

Key terms

Dual labour-market theory the view that two labour markets exist: the first has secure, well-paid jobs with good promotion prospects, while the second has jobs with little security and low pay, vulnerable groups such as women, the young, elderly and ethnic minorities are concentrated in this second sector.

Ethnicity cultural heritage shared by members of a particular group.

Hybrid identities new identities created by ethnic mixing.

Institutional racism where the sum total of an organization's way of operating has racist outcomes.

Prejudice/Cultural attitudes a style of thinking that relies heavily on stereotypes that are

factually incorrect, exaggerated or distorted.

Race variation of physical appearance, skin colour and so on between populations that confers differences in power and status.

Racial discrimination racial prejudice put into practice, for example by denying someone a job on the basis of their skin colour or membership of a different ethnic group.

Racialized class fractions term used by Miles to describe splits in the working class along racial lines.

Racism systematic exclusion of races or ethnic groups from full participation in society.

Reserve army of labour Marxist concept used to describe an easily exploitable pool of workers drawn from vulnerable groups such as women, ethnic minorities, the old and the young.

An eye on the exam Ethnicity and stratification

Describe only – no need for evaluation

Prejudice and discrimination expressed through media representations, policing, housing allocation, employer attitudes, employment, unemployment and pay, racial name-calling and attacks etc.

(a) Outline the evidence that racism exists in modern British society.

(20 marks)

Statistical trends and patterns, research findings and contemporary examples from any module studied and/or your wider sociological knowledge

Describe the main explanations for ethnic inequality using appropriate theories, concepts and writers

These should focus particularly on employment, unemployment and pay although references to education, housing etc. would be relevant too

(b) Outline and assess sociological explanations for ethnic inequalities in modern Britain.

(40 marks)

Compare the strengths and weaknesses of different explanations before reaching a balanced conclusion

Focus on comparing the main ethnic minority groups in the UK – Asians such as Pakistanis, Indians and Bangladeshis, and African-Caribbeans – with the White majority

Grade booster Getting top marks in question (b)

Outline some of the ethnic inequalities that exist in the modern UK today including access to skilled jobs, pay, unemployment as well as poverty, housing and education. You need to consider a range of different sociological explanations in your answer including functionalism, Weberianism, Marxism and postmodernism. In discussing explanations, make use of relevant concepts, such as assimilation, reserve army of labour, primary and secondary labour markets, underclass, and racialized class fractions. You can develop evaluation by considering evidence for and against different views, using one theory to argue against another and by considering how different ethnic minority groups compare against one another in the labour market.

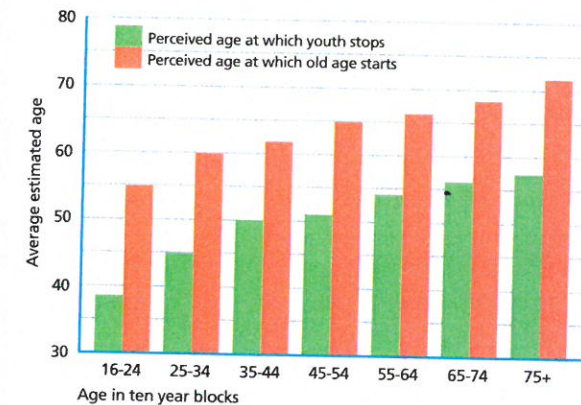
TOPIC 7

Age and stratification

Getting you thinking

- Young people are not allowed to watch films with too much sex or violence in them until the age of 18.
- The legal minimum age to stand for Parliament is 18 years.
- To become a judge, a person needs to have practised law for a minimum of 7 years.
- A person must be 13 years old to register on Facebook, Bebo and MySpace.
- Magistrates must retire at the age of 70.
- A third of job-seekers between the age of 50 and 65 are unable to find work.
- An analysis of fictional representations of the elderly in television drama and sit-coms found that 46 per cent of elderly characters were portrayed as grumpy, interfering, lonely, stubborn and sexless.
- Only 16 per cent of pensioners have a car compared with 77 per cent of all households.

Source: Ray and Sharp (2006) *Ageism: A Benchmark of Public Attitudes in Britain*, Policy Unit, Age Concern England



Study the figure above and the points on the left, and then answer the following questions:

- 1 What does the bar chart tell you about attitudes towards youth and old age?
- 2 What do the listed facts about age tell you about the treatment of the young and the elderly in UK society?
- 3 In your opinion, why are the elderly in particular subjected to such negative treatment in the UK?

Age cultures: a natural or social creation?

Ageing is a physical process that all human beings experience. However, in most societies, age is divided up into significant periods – childhood, youth or adolescence (i.e. being a teenager), young adulthood, middle age and old age. These periods have different social meanings attached to them with regard to social expectations about behaviour and lifestyle, responsibilities to others, independence and dependence, and so on. These social meanings are relative to culture and time.

In many pre-industrial and tribal societies, for example, the period of youth is notably absent, because at puberty children go through 'rites of passage' – often involving physical ordeal – that transform them into adults with much the same responsibilities as other adult members of the society. The term 'elder' in these societies symbolizes great wisdom, dignity and authority. The elderly are treated with great respect and consequently have a great deal of status. Vincent (2001) notes that what constitutes

'old age' varies cross-culturally, although how age is defined and treated differs within our own society too. It can be argued that young people and the elderly have a great deal in common in that they both experience low status. The transition to adulthood, however, is celebrated at 18 with a social event whilst those reaching their 100th birthday are regarded as so special they get a message of congratulation from the Queen.

These age categories, or **age strata**, are not 'natural' but created by society. That is, they are **social constructions**. You may have noticed from the exercise above that different age groups have different subjective interpretations of what counts as 'young' and as 'old' – what you see as 'old' may be quite different from how the 'objectively old' (official definitions see 65 years – the age of retirement – as the beginning of old age) view themselves. However, the consequences of these constructions are that members of different age groups will experience differing degrees of social status, self-esteem and prejudice. These, in turn, will produce different experiences of inclusion and exclusion, and often marginalization and inequality.

The elderly – the demographic picture

The decline in the death rate, the increase in life expectancy and a decline in the birth rate over the last 50 years have led to an ageing of the UK population. There are increasing numbers of people aged 65 and over and declining numbers of children under 16. Between 1971 and 2004, the number of people aged under the age of 16 declined by 18 per cent while the number of people aged over 65 increased by 29 per cent. Consequently, in 2008, about 18 per cent of the population, i.e. approximately 11 million people, were over retirement age. Davidson (2006) points out that, in 2002, in the UK population over the age of 60, for every 100 men there are 127 women; over the age of 80, this ratio increases to 100:187. Altogether, over 65 per cent of the elderly are women.

Age and inequality

Bradley (1996) refers to old age as the most neglected and hidden dimension of social stratification and hence inequality – for example, pensioners are one of the most significant groups that make up the poor. The annual Spotlight report by Help the Aged (2008) suggests that in 2005/6, 11 per cent of UK pensioners, i.e. 1.2 million people, were living in severe poverty on less than half of average earnings. Nearly double that number – 21 per cent, or 2.2 million people – were classified as living in poverty, with incomes less than 60 per cent of average earnings. These figures suggest that nearly a third of the elderly are in poverty. The Spotlight report claims that such poverty is having a negative effect on the health of the elderly – one in four of the elderly poor suffered illness as a direct result of poverty.

There is some evidence that, in 2007, an additional 200 000 pensioners were experiencing 'fuel poverty', meaning that they were spending at least 10 per cent of their income on electricity, gas and coal just to stay warm. The numbers of pensioners likely to be experiencing fuel poverty by 2010 is estimated at 1.2 million.

Age, gender, ethnicity and social class

Age interacts with social class and gender to bring about inequality. People who are poor in old age are most likely to be those who have earned least in their working lives, i.e. women and those employed in manual jobs. This can be seen especially with regard to pension rights. Many of those working in professions such as teaching and finance can supplement their state pension with a company or private pension. However, many manual occupations fail to provide this extra.

Davidson notes that the majority of those people who are not eligible for – or who cannot afford the contributions required for – participation in private occupational pension schemes are female. This is because they are more likely to have their careers interrupted by pregnancy and childcare, and are more likely to be employed in low-paid, part-time work for a significant period of their lives. Oppenheim and Harker (1996) found

that 73 per cent of male employees receive company pensions, compared with only 68 per cent of female full-time employees and only 31 per cent of female part-time workers. Consequently, women are more likely in later life to be dependent on a husband's occupational pension or on a state pension supplemented by benefits. Mordaunt *et al.* (2003) report that as a result twice as many elderly women compared with men rely on benefits and one in four single (never married, widowed or divorced) women pensioners in the UK live in poverty.

Davidson notes that the proportion of ethnic-minority elders reaching retirement is higher now than ever before. She argues that interrupted work patterns, low pay and racial discrimination mean that ethnic-minority workers also have less opportunity to pay into private occupational pension schemes. They also have less economic potential to save and invest for old age. Ethnic-minority women are further disadvantaged. Davidson suggests their old age may be underpinned by race, gender and age discrimination.

Scase and Scales (2000) argue that the elderly are likely to be split between affluent early retirees and those who are on or close to the breadline. This latter group may have to continue working beyond retirement age in order to avoid severe poverty, especially as the value of state pensions relative to earnings has been declining since the early 1990s. Ray *et al.* (2006) also note that the retirement age often differs according to social class and status. For example, senior business executives and political leaders have the power to resist the official legal retirement requirement, and consequently they may avoid the potential poverty and negative connotations associated with being elderly or retired.

The effects of ageism

Robert Butler (1969) defined ageism as a process of negative stereotyping and discrimination against people purely on the grounds of their chronological age. The elderly have mainly been the victims of this discrimination. For example, Butler argued that ageism is about assuming all older people are the same, despite their different life histories, needs and expectations, but Best (2005) also notes that the young, especially youth, can be victims of ageism too. Moral panics which negatively focus on the activities and cultural habits of young people are cited as evidence of such ageism. However, it can be argued that ageism practised against the elderly has greater negative consequences than that practised against the young, in terms of self-esteem and social well-being.

Butler suggested that ageism was composed of three connected elements:

- 1 prejudicial attitudes towards older persons, old age and the ageing process
- 2 discriminatory practices against older people
- 3 institutional practices and policies that perpetuate stereotypes about older people.

He argued that ageism leads to the elderly experiencing fundamental inequalities in the UK in terms of their access to jobs and services, their income and how they are viewed by younger members of society.

Focus on research

Milne *et al.* (1999) Grey power

A study of elderly people in Britain (Milne *et al.* 1999) found evidence of two distinct 'worlds'. In one world, composed of people in the early years of retirement who live in a shared household with an occupational pension, there is a reasonably comfortable lifestyle.

In the second world, made up of those over 80 who live alone with few savings, people can suffer acute poverty.

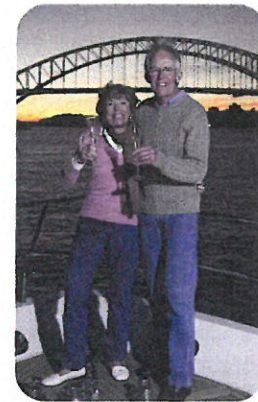
The former grouping, comprising relatively affluent older people, is much sought after by manufacturers all over the industrialized world, where the term 'grey power' is sometimes used to refer to the consumption habits and patterns of those over 65. Of course, the term cannot be applied to all older people. First, social-class differences continue into retirement. Lifestyle and taste differences, and the impact of different occupations as well as different forms of housing tenure, persist. Second, ill health is also gendered, with men more likely to experience it at an earlier age. The jobs people did also affect their income in old age; ex-professional and managerial workers have more income than ex-manual workers. Finally, older men have generally higher incomes than older women.

Adapted from Abercrombie, N. and Warde, A. (2000) *Contemporary British Society* (3rd edn), Cambridge: Polity Press

- 1 Why is it that the term grey power 'cannot be applied to all older people'?
- 2 What might be the circumstances which lead to an older person belonging to either of the 'worlds' described above?

Institutional ageism

Greengross (2004) agrees with Butler and argues that ageism is deeply embedded and very widespread in UK society. Moreover, it is often unconscious, which makes it difficult to tackle. She notes that arbitrary age barriers set by the state mean older citizens cannot participate in many voluntary and civic activities – for example, the age limit for being a juror is 65 years whilst all judges and magistrates have to retire at 70 years. In 2006, the government implemented the UK's first age discrimination legislation. This covered all higher and further education, but excluded unpaid voluntary and civic work. Despite this



legislation, employers are still able to force workers to retire at the age of 65. In 2008, Age Concern unsuccessfully challenged the compulsory retirement age in the European courts. However, the government have stated that it will eventually move away from insisting on a compulsory legal retirement age.

Greengross argues that the National Health Service (NHS) is guilty of institutional ageism because older patients in the NHS are treated differently from the young. Older people are subjected to discrimination in that they are often omitted from clinical trials or are denied particular treatment or operations on the basis of their chronological age. Greengross notes that these decisions are usually based on prejudiced views of what a 'good innings' is or is based on the view that the interventions are not worth pursuing because a person is 'too old'. There is some evidence that trainee medical professionals may be avoiding specializing in geriatric medicine because it is regarded as a low-status sector of the NHS.

Ray *et al.* (2006) argue that there is a subtle difference between age-discriminatory state practices, e.g. the ageist policies practiced by the NHS as outlined above, and age-differentiated state practices, e.g. protective legislation, positive stereotyping and special treatment. The latter policies and practices are designed to benefit rather than harm the elderly. For example, having an age at which a person becomes eligible for a state pension helps to ensure an adequate income in retirement, whilst concessions on a range of services, such as free or reduced public transport, free NHS prescriptions and free television licences for those over 75, help to reduce the financial burden on the old.

However, Ray and colleagues argue that some of these practices can prove just as harmful for older people as more overtly negative forms of discrimination. For example, the types of concessions mentioned above can reinforce ageist stereotypes of older people as needy and dependent and, by doing so, exclude them from choices and opportunities.

Greengross also notes that the elderly experience ageism with regard to services other members of society take for granted. For example, ageism practised by financial services may mean older people may have difficulty in hiring a car, getting insurance, getting a credit card or negotiating a loan.

Ageism and the mass media

Another type of institutional ageism is found in the mass media. Featherstone and Wernick (1995) point out that birthday cards in particular indicate the distaste widely held about the ageing process. Representations of men and women in the UK media tend to focus on the 'body beautiful', and television and advertising encourage women in particular to see their bodies as 'projects' in needs of constant care and improvement. Ageing – and its outward signs, such as wrinkles and grey hair often presented as the greatest threat to our well-being, one that needs to be resisted at all costs. Carrigan and Szmigin (2000) argue that the advertising industry either ignores older people or presents them as negative stereotypes – physically unattractive, mentally deficient, senile, cranky,

grumpy, cantankerous or difficult. They conclude that advertisers fail to reflect the elderly in any authentic way.

Older people portrayed on television are often marginalized, comical or based on inaccurate stereotypes. Genuine older people are generally underrepresented on television. These stereotypes are often the only experience younger people have of old age. These negative images may, therefore, create perceptions of a future old age as a time of dependency, poor health, poverty and vulnerability, even though this may bear little relationship to the lived experience of many older people.

The 'demographic timebomb'?

Another aspect of ageism is the debate about the so-called 'demographic timebomb'. It is predicted that in 2014, people aged over 65 years will outnumber people aged under 16 for the first time, and that the gap will widen thereafter. The number of people over retirement age in 2021 is projected to be 12.2 million. New Right thinkers have assumed, almost without question, that these elderly people are going to be dependent on younger people, that they are going to put intolerable strain on services such as health care, and that they will be a drain on the economy because of the disproportionate costs of the health care, social services and housing assistance they will supposedly need. Generally, then, this demographic timebomb is seen as likely to lead to a potential crisis for the welfare state, family and economy.

However, the concept of a demographic timebomb is based on a number of ageist assumptions that do not stand up to scrutiny:

- One such assumption is that elderly people are likely to be dependent because of poor physical and mental health. Whilst ageing is associated with some biological decline in physical and mental abilities, there is little evidence that this has a significant effect on the lifestyle of the elderly. For example, only one in 20 people over 65 and one in five people over 80 experience dementia. Ray and colleagues argue that overall, research has failed to prove a link between declining health and capability, and ageing.
- In terms of physical health, some authors suggest that there is a 'medical myth' that unfairly suggests ageing is synonymous with disease. However, decline in terms of illness may be due to prolonged and life-long

exposure to an unhealthy environment and lifestyle, rather than to the ageing process itself.

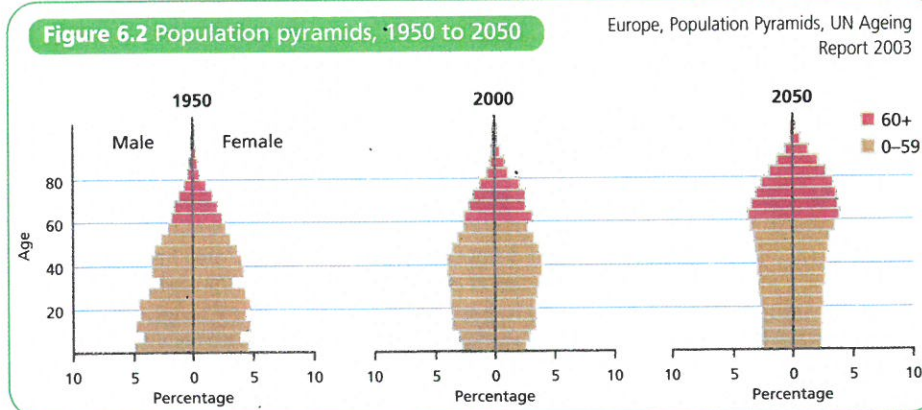
- There is also an assumption that the elderly are incapable of doing paid work because the ageing process makes them incompetent. However, Ray and colleagues note that research findings indicate that younger workers are no better at their jobs than older workers, despite the widespread perception that this is the case. In experiments, it has been shown that there is no significant difference between the abilities of younger and older workers, with each group performing particularly well or poorly in different areas. Increasingly, because of the prospect of poverty and inadequate state pensions, the elderly are already returning to work post-retirement in fairly large numbers despite discrimination in the workplace. Over 1 million people are already voluntarily working beyond the state pension age, and research by the Prudential insurance company in 2005 estimated that figure could rise to 2.5 million by the end of the decade because many people won't be able to afford to retire.
- Taylor-Gooby (1996) points out that the number of pensioners increased from 6.5 million in 1951 to 10 million in 1991 without causing any major economic or social problems.

Ageist attitudes

It can be argued that all these ageist practices result in negative stereotypes underpinning social attitudes about the elderly in the modern UK, so dehumanizing members of this group. The elderly have already lost a major source of status, respect, identity and economic security – work – when they have been forced to retire. However, the sorts of ageist practices and stereotypes outlined above result in their association, particularly by the young, with dependence, vulnerability and disability. The elderly are generally seen as making little or no contribution to society and/or as a burden on society. The ascribed characteristics of age therefore serve to exclude many elderly people from full involvement in society.

The research of Ray and colleagues found that ageism is common in the UK but, despite its negative consequences, it does not have a malicious character. They note that it exists in the form of what they call 'benevolent prejudice', in that the elderly are generally viewed as moral and admirable. Most people in their survey agreed that they should be valued and cherished. However, the sample also generally saw the elderly as 'incompetent, less intelligent but dear dodderers'. Ray and colleagues suggest that disadvantages can arise from both these positive and negative attitudes which can result in the

Figure 6.2 Population pyramids, 1950 to 2050



Europe, Population Pyramids, UN Ageing Report 2003

continued socio-economic exclusion of the elderly. At an individual level, they claim that the elderly are infantilized, ignored and treated in a patronizing and disrespectful fashion. It can also lead to conflict if the elderly person fails to live up to these social expectations – for example, they may be treated preferentially when being given a seat on a bus, but may be criticized as selfish for spending their savings on a holiday when they should be looking to provide an inheritance for their families.

At an institutional level, Ray and colleagues claim that ageism can mean exclusion from the workplace and positions of power or decision-making because employers assume lower competence. It might also lead to a failure to offer the elderly choices in health and social care, and to the assumption that older people might not want the sorts of life-chances that younger people do. Finally, it might be assumed that it is natural for older people to have lower expectations and reduced choice and control. Consequently, less account is taken of their views. Ray and colleagues conclude that ageism, and therefore age inequality, can only be tackled if older people are regarded by the state and society as active participants in decisions about their future, rather than as passive victims.

The young

Like the elderly, the young also make up a large subgroup of the poor. A quarter of children live in households receiving less than 60 per cent of the average median income. In addition, many young people of working age face social deprivation caused by low pay, student loans and, in some cases, ineligibility for benefits and unemployment. In 2005, the unemployment rate for those under 25 was over 18 per cent. However, the increase in those on training schemes masks the true figure. Again, this is affected by other factors, such as ethnicity – for example, twice as many African-Caribbean males are unemployed compared with Whites.

Furthermore, the extended transitions into adulthood that characterize the experience of young people in advanced industrial societies often bring with them extended periods of relative deprivation and reduced social standing. There are now more likely to be intermediate stages between leaving school and entry into the labour

market, between living in the parental home and having a home of one's own, and (perhaps) between being a child in a family and being a parent or partner in one, as Table 6.10 demonstrates. Each of these stages is, however, potentially problematic.

Declining opportunities for those in vulnerable groups has led to increases in homelessness and financial hardship amongst the young, especially in run-down urban areas. Beatrice Campbell in *Wigan Pier Re-visited* (1985) and *Goliath* (1993) referred to adaptations some young people make in the absence of access to the mainstream routes to adult status. She suggests that some young women use having a baby as a means of acquiring adult status in a society which has increasingly closed down other options for them. Young men, on the other hand, with little prospect of work, turn to daring crimes such as car theft and joyriding as alternatives which offer the opportunity to show off their skills. Both motherhood and car theft become public ways of achieving status.

Young people at work

Most young workers earn relatively little, and are given less responsibility and status in almost every occupational sector. Currently, some 227 000 18- to 20-year-old workers earn the minimum wage (Bulman 2003). Young workers are central to many industries, but are generally subjected to the worst pay and conditions and required to be the most 'flexible'. This is particularly evident in retail and catering. More than two-thirds of McDonalds' staff are aged under 20, while the Restauranters' Association says that in the commercial sector of the hospitality industry, 31 per cent of staff are aged 16 to 24. Of the nearly two million young people aged between 16 and 24 in full-time education, 40 per cent are also in paid employment. Two-thirds of Pizza Hut's 'crew' staff are in full-time education, as are one-fifth of Sainsbury's store staff (Sachdev and Wilkinson 1998).

There is some evidence that ageism that can affect the young too. Vincent notes that young job applicants may be passed over in favour of older and more mature workers. He notes that reverse discrimination – in which older workers are offered dead-end jobs because it is assumed that younger workers are more ambitious – also takes place.

Table 6.10 Extended transitions to adulthood

Childhood	Youth	Adulthood
School	College or training scheme	Labour market
Parental home	Intermediate household, living with peers or alone	Independent home
Child in family	Intermediate statuses, including single parenthood, cohabiting partner	Partner-parent
More secure housing	Transitional housing in youth housing market, e.g. furnished flats and bedsits	More secure housing
'Pocket money' income	'Component' or partial income, e.g. transitional NMW (National Minimum Wage)	Full adult income
Economic 'dependence'	Economic semi-dependence	Economic 'independence'

Source: Jones, G. (2002) *The Youth Divide – Diverging Paths to Adulthood*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Theoretical explanations of age inequality

Functionalism

Functionalists such as Parsons (1977) considered age to be of increasing importance in modern societies. In pre-industrial society, Parsons argued, age did not really matter because family determined one's place in society. However, since industrialization, people have been more socially and geographically mobile, and age groups have become more important. Parsons argued that they provide **role sets** that create a link between the kinship group and the wider society. For example, Pilcher (1995) suggests youth is a stage of transition that connects childhood (which is mainly experienced as dependency upon adults in families and schools) to adulthood (which is mainly experienced as independence at work and in relationships that might lead to the setting-up of our own families). In this sense, age is important as a mechanism of social integration – it allows people to move from one social institution to another without too much social disturbance or conflict. However, critics note that there is a strong possibility that such social order might be undermined by unemployment, low pay, the expensive housing market, the lengthening of education and higher education costs. All these trends are likely to lead to more dependence on the family. The difficulties in this transition to economic independence are having a knock-on effect in other areas of social life, e.g. young mothers are marrying later.

Functionalists, such as Cummings and Henry (1961), suggest that the way society treats the old has positive benefits for society. The ageing process and the social reaction to it is part of a mutual process in which the elderly, either by voluntary choice or legal compulsion, are encouraged to abandon their occupational roles within the specialized division of labour. The implication here is that the ageing process inevitably leads to social incompetence. This process of 'social disengagement' functions to allow younger members of society to take the place of the old in the specialized division of labour with minimum disruption to both social order and economic efficiency. However, critics of **disengagement theory** point out that retirement from work and society is often not voluntary. Moreover, this disengagement also has negative consequences for the self-esteem of the elderly in terms of ageism. Critics of functionalism point out that disengagement often leads to the neglect of the experience, skills and talents of older members of society which could still be of great benefit to society. Furthermore, disengagement theory ignores the fact that many old people continue to be active participants in society.

Marxism

According to Marxists, the young provide a cheap pool of flexible labour that can be hired and fired as necessary. They tend not to have dependants and so are willing to work for low wages. In terms of full-time employment, their lack of experience legitimates low pay, and competition for jobs keeps wages low.

Marxists, such as Phillipson (1982), suggest that the logic of capitalism, which is about exploiting workers and

Focus on research

Bynner et al. (2002)

Young people's changing routes to independence

Several studies funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have explored the different patterns of transition from school to work. Some have found that new divisions are appearing among young people entering adulthood and, according to the research, there are winners and losers in the system. The ways in which young people make their domestic transitions to adulthood are polarizing into the majority, whose transitions are extended over many years, and a minority, whose transitions are rapid, stigmatized and potentially problematic. According to Bynner et al. (2002), this polarization is increasing. They identify a 'widening gap between those on the fast and the slow lanes to adulthood'. What was previously a middle-class pattern of slow transition is becoming more widespread among the more affluent working class, and is now a majority pattern. This trend may be due to people choosing to marry and have children later in their lives, or because lack of resources and the demands of mortgages and expensive lifestyles cause them to postpone family building. At the other end of the scale, there is a continuation of the working-class pattern of early childbirth, which has become more problematic as the support structures of marriage, extended kinship networks, job security and formal welfare systems have become eroded. In the fast lane, early partnership formation and parenthood is usually followed by partnership breakdown and lone parenthood.

<< Teenage motherhood ... epitomizes the problem: early school leaving, no qualifications, poor job or youth training, pregnancy and childbirth, poor prospects of ever getting a decent job leading to family poverty. >> (Bynner et al. 2002)

These slow-track and fast-track patterns are closely linked to socio-economic background and educational level. Working-class and female transitions tend to be more condensed and earlier, while middle-class and male transitions tend to be more protracted and later.

Bynner, J., Elias, P., McKnight, A., Pan, H. and Pierre, G. (2002) *Young People's Changing Routes to Independence*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

- 1 What has caused the affluent working class to merge with the 'majority pattern of slow transition'?
- 2 Why is the fast track to adulthood increasingly problematic for the less affluent?

consumers for profit, is incompatible with the needs of the elderly. The elderly, despite their greater needs, are neglected by the capitalist system because they no longer have the disposable income or spending power which is so attractive to capitalists. Moreover, as Kidd (2001) notes, because their labour-power is no longer of any use to capitalism, the elderly are seen as a drain on its resources through their use of welfare and health provision. Consequently, then, in capitalist societies such as the UK, early retirement and increasing life expectancy mean that the elderly have little or no status because they are likely to possess little economic power. Cultural and ideological stereotypes of the elderly help justify this state of affairs. As a result, the elderly are more likely to be in poverty and to experience ill-health as an aspect of that poverty.

However, some old people, particularly those from an upper-middle-class background have more power and status because their earning power during their working lives was greater and they were able to accumulate savings and wealth. The relationship this group has with capitalism is beneficial. This privileged sector of the elderly has the economic power to consume services, such as private health schemes, and they therefore enjoy greater life expectancy and better health.

Labelling theory

Ray et al. (2006) generally take a social action or interactionist approach to the treatment of the elderly. They note that there is evidence that the mental capability and wellbeing of the elderly can be negatively affected by exposure to stereotypical labels and experiences of ageism. Their labelling theory suggests that a self-fulfilling prophecy may be the result of exposure to ageism, which can cause a person to behave in a way which confirms these beliefs. They note that research has shown that the use of 'baby talk' or infantilized language causes older people to accept the inference that they are no longer independent adults, thus causing them to behave in a passive and dependent manner. In addition, research has shown that the linguistic expression of pity, particularly from medical professionals, conveys the idea that older people are helpless. Some older people may internalize this message and, as a result, increase their dependence on others.

Ray and colleagues argue that negative stereotypes can also impact on older people in other ways. For example, it

Key terms

Age stratum (pl. strata) an age layer in society experiencing differential status and market situation relative to other age groups or layers.

Consumerism emphasis on lifestyle and purchasing patterns.

Demographic timebomb a population trend so potentially grave in its consequences that it could literally damage society in an explosive way.

Disengagement theory the proposition that society enhances its orderly operation by disengaging people from positions of responsibility once they reach old age.

Role set a group sharing similar characteristics of whom a particular set of roles are expected.

Social constructions social categories arising from shared meanings held by members of social groups.

can affect the way a person reacts to ageing themselves. Negative labels about ageing and the discrimination that follows can cause negative age-related changes to worsen, as the older person sees their life as a downward spiral and therefore takes no counter action. Evidence from the Age Concern and Mental Health Foundation Inquiry into Mental Health and Wellbeing in Later Life found that older people themselves said that the most effective way to improve mental health and wellbeing would be to improve public attitudes to older people.

Postmodernist theory

Postmodernists such as Blaikie (1999) argue that chronological age, ageism and age-determined inequality are less likely to shape people's life experience in the 21st century. He suggests that UK society has undergone a social transformation from social experiences based on collective identities originating in social class and generation to an increasingly individualized and **consumerist** culture in which old age can be avoided by investing in a diverse choice of youth-preserving techniques and lifestyles.

Featherstone and Hepworth (1991) argue that age is no longer associated with some events and not with others. For example, as Kidd notes, the elderly who were regarded

Check your understanding

- 1 'Age is an ascribed characteristic but is also socially constructed.' Explain this statement and give an example of another characteristic that can be understood in this way.
- 2 Give examples which show how some members of both the young and elderly may suffer disadvantages relative to the majority of the population.
- 3 (a) Why do some commentators suggest that the increasing numbers of elderly people constitute a 'demographic timebomb'?
(b) How can this view be criticized?
- 4 What sort of pressures may be put on families as a result of the 'demographic timebomb'?
- 5 What evidence is there that young people experience inequality?
- 6 Why might extended transitions into adulthood become problematic?
- 7 (a) What is an age stratum?
(b) Which age strata would you say enjoy the highest status and market position in the contemporary UK? Why?
- 8 Why, according to Marxists, are both the young and old marginalized in capitalist society?
- 9 What evidence is there of increasing opportunities for consumerism among the elderly?