

# Ageing-Demographic Time-Bomb or Social Construct: Outline of the Potential Horizons And Opportunities

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## Abstract:

Ageing whilst an inevitable process in the human being, does not have to be marked by progressive decline and social withdrawal. 'Ageism' can generate a number of negative and at times destructive perspectives, labelling the elderly and possibly encouraging them to reflect the attitudes and behaviour of the label. This discussion paper addresses concerns about the 'demographic time-bomb' in some advanced economies from a sociological and policy perspective; exploring briefly functional, critical and social action theory. The paper concludes by suggesting that social perspective significantly translate to social behaviour and interaction with and by the elderly. Many of the ageist preconceptions are not necessarily supported by research, and that advancing age should be marked by empowerment, participation, choice and more effective social integration or reintegration. Importantly, the ageing process and perspectives on ageing need to be addressed, both politically and structurally within societies.

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## Introduction

Across a number of advanced economies, the population dependency ratio has significantly increased in the last half-century (1). This is often presented and indeed to some extent fuelled through the media-as a global ageing 'demographic time-bomb'(2). This perception is addressed from the sociological perspectives of functionalism, critical theory and social action.

Both Fennell et al. (3) and Denny et al. (1) suggest an over focus upon chronological age within social gerontology- demonstrating that age is substantially a social construct. Characterisation of the over 65yrs is often marked by rather negative labels and stereotypical generalizations, including that older people are unproductive and a drain on health resources. These stereotypes are not necessarily supported by research (4).

Whilst some of the elderly are relatively affluent and have access to additional pension sources, for many people in Europe retirement is marked by a significant decline in income ; reflecting nutritionally, socially and in terms of accelerating levels of chronic stress (5). Vincent (6) argues that some of the elderly represent amongst the most disadvantaged groups.

There is significant misinformation and misunderstanding both with regards to the elderly and indeed by the elderly. Certainly there is evidence of negative labelling, discrimination and the stigmatisation of the elderly = 'ageism'. These negative stereotypes reinforce a manifestation of ageing as marked by helplessness, confusion, resistance to change, physical and mental incompetence (7). Almost inevitably, the labelled group are at risk of adopting the label. Denny et al. (1) suggest that ageism can be significantly evident within health and social care practices.

Functional theory may present ageing and perceived inevitable decline as a social threat - encouraging 'social disengagement' for the elderly, with status and social roles being progressively transferred to the young (1). Critics of a functional model argue that although this withdrawal might be evident in social practice, in many cases this is not necessarily a voluntary decision but reflects more ageist social policies, inadequate retirement income and 'dependence' creating services.

Critical theorists may present the labelling of the aged and the retirement process as a glaring example of

social inequality and ageism, where many would not necessarily seek retirement, but are forced to do so and consequentially suffer significant income reduction, poverty or relative poverty. Additionally, there is some critique of the market manipulation and sometimes unrealistic emergent image of the 'third age' (8).

A symbolic interactionist/ social action analysis, focuses more upon the individual experience; the extraordinary diversity of the ageing process and the ageing experience relative to the individual. Social action theorists would encourage re- engagement, possibly within a new model of work. This would emphasise a period of significant independence and the potential for a new exciting and valuable phase of life, focusing both on society's needs, but importantly on the individual needs (9) .

The ageing population or perception of a demographic time-bomb had created a certain degree of moral panic reinforcing an ageist approach to the support of this social phenomena and presents an image of economic un-productivity, dependency, a social burden with younger people having to work longer in order to generate a taxation return to support the hordes of frail, confused and dependent older people. Phillipson (10) challenges this model in underlining the extraordinary range and diversity of the ageing population and their continued contribution to the economy which whilst not necessarily directly supporting a classical market model is reflected in family support, voluntary contribution, unpaid social work and their often stabilising influence upon society generally. This alternative image perhaps rather more emphasises the potential of an ageing society with a longer and fitter life with at least some significant years for individuals to really pursue their own interests and more properly round off their life (11)(12). Similarly Clarke (13) suggests that whilst there is a perception of a significant and increasing economic and social burden this is not necessarily supported either in terms of cost, actual economic activity of the elderly or the actual value to society of an aged and relatively independent (if supported) population.

Phillipson (10) suggests policy towards the elderly and retired should focus upon;

- empowerment- controlling more of their own life and resources .
- participation- meaningful sharing/ involvement in

their life and care

- choice - to help towards 'personal validation' and to enhance 'personhood and citizenship'
- integration-more effectively sustained into mainstream life at as many levels as possible
- normalisation - making available to the elderly what is necessary to help them live as normal a life as the majority of other people within their society (1:p.173)

In addition and importantly focusing upon building and sustaining health and well-being in the individuals earlier years, that could reflect in increasing numbers of the elderly enjoying long, stable, healthy and productive years in retirement. An approach particularly focused upon a sustained income and social engagement. A significant challenge for societies over-focused on the shorter term economic strategy.

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