

Is ageism an oppression?

Introduction

Alongside an increasing use of the concept of intersectionality in framing contemporary later life, there has been a return to identifying the impact of ageism as a form of oppression within critical gerontology (Calasanti, 2019; Estes, 2019; Kruks, 2022). Used as part of an intersectional approach or as a stand-alone construct (Laws, 1996) the idea of ageism as oppression has had an impact on understanding the nature of ageism in structuring the negative experiences of old age. This has been seen recently in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic where the high death rate of older people, particularly within nursing homes, has been described as an ‘eldercide’ (Gullette, 2021). This shift in register has meant that the term has been used in many different contexts, often with different meanings, with the result that its analytic purchase has become unclear other than to stress the interconnectedness of the position of old age in the matrix of different oppressions.. In this paper we argue that the positioning of ageism as oppression, rather than constituting a deepening of gerontological focus, serves primarily as a way of connecting those using it with other social movements for whom oppression and its overcoming have been critical to their historical development.

In and of itself, we suggest, ageism as oppression has little instrumental value in effecting change over and above that associated with the identification of discrimination directed toward and experienced by older people in various settings. As with other discussions around the utility of the term ageism in contemporary old age (XXX & YYY 2020) we argue that there is both a need to provide a rationale for using a term as well as describing the circumstances where it can be used to some effect (XXX & YYY 2021). We argue that the term itself emerged in political discourse through the actions of groups occupying key sites of social division in order to account for the deeper processes that go beyond simple forms of inequality, and which could only be understood as forms of

oppression. Responses to the institutionalization of gender and race oppression are therefore particularly salient in contextualising the status of ageism, given how such movements have distinguished their claims of oppression from simpler forms of discrimination, exploitation, and inequality. While intersectional accounts may address multiple forms of oppression and inequality, it must be accepted that these are not the same thing (Dill and Zambana, 2020).

Ageism as oppression

The idea of ageism as oppression certainly has a powerful provenance within social gerontology and age studies. Key figures in the development of the field such as Carroll Estes (2001), Toni Calasanti and Kathleen Slevin (2001) and Margaret Gulleto (2019) have placed the idea of oppression at the core of their thinking about the social positioning of age. In her opening chapter of *Social Policy and Aging*, Estes discussed the interlocking systems of oppression of race/ethnicity, gender, class, and age (Estes 2001:13). These interlocking systems, she argued, provide the basis for understanding the structuring of the inequalities underpinning the position of older people. In a similar vein, Calasanti and Slevin write:

As a form of oppression, ageism *does* touch on everyone, even those who are most advantaged and privileged in society. Ageism matters, then, as another form of oppression intersecting with previous ones. As a result, the content of each – ageism, sexism, racism, and homophobia – and the ways in which people experience each, are transformed by age relations as well. (Calasanti and Slevin 2001:39)

The idea of ageism as oppression has thus become a recurring leitmotif in the development of critical gerontology (Laws, 1996; Overall, 2006; Twigg, 2013). Estes herself has returned to the term in her book, *'Aging A-Z – Concepts Toward Emancipatory Gerontology'* where she extends the concept to encompass the precarity and abjection experienced by older people (Estes, 2019).

The age discrimination manifested in society is considered but one dimension of the overall oppression of older people; of equal importance are the ageist discourses where ‘senile’ stereotypes of old age are used to belittle, undermine, and residualize the position of older people. In her book, *Ending Ageism*, Gullette similarly catalogues the wide range of harms ageism inflicts, “From neglect and inadvertence to symbolic violence to battering rape porn fraud and other material harms. From violation of personhood to publicly wishing us dead to senicide” (Gullette, 2019: 15).

Alongside the seminal contribution made by Robert Butler in coining the term ‘ageism’ (Butler, 1969), another key figure in establishing the status of ‘ageism as oppression’ was the American radical and activist Maggie Kuhn. She connected the oppressions of ageism and racism to their subject positions in American society (Kuhn 1976). She perceived the struggles of both groups, along with Third World national liberation movements, as part of a global struggle for liberation (Estes and Portacolone 2009). Supportive of the actions of the emergent Women’s Liberation Movement, Kuhn was instrumental in founding the Gray Panthers and saw their work as challenging the stereotyping and discrimination of older people. The Gray Panthers engaged in various campaigns, including highlighting negative ageist portrayals of older people in US television programmes. As Estes and Portacolone point out, these campaigns provided ‘positive consciousness raising about old age and aging’ (Estes and Portacolone, 2009:18).

Consciousness raising has been one of the key modes of activity among what soon came to be described as the new social movements, moving the concerns of discrimination from the personal to the terrain of wider social and political critique (Sarachild, 1978). An understanding of the oppressive nature of systematic and persistent discrimination not only led to a deeper awareness in society but also provided the motivation for activism and a refocussing of ‘the political as personal’ (Crook, 2018; Rowbotham, 2015). This template for

understanding ageism as oppression has been influential in a variety of other fields beyond what has become known as critical gerontology, such as critical social work, cultural studies, and within the humanities. In social work the need to locate practice in the context of ageist and oppressive stereotypes has been seen as essential for the benefit of practitioners and clients alike. Again, consciousness raising has been seen as a strategy for the construction of an anti-oppressive social work where social workers are encouraged to act as advocates and aid in the process of assisting clients to change the social dynamics which contribute to self-oppression (Gordon 2020; Moreau 1990). The all too easy negative positioning of older people by society is perpetuated through the language used and the assumptions about older people's agency (Azulai, 2014; Duffy 2014).

This theme has also been taken up by a significant body of work within cultural studies, which has focussed particularly on the role of the mass media (Edstrom 2018; Givskov & Petersen 2018) as well as popular culture (Jermyn 2012) in perpetuating systematic ageism. Pointing out that not all ageism stems from negative representations of older people, Katz and Calasanti have noted that positive representations of successful ageing can also be profoundly oppressive through the creation of divisive normative constructions of old age (Katz and Calasanti 2015). This interrogation of the complex representations of later life has in turn led to a number of critiques examining literature (Hess 2021), theatre (Harvie 2018), fashion (Twigg, 2013) and film (Dolan 2016), as well as internet studies (Lee and Hoh 2021; Rosales Climent, & Fernández Ardèvol 2020), all of which have seen the ageist positioning of older people as not only detrimental to their lives but also as constituting distinct forms of oppression. It is therefore unsurprising that some legal scholars have proposed that ageism should itself be listed as a hate crime with the same status as racism and misogyny (Goosey 2021).

Historical dimensions of theories of oppression

Identifying ageism as an oppression might seem relatively unproblematic in the context of the age discrimination evident in many societies (Stuckelberger, Abrams & Chastonay 2012; McNichol 2006). Given the range of theoretical concepts used within gerontology, it is nevertheless important to ask what the term ‘oppression’ might actually mean in relation to age? It is also pertinent to ask whether and how adding the concept of oppression to age discrimination changes our understanding of the position of older people in society? Is it a powerful tool for uncovering and changing the dynamics of contemporary old age, or is it an over-totalising representation of a more ambiguous set of relations and representations in which older people are socially embedded? Part of the difficulty lies in the way the concept of oppression has evolved over the last century and a half¹. We now propose to address this question of definition.

Iris Marion Young argued that oppression cannot be reduced to one single process, an underlying core, like Marx’s concept of exploitation. Rather, she proposed, there were ‘five faces’ of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young, 1990). She also pointed out that there was no clear account of the meaning of oppression although she did see old people as among those included as being described as ‘oppressed’, alongside other specific groups such as Women; Black people, Asians and Jews; Spanish-speaking Americans; Indigenous peoples; Lesbians and Gay men; People with physical and cognitive disabilities; and working-class people (Young 1990:40). While accepting that these groups are not all oppressed to the same extent or in the same ways, Young pointed out that “in the most general sense, all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts and feelings. In that abstract sense all oppressed people face a common position” (Young 1990:40).

Significantly, she also pointed out that while all these forms of oppression may entail or cause distributive injustices, they go beyond such a foundation. For her it was also necessary to go beyond the traditional usage of the term whereby oppression equates with the exercise of tyranny by a ruling group. This latter meaning permeated the anti-colonial struggles of the early and mid-20th century and led to their representation as ‘national liberation struggles’ (Cabral 1974). More contemporary usage has shifted these approaches and oppression is now seen as resulting equally, if differently, from “the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society” (Young 1990:41). Oppression thus becomes structural and deeply embedded in the normal processes of everyday life. Young writes: “we cannot eliminate this structural oppression by getting rid of the rulers or making some new laws, because oppressions are systematically reproduced in major economic, political and cultural institutions” (Young 1990:42). This shift in the meaning of oppression allows for a corresponding identification of privileged groups who both benefit from, and who contribute to the oppression of particular groups; these can be men, White people, the middle classes, or the able-bodied. Struggles against oppression therefore have their own dynamics and are not reducible to any one overarching form of oppression such as that associated with social class or imperial power. Nor can they be formed into a hierarchy or given primacy according to the degree of the oppression meted out. Intersectional approaches have their origins precisely in this recognition (Carastathis 2014).

The contributions of Simone Weil and Franz Fanon

In her classic text *‘Oppression and Liberty’* Simone Weil, the French philosopher and political activist, writes that it is important to grasp the mechanisms of oppression in order to be able to understand “by what means it arises, subsists, transforms itself, by what means, perhaps, it might theoretically disappear” (Weil, 2001:54). For Weil, such a need leads back to the understanding of society provided by Marx which she identifies as explaining why the

mass of people are oppressed. Yet this does not provide a sufficient account of the way in which the struggle for power impacts on both social structures and on people's lives (Blum and Seidler 2009). This extension of the concept of oppression as something beyond the social structuring of inequality leads to a focus on the general limitations placed on individuals in living their lives to the full. This movement beyond the structures of inequality has had profound implications for the many different groups theorising the nature and implications of their situations.

Movements against colonialism not only identified the tyranny of oppression meted out by the colonising forces, but also the way that it manifested itself in everyday life in the colonies. Franz Fanon, the anti-colonial writer of *'Black Skin, White Masks'*, was influenced by Weil's approach in his writing about the subordinate position of Black people in the colonial world and saw such subordination as a call to resistance (Zeilig 2016). He developed an approach that saw the domination of colonial peoples as an explicit outcome of the colonial process and not just a political injustice. For Fanon this subordination was as much about the psychological impact on subject peoples as it was about the political violence that maintained its institutions. Colonial oppression was about the re-ordering of the social world of those exposed to it, which he believed could only be overcome by counter-violence and political engagement (Roberts 2004).

Feminist approaches to oppression

Oppression, rather than simple sex discrimination, has also been identified as key to the subordination of women (Firestone 2005; Rowbotham 1977). Among 'second wave' feminists can be included the French sociologist, Christine Delphy whose book *'Close to home: A materialist analysis of women's oppression'* sought to locate the oppression of

women in the practices of patriarchy (Delphy, 1984). These practices saturated the domestic environment down to, as she famously pointed out, the nature of what was eaten at home and by whom. These examples of patriarchal practice, she argues are not simply matters of historical interest, rather they need to be demonstrated in their past and current forms so that the persistence of women's oppression can be understood. Addressing the need to understand patriarchy as something both oppressive and structuring of everyday life she writes:

Many people think that when they have found the birth of an institution in the past, they hold the key to its present existence. But they have in fact explained neither its present existence, nor even its birth (its past appearance), for they must explain its existence at each and every moment in the context prevailing at that time; and its persistence today (if it really is persistence) must be explained by the present context" (Delphy, 1984: 17).

This requirement for any theory of patriarchy can be perceived as equally necessary for any theory of oppression. Certainly, the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) has utilised the existence of patriarchy to explain the universal occurrence of women's oppression (Miller 2017). Other forms of oppression such as those based on nationality, race, disability, or sexuality are equally underpinned by a social theory of exclusion and domination evident in, and institutionalised by, the practices associated with it.

This has several consequences for how the oppressed putatively need to see their situation, how they can identify the forces against which they must resist, and, importantly, how they create an identity around which to organise that resistance. It is for this reason that politics and consciousness raising are intertwined and are critically important activities. Making individuals and groups aware of the oppressions prevalent in the behaviours, institutions and wider social structures that make up everyday life demands an engagement not only of the oppressed but also from the wider population who can be either allied with them or identified as their oppressors. From the 1960s onwards in North America and

Western Europe, the politics of oppression took many forms, sometimes operating around single issues or from the perspective of particular groups, but often in concert with other progressive ‘new’ social movements. In contemporary times, such struggles against oppression have become incorporated into discourses of intersectionality in which individuals are conceived of as intersectional assemblages of a variety of social and structural oppressions (Ahmed 2016). These may include more conventional categories such as class and economic exploitation, but increasingly they are now positioned alongside, rather than being considered primary foundational categories (Anthias 2013).

Oppression as a constituent of ageism

Ageism connects with this understanding of oppression, and old age, as we have seen, potentially merits inclusion as another dimension of emancipatory struggle. The extensive work undertaken by critical gerontologists to demonstrate, not just the social construction of old age, but the ‘structured dependency’ of older people (Townsend 1981) and the impact of the ‘aging enterprise’ (Estes 1979) serve as *prima facie* examples of the discrimination and social exclusion faced by older people. However, there is a tension within this rendering of the connection between ageism and oppression, namely why such oppression comes about and how it intersects with other forms of oppressive domination and the kinds of movement necessary to resist such oppression. How might ageism be viewed not just as discriminatory practices, but as a phenomenon more profoundly rooted in the structure and organisation of society?

As we have seen, ageism has been identified as a form of oppression equivalent to that experienced by other marginalised groups. In the promotion of anti-oppressive social work, focus is put on oppressive ageist assumptions leading to the formation of various relations of dependency which can take the form of money, health, isolation or social networks (Langley 2001; Phillips 2018). To this can be added the way that social policies

effectively exclude older people from their place as equal citizens in society – effectively creating old age as an excluded and residual category. This leads to the complaint that policies are ‘for’ but not ‘by’ older people (Woolhead et al 2004). It is paradoxical that the evidence of rising social exclusion of older people has emerged at the same time as governments have been actively pursuing policies seeking to minimise social exclusion (Burholdt et al 2020; Craig 2004).

Originally framed around the concept of exclusion from society of the “mentally and physically handicapped, suicidal people, aged invalids, abused children, substance abusers, delinquents, single parents, multi-problem households, marginal, asocial persons, and other social ‘misfits’” (Lenoir, 1974, cited in Sen, 2000: 1), the concept of social exclusion has since, not unlike the term ‘oppression’, encompassed a wider range of forms of exclusion, particularly in relation to older people (Walsh, Scharf and Keating, 2017). Burholdt and her colleagues, for example have defined a growing catalogue of forms of exclusion of older people, ranging from:

participation in ‘normal’ social activities: consumption activity (the ability to consume up to a minimum level the goods and services considered normal for society); savings activity (the accumulation of savings, pension entitlements, or property ownership); production activity (engagement in an economically or socially valued activity); political activity (engagement in some collective effort to improve or protect the immediate or wider social or physical environment); and social activity (engagement in significant social interaction with family or friends, and identifying with a cultural group or community) (Burholdt et al., 1999, cited in Scharf, et al., 2001: 305).

With this extension, an increasing constituency of older people has emerged capable of being designated ‘excluded’, despite in the majority of cases, older people being neither financially impoverished nor suffering selective material hardship (YYY & XXX, 2020a). The more

oppression loses its connection to exploitation and inequality, the more that older people qualify for the status of an oppressed group on the grounds of their collective non-recognition.

Oppression and the representation of age

As we have seen with the example of Maggie Kuhn, in the politics of aging there has been a focus on the ‘representation’ of age rather than on more coercive or direct forms of oppressive discrimination and exploitation arising from social structures. Part of the difficulty lies in the double nature of age discrimination which can be both negative and positive. The very cornerstone of contemporary old age, for example, is the state retirement pension and its age-discriminatory rules of entitlement. Younger people are excluded from these entitlements because they are not deemed to be old enough to get them. Whereas, when old age pensions were first introduced in Germany in the 19th century, older people chose disability rather than old age pensions because of the relatively easier eligibility rules (Scheubel 2013), it is now generally the case that people receiving disability benefits are expected to meet much more rigorous criteria than simply reaching a particular age (YYY & XXX, 2011).

This has created a paradox that makes chronological age, not a source of older people’s oppression, but rather a benefit, even when some of those arrangements may be otherwise unfair, such as in treatment of sex differential retirement ages (Pemberton 2017). Consequently, the nature of the oppression brought about by ageism is not necessarily brought about by chronological age per se, but by the *representation* of aging. Issues of representation and recognition have become a rich seam of much work undertaken by gerontologists demonstrating the implicit ageist discourses of contemporary aging particularly as it reflects on issues of the differences between men and women (Clarke and

Griffin 2008; Slevin 2008), sexuality (Simpson 2013; Thorpe et al 2015) and wealth (Lu, Pickhart and Sacker 2021; Torres et al 2016). While much of the attention of these studies has been directed toward old age, it could more accurately be described as being about the aging body more than chronological age, per se, as an indicator of a person's negative status.

The corporeality of the aging body serves both as a marker of old age and a projection of age's negative status. While this has been seen as both ideological and oppressive, the impact of aging rather than chronological age has been the signifier that creates the image and identity of old age well before any precise chronological age was employed to delineate its status (Roebuck, 1979). Old age may be socially constructed to various degrees, but it is the relation to processes of putative biological decline that allow the negative association with health and disablement to become the master category of older people's socially ascribed identity. The oppression experienced by older people therefore reflects and deepens the potential limitations of the ageing body in both its physical and cognitive aspects. The sense of 'decline' underpinning the corporeality of aging is however different from the 'corporealities' of race or gender that may mark, but do not in themselves, constitute their oppression.

The 'look' of agedness can perhaps be better considered as being similar to the way that disability theorists have identified the role of 'able-bodied-ness' in marginalising non-standardised bodies; in how society has long been organised and in how these arrangements follow the interests of the able-bodied majority (Abberley, 1987). As Abberley notes:

“While in the cases of sexual and racial oppression, biological difference serves only as a qualificatory condition of a wholly ideological oppression, for disabled people the biological difference, albeit as I shall argue itself a consequence of social practices, is itself a part of the oppression”. (Abberley, 1987: 8).

Obviously, this focus on the health and disability of older people is only one aspect of the role of ‘aging processes’ in oppressing older people. The intersections of gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity can add extra dimensions to the oppressive matrix in which older people are situated. However, it is noteworthy that older people are primarily positioned by what Gullette (2018) has termed a ‘decline ideology’, which leads to an institutionalised ageism where the needs of the older population are considered less significant (or less remediable) than those of younger fitter populations (Gullette 2021). Within this perspective the ageist oppression of older people seems more a combination of processes centred around assumptions of bodily decline and dependency than by their marginal capacity to produce, reproduce and consume.

Ageism and the relationality of young and old

In describing the oppression of ageism, a number of writers have pointed out how the linguistic framing of old age leads to much of its oppressive nature. As substantial material inequalities regarding the position of older people have become harder to demarcate as a distinguishing factor in the oppression of older people (YYY & XXX, 2020b), the significance of the negative *representation* of age has grown in importance. New forms of exclusion have emerged as oppositions appear between ‘young’ and ‘old’. These representations articulate differences in economic power as well as social exclusion, but often in quite contrary ways. Thus, older people are often projected as representing dependent categories of social policy that utilises resources which could be better put to use by younger cohorts; or in contradistinction, as a group benefitting unfairly from their accumulated resources in the shape of pensions and property assets (XXX & YYY, 2022). Not only do such representations convey an inverse ‘unfairness’ between the young and the old, but one to which responsibility is added for creating a climate of future ecological unsustainability impacting on those at the start rather than at the end of their adult lives (Elliot 2022).

Many commentators have pointed out that the very essence of ageism is its inherent relationality; namely the difference between people who are younger or older than one another (Calasanti, 2003). While the inequalities embedded in this relationality might also apply unequivocally to many other social divisions, it seems less straightforward when it applies to age and ageism – with the further complication that most adults transition from one status to the other in a way that few other identities do, effectively temporalizing the centrality of this relationality. The fact that all older people have at one time been young does not make the negative aspects of ageism any less significant, but it is more difficult to assert that it reflects putative self-interest, unless both self and interests are posited as inherently shifting, unstable social phenomena. Perhaps flowing from this lack of determinacy, it has been easier to concentrate on the representational as constituting the essential nature of the division, rather than being the result of an assumed ‘fundamental’ conflict of interests. But, in doing so, attention is brought back to the importance of bodily appearance and representational status in discussions of old age and its negative framing.

Ageism and generational culture

Concentrating on ageism as the negative representation and marginalisation of old age *tout court* risks overlooking many other less corporeal dimensions of later life, not least the beneficial aspects of age-based restrictions such as age-defined pensions and other associated benefits of seniority. There is also the question of whether the social and political power of older people - both as a voting bloc and an asset-holding constituency - may constitute the basis of the oppression of others, whether through occupying positions of authority or in supporting policies that emphasise more conservative modes of life (Favero and Galasso, 2015; Torres-Gil and Spencer-Suarez 2014). The generational schism of the 1960s, while not historically unique, was one in which rebellion was seen as the monopoly of youth and being old a synonym for reaction and inflexibility (Fraser 1988). This not only set up some of the

dynamics for the generational habitus of the post Second World War baby boomers but is also reflected in the valorisation of anti-aging cultures that these cohorts have perpetuated through mid and later life (YYY & XXX, 2007). As a result, the oppression resulting from the generational capture of cultural and social institutions by the baby boomers that some commentators have noted has a paradoxical quality, given that it is this very same cohort who are keen to emphasise the imaginary of an ‘ageless aging’.

The adoption of third age cultures which emphasise agency and choice elevates later life to a series of engagements with lifestyle rather than an old age constrained by dependency and decline. Meshing with the various articulations of ‘active’, ‘productive’ and ‘successful’ aging, the new aging has made a virtue of distancing later life from ‘real’ old age, commonly represented in its most vivid form by admission to the nursing home. The imagery of dependency and cognitive impairment has figured heavily in the separation that exists between those able to maintain their position as citizen consumers and those who have been othered by a fourth age imaginary. That these divisions exist among the older population as well as the young can be seen across the spectrum of later life; up to and including the Covid 19 pandemic where a form of ‘fourth ageism’ has been put forward to explain both the high mortality rates of older nursing home residents but also, the anger of many older people to being classified as vulnerable on the basis of their chronological age (XXX & YYY, 2021). This desire for differentiation, between those seeking validation through the cultures of the third age and those marginalised and objectified by the activation of fourth age imaginaries has brought to the fore an older debate about whether age is itself an ageist concept (Bytheway and Johnson 1990), with aging studies itself little more than a discursive manifestation of the pervasive decline ideology that overshadows and oppresses much of later life (Gullette 2018).

Conclusion

Bringing our arguments together, the positioning of the issue of ageism as a form of oppression risks confounding rather than clarifying the multiple social locations and dynamics of later life. In so doing, critical gerontologists run the risk of projecting an essentialism where all dimensions of an issue end up being reduced to an overdetermining logic; a fate that has befallen many other social movements and which often turns useful insights into an unwieldy determinism (Stanley and Wise 2002). In moving the idea of ageism from representing a form of discrimination relating to age (as a number of writers have argued, e.g. Macnicol, 2006) to framing it as an oppression, risks homogenizing the complexity of later life. It also potentially restricts research on aging through the foreclosure of explanations which might otherwise undermine the seeming coherence of treating old age as a field marked by ageist oppression. Furthermore, as Abberley has pointed out in his discussion of disablism as oppression, a theory of oppression “must at some point face the question of who benefits from oppression” (Abberley, 1987: 16). While it is not difficult to understand how men benefit from the inequalities of gender, how white people benefit from the inequalities of race, or how heterosexuality is rewarded in public policy, it is not so straightforward to see which age groups or generations benefit from the complex and often ambiguous inequalities characterising the relations between such age and generational groupings.

Even at the highpoint of industrial society, when most people found themselves unemployed and impoverished in later life, it was the inadequacy of the wages earned while younger that could neither sustain their children and their aged parents nor ensure any savings for later in their life, that constituted the gross inequalities between the younger and the older population at least as it existed within the working classes. The oppression meted upon the older population was seen to stem from the lifelong exploitation of the working classes; accentuated by, but not determined by chronological age. In most of the developed

economies of the twenty first century, median income in later life is no longer so much below that of working life, while necessary expenditure is if anything lower (YYY & XXX, 2020b). While the political interests of younger and older people may not always be aligned, evidence that those of the younger generation generally hold sway is hard to come by – and often as we have seen in public discourse the very opposite is asserted, if not proven (XXX & YYY, 2015). Indeed, freedom from oppression – whether from work, government, debt, or the responsibilities of the household – may be rather more available to the older retired population than to most working age people. What remains, however, is the lower regard for age as a harbinger of what could be described as its reduced ‘corporeal capital’ –less attractiveness, less drive, less energy, and less fitness, with the added impact of disabling illnesses (YYY & XXX, 2018). By and large these serve as proxy markers, not of ‘freedoms from’ but ‘freedoms to’ – a matter less of combatting oppression than of enhancing and expanding opportunity.

Platforms to extend the ‘freedom to’ do things in later life exist alongside the more constraining aspects of old age. Those with resources frequently take such opportunities and as a result become less subject to the constraints. In this respect, projecting the aim of a critical gerontology as mobilising to combat the oppressions of ageism alongside other oppressions is not obviously helpful unless the object is for gerontologists to be able to demonstrate that they constitute the ‘organic intellectuals’ of the politics of old age working towards emancipatory resistance (Estes 2008). In contradistinction, reducing the costs and increasing the resources to enable such opportunities to be more widely realised seems a more powerful argument for society to make more of later life.

References

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Notes

ⁱ The historical evolution of the term ‘oppression’ from the nineteenth century onwards has been usefully outlined by Ann Cudd, in her book *Analyzing Oppression* (esp. pp.8-20)