

Social inequality in relation to age

Exam tip

Candidates often make the mistake of thinking that they should respond to questions about age by only discussing the very young or the elderly. However, it is important to acknowledge that age is stratified into a number of different layers. For example, the elderly and the young are not homogeneous groups that experience social life in the same way. In order to maximise your marks, your response to questions about age need to include references to social class, gender and ethnic inequalities within particular groups.

Age and life chances

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Ageing is a physical or biological process that all human beings experience. However, in most societies, age is divided up into significant periods – childhood, youth or adolescence (teenage years), 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.

- Age categories, or age strata, are not 'natural' but created by society. That is, they are social constructions.
- 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 marginalisation and inequality.
- Butler defines ageism as a process of negative stereotyping and discrimination against people purely on the grounds of their chronological age.
- The elderly have been the main victims of this type of discrimination. For example, Butler argued that ageism is about assuming all older people are the same, despite their different life histories, needs and expectations.
- Best 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.

Patterns and trends in age inequalities

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Age inequality in work and employment

The way youth is socially constructed in the UK restricts the employment opportunities of children and teenagers.

- There are legal restrictions on what type of work young people can do and the number of hours they can work. Employers are legally required to pay them a minimum wage.
- If a young person is in school full-time they are not allowed to work more than 12 hours in a school week.
- However, young people are regarded by employers as cheap labour. Consequently young workers earn relatively little, and are given less responsibility and status in almost every occupational sector.
- However, unemployment for 16- to 24-year-olds has risen since 2004.

Old age is also a social construction, which can be illustrated by the fact that the state legally defines when people can retire and when they are entitled to state pensions.

- The UK is experiencing an ageing population; for example by 2021, 33 per cent of the population will be aged over 55 years and the number of over 65s will outnumber the number of those aged 16 years and under.
- The ageing of Britain's population has been described as a 'demographic time bomb' because there are serious worries about the costs of future pensions and how the government will pay for the extra strain put on adult social care and the NHS.
- The state pension age is currently 65 for men but slightly younger for women, although it will equalise with men in 2018. The state plans to raise the retirement and pension age to 66 by 2020 and 67 by 2026.
- Scase and Scales 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 poverty.
- Ray et al. also note that the retirement age often differs according to social class and status. For example, senior business executives, tycoons 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:
- For example, in 2017 the business tycoons Lord Alan Sugar (69), Rupert Murdoch (85) and Ricard Branson (66) and the rock stars Mick Jagger (73) of the Rolling Stones and Paul McCartney (74) were all working beyond the official retirement age.

Milne found evidence of two worlds existing among the retired in the UK:

- A fairly large section of the retired population is made up of affluent older people who are comfortably well-off because their state pensions are supplemented by occupational pensions and savings, and whose spending or consumption power – the grey pound – is eagerly sought after by advertisers and businesses.
- The other group of the retired population is made up of those who have little or no savings because they occupied low-paid jobs when they worked which did not offer occupational pensions. This group of retired people, who often live alone, often have to work post-retirement because they cannot afford to retire.

Sociologists have long been interested in how old age and retirement is interpreted by those who experience it. For example, work is important because it confers identity, status, self-esteem, purpose and social wellbeing, and provides people with social contacts.

- Retirement often means social redundancy, that is, loss of identity, status and purpose. It may also mean loneliness as the retiree is cut off from their regular social contacts at work.
- However, Jones et al. found that retirees in their study interpreted retirement in very positive ways. For example, many had deliberately taken early retirement because they saw it as a positive opportunity to be creative and to pursue new challenges and interests.
- Some pensioners choose to take on voluntary work in order to counter loneliness and to re-equip themselves with purpose.

Revision activity

Make two lists with the headings **work** and **retirement**. Under the heading of **work** list the ways in which work contributes to identity, for example, regular income, a status such as social class, dignity, respect and so on. Under the heading of **retirement** list the ways in which a person's identity might be negatively affected, for example, loss of income or poverty, ageism, loneliness and so on.

Age inequalities in wealth and poverty

Childhood, youth and old age are often associated with economic uncertainty and even poverty. In contrast, middle age is associated with financial security, responsibility and independence.

It is estimated that 3.5 million children are living in poverty in the UK – that is one in three children. Two thirds of children growing up in poverty live in a family where at least one person works.

Charities such as the Child Poverty Action Group and End Child Poverty have identified a number of consequences of poverty that particularly blight the lives of children:

- lower birth weight and chronic illness as a result in later life
- lack of access to extra-curricular activities
- impeded educational development, for example fewer qualifications and lack of progress to further education (FE) and higher education (HE)
- poor housing or homelessness.

The risk of poverty among older people in the UK is disproportionately high: 16 per cent of pensioners in the UK, according to Age UK.

- Age UK claims that 900,000 pensioners live in 'severe poverty' meaning that they are unable to afford decent food, heat their home or live an independent life.
- Fuel poverty is a common problem for the elderly because fuel bills in the UK are high. Age UK estimates that 2 million elderly people are so anxious about these bills that they turn their heating down when they are not warm, they go to bed even if they are not tired, or they just use one room in their house.

Age inequalities in social mobility

It is difficult to assess social mobility in terms of age. Other factors, particularly the social class origin and destination of the individual, must also be looked at.

Age and gender

Young females may experience inequalities specific to their gender such as genital mutilation, femicide (the killing of female babies) and denial of access to education.

The digital generational gap

There is a clear gap between the elderly and young in terms of their ability to use digital technology and social media. This digital gap may reflect the cultural separation of young and old, for example, older people may not be able to understand young people's obsession with social media, smart phones and texting. However, evidence suggests that there are a growing number of post-65 users of digital technology – the silver surfers – and that the digital gap is likely to shrink with every generation.

Exam tip

Your response to questions which ask you to outline ways in which something like poverty 'impacts' upon a particular social group should always focus on a wide range of ways rather than just one or two if you wish to maximise your marks. Always use evidence to back up these ways, either in the form of trends or sociological studies. With regard to the latter, it is important to cite the names of the sociologists who carry these studies out.

How can patterns and trends in age inequality and difference be explained?

Gerontology – the study of ageing – is a relatively recent area of study and consequently sociological theories are still in their early stages of development. Moreover, not all writers belong to a specific theory of thought.

Consensus approaches tend to focus on age as an aspect of culture or how it contributes to the maintenance of social order. These sorts of approach tend to see inequality as functional or beneficial to society or to the needs of capitalism.

Conflict theories such as Marxism and feminism tend to see age inequalities or experiences such as ageism as the product of the organisation or structure of capitalism and patriarchy respectively.

Social action theories are interested in how individuals interpret their experience of childhood, youth and ageing. They are particularly interested in how and why social groups come to be negatively labelled.

Gerontology: the scientific study of the biological, psychological and sociological factors associated with old age and the ageing process.

Exam tip

When you write about explanations of inequalities related to age, think CCS – consensus, conflict and social action.

A consensus approach: functionalism

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Functionalists such as Parsons (1977) considered age to be of increasing importance in modern societies.

- Parsons argued that in pre-industrial society, age did not really matter because family determined one's place in society. However, since industrialisation, people have been more socially and geographically mobile and age groups have become more important.
- Parsons argued that age groups 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.
- 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 socially disengage from their occupational roles.
- This process of 'social disengagement' functions to allow younger members of society to take the place of the old in the specialised division of labour with minimum disruption to both social order and economic efficiency.

Critics of functionalism note that there is a strong possibility that social order might be undermined by youth 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.

- These difficulties in the transition to economic independence may be having a knock-on effect in other areas of social life for example, young women are marrying later and having fewer children.
- 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 and social status of the elderly.
- Disengagement could lead to the neglect of the experience, skills and talents of older members of society which may still be of great benefit to society. Furthermore, disengagement theory ignores the fact that many old people continue to be active participants in society.

A conflict approach: Marxism

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According to Marxists, the young provide a cheap pool of flexible labour – a reserve army of 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 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.
- Phillipson claims that the elderly have historically been used as a reserve army of labour. He suggests that this role has grown in recent years as the retail sector has expanded and taken on elderly labour.

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.

Marxists are often accused of economic determinism and for being overly focused on social class. They therefore tend to neglect factors such as gender, ethnicity, religion, disability and nationality.

- For example, some people's experience of childhood and youth inequalities may be worsened by cultural and/or religious influences.
- The experiences of the elderly may not be homogeneous, for example there is some evidence that elderly Asians are viewed with much greater respect by young people and therefore are less likely to experience the sorts of ageism that may be common in White communities. However, the experience of being elderly in an Asian community may also be characterised by racism in all its varied forms.

A conflict approach: feminism

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- Arber and Ginn observe that older women face inequalities created by patriarchy that older men do not face.
- Itzin claims that older women are often doubly devalued by society because their status is devalued after the menopause (because they can no longer have children) as well as after retirement age.

- Women face great patriarchal pressure to resist the physical signs of ageing and to invest in 'cosmeticisation' – to spend money on hair dyes, anti-ageing creams, yoga and Pilates classes, cosmetic surgery and so on. In contrast, men are less likely to experience these pressures.

Feminist explanations for age inequality have been opposed in the following ways:

- Feminist explanations tend to over-state the influence of patriarchy and may neglect alternative reasons such as poverty.
- Feminists also make the mistake of assuming that the experience of girls and women is universally much the same. However, wealth and social class can help mitigate the effects of patriarchy.
- Feminists may under-rate the pressure men feel to cosmeticise, which suggests that this is a commercial profit-driven process rather than being an aspect of patriarchy.
- Social action studies also suggest that women choose to cosmeticise, rather than being forced to do so solely by the stigma of getting old.

Weberian theory

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Weber saw age as an important source of status. Ageism, whether aimed at the young or the elderly, is a reflection of the lack of status experienced by both groups and their poor market position. The elderly may lack the technological skills required for the workplace. Retirement too involves a loss of status, although Weberians point out that elderly people from upper-class backgrounds such as the Queen often retain their status as powerful individuals because their status is regarded as more important than their occupational status.

- Parkin claims some social groups such as ethnic minorities suffer in negatively privileged status groups. He sees racism and ageism as functioning to socially segregate low status groups such as ethnic minorities and the elderly from the rest of society. Some groups, for example, elderly members of minority ethnic groups are doubly negatively privileged.
- Turner claims that both the elderly and the young have low status because they lack the material resources required to attract status and consequently are dependent upon others.

Social action theory

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- Havinghurst observes that regular social interaction is essential to staying mentally and physically active. However, retirement often means the elderly are forced to disengage from regular interaction with others.
- Victor argues that public attitudes towards the elderly may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy because the elderly may be forced into acting out an 'elderly' role despite the fact that they report they don't feel any different compared to when they were younger. However, they were aware that dressing or behaving as though they were younger would attract social derision. They therefore chose to act according to how society viewed them.
- Ray et al argue that negative stereotypes or labelling about old age can also impact on the way people react to ageing themselves. They may view themselves as 'useless' and unable to learn.

- Victor argues that negative labels about ageing and the ageist discrimination that follows can cause negative age-related changes to worsen, as the older person sees their life as a downward spiral – they see themselves as ‘useless’ and ‘in the way’ and therefore take no positive counter action.
- **Labelling theory** also suggests that the negative stereotyping of children and youth by teachers, police officers and newspaper reports (moral panics) may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy and deviancy amplification as young people internalise these labels and act up to them.

Social action theories tend to neglect the view that interaction and interpretation rarely exist independently of structural influences. For example, in a patriarchal society it is likely that interpretations of female behaviour are shaped or coloured by patriarchal institutions, whereas the behaviour of youth is often shaped by social class or institutional racism; for example, working-class youth is more likely to be stopped and searched by the police, as is Black youth.

Postmodernism

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Postmodernists often paint old age as a positive time of life because they argue retirement allows people greater freedom and challenges, for example, the University of the Third Age encourages older people to come together to share their skills and life experiences and to learn together for pleasure.

- 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 **individualised** and consumerist culture in which old age can be avoided by investing in a diverse choice of youth-preserving techniques and lifestyles.
- Powell and Biggs observe that new technology and cosmetic surgery allow some older people to continually re-invent themselves.

Individualised: being free from social obligations and community controls.

Revision activity

Construct a spider diagram with the words **theories of age inequality** at the centre. Using a black pen draw six arrows reaching out to six boxes large enough to contain text labelled **functionalist, Marxist, feminist, Weberian, social action** and **postmodernist**. Within each of these boxes attempt to briefly sum up how each theory explains age inequality.

Polemus argues that 21st-century youth is not an homogenous group – young people today shop in a global supermarket of style and construct their identity from a range of disparate sources.

Postmodernists also stress the role of globalisation in bringing about social change; for example, as Britain has become multicultural the experience of being a child or an elderly person has become less predictable as cultural and religious norms and values change.

However, Vincent (2001) suggests that global capitalism is still the major determinant of age experience and inequality. He argues that decreasing labour-market stability and rapidly changing employment patterns have produced age groups which are still shaped and differentiated along social class lines.

Now test yourselfTESTED

- 1 Explain three ways in which inequality in the workplace impacts on the lives of young workers in the UK.
- 2 Explain two reasons why the impact of retirement differs according to social class and status.
- 3 Identify and explain three institutions in the UK that have been described as being institutionally ageist.
- 4 Evaluate the usefulness of the concept of social disengagement.
- 5 Outline ways that compulsory retirement impacts on the self-esteem of elderly people.
- 6 Outline the possible effects of ageism on relations between the young and elderly people.
- 7 Explain and evaluate the concept of the demographic time bomb.
- 8 Explain and evaluate the view that the young precariat are a 'dangerous class'.
- 9 Explain and evaluate the view that capitalism defines and treats the elderly as both a burden and a social problem.
- 10 'Retirement in the 21st century offers the elderly more choices and greater freedom.' Discuss.
- 11 Explain and evaluate the impact of globalisation on both the young and the elderly.
- 12 'The ageing process is functional for the economy and society because it encourages the elderly to voluntarily disengage from their social and occupational roles.' Discuss.
- 13 'Ageism affects both young and old alike.' Discuss.

Answers online**AS Exam practice****Researching and understanding social inequalities**

- 1 Describe two ways in which poverty leads to deprivation and exclusion. (10 marks)
- 2 Evaluate liberal-feminist theories of gender inequality. (20 marks)

Answers onlineONLINE **A Level Exam practice****Researching and understanding social inequalities**

- 1 Outline ways that poverty may impact on ethnic minority communities. (20 marks)
- 2 'Racial prejudice and discrimination can be seen in the allocation of the majority of ethnic minority workers to the secondary labour market.' Discuss. (40 marks)

Answers onlineONLINE