



## How Social Experience Can Be Shaped by Age

### Introduction

Age is an important aspect of stratification in society. It is an interesting aspect because it both creates barriers and empowers, dependent on the specific age of an individual or group. Power, status, wealth and income are all affected by age. Attitudes to age have changed over time and across cultures. It is also affected by class, gender and ethnicity.

The information in this Factsheet would be relevant to exam questions on the topics of **Culture and identity** and **Stratification and differentiation**.



Society can be divided into many different groups including social class, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and age.

**Activity:** Look at the following list and put the demographic groups in order of how you perceive their importance in terms of the fight for equality:

- Social class
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Age
- Disability
- Sexual orientation

When you have put them in order, explain your reasons. Where have you put age in your list? Explain why?

Vincent (2006) suggests that there are three types of age classification:

1. Age strata/classes – these are groups of people of the same age, they share the same life chances and social rights. E.g. in the UK people can vote at the age of 18.  
**Give another 2 examples.**
2. Generation – this is the position in the family and can be a source of conflict. E.g. think about the Brexit vote and the breakdown in age group voting.  
**Give another 2 examples.**
3. Cohort – this refers to the groups of people born at the same time. These groups experience the same historical changes which can influence their outlook. E.g. you are often referred to as a ‘cohort’ of students.  
**Give another 2 examples.**

**Activity:** Think about your age, and with reference to the two Sociology A-level topics: *Culture & identity* and *Stratification & differentiation*, answer the following questions:

- What aspects of your age are linked to your identity?
- What are the limitations of your age group?
- What are the advantages of your age group?

### Culture and identity

It can be argued that age is not simply a matter of biology, but that it has a social element.

Age is a social construction. A social construction is when something, such as age, is defined by a particular society.

The social construction of age can be seen clearly both historically and cross-culturally.



### Historically

As a concept the ‘teenager’ did not exist until the twentieth century, there were children and adults prior to this. Phillippe Aries (1973) in his book *Centuries of Childhood* found that in Medieval times ‘childhood’ did not exist, children would move from infancy needing constant care and dependence on parents to working roles in the community. Even as late as Victorian times children worked in factories, down mines, on the land and went up chimneys. In fact, children were often forced to work as soon as they could walk. Childhood was not the protected time of life we associate with children today.



### Cross-culturally

The concept of age may differ between different cultures. For example, in some societies older people have high status and are looked up to, seen as ‘elders’, but in contemporary UK older people most often lack status and power. Asian ethnic groups tend to hold older people in higher regard.

As age is a social construction it leads us to think about people in terms of age groups, such as – infants, childhood, teenager, youths, mature adults, middle-aged, old-aged, elderly, pensioners – however, the boundaries between these groups tend to be arbitrary and vague. When does childhood end and adulthood begin? When does middle-age or old-age begin?

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**Activity:** Answer the following questions:

- What age is infancy?
- What age range is childhood?
- What age range is youth?
- What age do you become an adult?
- What age does middle-age begin?
- What age does old-age begin?

When you have decided the answers to these questions, compare them to your fellow students. Are they the same or different?

A big part of the social construction of age is facilitated by the media, and as a consequence there are stereotypes of these different age groups, which then create assumptions about the lifestyles associated with age. Stereotypes of what is appropriate attire and behaviour for middle-aged women, the ‘mutton-dressed-as-lamb’ stereotype, which does not translate to a male equivalent. Behaviour considered appropriate for a teenager might not be regarded so for an elderly person.

These age groups are consequently a form of social identity, and can have an impact on your own sense of identity – your behaviour and how others see you.

We will look at two groups more closely: young and older age groups.

**Young people**

Young people spend more time in the company of their peer group than any other group because fundamentally they lack responsibility. They are not necessarily burdened with paying the household bills, mortgages or



rent. They generally do not have responsibility for childcare, so they are much freer than older age groups. As a consequence, they are likely to form their identity through their peer group and the activities and lifestyles the group indulge in. From a postmodern perspective however, Bennett (1999) argues that it is easier now to see the cultural activities of the young as neo-tribalism. This is the idea that youth no longer form fixed youth sub-cultures, around such things as class, gender and ethnicity, they instead make consumer choices to identify themselves for short periods with a range of groups or tribes which they move between. These tribes have fluid boundaries, an ever changing membership and only arise when they come together for specific rituals like clubbing and dancing. In our individualised, media-saturated, consumerist, pick n’ mix postmodern world, people can be whatever they want to be, young people’s lives are much more fluid.

**Older people**

With growing life expectancy, it could be argued that retired people could be in the ‘older’ age group for perhaps longer than in any other age group. Spijker and MacInnes (2013) suggest that though there are now more people over 65 in the UK than children under 15, greater life expectancy suggests that older people are now younger and healthier than in previous generations. Life expectancy has crept up over the decades rising from 40 for men and 42 for women in 1841 to 79.4 for men and 83.1 for women today. Spijker and MacInnes argue that as a consequence of this, society needs to rethink some of the common stereotypes around old age – e.g. it being a time of inactivity and passivity, growing ill-health and dependency. It is hard to simply see old-age now in terms of this one-dimensional stereotype. There is much more diversity now of older identities – people feel both younger and older than their actual age. The media offers a plethora of representations that break traditional stereotypes of older people – such as:



- Helen Mirren – actor – 72
- The Queen – 91
- Elton John – musician – 70
- Morgan Freeman – actor – 80
- Prince Charles – 68
- Harrison Ford – actor – 75
- Paul McCartney – musician – 75
- Meryl Streep – actor – 68
- Judi Dench – actor – 82

The experience of old age however, can vary depending on factors such as – class, ethnicity and gender.

**Activity:** Do some research into two of the people in the above list. Find out how much money they earn, what roles they have (outside of their particular profession), such as ambassadors or figureheads. Find some news articles written about them, and look at the language used. Then sum up your findings.

**Activity:** Go back and look at the different groups identified above. What characteristics would you associate with these different age groups?

Age group	Stereotypical characteristics
Infancy	
Childhood	
Youth	
Adult	
Middle age	
Old age	

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**Exam Hint:** Use current examples in your answers to support what you are writing

### Stigmatisation of the elderly

Regardless of the fact that life expectancy is rising and older people are more affluent and healthier, they still suffer prejudice and discrimination, which are fuelled by negative stereotypical assumptions about them being grumpy, forgetful, in poor health, dependent etc. They also encounter ageism. Like sexism, racism, homophobia, ageism can have detrimental effects on the identity of older people.

**Activity:** What are the negative stereotypes that you see regularly in the media of old people? Give some examples, and try to explain how and why they are negative.

These stereotypes can have negative impacts on the real lives of older people, and though the Acts of Parliament – the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations of 2006 which outlawed discrimination and harassment in employment and the Equality Act of 2010 banned age discrimination outside of the workplace, these things are difficult to prove.

### Stratification and Differentiation

There are cross-overs within the topics of Culture and Identity and Stratification and Differentiation, though there are also differences, obviously in terms of focus. The focus now, is on what differentiates groups.

John Vincent (1995) in *Inequality and Old Age* shows how older people, but specifically working-class women are more likely to be poor than other age groups. This is for several reasons:

- The value of the old-age pension has declined since 1979
- Women who are in part-time or low-paid jobs are likely to have less entitlements to pensions
- Women live longer than men, so therefore have more years of dependency

It is therefore not surprising that feminists link inequalities of age with gender. For Gannon (1999) this is because women are materially disadvantaged in old-age because they are likely to be paid less and to have the added burden of caring responsibilities. Aldridge et al (2011) found that the age group 50-59 about 30% earn in the top fifth of income distribution, but by the age of 70, more women are in the bottom fifth. For men, this point is reached 10 years later at 80.

Postmodernists however, such as Blaikie (1999) argue that stereotypes of ageing have broken down and people past retirement age are an important market for consumer goods. For him people are no longer restricted by age.

**Activity:** What do you think? Can you find some evidence to support and illustrate Blaikie's argument that people are no longer restricted by age? Or do you have evidence to illustrate the opposite?

**Exam Hint:** What you are being asked to do here is evaluate a theoretical perspective. This is a higher level skill, and to achieve the highest marks you must do this in exam essay questions

Poverty is not just linked to older people and women.

The young also have a higher chance of being in poverty.

According to research by End Child Poverty – The Households Below Average Income figures for 2015/16 released on 16/03/17 show that child poverty now stood at the highest level since 2009/10, with 4 million children in the UK living in relative poverty.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies projects that child poverty will rise to around 5 million children by 2020. They also give the following statistics:

- The % of children living below 60% median income, after housing costs is 29% for the whole of England
- This varies by region, with the highest % being 42% for Inner London
- The lowest % being 23% for Scotland

**Activity:** List some of the ways that you think child poverty impacts on the social experience of children.

In 2009/10 1.1 million pensioners only income was their State Retirement Pension and/or state benefits. Generally, women earn less than men during their working life and then go onto suffer greater poverty during retirement. This is exacerbated if the women are from an ethnic minority or disabled.

### Social exclusion

Poverty can in some circumstances lead to social exclusion, particularly in relation to older age – for example, an older woman living on her own in a remote village without services, such as bus services, shops, doctors etc., could be socially excluded, even if she is reasonably well off.

Putnam (2000) has suggested that there can be a link between *social capital* and social exclusion. Social capital refers to the social networks of influence and support a person has. High social capital can potentially lessen social exclusion.

**Activity:** Try to think of situations where social capital lessens social exclusion.

### Inequality for economic reasons

Both young and older people experience economic inequality. According to *researchbriefings.parliament.uk* as at March 2017, total unemployment in the UK was running at 4.5%. However, 528,000 young people aged 16-24 were unemployed between May-Jul 2017, the unemployment rate for 16-24 year-olds was running at 11.9% (this figure was down from 13.6% in 2016).

Young people generally have lower incomes, but are also more likely to be unemployed. Older people tend to suffer economic inequality through poor pensions and difficulty finding work. The UK population is ageing, a consequence of this is that there are more people aged 55-64 in the population than those aged 16-24.

### Social attitudes

Interestingly, though there is economic inequality in both young and older age groups, attitudes to the two groups are very different.

The attitudes towards young people, tend to be in response to social problems such as youth crime as opposed to being solely about age. There is evidence that media stereotypes of young people fuel perceptions and attitudes towards young people.

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To illustrate this, a study of public attitudes to youth crime by Hough and Roberts (2004) found that the perception of the extent of youth crime is far greater than actual crime figures show. Around 75% of participants believed that youth crime had significantly increased in the previous 2 years – however, police statistics showed a fall of 9%.

42% of respondents said they believed that half of all crime was committed by young people, but the actual figure is around 10-20%.

There is also some sense that media stereotypes of older people have an impact too. A study by Ray and Sharp (2006) with Age Concern found that 1 in 3 respondents thought that older people over 70 were incompetent. However, respondents were as likely to hold these stereotyped attitudes to others in their own age group but not towards themselves. There is here, a sense of internalized prejudice. Participants, interestingly considered ageism to be less serious than other forms of discrimination, there was also evidence that lesser life chances were expected for elderly people and hence not important.



**Activity:** What reasons can you give for these particular attitudes to ageism?

**Activity:** Do some content analysis of television representations of both old and young. Simply set aside a certain time frame, say 6 to 9pm on a weekday evening, and count the number of young people, and the number of old people. Of these numbers how many are negative representations, how many are neutral and how many are positive? Put all of the data into a chart that helps you to read this information.

**Exam Hint:** A question such as 'Outline and explain the ways in which an individual's social experiences may be shaped by age' – would more likely be found within the topic of 'Culture and identity', so you would need to cover such things as: experiences of different cohorts, the social construction of age, leisure opportunities and choices, the nature of personal roles and relationships. All of which can be found within this Factsheet.

However, if the question was within the Stratification and differentiation topic, it might include such descriptors as power or inequality, then you would need to cover such things as: inequalities related to gender as well as age, economic inequality, different ages – childhood, teenagers, middle-aged and older aged, social exclusion, social attitudes. All of which can be found within this Factsheet.