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Editorial

Editorial for special issue *Ageing, body and society: Key themes, critical perspectives*



Over the last two decades significant theoretical, methodological and empirical developments have explored the social, biological and cultural dimensions of our bodies as we grow older. An earlier concern within ageing studies that a focus on the bodies of older people represented a return to biological determinism and an overly medical approach has been replaced by a realisation how a focus on ageing bodies offers a novel lens to examine a range of existing sociological and theoretical concerns. These include the nature of the body, self and ageing; social identities and social inequalities; lived experiences and everyday life; the role of materiality and consumption in the cultural constitution of age; health and illness; and ageing across the full lifecourse from midlife to deep old age.

It is over twenty years since Peter Öberg published his seminal article in *Ageing & Society* on the absent body in gerontology (Öberg, 1996). It is therefore timely to bring together established and emergent researchers to review the wealth of work in this area, and to take forward key debates, enhance current and emergent theoretical perspectives, and disseminate empirical research in ‘ageing, body and society’. In particular, this special issue aims to highlight and explore interconnections between the corporeality of ageing bodies and the socio-cultural context in which we live.

The special issue has built upon the international networks and focus of the *British Sociological Association (BSA) Ageing, Body and Society* study group¹ for which the co-editors Dr. Wendy Martin and Professor Julia Twigg have been co-convenors since 2007. Through international symposia and an annual one day conference, the study group has brought together international academics and researchers whose work focuses on ageing, bodies and embodiment, exploring and debating different theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches and empirical findings.

Absence/presence of the ageing body

The body is central to our everyday lives. Ageing moreover is a key indicator of difference that is deeply embedded in our physiology (Twigg, 2006). Popular and media accounts of ageing often represent these bodily and visual markers of age in terms of corporeal changes, such as grey hair, wrinkled skin, increased body weight, the experience of “slowing down” and the onset of health conditions. Growing older is therefore experienced and perceived within and through our bodies (Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011). These discourses and images of ageing are reinforced within the dominant biomedical discourse that emphasises the process of senescence, decline, the onset of ill-health and loss of function. As Katz (2010) aptly comments, the physical, social and cultural body is the foundation of gerontological knowledge, for ‘if the body did not age there would literally be no gerontological story to read or write’ (Hepworth, 2000, p. 9).

Ageing studies did not initially address the body. In part, this omission was an attempt to escape from overly medical accounts of old age (Tulle, 2015; Tulle-Winton, 2000; Twigg, 2006). Old bodies, subjected to a medical gaze, are conceptualised as distinct and rational biological entities, that can be observed and measured, thus becoming ‘objects’ of medical expertise (Tulle-Winton, 2000, p. 72). The dominance of biomedicine however was first challenged by political economy perspectives that argued that experiences of older people were determined not only by biology but by structural, economic, political and social processes including retirement, social class and gender (Arber & Ginn, 1991, 1993; Estes, 1986, 1991; Estes, Biggs, & Phillipson, 2003; Walker, 1981, 1987, 1993). These perspectives aimed to separate ageing from dominant discourses of ill-health and biological decline. In this context a focus on ageing bodies was viewed as a backward step, an unwelcome return to biological determinism and narratives of decline (Twigg, 2003, 2004, 2006). As a result, social constructionist accounts gained prominence, and the body ‘disappeared’ (Gilleard & Higgs, 1998; Öberg, 1996; Tulle-Winton, 2000). The ageing body thus became inadvertently marginalised in ageing studies, left to the biomedical sciences that are then criticised by gerontologists for being reductionist and objectifying (Katz, 2010). This leads to a paradox within ageing studies (Katz, 2010; Öberg, 1996), for whilst the ageing body is central to the everyday lives of older people, it is relatively absent from gerontological and sociocultural discourses. As Katz argues this represents ‘the paradox at the heart of social gerontology, whereby the body becomes the target of the overlapping resistance to and denial of aging’ (2010, p. 358).

Our embodied experiences of everyday life are also absent from view (Leder, 1990). We are not routinely noticing and directing our bodies nor are we always consciously aware of our body whilst undertaking everyday practices, such as, walking, smelling flowers or observing our visual world (Nettleton & Watson, 1998). As Leder argues:

¹ The *Ageing, Body and Society* study group is part of the *British Sociological Association (BSA)*. See <https://www.britisoc.co.uk/groups/study-groups/ageing-body-and-society-study-group/> for more information.

While in one sense the body is the most abiding and inescapable presence in our lives, it is also essentially characterized by absence. That is, one's own body is rarely the thematic object of experience. When reading a book or lost in thought, my own bodily state may be the farthest thing from my awareness (Leder, 1990, p. 1)

Empirical research has demonstrated how the body in everyday life is taken for granted except when bodily states, such as pain and ill health, and bodily changes associated with ageing, intrude on our daily routines and we become consciously aware of our corporeality (Bendelow & Williams, 1995; Williams & Bendelow, 1998). The tension between the absence/presence and the invisibility/visibility of the ageing body remains a key feature of work on ageing.

Whilst cultural perspectives have challenged the biomedical accounts of ageing, bringing to the fore how the ageing body is culturally and socially constructed, there are however limitations to social constructionism, as bodies do age and die and ageing therefore does require an analytic engagement with the corporeality and materiality of our ageing bodies (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Katz, 2010; Twigg, 2003, 2004, 2006). The visible manifestations of ageing, such as, greying hair, sagging skin and reduced physical capacities, not only bring the physiology of our bodies to the fore, but highlight bodily changes and limitations that are neither merely symbolic nor social constructions. The analytic reality of our corporeality is therefore difficult to evade: for whilst we are “aged by culture”, we are also aged by our bodies (Twigg, 2003).

In this context, researchers in ageing are continually required to balance the recognition of physical changes that are associated with growing older, whilst avoiding inadvertently reinforcing the alternative negative and positive stereotypes, and, at times, ageist discourses, that focus on the body (Katz, 2010). As Gubrium and Holstein (2003) argue, the ageing body is not an objective constant presence in everyday life but is instead an experiential entity that at times feels very noticeable and evident, a body that at times intrudes into daily routines, whilst at other moments recedes from view. So whilst experiences of the body are variable, concurrently transient and ever-present, for older people it is the increasing visibility of an ageing body that needs to be managed and given new meanings and explanations (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 206). The body is therefore an unfinished biological and social entity that can continually change, within certain limits, through participation in our everyday lives (Shilling, 2004).

The emergence of cultural gerontology

An intellectual shift from structure associated with the political economy school, towards agency, associated with cultural analyses, has opened up the possibilities for more reflexive accounts that focus on identities and lived experiences of old age (Gilleard & Higgs, 1998; Twigg, 2003, 2004, 2006; Twigg & Martin, 2015a,b). The emergence of consumer culture, postmodern and cultural perspectives, and masking theories (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1990, 1995; Gilleard & Higgs, 1998, 2000, 2005; Gullette, 1997, 2004; Twigg & Martin, 2015a,b; Woodward, 1991) brought the nature of body and self into analytic focus:

This literature drives forward the earlier agenda of social constructionism, but in a more radical way, showing how the body itself is social constituted. Essentialising discourses in relation to the body need to be replaced by ones that recognize its nature as a social text, something that is both formed and given meaning within culture. The ageing body is thus not natural, is not prediscursive, but fashioned within and by culture (Twigg, 2004, p. 60)

Cultural perspectives therefore destabilised earlier conceptual distinctions between nature/culture, biological/social and reclaimed questions and concerns about ageing bodies that had effectively been handed over to medicine.

The Cultural Turn came quite late to ageing studies, reflecting the tendency of the field to be dominated by practical issues and policy concerns. It is mainly in the last decade that its influence has begun to be fully felt, with cultural perspectives increasingly impacting on the field, with new theorising and new subject areas evident (see Twigg & Martin, 2015a,b). The scope of ageing studies has significantly expanded and it is no longer dominated by the perspectives of medicine and social welfare. Not only does age increasingly feature as an analytic category across the social sciences but this tendency is also reflected in the arts and humanities. The focus on researching ageing bodies has moreover been central to this interdisciplinary work that draws together research across the arts, humanities and social sciences within Cultural Gerontology (Twigg & Martin, 2015a,b). In particular, the complex interplay between the body and its social and cultural constitution in age has come to be recognised as one of the central themes of cultural gerontology (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013, 2015).

The expansion of consumption culture has created a new arena within which subjectivities are being forged and has resulted in a new emphasis on lifestyle as the locus for identity. A focus on subjectivity and identity, also reflects the shift in analysis from structural aggregate forms of sociality towards more fluid conceptions of ‘being in society’ (Rojek & Turner, 2000). An emphasis on agency has moreover reinforced a sense of society as malleable, as something that is inherently plastic, constituted in and through cultural practices and discourses, capable of being made and remade through changing lifestyles, values and discourses (Nash, 2001). There is also a stronger understanding of how social representations constitute and remake what they represent. In this context art, photography, novels, films, music and theatre do not only explore later years but can influence how we understand, embody, and perform age and ageing. Cultural perspectives have therefore become a key territory for changing how we negotiate our embodiment and age.

Cultural gerontology has moreover led to a fuller and richer account of later years in which the subjectivity and identities of people in mid to later life, and the full expanse and depth of their lived experiences of age, has been at the forefront of analysis (Twigg & Martin, 2015a,b). These developments have produced a renewed emphasis on old age from the perspective of older people themselves rather than the external, objectifying, and often denigrating ones from the dominant culture, that tends to homogenise and stereotype old age. The Cultural Turn therefore emphasises the range and variety of older people's experiences and views, and has resulted in a new interest in diversity, exemplified in work around gender, ethnicity, ‘race’, sexuality, and disability.

Outline of special issue

The aim of this special issue has been first to bring together academics and researchers whose work focuses on ageing, bodies and embodiment to explore and debate different theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches and empirical findings; second to explore key developments and highlight new areas of research and ideas emerging about ageing bodies; and third to highlight and debate interconnections between the corporeality of ageing bodies and the socio-cultural context in which we live. In this context, we are delighted to have brought together internationally renowned researchers in the area of ageing, body and society as well as emergent researchers and writers who in their current work consider the significance of embodiment and ageing bodies.

The opening article by Gilleard and Higgs explores key concepts within ageing, body and society and, in particular, focuses on the distinction between ‘embodiment’ and ‘corporeality’ in which it is argued that social agency is central. The authors define corporeality as the role of the body as a set of structures whose identity and meaning is mediated by culture and society. In contrast, embodiment is defined as the processes by which social actors realise distinction, identity and lifestyle within and through their bodies. These concepts are further linked to Gilleard and Higgs’s well-established work on the third and fourth age.

The gendering of ageing bodies has been a central topic, and the next three articles explore the diverse and complex ways gendered bodies are experienced and perceived as people grow older. Calasanti and King highlight the dynamic nature of gender, and consider a popular belief that men and women become more alike with age, asking whether and how bodily changes that accompany ageing might influence the ways that people do gender. Drawing on theories that view both gender and age as ongoing accomplishments, and by empirical research, they conclude that whilst popular ideals of gender are based on youthful bodies, older persons still see themselves as men and women.

Drawing on empirical research Hurd Clarke and Lefkovich then consider how older Canadian men define masculinity, how they evaluate their own masculinity, and how and why they use particular forms of body work in response to ageing and their understandings of masculinity. They conclude by showing how men in the study continue to define masculinity relationally with femininity and homosexuality, and identifying three hallmarks of masculinity, namely: physical strength, leadership, and virility. How these are played out in the context of age is subject to their analysis.

Sandberg next explores gender in the context of older people with dementia. She highlights how despite the shift towards person-centred approaches, the role of gender has been little explored in dementia studies. In particular, she considers how pervasive discourses on a loss of self and dementia as subject are interwoven with a de-gendering of persons with dementia. The care of people with dementia often implicitly involves a ‘re-gendering’ of persons with dementia where gendered biographies and pasts are upheld and gendered embodied selfhood is maintained through, for example, dress, hair and other aspects of appearance. She concludes by arguing that gender needs to be central in care.

Rajan-Rankin moves our attention to the significance of race and ethnicity that has rarely been considered within ageing body research. She provides a theoretical essay that examines the intersections between race, ethnicity and old age from an inter-disciplinary lens. Drawing on cultural gerontology (especially embodied ageing studies) and post-colonial perspectives on ageing, she explores how an emphasis on the body and embodiment can serve as a conceptual lens for understanding racialized ageing bodies. She puts forward new theorising and new methodologies as a way to analyse and understand the lived experiences of ageing bodies of colour.

The analysis of ageing bodies has also operated as a focal point for interdisciplinary work that draws together research across the arts, humanities and social sciences. This is highlighted in this special issue with research on music and ageing bodies. Kontos and Grigorovich first question the biomedicalisation and pharmaceuticalisation of dementia, in which music programs are being primarily implemented as a non-pharmacological means to generate social and behavioural changes. In particular, they argue that understanding and fully supporting the musicality of persons living with dementia requires engagement with citizenship discourse. They draw on a model of relational citizenship that recognises that corporeality is a fundamental source of self-expression, interdependence, and reciprocal engagement. Relational citizenship in this context thus brings a new and critical dimension to the discourse on music, ageing, and the body in contemporary society.

Bennett then critically examines how ageing members of popular music scenes might be recast as a salient example of the more pluralistic fashion in which ageing is anticipated, managed and articulated in contemporary social settings. He considers two ways in which ageing members of music scenes continue their involvement. The first focuses on evolving a series of discourses that legitimately position them as ageing bodies in cultural spaces that also continue to be inhabited by significant numbers of people in their teens, twenties and thirties. The second sees ageing fans taking advantage of new opportunities for consuming live music including winery concerts, dinners and show events.

The changing nature of space and place is highlighted in Nettleton, Buse and Martin’s article that focuses on the role of architects who shape future dwellings and built environments in ways that are critical for ageing bodies. They explore how assumptions about ageing bodies are made manifest in architectural plans and designs through analysis of entries in an international student competition *Caring for Older People*. Through this they highlight non-representational ways in which design and spatiality may be crucial to the fabrication of embodied practices, atmospheres and affects. They conclude by reflecting on how configurations and ideologies of care can be reproduced through architectural spaces, and conclude that a dialogue between architecture and sociology has the potential to transform concepts of ageing, embodiment and care.

Finally, Katz and Marshall highlight the technical turn around ageing bodies, pointing to how the changing nature of technologies leads to new and different experiences of ageing bodies. In particular, they explore new ways of quantifying and standardising measurements of age as these intersect with discourses of anti-ageing and speculative futures of ‘smart’ quantified ageing bodies. Their research is located in the current literature that links ageing, bodies and technologies, with specific extended examples of wearable devices such as fitness trackers and digital exercises such as brain games designed for memory performance. The article suggests that new technologies around ageing and quantifiable fitness create an ambiguous image of the ageing body and brain as both improvable and ‘plastic’ but also inevitably in decline.

Concluding remarks

In the last few decades there has been a wealth of research, theoretical insights and methodological innovations into ageing bodies. This special issue has brought together key writers and researchers that have explored theoretical underpinnings, new topics of research and social identities that have provided rich insights into the body and embodiment. In particular, the special issue has explored the complex and diverse interconnections between the corporeality of the body and the sociocultural context in which we live. The body is no longer absent or invisible within ageing studies. The diverse and critical perspectives within this special issue provide a springboard to enable the continuing development and enhancement within the study of ageing, body and society. We believe that a focus on embodiment and ageing bodies will bring novel insights into the complex, diverse, embodied and lived experiences of people as they grow older.

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