

**Essential notes**

Differences can be found across societies; for example, children in the UK are not permitted to work full-time until they are 16 but worldwide there are 1.5 million children between 5 and 14 working full-time.

**Essential notes**

There are some similarities in the ways in which the young and elderly are treated and some of these lead to stereotypes:

- vulnerable and in need of care and protection
- low status
- having less power than other population groups.

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The **feminization of the elderly** is partly a result of women's longer life expectancy and partly the loss of numbers of men who would by now be in this age-group but died in the Second World War.

**Essential notes**

Life expectancy refers to how long someone born in a particular year can expect to live.

**Essential notes**

Pensionable age in the UK is rising to 66+. From 2011 an employer cannot force an employee to retire. Some professionals such as judges and GPs can already choose when to retire.

**Age and inequality**

The meanings attached to stages of a person's life-course vary; what it means to be young, middle-aged or elderly is **socially constructed**.

**Demography**

The population of the UK is approximately 62 million, almost 20% of whom are under 16, while just over 20% are 60 plus. The birth rate has started to rise, but the over-85s are the fastest growing age-group. The percentage of women in this group is higher than men.

**The elderly**

The United Nations defines elderly as 60 plus.

Milne and Harding (1990) studied the lifestyles of over 1 000 people and found two elderly worlds, the 'young elderly' and 'older elderly'. As people live longer, their expectations of when to retire and perceptions of themselves as 'elderly' change. Age tends to exacerbate existing inequalities of gender, class and ethnicity, and retirement can bring loss of status and power. The elderly non-productive are increasing, although many are taking on childcare roles, enabling their children to be productive.

**Economic factors**

**Fuel poverty** affects over 1.7 million pensioners (Age Concern 2010) and the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG, 2009) estimate that over two million are below the poverty line.

Giddens (2006) argues that 18% of pensioners live in poverty compared to 7% of the working population.

The costs of health care increase with age and Greengross (2004) argues that the elderly are penalized in relation to travel insurance and loans.

**Material deprivation** is worse for older women than men and they are likely to have smaller pensions than men, while some minority ethnic groups, particularly Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, may not have an occupational pension (Ginn, 2001).

Those who bought property in their 20s are often 'equity rich but income poor' (Davidson, 2006). They own a house but much of their income is spent on mortgage repayments.

**Health and care**

Many elderly people experience life-limiting illnesses such as arthritis. The increase in the numbers of the elderly has increased health care costs and led to a view of the elderly as a burden. Greengross notes there is some evidence of institutional ageism in the NHS. Geriatrics is viewed as a low-status specialism.

The elderly who need care are often reliant on younger women. The EHRC found that the ageing population is creating a new kind of 'chronic disadvantage' as many middle-aged couples struggle to care for elderly relatives as well as children (2010).

Arber et al. (2006) found that older men on their own often delay going to the doctor. Older divorced and never-married men are more likely to indulge in a poor diet and smoke.

**Essential notes**

Ageism is the unfair treatment of a person or group compared to another because of age.

**Essential notes**

Age patriarchy is control of children by adults, a reinforcing of the inequalities between adults and children.

**Source:** Midgely, J. and Bradshaw, R. *'Should I Stay or Should I Go?' Rural Youth Transitions* (IPPR and CRC, 2006)

**Essential notes**

NEETS are young people not in employment, education or training.

**Examiners' notes**

Make sure you revise your AS notes for examples on age inequalities in all areas, including those on youth and youth subcultures.

**Employment**

Some of the inequalities faced by the elderly are a result of **age discrimination**. One in five workers experience discrimination, and 38% of them said that ageism was the reason (MORI 2002). However, some companies, such as B&Q, have a positive commitment to the employment of older or retired people.

**Young people**

During the last 50 years legislation has sought to control children's lives and protect them. Gittins (1998) describes this as **age patriarchy**.

**Economic factors**

There are 2.8 million children living in poverty in the UK (CPAG 2009). Many young people who are working are paid the minimum wage. Young people leaving university have large student loans and graduate employment is low.

**Education**

There are barriers to continuing education. For example, Midgely and Bradshaw (2006) found that access to post-16 education and training differs in rural and urban areas.

Increased student fees may deter some young people from going to university, while graduate unemployment rose from 7.9% in 2009 to 8.9% in 2010.

**Key study**

Using focus groups and interviews Midgely and Bradshaw studied the barriers and opportunities available to 16–19 year olds in rural areas as they left full-time education. They found that the options were limited as 'specialized diplomas' and other training courses were not available, and job opportunities were scarce in the rural areas. The young people could not afford to move to cities where there were courses and jobs. Midgely and Bradshaw argue that these young people would end up as NEETS.

**Social exclusion**

In areas of high unemployment young people may be excluded from mainstream society (McDonald and Marsh, 2005), while the increase in NEETS has the same effect.

**Health**

Children from low income families are more likely to die at birth or go on the child protection register (Howard, 2001), and are 2.5 times more likely to suffer from chronic illness (Millennium Cohort Study, 2008).

There has been an increase in certain diseases in young people; for example, chlamydia rates have doubled from 1999 to 2008 (NHS, 2009).

**Essential notes**

The 'march of progress' theorists such as Ariès and Shorter argue that the position of children is a continually improving one; children are now protected against abuse, poverty and under-age work.

**Essential notes**

There is no evidence that the elderly are as dependent as has been suggested, although some occupational pensions providers have announced they are struggling as the number of retired rises compared to those who are working and paying into the schemes.

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Hillipson (1982) argues that capitalism needs people to be 'useful' in terms of their labour power; it does not want people dependent on benefits.

**Essential notes**

**Reserve army of labour** is a term used by Marxists to describe groups who can be easily moved in and out of the labour force as it suits the ruling class. These groups may include women, young people, older people and immigrants.

**Explanations of age inequality**

**Functionalist explanations**

- Parsons argued that social cohesion is based on age groups knowing their place and their roles.
- Children must be socialized into their adult roles. Eisenstadt agreed and argued that children have less status than adults. They must be taught skills and knowledge to enable them to perform their adult roles.
- The position of the elderly has improved with a statutory retirement age and a state pension, but they lose power and status as their children leave home and they retire.
- Older people need to 'disengage' from the workforce in order to make way for younger ones (Cumming and Henry, 1961). This ensures society is continually being 'refreshed'.

**Evaluation**

- Age groups are not homogeneous. Young people do not always accept what they are taught; some rebel and join sub-cultures.
- Class affects the extent to which young and old are socially included in mainstream society.
- Hockey and James (1993) argue that functionalism is over-deterministic, emphasizing conformity and consensus; it fails to address inequalities which are a result of class, gender and ethnicity and seems to imply that the young rebel because society needs them to.
- 'Youth' and 'old age' are socially constructed and this serves to legitimate the separation of people by age and the resulting inequalities.
- Pensions create dependency and a fall in status.
- Hunt (2005) argues that the elderly do not automatically disengage; they may wish or need to continue working.

**Marxist explanations**

- The inadequate state pension leads to some elderly people being dependent on benefits.
- Young people without skills and retired people form a **reserve army of labour**. Both groups have little power and it is easy to hire and fire them.
- The elderly tend to have less disposable income and are consequently of less interest to capitalism; they do not produce or consume.
- McDonald and Marsh (2005) found that young people in deprived areas lacked power and status.

**Evaluation**

- Class divisions between youth subcultures are 'fleeting, fragmented and fluid'.
- The reserve army of labour theory does not explain age inequality. It can apply to social groups from any age.

- There is a growing number of elderly with disposable income who have 'consumer power'.

**Feminist explanations**

- Oakley argues that inequalities experienced by children are inextricably linked to those of women and the patriarchal nature of society.
- Children are controlled by adults in relation to the age they can start work, their education, where they play and the use of their time. Some are controlled by abuse and neglect.
- Older women are materially deprived compared to men as a result of time out of employment and the gender pay gap (Gannon, 1999).

**Evaluation**

- Wyness (2006) argues that children are controlled by both men and women.

The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) has identified age inequalities being experienced by the over 50s.

**Key study**

The ELSA study (2008) found the poorest people had been affected most by price rises on food and fuel. They also found that working beyond the state pension age was linked to a higher level of education and good health. As far as the over 80s were concerned, women were more likely to have at least one physical limitation compared to men. The wealthier tended to consume more alcohol but ate a better diet and were less likely to be generally unwell.

**Postmodern explanations**

The social significance of age is changing. Age groups have become diverse and fragmented and boundaries are becoming blurred.

- Featherstone and Hepworth (1999) note there is a constant bombardment of messages from the media to try to 'stay young' and delay the ageing process. They call it the '**mask of ageing**'. On the other hand, children are being encouraged by the media to take on adult behaviours.
- The wealthier retired are described by Milne et al. (1999) as having '**grey power**', being conspicuous consumers.

**Evaluation**

- Certain lifestyle choices, for example plastic surgery, may not be available to those with low incomes.
- Nayak (2003) argues that 'processes of class and racial disadvantage, and social and economic exclusion, impact heavily on youth leisure and culture'.
- Shildrick and McDonald (2010) argue that youth sub-cultures emerge as a response to material deprivation in areas such as Teesside.

**Source:** Institute of Fiscal Studies (2008), *The 2008 English Longitudinal Study of Ageing*