moral</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>66%</td>
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<td>As friendly</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>48%</td>
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<td>With disgust</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<td>With admiration</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>31%</td>
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<tr>
<td>As capable</td>
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<td>41%</td>
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<tr>
<td>With envy</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>As intelligent</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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[^42]: Age Concern’s report *How Ageist is Britain?* charted stereotypical attitudes in society towards older people and contrasted this with attitudes towards younger people.
How does society treat older people?

Most research has concentrated on the negative attitudes of society towards older people. Evidence is available to back up the thesis that age discrimination exists in the United Kingdom, not only in the eyes of older people themselves (for instance, the Help the Aged report Too Old found that 73 per cent of the older people surveyed agreed that older people face discrimination on grounds of age in their everyday lives), but also in specific, measurable form in a variety of settings and situations.

The extent to which differences in treatment or provision are discriminatory or simply reflect circumstances, about whether differing treatment is fair or unfair, or how serious the lack of a specific entitlement or facility may be, is open to debate. But the cumulative effect of examples such as those below is that few would now argue with the premise that older people are subject to a degree of discrimination because of their age, particularly those facing multiple disadvantage and those forced by lack of material resources to rely on basic state services.

Age discrimination in health and social care

After many complaints by NHS patients and interested organisations, the 2009 Health Bill made provision for the NHS Constitution to be amended to ensure all patients have the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of age. In addition to complaints about treatment of individuals, examples of institutional discrimination have been cited. For instance:

- NHS and social care funding can be regarded as unfair towards older people: unit costs for older people’s services are significantly below those for equivalent services for children and younger adults.
- Hospital waiting times are particularly high for services such as joint replacements where people over 65 are significant users.
- The NHS provides free breast screening for all women in the UK aged 50+, but do not automatically invite women 70 and above, despite risk of breast cancer increasing with age.
- In breast cancer older women (aged 70+) are less likely to be diagnosed via needle biopsy and triple assessment, undergo surgery or receive radiotherapy than younger women, and this differential treatment is related to their age rather than differences in the biology of their tumour.
- The average size of a care home for older people in England is 34 places, compared with nine places for younger adults.
- One opinion poll survey found that 76 per cent of adults in Great Britain think that people in care homes tend to be forgotten by society.
- Patients over 65 are under-represented in clinical trials relating to diabetes, cancer and cardiovascular disease, and a 2004 review of papers published in four major medical journals found that almost 15 per cent of papers excluded older people without justification.

Age discrimination in welfare benefits

Those aged 65 years+ who become disabled are not eligible to receive Disability Living Allowance. They qualify instead for Attendance Allowance, which takes longer to qualify for, is less generous and does not include any help with mobility costs.

Unequal treatment in goods, facilities and services

Research carried out for Help the Aged in April 2006, which looked at 288 single-trip and 375 annual multi-trip travel insurance policies, found that about 95 per cent of annual travel policies impose upper age limits. The Association of British Insurers (ABI) found that 63 per cent of travel insurance companies have an upper age limit on single-trip policies. The ABI also found that only 12 per cent of motor insurance companies will cover new customers without age limits, but 78 per cent of the motor insurance market will cover existing customers without upper age limits.

In a research study for Help the Aged and Age Concern, 29 per cent of people aged 75+ failed...
to obtain a quotation for motor insurance, travel insurance or car hire, as opposed to 3 per cent of those aged 30–49.\textsuperscript{57} In the same study, 20 per cent of people aged 75+ had applications for travel insurance declined, as opposed to 4 per cent of those aged 30–49. Of those aged 75+, 10 per cent were declined because of their age, 8 per cent for health-related reasons and 2 per cent for other reasons.\textsuperscript{58} In the same study, 10 per cent of people aged 75+ were refused motor insurance, as opposed to 3 per cent of people aged 30–49. All of those aged 75+ who were refused cover were turned down because of their age.\textsuperscript{59} Twelve per cent of people aged 65+ found quotation enquiries difficult, as opposed to 3 per cent of people aged 30–49. It also found that older people are less likely to shop around for motor insurance and travel insurance.\textsuperscript{60} Thirty-one per cent of people aged 80+ felt ‘discriminated against’ when obtaining quotations, as opposed to 2 per cent of people aged 30–49 – and 13 per cent of people aged 75–79.\textsuperscript{61}

Unequal treatment in employment

Research conducted among 200 human resources directors and managers revealed that two-thirds believe people should retire at 65; half believe that the major drawback to employing people over this age would be increased sickness; 16 per cent think an older workforce would be slower; and 12 per cent believe it would be more expensive.\textsuperscript{62} Once out of work, older people remain unemployed longer than their younger counterparts: 37 per cent of those aged 50+ remain unemployed for more than 12 months, as against 27 per cent of those aged 25–49.\textsuperscript{63} The gap between the employment rate in Great Britain for people aged 50+ and the overall employment rate is 2.7 per cent. It has reduced by 0.8 percentage points since 2006 (from 3.5 per cent) and 1.2 points since 2005.\textsuperscript{64} The National Audit Office estimated in 2004 that, of the 2.7 million people between 50 and state pension age who are not working, between 700,000 and one million would like to work.\textsuperscript{65} In a 2006 Age Concern survey 58 per cent of people in their 50s and 60s who were still working said they wanted to carry on until after 65, while 10 per cent did not want to retire at all.\textsuperscript{66}

A survey that asked over 50 private and public organisations with a combined staff of almost 80,000 about the impact of the Age Regulations found that more than 40 per cent of employers had had requests from employees to work past retirement age.\textsuperscript{67} In a survey on mandatory retirement ages, conducted between November 2004 and May 2005, of over 2,000 establishments with five or more employees, 23 per cent of establishments had a fixed retirement age. For 20 per cent of these, the age was 60, and for 77 per cent the age was 65. Seventy per cent could not give a reason for having a fixed retirement age, and an additional 14 per cent merely said that they had always done so.\textsuperscript{68} There is also evidence of an earnings gap for older workers. In the UK in 2007 full-time workers aged 50–59 earned on average (median) 6.6 per cent less per hour than full-time workers aged 40–49, while those aged 60+ earned an average of 22.3 per cent less. However, workers aged 50–59 earn more than workers aged 22–29.\textsuperscript{69}

Another area in which there is evidence of inequality is that of workplace training. All available evidence suggests that older employees are less likely to receive such training than younger employees. In the third quarter of 2008, 16.6 per cent of employees in the UK aged between 50 and retirement age had received job-related training in the last four weeks, as opposed to 25.4 per cent aged 25–34 and 38.2 per cent aged 35–49.\textsuperscript{70}

Unanswered questions

Despite a considerable body of evidence on certain aspects of older people’s identity, research has little to say definitively on some of the key questions.

- How can the culture of society and the attitudes of everyone (especially those of older people themselves) be brought in line with the current realities of fundamental demographic change?
- How can younger people be convinced that they will themselves grow old and benefit from better treatment of older people in general?
- How can the skills and experience of older people be more effectively exploited for the
benefit of society as a whole and older people themselves?

- Are the eleven challenges outlined by Demos a useful guide to the future and, if so, how can they best be addressed?
- How can people prepare for post-retirement life so that they have a more active and valued role in society?
- How can the hearts and minds of people in the UK (including older people) be changed so that ageism becomes as socially unacceptable as racism? Should a shift in attitudes take place before legislation or should the law lead social change?
- Do older people need a common identity? If so, how can this be fostered and how can ‘grey power’ and the ‘grey vote’ be mobilised to change public policy in their favour?
- Should the image of older people be improved by marketing techniques? If so, by whom and how?
- Are there any lessons we can learn from cultures, both within the UK and in the rest of the world, which honour or revere old age?

Only if these questions are answered can the identity of older people be established and a new one defined that is more fitting for today’s rapidly changing society.

References

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Fighting for disadvantaged older people in the UK and overseas, **WE WILL:**

**COMBAT POVERTY** wherever older people’s lives are blighted by lack of money, and cut the number of preventable deaths from hunger, cold and disease

**REDUCE ISOLATION** so that older people no longer feel confined to their own home, forgotten or cut off from society

**CHALLENGE NEGLECT** to ensure that older people do not suffer inadequate health and social care, or the threat of abuse

**DEFEAT AGEISM** to ensure that older people are not ignored or denied the dignity and equality that are theirs by right

**PREVENT FUTURE DEPRIVATION** by improving prospects for employment, health and well-being so that dependence in later life is reduced