

and for Marxist writers the opposite is true. The main criticism against them comes from the postmodern views, but these can be taken as a critique against all of the classic sociological theorists.

Postmodern

Postmodern sociologists in this area are keen to extend the analysis of ethnicity beyond that of recalling disadvantage and offering structural solutions. In a world characterised by diversity, fluidity and fragmentation, postmodern writers have engaged with the concept of super-diversity and are producing work which documents the range of diversity within the UK. They are working to bring about lasting change, not only in material circumstances but also in seeking to

ensure that grand themes and analyses are no longer applied to whole ethnic groups – who are, they argue, not all experiencing the same advantages and disadvantages and who are as diverse as they are common.

Modood leads the way here in wanting to develop a more plural approach to ethnic relations that will extend into the future, rather than looking backwards. His work stresses difference and diversity of experience rather than commonality, and is critical of the portrayal of ethnic-minority groups as being victims (Modood and Berthoud, 1997). Work on hybrid identities and code-switching also form part of the postmodern contribution. You should be familiar with these from the AS course.

Section summary

The key theories to consider in this section are functionalism, Marxism, neo-Marxism, Weberianism and postmodernism.

Use the following words to write a paragraph explaining the key themes of this section.

- Super-diversity
- Assimilation
- Racialised
- Ethnocentric
- Islamophobia
- Ethnic penalty

Exam practice

- 1 Outline the evidence that ethnic disadvantage is a feature of life in the contemporary UK. (20 marks)
- 2 Assess Weberian explanations of ethnic inequality in the contemporary UK. (40 marks)

Stretch and Challenge Activity

Create a log of evidence relating to ethnic disadvantage in the contemporary UK. Look for evidence relating to specific ethnic groups and gender divisions. Following the media closely will be helpful in this task.

(iv) Inequalities relating to age

Pause for thought

- What age groups do you think are most disadvantaged in the UK, and why?
- At what age should people stop 'working'?
- What are your views on having a minimum wage law that does not cover people under the age of 17?

You should recall from your AS course that the older age categories are the fastest growing in the UK, where increasing life expectancy and a falling birth rate have resulted in changing demographic patterns. You may also remember examples of age-related restrictions in the UK. Schools are based on chronological age, and the right to vote, to learn to drive, buy alcohol and be eligible for a state pension are all age related. In this section we will focus on evidence of social inequalities relating to age and the sociological explanations for this.

The main site of disadvantage is related to the workplace and incomes, which evidence suggests shows examples of discrimination and ageism. Bytheway (1995) however explains how ageism is a misleading concept as age is experienced so differently by sections of the population. Age discrimination may be prevalent in the UK, but finding evidence of shared experiences can be difficult.

Workplace

Age disadvantage in the workplace is complex. Increasingly, people are experiencing compulsory early retirement, where they lose their once-secure employment and may find themselves unemployable, many years short of state retirement age. The phrase 'too old to employ' is frequently related to this growing group of workers, and the cost of the economically inactive over-fifties is a considerable drain on government resources. However, other people choose to work past the state retirement age, not wanting to lose their employee status. Others are in a position of relying on part-time work in retirement to maintain their standard of living. There are no

clear patterns of age-related behaviour in the workplace. Featherstone and Hepworth (1999) argue from a postmodern perspective that this is an example of how individual life-courses are becoming destructured and fragmented.

European legislation passed in 2006 made age discrimination illegal, however legislation often takes time to have the desired effect and loopholes are often present. One in five workers from all age sectors told a MORI survey that they had experienced discrimination at work, with 38 per cent citing ageism as the cause (MORI, 2002).

However, for employers there are often benefits associated with employing workers from particular age-related categories. Younger people are often cheaper to employ as they have not accumulated years of experience to justify higher wages; they are also likely to be easier to train and mould. Middle-age categories are associated with higher earners and those seeking career progression. Employing older people can be costly, as they are likely to remain in that employment until retirement, and if their skills are no longer required this can result in costly redundancy or retraining packages. While the idea of age-diverse workplaces is an inclusive one, in reality they are not always easy to find.

Economically and culturally, old age is experienced differently by different people (Vincent, 2006). Life expectancy favours women, hence the concept of the 'feminisation' of later life. Many women have been the most affected by material disadvantage during their lives. Material disadvantage in youth and middle age is structured around class, gender and ethnicity; in old age this becomes more pronounced and can be related to the issue of pensions.



Figure 1.8: Examples of age-diverse workplaces can be difficult to find

Pensions

Traditionally, receiving the state pension has been considered as a marker of old age. However, with life expectancy increasing; it is becoming common for society to think about pensions and old age in different ways. McKingsley (2001) refers to people aged 85 and over as the 'oldest old', therefore implying that there is a stage of being 'young elderly'. Milne and Harding (1999) researched the lifestyles of over 1000 older people in the UK and found evidence of two worlds. One was made up of people in the early years of retirement, often practising active ageing. The other was made up of over-eighties, increasingly likely to be living alone, with few savings and increasingly isolated. These different experiences mean that old age is not a universal category with shared social, cultural and economic experiences. However, there is evidence to suggest that the elderly are disadvantaged in the contemporary UK.

Individuals in the UK are eligible to receive state pensions when they reach a certain age, soon to be 65 for both men and women. Like Child Benefit, the pension is not means tested – it is a universal benefit available to everyone legitimately residing in the UK. In recent years, studies have shown that pensioners are more prone to poverty than those in the working population; between 1998 and 2001, 18 per cent of pensioners lived in poverty compared to only

7 per cent of the working population (Giddens, 2006, page 352). Pensioners (along with children) in the UK are among the most likely social groups to live in low-income households. Single female pensioners and older pensioner couples are the most likely to live in low-income households (JRF, 2007). Despite this universal benefit, there are huge discrepancies in the standard of living for older people, and this is related to social class, gender and ethnicity as much as to age.

Many older people have contributed to private pension schemes during their lives, and reap the benefit of this in later years. However, those groups who are materially disadvantaged during their working lives are unable to buy into the private schemes or to pay as much into them. For them, older age brings increased deprivation and disadvantage (Vincent, 2006). Ginn and Arber (1992) examined the extent of disadvantage in private pension scheme arrangements and analysed the results according to gender and ethnicity: Pakistani and Bangladeshi women were particularly disadvantaged compared to their white British counterparts – reflecting patterns of disadvantage in the workplace.

The issue of pensions, rights and responsibilities is a thorny one. Being the main pension provider places a huge financial burden on the state, and there is increasing criticism that provision is insufficient. The likelihood in the future is for pension provision to be modelled as it is in the

USA – based much more on private and personal financial contributions – and this will inevitably favour the higher earners in stable employment, who are able to contribute the most to their individual pension plans. Johnson (1995) argued that contributing to state pension funds would disadvantage the younger age groups, who were unlikely to receive the same level of pay-outs as the older people now do. Provision for the elderly also has social costs for families and carers. The concept of the 'sandwich generation' has been used to refer to those carers caught in the middle of young and older generations – caring at both ends of the spectrum.

Activity 21

- 1 Why do you think there is frequent discussion about raising the age of entitlement to the state pension?
- 2 What are the social implications of abolishing state pensions and telling everyone they have to finance their own retirement through private schemes?

Age disadvantage in other areas

The optimum age for committing crimes in the UK has been linked to age and gender in particular. Girls are likely to deviate at a younger age than boys and to engage in criminal activity for a shorter period of time. Young males are most at risk of being the victim of a crime, yet amongst the least likely to fear crime. Older people living alone fear crime the most, yet are unlikely to experience it. The media could be accused of creating moral panics about old age and crime in the UK.

It could be argued that older age groups are better represented in the political system than younger ones. However, the age composition of British politicians cannot be expected to be representative. Furthermore, older people are more likely than younger ones to know and understand how to use the political system to meet their needs. Groups such as Age Concern wield considerable power in Parliament, as they are well known and well connected, with high levels of social capital. Younger people tend not to have these links and are more likely to be marginalised by the political system.

Clearly patterns of ill-health are age-related. Children, young people and the elderly suffer most frequently, for obvious reasons. However, there is evidence that age discrimination occurs in healthcare provision in the UK, which often goes unnoticed. For example, there are upper age limits for breast-cancer screening which seem to go unopposed.

The representation of older age groups in the media has been described as stereotypical, focusing on dependency and ill-health. Positive representations of active ageing are difficult to come by in the media. Carrigan and Szmigin (2000) argue that the advertising industry either ignores older people or stereotypes them as caricatures who are decrepit, withering, physically ugly or losing their mind. In this way advertisers fail to reflect the reality of life for older people.

Activity 22

Carry out an analysis of advertising on either the television or print media. Collect images of older people and categorise them according to the roles they portray.

There seems to be considerable evidence which indicates that age is a site of social disadvantage for some social groups in the contemporary UK, and we will now consider how sociologists have explained these patterns. As we proceed through the next section, please keep an important point in mind: age is a relatively new emerging area of social research, which has not received the same degree of treatment (or interest?) as class, ethnicity or gender. One reason for this is the complexity of isolating age from any other social category. When considering sociological explanations of the patterns, we will draw on sociological concepts already covered as well as introducing some new ideas.

Sociological explanations

Functionalism

Functionalists have viewed age stratification in terms of modernisation and social roles. The development of a modern industrial economy brought with it inevitable changes for the young and old. Laws restricting the employment of

children and laws bringing in a retirement age and universal state pension provision meant that socially and economically, conditions would change in the name of modernisation and progress. Some functionalist writings associated old age with the concept of **disengagement**, where age brings with it a movement from the mainstream to the periphery of society. Disengagement concerns itself with the role old age plays within the social system, rather than at an individual level. Individuals become aware of the ageing process and actively seek to abandon some social roles, leaving them for younger generations to pick up. Such a process serves to maintain the social order, a key component of functionalist theory.

Arguably, functionalism has offered more insight into age difference than any other sociological theory. Critics, however, point out that disengagement does not align itself particularly easily with the concepts of social solidarity or the collective conscience.

Parsons (1954) concentrated on the important role that age played in the acquisition of social roles. He viewed teenage culture as a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, associating it with issues of transition and insecurity as young people sought to fulfil their social roles. Old age was considered as a time of isolation and loneliness. Receiving a pension created a dependency and with it came a drop in status. The social roles of old people changed as they became increasingly cut off from mainstream society. In a similar way Eisenstadt (1956) argued that differential age groups (youth, middle age, old age) enable individuals to learn and acquire new social roles and therefore contribute to social cohesion and solidarity.

There are many criticisms of the functionalist approach to age stratification. First, it assumes homogeneity of experience, whereas in reality it is characterised by diversity of experience. Secondly, it neglects the issues of class, gender and ethnicity which intersect with age to create disadvantage. However, Parsons did consider the role of gender in his work, and class differences alluded to in some functionalist writings. Thirdly, the functionalist work was researched by middle-class American males in their own communities and hence could be accused of lacking generalisability.

Marxism

Marxist theory can provide answers to some of these failings, yet they themselves do not provide a convincing account of age disadvantage in the UK.

The reserve army of labour could be applied to age groups at both ends of the spectrum. Those under 14 provide cheap labour in the informal economy in jobs such as newspaper delivery. Equally those over 65 are increasingly seeking to extend their working lives with part-time work for financial and social reasons. Both groups can meet the needs of an economy which experiences boom and bust, as both can be easily hired and fired. However, the reserve army of labour can be applied to many other sectors of the workplace too, and it fails to explain the breadth of experience that age disadvantage begs.

State provision for the young and old through Child Benefit and pensions also raises the question that the state wants to create dependent groups who legitimate the position of the powerful as the rule-makers in society. Laws created by the state serve the needs of a capitalist economy, and it could be argued that in the past, older age groups may have drained the economic resources of private companies by demanding higher wages to match their levels of skill. In establishing universal state pension provision, the state may have been seeking to divert such costs, and few could have predicted the increase in life expectancy during recent decades, which may result in a reversal of the universal benefits for older age groups. In this sense, welfare provision may be a part of the ideological state apparatus.

Weberian

The ageing process can clearly be associated with issues of status and power in the UK. Old age and indeed retirement can be construed as triggers for a loss of status (McKingsley, 2001) and this is as much cultural as it is economic. Without a strong market and work situation there will inevitably be a weakening of status and power. Youth groups could also be explained with adherence to these concepts.

Parkin (1968) used the concept of negatively privileged status groups in his work on ethnicity, a concept which could be applied to older

people who have lost their position in the labour market, kept out by younger workers keen to work their way up the occupational ladder. Related to this is the idea of the glass ceiling, that some people quite simply become too old to promote, regardless of their credentials. The dual labour market theory could be applied to older and young groups in the workplace. However, as with Marxist concepts and ideas, these could all apply equally well to an array of social groups, they are not particular to age, so where does this leave us?

It is fair to say that theories of age disadvantage and difference are in the process of developing, that economic rewards and status are linked to participation in the productive capitalist system, and that this is governed to a large extent by the activities of the state. Whether discussing state retirement, Child Benefit or the existence of Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), the state does play a key role in establishing and maintaining age differentials in the contemporary UK. Marxist and Weberian concepts can help to explain some of the reasons for this, however the diversity of age experiences can probably be explained most readily with reference to postmodern concepts.

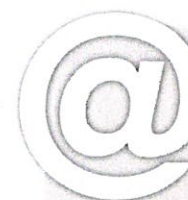
Postmodern views

The concept of individualisation has been applied with some accuracy to an individual's life trajectory – which is highly unlikely to follow a common course or theme (Everingham, 2003). Individual choice and a de structuring of society has made age an increasingly fragmented and diverse social category (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1999). Individuals such as Mick Jagger and Helen Mirren are good examples of older people who do not adhere to the typical expectations of how older people should look or think.

However, to argue that age is too heterogeneous to make sense of, falls into the trap of ignoring crucial social divisions. Evidence from earlier in this section shows that older people, particularly women, do appear to be amongst the groups most likely to experience poverty. For this reason, sociological research that focuses on the intersection of age with other social divisions needs to become the norm, and this is the focus of the next section.

Stretch and Challenge Activity

Research examples of age discrimination in the UK and compare them to the numbers of cases of ethnic and gender discrimination.



Weblink

You can read more about the inequalities faced by older people on the Help the Aged website (see 'Websites', page ii).

Section summary

The key theories to consider in this section are functionalism, Marxism, Weberianism and postmodernism.

Use the following words to write a paragraph explaining the key themes of this section.

- Ageism
- Demographic
- Disengagement
- Functionalism
- Marxism
- Weberianism
- Postmodern

Exam practice

- 1 Outline the evidence to show that older people are disadvantaged in the UK. (20 marks)
- 2 Assess functionalist explanations of age differentiation. (40 marks)

The intersection of class, gender, ethnicity and age

One of the key themes of this section and your Sociology course is the extent to which any social category exists independently of the others. In the examples used throughout this section, people are never solely men or women, black or

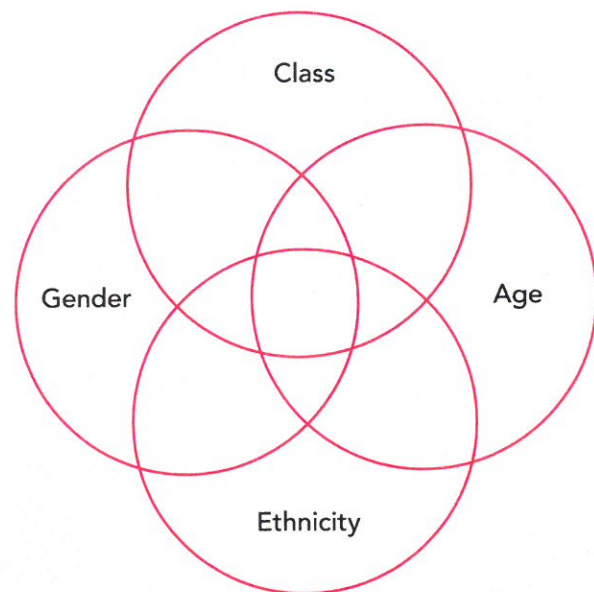


Figure 1.9: The intersection of social categories

white, young or old. Social categories interact and intersect with one another. This could be considered diagrammatically, as in Figure 1.9.

The social categories intersect and interact with one another, making social behaviour difficult to pin down to any one variable. Sociologists from different perspectives have looked at the issue of intersection, as the two examples below show. Although postmodern sociologists are perhaps the most keen to point out the importance of the intersection, the two examples considered in this section are not from postmodern work. Writers such as Anthias (2001) show how the material and cultural aspects of class, age, ethnicity and gender all need to be considered within quality theoretical work. This poses a huge challenge for sociologists trying to produce detailed research evidence. Many postmodern writers will argue that it is not possible to produce high-quality research that focuses on the intersection of class, gender, ethnicity and age, as the relationships are too complex and fragmented. If this is true then the explanations for the intersection are also going to be over-complex. Some sociologists have drawn on existing theories (Marxism, feminism, functionalism) to make sense of the relationships.

Example 1: 'Class in construction: London building workers, dirty work and physical cultures', by Thiel (2007)

Thiel studied a group of male builders working on a building site in London. This was an ethnographic study, using participant observation

and unstructured interviews. The men displayed a working-class and highly masculine culture. They had strong physical capital (their bodies) and social capital (their family and friends) and were embedded within local community networks. They learnt their trade skills informally, through on-the-job training, and had a 'them and us' attitude to management. The men did not, however, identify themselves as being part of the 'working class', their identities were fractured by their status as builders, and by ethnic and gender divisions.

Example 2: Formation of Class and Gender, by Skeggs (1997)

Skeggs studied a group of white working-class women in their twenties and thirties who had enrolled on Caring courses in an FE (Further Education) college. She gained access to the women as she was a lecturer on some of the courses. Her study was longitudinal, conducted over an eleven-year period as she sought to construct accounts of the women's lives and analyse the data. Skeggs was writing from a feminist perspective, using feminist methodology, and was clear in her view that she brought values to the research, from the lived experience of being a woman and sharing some features of the women's lives with them. Nevertheless, Skeggs argued that she was able to produce valid and authentic accounts from the women. Skeggs spent the first three years of the research 'doing ethnography' and spending as much time as possible with the women – in and out of the college environment. She remains in touch with some of the women today. Her research found that these working-class women could be defined by their desire to achieve 'respectability'. Respectability meant that the women were concerned to distance themselves from working-class women who lacked what they viewed as respectability – through factors such as what they wore, their employment and lifestyle.

Stretch and Challenge Activity

Assess the view that it is not possible or desirable for sociologists to consider social differences in isolation from each other.

In your answer you should include theoretical and methodological issues.

Section 2

Exploring sociological research on social inequality and difference

Pause for thought

- 1 If you wanted to collect data on the extent of poverty in the UK, how would you do it?
- 2 If you wanted to collect data on the experiences of 16- to 19-year-olds in rural areas as they proceeded from education to employment, how would you do it?
- 3 What are the main problems you would face in both scenarios?

