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# Reconstructing Old Age



*New Agendas  
in  
Social Theory  
and  
Practice*

PHIL

## PART I

# CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

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## 2

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL GERONTOLOGY

In the 1990s, three important streams emerged in the growing debate about the nature of an ageing society. First, the continuation of political economy perspectives, this emerging from early work from Estes (1979), Walker (1981), Guillemard (1983), and others (see Minkler and Estes, 1991 and 1998; Phillipson, 1991; Estes, 1993, for reviews of this area).

Second, there is the work of researchers from the humanities, with important studies from scholars such as Thomas Cole, Harry Moody, Andrew Achenbaum and Andrew Wernick. Some of the main perspectives from this tradition were brought together in a number of volumes published in the early 1990s, these combining the research of historians, ethicists, and other scientists (see, especially, Cole et al., 1992; Cole et al., 1993; Schaie and Achenbaum, 1993; Bengston and Achenbaum, 1993).

Third, there is the emergence of biographical and narrative perspectives in gerontology, this building on the work of Malcolm Johnson (1976) and Jaber Gubrium (1986). Advocates of this approach have made important contributions to critical gerontology (see, for example, Gubrium, 1993), as well as extending our knowledge about the social construction of later life (Ruth and Kenyon, 1996a).

Taken together, these intellectual trends may be seen as illustrating the emergence of a critical as opposed to traditional gerontology (Phillipson and Walker, 1987; Baars, 1991). The critical elements in this gerontology centre around three main areas: first, from political economy, there is awareness of the structural pressures and constraints affecting older people, with divisions associated with class, gender and ethnicity being

emphasized (Estes, 1993). Second, from both a humanistic as well as a biographically orientated gerontology, there is concern over the absence of meaning in the lives of older people, and the sense of doubt and uncertainty which is seen to pervade their daily routines and relationships (Moody, 1992). Third, from all three perspectives, comes a focus on the issue of empowerment, whether through the transformation of society (for example, through the redistribution of income and wealth), or the development of new rituals and symbols to facilitate changes through the life course (Kaminsky, 1993).

Critical gerontology in fact draws on a variety of intellectual traditions, these including: Marx's critique of political economy; the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse), and more recent researchers from this tradition such as Jürgen Habermas (1971; Moody, 1992); psychoanalytic perspectives (Biggs, 1997); as well as contemporary sociological theorists such as Anthony Giddens (1991). These different approaches are used both to challenge traditional perspectives within gerontology, and to develop an alternative approach to understanding the process of growing old.

Central to the idea of a critical gerontology is the idea of ageing as a socially constructed event. In respect of political economy, this is seen to reflect the role of elements such as the state and economy in influencing the experience of ageing. In relation to the humanities, the role of the individual actively constructing his or her world is emphasized, with biographical approaches emphasizing an interplay between the self and society (Kenyon, 1996). The idea of *lives* as socially constructed is perhaps the key theme of critical gerontology, with different points of emphasis depending on the approach taken.

Despite the growth of critical perspectives, it is clear that several uncertainties need to be faced if the scope and ambitions of this approach are to be fully realized. The meaning of critical gerontology is itself somewhat evasive, with its construction around a variety of discourses within the humanities and social sciences (Green, 1993; Biggs, 1997). At its simplest, critical gerontology, as Baars (1991) puts it, is concerned with: '... a collection of questions, problems and analyses that have been excluded by established [mainstream gerontology]'. These vary from questions about the role of the state in the management of old age (Townsend, 1981), to issues about the purpose of growing old within the context of a postmodern life course (Cole, 1992).

The focus of this chapter is on identifying the range of theories and perspectives contained within critical perspectives. The chapter will conclude with an assessment of the progress in this field, especially in respect of extending our knowledge about the contemporary crisis facing older people in the developed world.

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range of theories and perspectives. The chapter will focus on this field, especially in the contemporary crisis facing

### Disengagement theory and social gerontology

Critical gerontology must be seen, in part, as a response to the limitations of traditional theorizing in the study of old age. At least up until the 1960s, the dominant approach was to focus upon ageing as a problem arising from concerns and anxieties residing within the individual. The key theoretical ideas, developed by researchers such as Cavan et al. (1949) and Havighurst (1954), were built around concepts of individual 'adjustment', 'activity', and 'life satisfaction'. Lynott and Lynott argue that:

These concepts were to be understood to be a working language describing the central process of growing old. They were not part of a formal theoretical system whose major problem was whether or not it provides an adequate explanation of ageing. Rather, the concepts were treated as the 'facts' of growing old . . . [Ageing] was seen as a process whereby individuals – not social systems, structures of domination or ideologies – hope to alter themselves in some way to deal satisfactorily with their experiences. The problem was not retirement, poverty, ill health, and/or social isolation *per se*; these were the conditions, seemingly 'natural ones'. Being natural, they were accepted by the researchers as the way things were, the facts of elderly life. (1996: 750)

It was precisely the 'naturalness' of the concerns facing older people that came to be questioned from the 1970s onwards. Other theoretical perspectives had, of course, emerged to provide an account of the experience of old age. Disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry, 1961), for example, led the way in providing an account which related the changing needs of the individual to those of the social system. The theory was developed in the late 1950s by a group of gerontologists associated with the Committee on Human Development at the University of Chicago. The group included Havighurst, Neugarten, Cumming and Henry. The researchers considered that properly to understand old age, elderly people had to be studied within their own environments as opposed to hospitals or nursing homes. The environment selected was Kansas City, Missouri, a large metropolitan centre. Here, a panel of people aged 50 and over were chosen as subjects, and interviewed over a number of years. The theory of disengagement was derived from analyses of these interviews.

The central postulate of the theory has been summarized by Cumming and Henry as follows:

Ageing is an inevitable mutual withdrawal or disengagement resulting in decreased interaction between the ageing person and others in the social system he belongs to. The process may be initiated by the individual or by others in the situation. The aged person may withdraw more markedly from

some classes of people while remaining relatively close to others. His withdrawal may be accompanied from the outset by an increased preoccupation with himself; certain institutions in society may make the withdrawal easy for him. When the ageing process is complete the equilibrium which existed in middle life between the individual and his society has given way to a new equilibrium characterized by a greater distance and an altered type of relationship. (1961: 14)

A key assumption in the theory concerned the way in which what was termed 'ego energy' declines with age. As the ageing process develops, individuals were seen to become increasingly self-preoccupied and less responsive to normative controls. The theory is predominantly a psychological one, although references to social components locate it within functionalism in theory and conservatism in political ideology. The sociological premise is that, since death occurs unpredictably and would be socially disruptive if people 'died in harness', there is a functional necessity to expel from work roles any older person with a statistically higher risk of death.<sup>1</sup>

Disengagement theory, while heavily criticized by researchers, was of considerable significance in developing theoretical debates around the social dimension of ageing. Passuth and Bengston (1996) suggest that it was the first formal theory that attempted to explore the relationship between individual and social aspects of ageing. Disengagement theory also stimulated a range of complementary as well as alternative theoretical approaches, these including: modernization theory (Cowgill and Holmes, 1972); exchange theory (Dowd, 1975); life course perspectives (Neugarten and Hagestad, 1976); and age stratification theory (Riley et al., 1972). Although challenging many core assumptions of the disengagement model, these theories furthered the debate about the experience of growing old, applying in the process central concepts from within the social sciences.<sup>2</sup>

Disengagement theory had a third, and possibly more significant, impact on debates about ageing. For many researchers, conventional theorizing in gerontology itself became part of the research problem. Gerontological research – in its traditional form – was seen to be colluding with a repressive and intolerant society (an issue raised by social activists such as Maggie Kuhn). The concept of disengagement could be viewed, it was argued, as legitimating a form of social redundancy among the old. Zena Blau, an American sociologist, drew support from older people as well as researchers when she argued that:

The disengagement theory deserves to be publicly attacked, because it can so easily be used as a rationale by the non-old, who constitute the 'normals' in society, to avoid confronting and dealing with the issue of old people's marginality and rolelessness in American society. (1973: 152)

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It was precisely the concern identified by Blau which suggested the need for a different kind of gerontology. Traditionally, theory in social gerontology had avoided questioning the social problems and conditions facing older people, a point made by Carroll Estes in her seminal book *The Aging Enterprise*. By the 1970s, however, this came to be questioned in a context of political radicalization and economic recession. The result was the emergence of a different – critical – gerontology, one initially built around ideas drawn from Marxist political economy. The next section of this chapter identifies some influences on this approach and the key arguments advanced by its proponents.

#### The rise of political economy

The political economy perspective developed in the context of the crisis affecting public expenditure from the mid-1970s onwards (Phillipson and Walker, 1986). Traditional perspectives in gerontology had operated on the assumption of continued growth in state expenditure in areas such as pensions and welfare. The basis for this was undermined, however, with the rise in unemployment and inflation during the 1970s. Alongside this economic collapse was a significant political and economic change, with cuts to public expenditure in general and welfare spending in particular. Given that a substantial proportion of social expenditure was allocated to older people (Myles, 1984), they were inevitably subject to a sustained political attack by right-wing governments in Britain, the USA and elsewhere. This was to bring a significant change in perceptions about older people. The post-war vision of services to the elderly, as a crucial element of citizenship, now faced a significant challenge. Older people came to be viewed as a burden on western economies, with demographic change, especially the declining ratio of younger to older persons, seen as creating intolerable pressures on public expenditure.

A critical response to this crisis came from a number of studies that used a broad political economy approach. These included: *The Aging Enterprise* by Carroll Estes (1979); 'The Structured Dependency of the Elderly' by Peter Townsend (1981); 'Towards a Political Economy of Old Age' by Alan Walker (1981); *Political Economy, Health and Aging* by Estes et al. (1984); *Old Age in the Welfare State* by John Myles (1984); and *Capitalism and the Construction of Old Age* by the present author (1982).

A major concern of these studies was to challenge a view of growing old as a period dominated by physical and mental decline, an approach labelled as the biomedical model of ageing. This model was attacked for its association of age with disease, as well as for the way that it

individualized and medicalized the ageing process (Estes and Binney, 1989). The alternative approach taken was to view old age as a social rather than biologically constructed status. In the light of this, many of the experiences affecting older people could be seen as a product of a particular division of labour and structure of inequality, rather than a natural part of the ageing process. Alan Walker (1981) developed this perspective with his concept of the 'social creation of dependency' in old age, and Peter Townsend (1981) used a similar term when he described the 'structured dependency' of older people. This dependency was seen to be the consequence of the forced exclusion of older people from work, the experience of poverty, institutionalization, and restricted domestic and community roles. Finally, Carroll Estes (1979: 2) introduced the term the 'ageing enterprise': '... to call particular attention to how the aged are often processed and treated as a commodity in our society and to the fact that the age-segregated policies that fuel the ageing enterprise are socially-divisive "solutions" that single-out, stigmatize, and isolate the aged from the rest of society'.<sup>3</sup>

The basic tenets of the political economy model have been defined in terms of developing 'an understanding of the character and significance of variations in the treatment of the aged, and to relate these to polity, economy and society in advanced capitalism' (Estes, 1986). Political economy has challenged the idea of older people being a homogeneous group unaffected by the dominant structures and ideologies within society. Instead, the focus is on understanding the relationship between ageing and economic life, the differential experience of ageing according to social class, gender and ethnicity, and the role played by social policy in contributing to the dependent status of older people (Minkler and Estes, 1998). Political economy also gives central consideration to the role of the state as an active force in managing the relationship between the individual and society. Estes (1998: 20) argues that the study of the state is fundamental to understanding old age for three main reasons: first, it has the power to allocate and distribute scarce resources; second, to mediate between the different segments and classes of society; third, to ameliorate conditions that threaten the social order. These activities have, as we shall see, been crucial in the construction of old age, with different points of emphasis over the course of the twentieth century.

The political economy perspective has been applied to a variety of concerns within the field of ageing. First, Graebner, Phillipson and Guillemard used this approach to examine the institutionalization of retirement (see Chapter 5). The retirement experience, its timing and eventual outcome were related to the supply and demand for labour and the production relations of a capitalist society. The growth of state pension schemes was itself related to economic factors, with, for example, the experience of mass unemployment being a stimulus behind legislation in countries such as the USA and Britain.

process (Estes and Binney, 1979: 2) to view old age as a social construct. In the light of this, many of the activities of older people can be seen as a product of a system of inequality, rather than a natural consequence of ageing. Minkler (1981) developed this concept of 'structured dependency' in old age. This dependency was seen as a result of older people being excluded from work, education, and restricted domestic resources (Estes, 1979: 2) introduced the term 'structured dependency' to draw attention to how the aged are marginalized in our society and to the ways in which the ageing enterprise are stigmatized, and isolate the

model have been defined in terms of their character and significance and to relate these to polity, economy, and culture (Estes, 1986). Political economy views older people being a homogeneous group with shared experiences and ideologies within the relationship between the experience of ageing according to the role played by social policy and the role of older people (Minkler and Estes, 1993). The relationship between the state and older people that the study of the state is concerned with are three main reasons: first, to ensure the state has sufficient resources; second, to ensure the state has sufficient resources for different classes of society; third, to ensure the state has sufficient resources for different orders. These activities have, over time, shaped the experience of old age, with different meanings in the twentieth century.

Political economy has been applied to a variety of issues in gerontology (Graebner, Phillipson and Minkler, 1998). The institutionalization of care, the experience, its timing and its impact on the demand for labour and resources. The growth of state pension schemes, with, for example, the state pension as a stimulus behind legisla-

tion. Second, the political economy model was significant in developing a range of counter-arguments to perceptions of demographic change as a cause of the state's fiscal crisis. Blaming older people was seen as a means of obscuring '... the origins of problems [which stem] from the capitalist economic system and the subsequent political choices that are made' (Estes, 1986: 123). Attacks on the burden of the elderly population were seen to legitimize a transfer of responsibilities from the state to individual older persons. At the same time, the class basis of old age policies meant that inequalities were not only maintained but were in fact widened through the encouragement of privatization in areas such as health care and financial support (Estes et al., 1996).

Third, the political economy approach also contributed, as already indicated, to theorizing about the relationship between age, race, class and gender (Estes, 1991; Minkler, 1996). This helped to produce a range of new questions for social gerontologists to explore. For example: how does the individual's lifelong identity change (if at all) with retirement? Are there specific transformations in respect of class and occupational identities? If so, what implications might this have for a political sociology of ageing?

Finally, political economy also provided a critical analysis of the character of health and social services. These were seen to reinforce the dependency created through the wider economic and social system. Welfare services were criticized for stigmatizing older people, compounding their problems through the imposition of age-segregated policies (Estes, 1979; 1993). In practical terms this analysis raised issues about challenging older people's experience of being passive consumers of welfare and medical services. It also raised questions about the relationship of professionals to older people: how far do they challenge the low expectations that elderly people have about services? To what extent do they contribute to the experience of old age as a period of dependency.

#### The critique of political economy

The political economy perspective is still being developed in a variety of ways by its original proponents (see, for example, Estes et al., 1996; Minkler and Estes, 1998). At the same time, a number of important criticisms have been made of this approach. Three in particular may be highlighted. First, an important concept developed in the theory is the idea of 'structured dependency' (Townsend, 1981; 1986). This draws attention to the way in which social and economic relations foster



passivity in old age. At the heart of this process is the role of the state as a system of control and domination. Accordingly:

The approach is one whereby society is held to create the framework of institutions and rules within which the general problem of the elderly emerge or, indeed, are 'manufactured'. In the everyday management of the economy and the administration and development of social institutions the position of the elderly is subtly shaped and changed. The policies which determine the conditions and welfare of the elderly are not just the reactive policies represented by the statutory social services but the much more generalised and institutionalised policies of the state which maintain or change social structure. (Townsend, 1986: 2)

This leaves unclear, however, the link between structures at a macro-sociological level, and individual behaviour and action. In this sense, structured dependency could be said to be over-deterministic in its approach, failing to address the way in which individuals could themselves challenge the impact of different forms of institutional control (Giddens, 1991; Bury, 1995).

Second, political economy has been charged with failing properly to address issues of gender. Bury (1995), for example, points out that the problems experienced by men and women do not arise solely through the operation of the labour market, but are 'part of a set of culture-bound gendered relationships' (Bury, 1995: 20). Political economy has, it is argued, underplayed the impact of gender differences in status and power and, as well, the effects of the cumulative oppression faced by women. This argument almost certainly carries more weight in the UK than the USA, where these issues have been more comprehensively addressed (see, for example, Arendell and Estes, 1991; Ovrebo and Minkler, 1993; Calasanti and Zajicek, 1993; Calasanti, 1996; Ray, 1996). On the other hand, the failure in Britain may be less the problem of the political economy of old age, and rather more the limitations of sociological work in general in dealing with gender inequalities in old age (the study by Arber and Ginn, 1991, is a notable exception here).

Third, political economy has been vulnerable to the charge of ignoring broader issues of meaning and purpose in the lives of the old. Focusing on questions of structure has tended to sideline, it is argued, the important moral and existential issues faced by older people. These areas have certainly been more central to the tradition of theorizing represented in the humanities. On the other hand, wider concerns have been explored in debates around generational equity (see Chapter 7), where the idea of interdependency between generations has been a major theme in political economy perspectives (Walker, 1996; Phillipson, 1996; Minkler, 1996).

Despite the above criticisms, political economy has continued to play an important (and subversive) role in monitoring and explaining struc-

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tural changes in the welfare state. It has also been pivotal in challenging the 'alarmist' or 'apocalyptic' demography which has become commonplace in the 1990s (Robertson, 1998). This development raised a new set of concerns around both societal attitudes and cultural assumptions about the position of older people – what has been termed the 'moral economy of ageing' (Minkler and Cole, 1998). Awareness of the moral dimension to growing old has become an important issue both within political economy and through the influence of work from within the humanities. An assessment of some of the arguments from this latter perspective will now be considered.<sup>4</sup>

#### The crisis of meaning

The approach taken by political economy highlighted the role of the state and capital in the construction of ageing as a demographic crisis. Another response has been to locate problems of ageing within a broader paradigm, one linked to the limitations both of western culture and positivistic social and natural sciences. The former has been addressed by Thomas Cole (1992), in his book *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America*. In this study, Cole traces what he sees as the historical shift from viewing ageing as an existential problem, to one focused around scientific and technical management. Cole argues:

By the early twentieth century, ageing had been largely cut loose from earlier religious, cosmological, and iconographic moorings, made available for modern scientific enquiry. Laboratory scientists and research physicians attempted to cast off religious dogma and mystery surrounding natural processes. Rejecting transcendental norms and metaphysical explanations, they turned to biology in the hope that nature itself contained authoritative ideas and explanations of old age. (1992: 192–4)

Cole argues that ultimately this has proved a dangerous illusion in respect of understanding the nature of ageing. Scientific enquiry cannot replace, he argues, the essential mystery and 'fatedness of the course of life'. By presenting ageing as a technical problem, we have lost sight of the fact that it is 'biographical as well as biological'; that 'old age is an experience to be lived meaningfully and not only a problem of health and disease'. Cole concludes that:

We must acknowledge that our great progress in the material and physical conditions of life has been achieved at a high spiritual and ethical price. Social security has not enhanced ontological security or dignity in old age. The elderly continue to occupy an inferior status in the moral community marginalized by

an economy and culture committed to the scientific management of growth without limit. (1992: 237)

This position has also been developed by Harry Moody (1988; 1992; 1993), in a series of papers drawing out the implications of a humanistic approach to the study of ageing. Moody is concerned with the development of a critical gerontology that breaks from the positivist tradition, and which acknowledges the central place of meaning and interpretation in the construction of social life. For Moody, the abstract language of social science and the ordinary language of daily experience are tied in ways that demand explication or interpretation. There are no straightforward 'facts', in other words, about social ageing. Moody (1988: 32) illustrates this point by taking what seems to be the 'deceptively simple question: What is it that constitutes retirement? How do we know, for example, how many people are retired at any given time or how retirement behaviour has changed over time?' Moody suggests that answering such questions is somewhat complex, because:

to some extent *retirement* is a shared meaning of social events, an interpretation of *why* an individual no longer participates in the paid labour force. One and the same individual may have been laid off or be partially disabled and may then describe him or herself to a survey researcher as 'retired', whereas others might describe the individual as 'unemployed' . . . The failure of researchers to acknowledge the preinterpreted world is no innocent error. The uncritical acceptance of retirement rates as an unambiguous 'fact' about the social world becomes a kind of mystification of the lived experience of unemployment and chronic illness, and this mystification has political as well as ideological consequences. (1988: 32)

Moody's development of a critical gerontology is to define it against what he sees as its opposite, namely, that of *instrumental gerontology*. This he views as the province of conventional social science, where the emphasis is upon the development of new tools to predict and control human behaviour. Social gerontology, according to this view, is dominated by a form of rationality that seeks to objectify what is essentially a human and subjective experience. Instrumental reason forces us to stand outside ageing as an individual process, suggesting that it can be controlled through a variety of technical interventions. To set against this, the task of a critical gerontology is to reinsert the notion of ageing as a 'lived experience', one which demands a dialogue between the older person, the academic community, practitioners, and other relevant groups. Moody suggests, however, that critical gerontology must go beyond merely a negative critique of current practice and ideology, offering as well its own vision of a different approach. Accordingly:

A critical gerontology must also offer a positive idea of human development: that is, ageing as movement toward freedom beyond domination (autonomy,

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Moody (1988; 1992) calls for a humanistic approach to ageing, one that is not bound by the developmental and positivistic tradition of research. The abstract language of research and interpretation of experience are tied in such a way that there are no straight lines. Moody (1988: 32) suggests that 'deceptively simple' research asks 'how do we know, given time or how' and 'Moody suggests that'.

...an interpretation of labour force. One and a half million disabled and may be 'red', whereas others are not. The uncritical nature of researchers to report error. The uncritical nature of the social world of unemployment and well as ideological

...to define it against the history of gerontology. This is a science, where the goal is to predict and control. This view, is dominated by a view that is essentially a reductionist. It forces us to stand back and see that it can be done. To set against this is the view of ageing as a process between the older and the younger. Other relevant aspects of gerontology must go beyond the biological and ideology, and accordingly:

...human development: the concept of autonomy,

wisdom, transcendence). Without this emancipatory discourse (i.e. an expanded view of ageing) we have no means to orient ourselves in struggling against current forms of domination. (1988: 32-3)

Moody calls in fact for an emancipatory praxis (or practice) which can transcend the conventional categories of work, sex roles and age stereotypes. These are seen to circumscribe the possibilities of human development, and to produce a 'shrunken and fragmented view of what the life course might be' (Moody, 1988: 35).

#### Subjectivity and social research

The concern to 'reinsert' human subjectivity into the study of ageing has prompted several important developments – notably with the encouragement of qualitative and interpretive methods in ageing research. Two examples illustrate this theme: first, the interest in biographical perspectives in the study of ageing; second, the influence of a phenomenologically orientated sociology.

Biographical perspectives have an extensive pedigree in the social sciences, with notable examples including: the symbolic interactionist approach of the Chicago School (Blumer, 1969), and the work of sociologists of the life course such as Thomas and Znaniecki (1966). Johnson (1976), drawing on sociologists such as Erving Goffman and Howard Becker, developed the notion of ageing as a 'biographical career'. He put forward the case for 'reconstructing biographies' in order to identify the development of life histories, and the way that these have 'sculpted present problems and concerns' (Johnson, 1976; see also Thompson et al., 1990). Ruth and Kenyon (1996a) note the influence of Bertaux's volume *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*, this identifying the importance of using biography as a methodological approach within social research.

Subsequently, the biographical perspective was extended by researchers such as Coleman, Birren, Ruth and Kenyon, with the key arguments brought together in a collection edited by Birren et al. (1996) entitled *Ageing and Biography*. The view adopted was that biographical approaches can contribute towards understanding both individual and shared aspects of ageing over the life course. Examining reactions to personal crises and turning points could provide researchers with unique insights into the way individuals construct their lives. Equally, however, studying lives provides a perspective on the influence of social institutions such as work and the family. Biographical data thus helps us to understand what Ruth and Kenyon (1996b) refer to as the possibilities and limits set by the historical period in which people live.

Ruth and Kenyon (1996b) summarize the value of using biographical materials as threefold: first, at a general level, they contribute to the development of theories of adult development and ageing; second, they provide a focus on both the public and the personal way in which lives develop; third, they are important in determining ways to enhance the quality of life. Central to the biographical approach is the idea of the 'reflexivity' of the self, or the way in which individuals both influence the world around them, while modifying their own behaviour in response to information from this world. This idea (which strongly parallels the sociology of the self developed by Giddens, 1991, and others) leads to a view that focuses on a 'responsive' and 'changing self'. Ruth and Kenyon emphasize this point in the following way:

A potentially optimistic feature of viewing human ageing biographically is that there is an openness or flexibility to the human journey . . . While there is continuity, there is also change and the possibility for change. In other words, there may be no necessary connection between the events of our lives, our number of years, and the meaning ascribed to those events; stories can be re-written, plots altered, and the metaphors traded in and traded up . . . according to the needs of the self. (1996b: 6)

As this quotation suggests, narratives or stories are seen to play a central role in the construction of lives. We express what is meaningful about ourselves through the telling of stories.<sup>5</sup> Story-telling is of importance in a wider cultural sense, hence the importance of oral history as a method of communicating the significance of particular lives and communities for society as a whole (the work of Thompson and Bertaux best illustrates this point).

At an individual level, however, the telling of stories is a medium for the integration of lives; for explaining discontinuities as well as continuities. Talking to people about the story of their lives (their 'autobiographies') gives the researcher access to the way in which people 'age from within' (Ruth and Kenyon, 1996b). Invariably, this provides us with a different perspective to that of traditional gerontology, where the physical and social changes accompanying ageing are seen as the primary forces influencing the individual. Against this, researchers such as Kaufman present a more challenging view of the self:

The old Americans I studied do not perceive meaning in ageing itself; rather they perceive meaning in being themselves in old age . . . When old people talk about themselves, they express a sense of self that is ageless – an identity that maintains continuity despite the physical and social changes that come with old age. (1986: 6–7)

The emphasis on stories and narratives is especially prominent in the work of the American sociologist Jaber Gubrium (1993). Gubrium is concerned with, as he puts it, 'the manner by which experience is given

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ance'. He argues that while a focus on individual thoughts and feelings is important, the context in which these arise must also be studied. Context is being used here to refer to the way in which people both share and develop their own ideas about growing old, and the settings in which meanings are assigned. Gubrium (1993) argues, for example, that we should pay attention to how respondents raise and explore their own questions in response to those of the interviewer. Rather than dismiss their conjectures as so much research debris, the process itself identifies important issues about the construction of ageing:

*When a respondent states that his or her feelings or thoughts about something 'depends', I pay as much attention to the 'what' it depends on and the 'how' of the connection as to the eventual answer. When someone asks me what I mean by a particular question, I believe it important to zero in on how that meaning is mutually worked out. When a respondent states or marks that she both agrees and disagrees with a particular questionnaire item... it is important to probe how a single question can have a seemingly contradictory response. Rather than treat the response as methodologically meaningless, I wonder what kinds of questions could make such ostensible contradictions reasonable. (1993: 49)*

Gubrium's work acknowledges two important issues about the social reality of ageing: first, certain aspects of ageing remain uncharted and ambiguous for many (if not all) individuals: researchers as well as elderly respondents have in this context the task of working out and reflecting upon the meaning of this stage in the life course. Second, it is also the case that many situations that affect older individuals (or their carers) are literally beyond their experience, thus creating complexities in terms of naming and identifying feelings and beliefs.<sup>6</sup> Much of Gubrium's work has focused on the issue of Alzheimer's disease, examining the way in which the meaning of the illness is derived and communicated. He uses the example of support groups for people with Alzheimer's to show the way in which these can provide a basis for speaking about and interpreting the caregiving experience. For Gubrium (borrowing a concept from social anthropology), the 'local cultures' of residential settings, day centres and support groups will provide important contexts for working through and assigning meanings to particular experiences. In this approach, language is seen to play a crucial role in the construction of reality. Lynott and Lynott make this point as follows:

*Instead of asking how things like age cohorts, life stages, or system needs organise and determine one's experiences, the phenomenologists turn the question around and ask how persons (professional and lay alike) make use of age-related explanations and justifications in their treatment and interaction with one another... Facts virtually come to life in their assertion, invocation, realization and utility. From this point of view, language is not just a vehicle for symbolically representing realities; its usage, in the practical realities of everyday life, is concretely productive of the realities. (1996: 754)*

Gubrium (with Wallace, 1990) draws out an important and somewhat subversive conclusion from this fact, namely, that 'ordinary theorizing (for example by older people themselves) should have equal (complementary status) to that of professionals. People are not merely *respondents* in the passive sense of the term; they develop facts and theories of their own, and the relevance of these deserves wider recognition. Using the standpoint of social phenomenology derived from Schutz and Husserl, Gubrium and Wallace argue that:

When we suspend the natural attitude and allow the ordinary theoretical activity of the aged and others to become visible, a whole world of reasoning about the meaning of growing old . . . comes forth. We find that theory is not something exclusively engaged in by scientists. Rather there seem to be two existing worlds of theory in human experience, one engaged by those who live the experiences under consideration, and one organised by those who make it their professional business systematically to examine experience. To the extent we all attend to experience and attempt to understand it or come to terms with its varied conditions, we all theorise age. To privilege scientific theorising simply on the basis of its professional status makes scientific what otherwise could be firm recognition of the theoretical activity of ordinary men and women, along with the opportunity to refocus social gerontology from behaviours to meanings embedded in ordinary discourse. (1990: 147)

The different perspectives discussed in this section take as their standpoint the centrality of the human subject in defining the social world of ageing. Through the medium of language, people describe the story or stories which make up their lives. Attention to these gives the researcher access not just to how particular individuals experience growing old, but also to the way in which ageing is constructed. Such a view provides a powerful corrective to the tendency – dominant in traditional gerontology – of seeing older people as 'empty vessels' reacting to, rather than shaping, experiences in later life. Taken together however, the focus on meaning provided by humanistic gerontology and biographical perspectives on ageing have a number of limitations. The nature of these will now be discussed and summarized.

### Constructing later life

There are at least three main problems which can be cited, shared to different degrees by both humanistic and biographical perspectives within gerontology. First, an important theme running through the biographical approach is that of the self actively constructing his or her social universe. However, the view of the self is inconsistent in the literature. At one extreme is Johnson's (1976) notion of the biographical

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career, in which the self would seem to be largely derived from the  
 different strands making up a person's life. At the other extreme is  
 the idea of the 'storied self', in which the underlying plot is open to  
 endless revision. Although Kenyon (1996) denies the charge of solipsism,  
 arguing for what he sees as the 'fundamental interpersonal dimension',  
 the approach to the self seems at times somewhat too literal and open-  
 ended. In particular, there is insufficient acknowledgement in this  
 approach that social and structural constraints may compromise both  
 biographical development and interaction with significant others in the  
 universe of the older person.

A second problem concerns the extent to which social inequalities are  
 taken into account in the subjective approach. Gubrium (1993), for  
 example, makes a powerful case for a social gerontology which avoids  
 privileging certain voices and silencing others'. But this assumes that  
 professional researchers are able to overcome forms of oppression which  
 themselves penetrate the language and relationships around which daily  
 life is constructed. Assuming the methodological stance suggested by  
 Gubrium may be effective for certain groups, less so for others. For  
 certain Black-African or Asian groups, the experience of exclusion may  
 compromise even explicit attempts to foreground all, rather than particu-  
 lar, voices of ageing.

Third, the work of Moody and Cole, in providing a critique of  
 instrumental reason, seeks to demonstrate the way in which existing  
 explanations of ageing are linked to forms of social control. Instrumental  
 reason is seen to reify or mystify structures of social domination, thus  
 reinforcing the status quo. As a formal critique, the arguments advanced  
 are of considerable power. But the alternatives produced seem to lack  
 substance. Moody refers to the need for 'emancipation', and for a  
 positive vision of how the social order might be different' (1992: 295).  
 But the form of the emancipation and the nature of a new social order is  
 left unclear. Of course, the response might be that it must be left to those  
 growing old themselves to define a different type of adult development,  
 one which (in Cole's terms) would recover a sense of 'mystery' about the  
 last phase in the life course. However, specifying the basis for emancipa-  
 tion would seem to be important and cannot be left entirely open-  
 ended.

#### Conclusion

As the above review suggests, a number of strands may be identified  
 within the broad area of critical gerontology. All may be seen as  
 providing a valuable contribution to the debate about the way in which



older age is socially constructed. As suggested, political economy has played a central role in highlighting structural inequalities within later life, and has challenged the specific form of crisis construction influencing the debate on ageing populations. Humanistic gerontology has advanced understanding about the experience of ageing as part of the whole course of life. At the same time, it has challenged the way in which older people have been marginalized within society, emphasizing the extent to which life appears emptied of meaning and significance. Finally, biographical perspectives draw out the importance of ways of coping and managing which have been formed over the life course. Placing the individual within the context of a particular life history is viewed as central for understanding how individuals adapt and respond to change in old age.

These different ideas and tendencies within gerontology will be used as a basis for exploring changes in the social construction of later life. We shall use these theories as tools for illuminating some of the contradictions and conflicts experienced by older people in their daily lives. The next two chapters build upon the theories reviewed in this chapter by examining in more detail the nature of this social construction. The task of the next chapter is to examine this through the policies and practices towards older people which developed after the Second World War, a time when western society identified old age as a time for a range of interventions in the field of economic and social policy.

#### Notes

1 Fennell et al. (1988) summarize some of the literature on disengagement theory. Hochschild's (1975) article remains one of the most incisive critiques of the theory.

2 Lynott and Lynott (1996) provide an excellent account of theoretical issues in the sociology of ageing.

3 See Estes (1993) for an examination of the approach taken in this book.

4 The critical reaction to studies such as Callahan's (1987) *Setting Limits*, was also influential in the development of the moral economy approach.

5 See McLeod (1997) for a valuable discussion of biographical and narrative perspectives as applied to the counselling field.

6 Grant (1998) explores this aspect in her powerful account of her mother's experience of dementia.