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Another form of bigotry: Ageism gets on to the agenda

From Bytheway, Bill (1995)


The previous chapter has provided ample evidence that there has always been an interest in later life and a willingness to discuss the negatives of old age and the old. Is this ageism? Before this question can be addressed, we need to study in a little more detail the concept of ageism and, again, to look at history.

Butler's initiative

Much of the research into residential care for older people in the 1960s and early 1970s was intended to expose what went on behind closed doors. Townsend (1962), Robb (1967) and Meacher (1972) are particularly well-known British examples. Although these studies do not use the word ageism, they represent real outrages liberal sensibilities that fuelled, amongst other things, the development of the feminist and anti-racist movements of the 1960s and the early 1970s.

During the same period, gerontologists were heavily involved in debating the issues raised by disengagement theory. This postulated an inevitable mutual disengagement between the ageing person and society:

His withdrawal may be accompanied from the outset by an increased preoccupation with himself: certain institutions may make the withdrawal easy for him.

(Cumming and Henry 1961: 14)

There was an immediate response from many sociologists and gerontologists protesting that older people remain engaged and active in society (Fennell et al. 1988: 46-8). This concern to demonstrate the positive side of later life and, in particular, the continuing social activities of older people, continued to dominate much gerontological writing during the 1970s.

Two other sociological issues of that time were the aged as a minority group (Barron 1953; Streib 1965) and the ageing subculture (Rose 1965). Both concepts were modelled on other debates associated with ethnic minorities and adolescence; again it is possible to see connections between these much more extensive literatures and the development of critical studies of ageing.

It was not surprising therefore that the word 'ageism' itself was introduced to represent prejudice against older people. This happened in the late 1960s as a result of the efforts of the psychiatrist Robert Butler. Many sceptics refer to the term as having been coined by Butler, seeming to imply it is a less than convincing concept. The critical point to appreciate is that, although Butler succeeded in putting the word on the agenda, all sorts of writers came to the subject from many different disciplines and activities, and many have
The origins of ageism

subsequently made good use of Butler’s initiative. As Gruman comments, through Butler ageism was ‘given a history’ (1978: 362).

At that time, in 1969, Butler was involved in a controversy over the proposed use of a high-rise block as public housing for the elderly located in a fashionable part of Maryland. This was covered by an article in the Washington Post — purportedly the first time the word ‘ageism’ appeared in the mass media. In the angry debates over the use of the residential block, Butler had seen the same generational conflict that had characterized the student-police battles in Chicago a year earlier. The arguments in Maryland centred upon the swimmimg pool, air-conditioning and parking facilities that were attached to the building. The middle-aged local residents felt they were appropriate for their boom-time home comfort, but not for the elderly, a pre-war generation that had no use or need for them. They saw the prospective old incomers as an unsettling force that threatened the peaceful harmony of their local community.

So the concept of ageism did not emerge out of academic gerontology — it originated in community action against the NIMBY tendency that still taxes us in the 1990s. It is also significant that it was a housing issue that was involved and, of course, housing policies have often reflected prejudice against other groups: the poor, women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and the young (Macdonald and Rich 1983: 76).

Butler and Lewis (1973) defined ageism as follows:

> Ageism can be seen as a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin colour and gender. Old people are categorized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old-fashioned in morality and skills . . . 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.

This definition has appeared in many publications; recently, for example, in Butler’s contribution to The Encyclopedia of Aging (Palmore 1987: 22–3). For this reason it deserves close attention and I return to it at the beginning of Chapter 9.

The response

The impact of Butler’s paper was such that anti-ageism quickly became ‘an enlightened prejudice’ in influential circles in the US (Cole 1992: 228). Butler went on to publish a book in 1975 which elaborated his argument: Why Survive? Being Old in America. The word ‘ageism’ was included in The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language for the first time in the 1979 edition. It is significant that for ten years or so there was little response from the gerontological community — what Estes has referred to as ‘the aging enterprise’ (Estes 1979). There was some critical discussion of stereotypes (Seltzer and Atchley 1971; Tibbits 1979) but little appeared in print that developed Butler’s argument. A number of restatements of ageism were published; for example, Hendricks and Hendricks (1977) and Comfort (1977). The latter, a biologist with an international reputation based on extensive research on ageing, published a polemical book, A Good Age, that was directed at the coffee table market. It lauded some notable older people, and was the subject of a two-part feature in the Sunday Times Magazine. The first item in its encyclopaedic section reads:

> Ageism is the notion that people cease to be people, cease to be the same people or become people of a distinct and inferior kind, by virtue of having lived a specified number of years. The eighteenth-century French naturalist Georges Buffon said, ‘to the philosopher, old age must be considered a prejudice.’ Ageism is that prejudice.

(Comfort 1977: 35)

Comfort’s literary style, much bolder than Butler’s, together with the forceful marketing of this book, helped to establish ageism in the popular consciousness.

New ageism

The first published challenge to Butler came from Kalish in 1979. He argued that there was a ‘new ageism’ typified by the claims:

that ‘we’ understand how badly you are being treated, that ‘we’ have the tools to improve your treatment, and that if you adhere to our program, ‘we’ will make your life considerably better. You are poor, lonely, weak, incompetent, ineffectual, and no longer terribly bright. You are sick, in need of better housing and transportation and nutrition, and we—the nonelderly and those elderly who align themselves with us—and work with us—are finally going to turn our attention to you, the deserving elderly, and relieve you from ageism.

(Kalish 1979: 398)

Kalish argued that the first part of Butler’s book, focusing on this Incompetent Failure Model, may have had more impact than the later part which focused on a better way of life for older people, and that the effect of this may have been to promote and reinforce this ‘new ageism’. This argument was taken up more aggressively by Cole (1986), but first Levin and Levin, two sociologists who had studied racism, entered the fray. In the preface to their book they make the following telling comment:

The literature of gerontology has consistently reported and emphasized decline, whether physical, psychological, or social, in the characteristics and capacities of the aged.

(Levin and Levin 1980: ix)

Their focus is primarily upon the concept of decline: for them ageism is equivalent to the assumption of inevitable decline. Coming from outside they saw the aging enterprise, and gerontology in particular, as having contributed significantly to the knowledge base of ageism through the collection and documentation of evidence that substantiates the assumption of decline.

Butler’s definition received further critical attention from Schonfield (1982). In the title of his article, Schonfield posed the challenging question: ‘Who is
move discussion away from personal attitudes. He distinguished between prejudicial attitudes, discriminatory practices and institutional policies:

All three have contributed to the transformation of aging from a natural process into a social problem in which the elderly individual bears the detrimental consequences.

(Butler 1980: 8)

It would have been easy for Butler to have attacked the myths and stereotypes that underpin the attitudes of the public towards old people, and to use the parallels with sexism and racism to blame discrimination upon individual prejudice. His notable achievement, over and above that of launching the concept of ageism, was to link the individual and the institutional aspects in one definition: in this respect the words systematic and categorized are critical components of his definition.

de Beauvoir

Around the same time that Butler was publishing his critique of ageist America, Simone de Beauvoir was working on her book La Vieillesse which was published in France in 1970. Woodward (1988: 28) describes it as ‘a prodigious effort to explore the roots of ageism from social, economic and psychological perspectives’.

By and large, the book has been poorly received. Upon being published in the US, ‘it met with a wave of censure by journalists and gerontologists alike for its dark and tragic portrait of old age’ (Woodward 1988: 28). Stearns, for example, describes her approach as that of ‘the usually bitter old literati’ (1977: 12). Butler was particularly critical:

[Her book] was motivated by her desire to improve the treatment of the elderly in Western civilization. Ironically, her book’s purpose was offset by her reinforcement of a multitude of stereotypes about aging. Her work suffers from incomplete scholarship, ideology, elitism, and obvious subjectivity as regards aging. It is probable that de Beauvoir worked from the armchair in Parisian libraries and made few forays among the elderly. She detests aging and the older person in herself.

(Butler 1978: 389)

Fischer was exceptional in referring to it as ‘a learned, graceful and intelligent work’ (1978: 20). Finley (1984) is ambivalent: ‘brilliant though flawed… the only synoptic work of its kind that I know’. More recently, Greer has commented, ‘de Beauvoir does not show any signs of realization that her view of old age was wildly distorted’ (1991: 280).

What is regrettable, however, is not de Beauvoir’s delusions but rather that there should have been such a censorious response to a book that was intended: ‘to break the conspiracy of silence… I call upon my readers to help me in doing so’ (de Beauvoir 1977: 8, 14).

The main body of the book is divided into two sections: ‘Old Age Seen from Without’ and ‘The Being-in-the-World’.

In the first part of this book… I shall examine what biology, anthropology, history and contemporary sociology have to tell us about old age.
In the second I shall do my best to describe the way in which the aged man inwardly apprehends his relationship with his body, with time and with the outside world.

(de Beauvoir 1977: 16)

The distinction between these two contrasting approaches is crucial to understanding her critique. Whereas Butler approached ageism as an established and successful middle-aged psychiatrist, someone who had a command of contemporary gerontological knowledge and who was eager to challenge societal assumptions about old people, de Beauvoir based her book on her own experience of approaching old age after a long career as an influential French intellectual and partner of Jean-Paul Sartre. As for so many other successful people (as implied by Stearns), this had been something of a revelatory and demoralizing experience:

What a furious outcry I raised when I offended against this taboo [against talk of old age] at the end of La Force des Choses! Acknowledging that I was on the threshold of old age was tantamount to saying that old age was lying there in wait for every woman, and that it had already laid hold upon many of them. Great numbers of people, particularly old people, told me kindly or angrily but always at great length and again and again, that old age simply did not exist!

(de Beauvoir 1977: 7)

What both Butler and de Beauvoir share is the assumption that old age, and thereby old people, indisputably exist. They diverge only in Butler's inclination to adopt a positive view and de Beauvoir's much more pessimistic approach. Also, like Butler and Comfort, de Beauvoir raises one critical element of ageism (one that many older people articulate): that old people are seen as sub-human. Whereas Butler points to younger generations for whom older people 'subtly cease to be human beings, de Beauvoir comments:

When their economic status is decided upon, society appears to think that they belong to an entirely different species: for all that is needed to feel that one has done one's duty by them is to grant them a wretched pittance, then they have neither the same needs nor the same feelings as other men.

(de Beauvoir 1977: 9)

Like Comfort, de Beauvoir made a remarkable contribution to the establishment of a popular anti-ageist consciousness. Both, for example, were quoted by Gladys Elder in her book The Alienated (1977). One cannot overestimate the significance of someone of de Beauvoir's standing in the intellectual world joining in the study of the experience of ageing. At the same time there is little disputing that her commentary on her research was greatly affected by her own feelings about age as she approached what she perceived to be her own old age. The critical point about 'the literati' is that the famous and successful do approach later life from a distinctive angle. As Minois comments:

The elderly mystique

In 1965, Rosalie Rosenberg published the following astute account of the Elderly Mystique modelled on Betty Friedan's famous 1963 work The Feminine Mystique.

We know that many a person at some point late in life comes to consider himself old, and this implies he views himself as different in important respects from what he considered himself to have been earlier. According to the mystique, this point marks an unmitigated misfortune, which a series of lugubrious losses, deficits and declines has forced upon his attention. Despite his grim determination to 'think young' destiny has had the last laugh and has forced him to the mat for the final countdown...

While the old person is taking stock of himself, he might as well become resigned to being 'behind the times', for it is inconceivable he should have kept abreast of them. As a worker, he has become a liability. His rigidity, his out-of-date training, his proneness to disabling illness, not to mention his irritability, lowered efficiency and arrogant manner, all militate against the likelihood of his being hired or promoted...

The nadir of the process is, of course, institutionalization of the aged -- not always a necessary or desirable outcome, to be sure, but a practical method of storage until death. Providing the old one learns to conform to the inmate culture, this solution by storage should not be too difficult, although it is recognized he might have preferred another fate -- slow torture.

(Rosenfelt 1965: 37–43)

What this demonstrates is how, in the 1960s, the standard gerontological model of later life was the older male industrial worker. The implication of Rosenberg's argument, like that of Friedan's, is that this negative scenario is a self-fulfilling prophecy.
Feminism and ageism

Following de Beauvoir, feminists such as Sontag (1978), Macdonald and Rich (1983), Itzin (1984, 1986), Walker (1985), Greer (1991) and Friedan (1993) have made important contributions in clarifying the complex relationship between ageism and sexism. Arber and Ginn (1991) have produced a review of the evidence of how older women suffer from the consequences of both ageism and sexism. They provide a concise argument of how a patriarchal society exercises power through the chronologies of employment and reproduction, and through the sexualized promotion of a youthful appearance in women. There can be little doubting the double jeopardy thesis that older women suffer doubly as a result of both forms of prejudice (Chappell and Havens 1980; Itzin 1984). Women have been at the forefront of a number of anti-ageist initiatives mounted by older people, most well-known perhaps being Maggie Kuhn of the Gray Panthers.

What is interesting (certainly for an outsider to observe) is the problems that women in the post-1960s feminist movement have had in coming to recognize the significance of age (Macdonald and Rich 1983; Rosenthal 1990). It seems that as the 60s generation has come face to face with ageism, so another — younger — generation is acquiring power within the movement, a generation that is equipped with the much-respected energy and passion of youth. This kind of generational dynamic affects many groups that are committed to promoting age-related change, not least those within the pensioners' movement. There is always a feeling of disillusion among the older members as younger ones discover and take command of the wheel.

The contribution of older people

Laslett begins his book with the following statement:

This book on ageing, and on ageing in Britain particularly, belongs wholly to the later life of its author. My first writing on the history of ageing, and the earliest treatment of that subject, appeared when I was sixty-one and nearly all the rest of the work was done in my later sixties and earlier seventies. Here then is a report on experience as well as an exploratory analysis. It is in itself a project of an individual Third Age.

(Laslett 1989: vi)

It is interesting to contrast Laslett's statement with that of de Beauvoir (page 34). She was writing in anticipation of old age, from a position of expectation of what she perceived to be its threshold. Her priority was to break the silence on the reality of the old age in prospect, and she might have agreed with Laslett that it was a project of her third age, but one based on anticipatory research not experience. Other people who have been successful and famous in other fields have similarly taken up the challenge of age at the point of perceiving themselves as having reached a certain threshold in life — Jack Jones, for example, has been at the forefront of the pensioners movement in Britain since retiring from his position as General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union in 1977. What is significant about de Beauvoir and Laslett is that they each drew upon their scholarly skills rather than on the experiences of their contemporaries. The alternative, the traditional ethnographic approach, is to interview, listen to, and study the lives of an appropriate sample of older people.

Ethnography

Consider the introduction of Ford and Sinclair:

We set out to uncover and report upon the lives of older women, concentrating upon a more complete account of their thoughts, feelings and activities. We became interested in the lives of older women because we were involved in visiting them, either as part of volunteer schemes or as neighbours and friends . . . We wanted to obtain personal accounts of the lives of a group of women, presenting them in the women's own words.

(Ford and Sinclair 1987: 5)

Many other researchers have approached older people in a similar way, seeking to 'give voice to their feelings', to produce accounts of their lives in their own words. Often this is done with tape-recorders and with the interviewee being photographed, so that the reader does gain a very real sense of hearing older people talk. Nevertheless, we should never underestimate the power of the authors or editors to determine which voices and which words the reader hears. Who did the older women interviewed by Ford and Sinclair represent? What kinds of older women become involved in volunteer schemes, become known to their neighbours or develop friendships and so enter the networks of the two researchers? Who refused or were unable to participate? To ask these kinds of critical questions is not to question the value of Ford and Sinclair's book for the study of ageism. It includes, for example, the testimony of Mrs Hatter. We could not hope for any more powerful testimony of the oppressive quality of ageism:

I'll tell you what happened with my pension book. They have it here, they take it when you come in to help keep you and they give you so much back as spending money. I think they decide how much you get. In fact I do not know how much the pension is now. I've told them they are to let me know when it's due again. It's nice to know. I know it belongs to me, but they have it. You never see the book. They never say anything about it.

(Ford and Sinclair 1987: 36)

Without doubting for one moment the authenticity of Mrs Hatter's statement, the difficult question still has to be addressed: what does it represent? Is her experience typical or eccentric? Between these two extremes of library research by older people and field-work by younger researchers, there are two important ways in which older people have contributed to our understanding of later life, and ageism in particular. One is through personal research into the lives and circumstances of contemporaries and a particularly significant example of this is Elder (1977). The second is personal testimony published in person, not through an intermediary.
**Becoming angry**

The following is the Preface from Gladys Elder's book *The Alienated: Growing Old Today*:

I began to talk to all the elderly around me. I tried to cultivate insight, understanding and patience, and as I pondered on the life stories I pieced together I became angry. I watched my acquaintances shopping. I had no difficulty in seeing the economic limitations, the scraping and stinting to which so many are condemned. Sometimes I sat at home, reflecting, thinking back over the years, seeing those lives against a familiar background — my own. I thought of the devastating times my elderly neighbours had lived through, of their deprivations so stoically borne — and my anger increased. Anger is a fine spur and very soon I had gathered together enough material to start along the hard road of authorship. For, growing with the anger, I had a vision. A vision of comfort, peace and rest for the elderly, achieved not by charity and well-meant aid from the outside, but by the concerted actions within this group, in other words, by themselves . . . At 75, I know very well what aging is, what it feels like after a lifetime's struggle, to find oneself among society's cast-offs, duly labelled and slotted into the compartment called OAP . . .

Books on old age by sociologists, psychologists and gerontologists are growing in number, a hopeful sign that the subject is at least receiving due attention. Yet none has been written by an OAP; this distinction makes me feel I am well-placed to plead this case.  

(Elder 1977: 13–15)

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**Personal testimony**

As with the literary work of prisoners, personal testimony is often produced in the most difficult of situations. A famous example is Ellen Newton's diary:

Incidents and conversations are set down exactly as they happened, sometimes while they were actually happening. Gaps here and there, sometimes of days, sometimes of months, are due to illness, intrusive curiosity as to what I was writing about, and some editing at a later stage to improve the narrative. Very often I wrote in the small hours, and in the morning, in pencil, mostly, on salvaged spare pages of notebooks and the backs of used envelopes. These bits and pieces were scattered in bags and boxes for want of a desk to hold them.  

(Newton 1980: 1)

In 1983 May Sarton published a novel centred on the experience of Caro, a person in a similar position to Ellen Newton:

I am not mad, only old. I make this statement to give me courage. To give you an idea what I mean by courage, suffice it to say that it has taken two weeks for me to obtain this notebook and a pen. I am in a concentration camp for the old, a place where people dump their parents or relatives exactly as though it were an ash can.  

(Sarton 1983: 9)

In 1990 Sarton herself kept a diary for one whole year in which she documented her growing problems with chronic illness:

Should I publish this journal at all? What value does it have, coming from a diminished old Sarton? I hope I am right in thinking that flawed though it is, it does have value, if only in suggesting how one old lady has dealt over a year with chronic pain; what the rewards are of living here by the sea, even old and ill; how I have had to learn to be dependent.  

(Sarton 1993: 10)

These are examples of the literary work of older people who have sought to document the realities of later life, both subjective and objective. Very different strategies have been adopted. Each has strengths and weaknesses. It is when they are studied together that the evidence regarding ageism becomes indisputable.
Direct action

There are many other areas of activity in which the same goals have been pursued. It is, of course, difficult to present a comprehensive account of this since so much goes unrecorded — action in local public meetings, representations to the authorities, the debates in voluntary organizations and self-help groups, the raising of funds and the resulting arguments on the doorstep and in the high street, the petitions and the mass lobbies of parliament, and so on.

One of the most difficult forms of individual action is appearing in television documentaries. Towards the end of 1993, there were two television programmes, broadcast on successive nights, which provided two contrasting examples. First there was a film of the meeting of four young male neo-nazis with three survivors of Auschwitz. Although more a confrontation of generations and cultures, the viewer could not but be impressed by the courage of the survivors who, each in turn, faced the four bigoted men in locations associated with their own vivid memories of past atrocities. Outnumbered, there was a sense of humiliation as they each appeared to fail in getting the young men to hear what they had to say and to accept the evidence of genocide.

The following night, three pensioners were shown travelling from Bridlington to Blackpool. They planned to confront the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the 1992 Tory Party Conference, over his proposal to impose Value Added Tax on domestic fuel. They were not experienced campaigners and once again the viewer witnessed older people being publicly humiliated. They sought and failed to get a powerful younger person to hear what they had to say. He did not recognize that people might die as a direct result of the proposed increased taxation.

It has often been argued that the only effective political action is organized collective campaigning. Commentators often point to the potential voting power of the elderly, but politicians by and large have not responded to the threat. The historical record is depressing. In the UK, there has been an enormous investment by older people in the various pensioner organizations but their efforts have often been wasted by internal conflict and political timidity (Blaikie 1990). In 1983, for example, Margaret Thatcher visited Swansea. A broad alliance of local organizations and unions collaborated in an enormous and largely peaceful march through the city centre. For those of us who took part it was an exhilarating and novel experience marching with so many friends and colleagues down the Kingsway. The joint committee of the pensioners’ organizations, however, fearful of trouble, were taking part at the same time in a rally they had organized in a chapel hall in Morriston. Mrs Thatcher had been invited but she was, of course, otherwise engaged, scurrying past the mass demonstration on Oystermouth Road.

The Gray Panthers

Over the last twenty years the Gray Panthers have often been seen to be the model for collective political action by older people in the future. This movement was launched in 1970 by Maggie Kuhn and live other involuntary retirees to protest about the Vietnam War. Its association with revolutionary anarchic action is evident in an early press statement:

We did not select our name; the name selected us. It describes who we are: 1) we are older persons in retirement; 2) we are aware of the revolutionary nature of our time; 3) although we differ with the strategy and tactics of some militant groups in our society we share with them many of the goals of human freedom, dignity and self development; and 4) we have a sense of humour.

(Butler 1975: 340–1)

Kuhn was particularly concerned about the patronage implicit in the word ‘play’. She described Golden Age Clubs as glorified playpens. During the 1970s they campaigned on race (organizing a Black House Conference on Aging), health (paying a ‘house call’ on a Convention of the American Medical Association), television (getting the Code of Ethics to include references to age), the hearing aid industry and nursing home abuse (Phillipsen 1982: 135; Friedan 1993: 609–12). Gerontological research was not overlooked either. Estes quotes a pamphlet distributed by the Gray Panthers at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society in San Francisco in 1977:

Gerontology has assumed the deterioration of the aged, and has attempted to describe it in terms which ignore the social and economic factors which in large measure precipitate that deterioration. By reifying the attribute ‘old’, gerontology reinforces societal attitudes which view older people as stuck in an inevitable chronological destiny of decay and deterioration.

(Estes 1979: 226)

By the end of the 1970s the Gray Panthers had a membership of 15,000 throughout the United States. Friedan (1993: 610) provides an up-to-date account of current activities: a national health plan, affordable housing, flexible work and retirement schedules, and increased intergenerational networking.

In conclusion, the history of ageism as a political idea, a phenomenon which challenges the beliefs and reasoning of individuals and institutions, is only twenty-something years old. Older people have always been aware of the prejudice and discrimination they have suffered, but only since the cultural revolution of the 1960s has there been any kind of recognition of this among younger people. It is clear that the biggest challenge is that posed by Kalish’s ‘new agestics’—people who know they should be against ageism and purport to be, but who patronize older people, making decisions for them, telling funny stories about them, and feeling good that they are looking after them.