

ARTICLE

Revisiting the social construction of old age

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to review the social constructionist view of age and ageing that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It begins with a general consideration of social constructionism as an epistemological framing of the world, before turning to its use in social gerontology. It considers two distinct social constructionist approaches treating later life as a social reality: (a) as a structural consequence of the rise of the modern state and its organisation of the labour market and (b) as a consequence of shifting cultural and social representations. Arguing that the earlier more structuralist accounts have gradually become overshadowed by concerns over age as identity, socially constructivist approaches now place as much emphasis upon the social representation of age as on its social-structural organisation. The paper then reviews the costs and benefits of social constructionism in general and its becoming a key part in the study of ageing. Its benefits arise from drawing attention to the salience of the cultural and the social in fashioning age and ageing and thereby advancing the sociology of later life. At the same time, social constructionist approaches to old age risk neglecting an other personal and social reality arising from corporeal decline and fear of the body-to-come. The paper concludes by noting how, whether approaching ageing and old age as natural kinds or as human kinds, adopting biological or sociological methodologies, all such methods privilege the externality of age – whether as a social or a biological fact. What is not captured by either is the problematic internality of age. What might be called the subjectivity of age will remain a topic for cultural representation, beyond the methods of both biological and social science.

Keywords: age and ageing; social constructionism; epistemology; social representation

Introduction

In their article entitled ‘*Tracing the course of theoretical development in the sociology of aging*’, Lynott and Lynott (1996: 749) argued that, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, a new direction emerged in the sociology of ageing, questioning ‘the nature of the reality being theorized about, that is, what is the nature of age and how can it be described?’ This questioning of the term ‘ageing’ and the associated turn toward ‘the social construction of age’, they argued, occurred within two quite distinct epistemological approaches. The first they identified as based on a Marxist critique of

the state, while the second critique derived more from social phenomenology. Both approaches ‘criticized theories of aging, in general, for taking the existential status of age for granted’ and both proposed treating age and ageing as ‘social constructions’ (Lynott and Lynott, 1996). In the first case the ‘construction’ of age was framed as the product of political economy, while in the second case the work of ‘construction’ was reflected in the shifting social meanings through which age was discussed, debated and realised within contemporary culture. The aim of this paper is to reconsider this ‘new direction’, first, by looking back at how social constructionism emerged within the social sciences, secondly, how it was subsequently introduced into social gerontology and, thirdly, its gradual evolution as a hegemonic theme within social gerontology. The paper concludes with a re-evaluation of the social constructionist approach in furthering a future sociology of later life.

Before addressing the question of the social construction of age, the paper begins by addressing ‘social constructionism’ as a general epistemological framework within the social sciences. Although the Lynotts’ paper did not seek to trace the origins of ‘social constructionism’ *per se*, they did associate its emergence in social gerontology with earlier developments in sociology, particularly with the work of Alfred Schutz and his phenomenological approach to social science (Schutz, 1962). The promulgation of Schutz’s approach in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s book *The Social Construction of Reality*, first published in 1966 (Berger and Luckmann, 1967), initiated the social constructionist movement, more so than Schutz’s own writings.¹ Although Berger and Luckmann did not pursue their collaboration further, the idea of ‘social constructionism’ that their book advocated diffused across the social sciences, reaching its peak influence during the 2000s (Knoblauch and Wilke, 2016: 57). In the course of the diffusion of their ideas, the meaning attached to ‘social constructionism’ widened considerably. As a result, some authors have questioned whether it has now lost much of its original purchase. At the same time, the trajectory taken by social constructionism since the publication of their book has seen the concept of social constructionism being subjected to more rigorous analyses and critiques. The first section of this paper, therefore, addresses the epistemological and ontological status of the term.

Social constructionism: social epistemology and social ontology

Put at its most general, the thesis behind Berger and Luckmann’s book is the ‘constructed’ nature of our social worlds and the social – inter-subjective – production of its ‘facticity’. Our inter-subjective understandings of the world become internalised in the form of the life-world (a Schutzian term, derived from the philosopher, Edmund Husserl) in which we and subsequent generations are immersed from birth (Seidman, 1997: 129). As a framework for a social epistemology of the social world, social constructionism can at times seem to treat everything as if it were all a ‘social construction’ with the consequence of dissolving the term into little more than ‘an empty signifier’ (Lynch, 2001) whose initial value has become exhausted, a sociological shibboleth of our times.

At the heart of social constructionist thinking, however, are important issues of social ontology and social epistemology – concerning what social things are and

how they should be understood. It draws attention to the tension that exists between what John Searle (1995) once called the 'brute facts' about the world as external reality contrasted with the 'institutional facts' making up society. These latter, Searle argued, are continually being created through and by human action, though not necessarily through individual human intent and often as the unintended consequences of social, political and economic change directed towards other ends.² Institutional facts, according to Searle, serve as 'placeholders' for possible ongoing activities, determining what can be done and how it can be done but not what is. Brute facts, however they may be interpreted by society, and however they may be represented, remain constant in their facticity (Searle, 1995: 57). Hacking (1999) makes a similar distinction between what he calls 'human kinds' and what he calls 'natural kinds'. While the latter are unaffected by their becoming objects of study, institutional or human kinds are, leading him to describe them as 'interactive kinds' since their form is contingent upon human actions interpretations and representations (Hacking, 1999).

Further distinctions have been made between the social construction of ideas (theories, beliefs, representations) and the social construction of entities in the world. While few would dispute that the former (theories, beliefs, representations) are socially constructed, the status of the latter (socially constructed entities or objects) is both more problematic – and more radical. As Searle noted, social objects may depend upon a material existence – but those brute facts may serve only a place-holding role in structuring social relations, so that it is their meaning rather than their materiality that determines their status as social objects. Social philosophers such as Diaz-Leon, Haslanger, Mallon and Marquez have considered two distinct ways in which such socially constructed entities may exist, entities that are socially constitutive and entities that are socially caused (Haslanger, 1995; Mallon, 2007; Marquez, 2017; Diaz-Leon, 2018). In the first case, socially constitutive phenomena are entirely dependent upon some aspect of the social. They are constituted by and within the social world. Without a social world, they could not exist. In the second case, something may be causally linked to or implicated by social factors playing a significant part in its emergence, even if its place is held, in part or as a whole, by its status as a 'brute fact' existing within the world however it may be socially organised.

Socially *constituted* phenomena can have no independent existence outside the social; thus buildings, artistic and literary products, planes, trains and automobiles are material entities, but what they are – as books, churches, forms of transport, *etc.* – only makes sense – has meaning – in the context of human society. The same cannot be said of the latter. These phenomena (socially causative entities) can be considered to have materially real and materially significant properties, even if (a) they have socially important significance and (b) that social change can alter both their symbolic significance *and* their material properties. Examples that spring to mind might include human diseases, domestic animals, systems of irrigation and so forth. Their existence, their being, constitutes a brute fact that can be studied and understood without reference to their social signification. Even so, this does not mean that they cannot be more thoroughly studied and understood through other means, including through the social sciences and through the arts and humanities. Osteoarthritis can be understood whether in a

human being or in non-human animals; the same goes for the shape, size, constitution and development of cows, pigs and sheep. That does not prevent studying the effects of social interventions (or already-existing social conditions) on the manifestation of the disease or the nutritional properties of their meat. Equally, their material facticity does not pre-determine the symbolic significance they may acquire in a society.

Such ontological and epistemological complexities make social constructionism a potentially controversial theme, particularly in relation to various body-based (corporeal) but socially significant phenomena such as age, disability or gender. While it might be the case that height or weight constitute 'biological realities', whose variation may well be affected by social practices, habits and 'conditions of living', such socially constituted causal variation may have in itself little or no social significance. Other equally physical features, though no more or even less biologically salient, on the other hand, may have considerable social significance across a wide range of settings. While the existence of a biological reality may be necessary for such features to exist, their biological existence may be more a place holder than a substantive social fact when it comes to determining their part in the social world, whether they are strongly or weakly subject to social causes and influences. Although issues of sex and gender are currently among the more controversial topics when determining their biological or social constitution, the social construction of age can be said to be equally controversial, and whether it constitutes merely 'a brute fact', a socially constitutive entity or a socially causal phenomenon.

The social construction of age: developments within social gerontology

As Lynott and Lynott (1996) observed, the social construction of age first emerged as a theme within social gerontology during the late 1970s and early 1980s. At that time, it was particularly associated with the political economy approach, adopted by such academics as Carol Estes, John Myles and Laura Olson in the United States of America, by Chris Phillipson, Peter Townsend and Alan Walker in the United Kingdom, and Martin Kohli, Karl Mayer and Walter Müller in Germany. These writers promulgated the notion that old age 'is a social rather than a biologically constructed status' determined by the institutions of the state and the structures of welfare (Phillipson, 1991: 404; Phillipson and Thomson, 1996). Other less structurally framed trends supported the questioning of the 'brute facticity' of ageing, notably those who, like Jaber Gubrium, have adopted a more interpretive approach to the sociology of ageing (Gubrium and Wallace, 1990). Within this latter tradition, the emphasis has been less on the social construction of old age and ageing as socially structured phenomena but on the social constructed ideas, interpretations and understandings of ageing and old age – what Hazan (1996: 91) has referred to as 'the construction of social knowledge and its contextual conditioning'. This issue of the social representation of ageing and old age will be explored in a subsequent section. For now, it is sufficient to note that social constructionism, in all its forms, has been critical in shaping developments both in social gerontology and in the sociology of ageing. Whether adopting what the Lynotts have called a social phenomenological position, or a more structural account of the

institutionalisation of old age the social constructivists have chosen to 'bracket', or set aside, belief in the brute facticity of age and age-related concepts 'and focus upon the process or processes by which they are socially constructed' (Lynott and Lynott, 1996: 753). This, the Lynotts claimed, has 'liberated' social gerontology and the sociology of ageing from the historical dominance of biological and medical approaches to the study of age and ageing.

Insofar as a theoretical basis can be discerned in such empirical work,³ several sociologists of ageing have proceeded along the lines of a social constructionism that takes for granted that 'social structure [is responsible for] forming, constraining, directing, and empowering individual development' (Kohli and Meyer, 1986: 147–148). Working under the general remit of a 'political economy' of ageing, they have begun with the general premise that old age is a socially marginalised position or status, realised less by biology or chronology than through enforced retirement, limited benefits, poorly resourced forms of support and an underlying constraining structure embedded within the legacy of the poor laws (Townsend, 1981; Olson, 1982). Pensioner or retired households are characterised as marginal to the central dynamic of post-war economies, maintained through a constrained transfer income and deprived of the means to earn more. Limited alike as producers and consumers, older people are seen as having little scope to contribute to the development of the economy. Old age, in these authors' views, is determined less by the biological status of their bodies than by their marginal economic status. Old age, in short, was constituted by, and within, the social and economic structures of the time.

Towards the latter decades of the 20th century, the economic status of retired households ceased to be confined by such predetermined positions of economic and social marginality. With a steady rise in disposable income, many of those moving into later life began occupying a more central position in society and in the economy. The marginality that had been attributed to later life was not abandoned, however, but slowly became reframed around its cultural and social representation. Age, it was said, became a sign marked by its cultural invisibility, reflecting the more widespread political turn towards issues of recognition over those of redistribution (Fraser, 1995). Identities rather than classes acquired prominence, and the lack of recognition given to older, retired people was seen as continuing to marginalise old age, despite the changing economic circumstances of such households. A parallel could be drawn in relation to gender inequality, much as Naomi Woolf argued that women remained constrained by the 'beauty myth' despite their improved economic position (Woolf, 1990).

With this shift came a changing focus in accounts of the social construction of age. How age was represented – its social representation (to use Moscovici's term) – became key, not how financially constrained older people were. Studies focused upon the representations of age in policy documents, in social media and technology, in film and television, in advertising and in literature (Coupland, 2000, 2007; Walz, 2002; Zhang *et al.*, 2006; Williams *et al.*, 2007; Levy *et al.*, 2014; Brooks Bouson, 2016; Elmersjö, 2020; Burema, 2022; Rasi, 2022). The concept of ageism became an increasingly popular area of research in social gerontology, sociology and psychology (Levy and Macdonald, 2016; Nelson, 2016). The work of Becca Levy in particular has proved seminal in providing wide-ranging empirical evidence

illustrating how the ‘aged gaze’, whether arising from the psychological within or the social without, ‘ages’ those subjected to it (Levy *et al.*, 2002, 2020; Levy, 2009). In short, the social construction of age and agedness has evolved from being framed as a position or status that is structured by the political economy to one that extends into the symbolic domain. This has seen age viewed more as a culturally and socially represented status, positioned variously within binary divisions, between the ‘young’ and the ‘old’, or the ‘old’ *versus* the ‘not old’, or as ‘boomers’ *versus* ‘generation Xers’ and so forth. But whether framed largely in generational terms or as age groups, age has become an actively contested identity and in Bourdieu’s terms a site of ‘symbolic struggle’ over both its meaning and its representation (Bourdieu, 1992: 242–243).

Ageing: realisation and representation

Before reaching any overall evaluation of the social constructionist approach, it is helpful to consider just how hegemonic this approach has come to be within the fields of social gerontology and the sociology of ageing. Arguing for the critical importance of ‘the sociological construction of ageing’, Powell and Hendricks (2009: 85) see the social construction of ageing as ‘an important theoretical alloy’ highlighting the point that ‘the meaning of ageing derives not from innate biological processes but is socially determined’. Whether this is understood in ‘social structural’ or in ‘social representational’ terms, the point these authors stress is that thus conceived, ‘ageing has no existence independent of social interaction and power relationships in society’ (Powell and Hendricks, 2009: 85). As alluded to in the earlier part of the paper, what kinds of things that are subsumed by social constructionism encompass a range of phenomena, from entities that make sense only as socially constitutive, to entities whose realisation is socially causal, to entities that are primarily socially representational – matters not of external structure but of meaning and understanding. While the strongly structural approach outlined by Powell and Hendricks emphasises that the very existence of ageing is the product of ‘interaction and power relationships’, the more phenomenological tradition associated with Berger and Luckmann focuses upon the representational aspects of age and ageing. Viewed in this light, one must acknowledge that age and ageing have long been viewed as conceptually problematic – as things thought about as much as materialised entities.

Thus Galen, writing in the third century CE, confessed his own uncertainty as to whether ageing should be considered a ‘natural’ kind or not (Theoharides, 1971).⁴ Ageing, framed as a term for a process, rather than a status like old age, does not seem to have existed, in English, until the late 18th century (Yallop, 2016: 2). Moreover, at least until quite recently, most people in the world had only the loosest notion of their own chronological age, in large part because there was very little cause to use it (Roebuck, 1979). Brute fact or not, the place-holding function of the term was generally quite limited. Chronological age was, as Christine Fry (2018: 275) put it, ‘a remarkable cultural innovation’. For long periods of time, age and ageing impinged little upon society. It was only as the outcome of modern social policies, designed to calculate society’s human capital, by counting, enumerating and segmenting all its population that chronological age and chronological

agedness began to play a significant role in the social organisation of the state (Roebuck, 1979; Gilleard, 2002). Even in some of the early national population censuses, age was either omitted altogether, or used as a grouping measure, such as 'those 16 years and over' or as decade-based age groups, before eventually settling on recording everybody's precise chronological age (A'Hearn *et al.*, 2009: 794; Whitby, 2020).

In short, while the social representational approach to the 'social constructionist' model of ageing can be understood within a socio-historical framework, thus supporting the view that ageing is a rather 'modern' social fact (in the sense of its 'collective' (Durkheim, 1898) or social (Moscovici, 1988) representation), its existence as an observable fact is not to be undermined by insisting upon what Beck (2011: 233) has called a 'nothing-but-society sociology' such as that espoused by some in social gerontology. Human understandings of old age and agedness are, as Hazan (1996: 91) notes, 'contextually conditioned'. For well over a thousand years, explanations have been proposed for how ageing happens, most of which have centred upon intrinsic processes of 'withering' through the loss of living matter's 'essential heat' and its 'radical moisture' rather than the mere passage of time (Gilleard, 2015). Exactly what those processes are, how they should be understood and how if at all they might be altered remains a problem, but not for the sociology of ageing. On the other hand, how age should be represented, what meanings it confers, how it should be morally valued and how far it can, or should be, deployed as an identity, class or category are important matters both of symbolic contestation and shifting sensibilities.

These representational problems have become more pervasive, both as the space that later life occupies in society continues to expand and as the shift taking place towards a more cultural turn in the social sciences (Gilleard and Higgs, 2015). Considered as a site of symbolic struggle, there is a contrast between those adopting a 'lifecourse' perspective emphasising that all lives are lived through time and that the past helps shape the future, and what may be termed a 'life-stages' approach which considers that there are definable periods or stages in life, each differentially defined by growth, maturity and ageing. Within the former camp, it is often claimed that from the moment of our arrival in the world we are ageing. In the absence of anything more substantive than that all lives are lived in and through time, the further delineation into distinct divisions within the lifecourse is considered to be structured mainly as representational – constituted entirely by the social and cultural discourses and practices of the time.⁵ Shorn of the artifices of culture science and society, such divisions as 'old age' are thus arbitrary and institutionally contingent constructions: age is fundamentally socially constitutive. This seems an increasingly hegemonic position, both within the humanities and the social sciences, as leading writers such as Margaret Gullette seek to eliminate the very idea of ageing as inherently 'ageist' (Gullette, 2018, 2022).

For those still attached to a 'stages of life' representation, age continues to be granted an existence outside society and its institutions, albeit one that is socially overlaid and instrumentalised by society.⁶ Within this approach, the question then becomes one of teasing out whether these socially representational divisions affect age's brute facticity. Do they constitute more than a struggle conducted within the symbolic order of culture and society, beyond mere social

representations, affecting old age's actualisation? If the latter position is adopted, are age divisions like old age examples of entities of an 'interactive' kind, to use Hacking's term: potentially socially causal but not constitutive. For those espousing this perspective, the rate, style and extent to which the biological processes of ageing manifest themselves cannot be considered in isolation, *i.e.* bracketed out from the social milieux within which they are shaped and ordered.⁷ As two American social gerontologists have aptly put it, not only does the social get under the skin – it also does work there (Ferraro and Shippee, 2009).

In this more representational framing, social constructionism makes two rather different claims regarding old age. For those who take what I have called the life-cycle approach, ageing can be viewed as little more than a time-dependent variable, whose social representations, moral valuations and cultural depictions appear in a variety of symbolic forms, whose differentiation into life stages 'has been an historically emergent property of modern societies' (Settersten and Mayer, 1997: 248). Until the modern era, ageing as a form of representational ordering has taken place largely under the radar, outside what Habermas calls the system world (Baxter, 1987). While various biomedical theories have been articulated to define and explain ageing, such pre-modern cultural representations have scarcely touched the organisation of society or indeed the framing of individuals' life-worlds.

The continuing dominance of these cultural representations of ageing and old age have effectively masked the formative influences of social structure that, with the onset of modernity, began to shape how persons are aged. By drawing attention to those structures and their impact on all that we attribute to 'ageing' and 'old age', the advocates of social constructivism proposed a new direction leading scholars to rethink how they – we – are aged as much by our society as by our biology. As a result of this development, we have begun to better understand how 'old age is a social rather than a biologically structured status' (Phillipson and Thomson, 1996: 14). This shift – as noted by the Lynotts – has proved of seminal influence in how the social sciences have examined age and ageing, as 'facts' achieved as much through the social organisation of lives in time as by ageing and old age's cultural representations. While the more extreme form of social constructionism treats ageing as having 'no existence' outside social interaction and power, a social fact masquerading as a natural fact, the constructionism derived from Berger and Luckmann's social phenomenology emphasises the social importance of ageing's social representation and its capacity for social causation. The hegemonic position that social constructionism has taken, in both social gerontology and the sociology of ageing, risks concealing these different perspectives.

Old age and its facticity: costs and benefits of a social constructivist approach

While not ignoring the very real value in opening up less biologically deterministic accounts of the lifecourse and its directedness, social constructionist understandings of ageing contrast significantly with the biological framing of ageing as a process or set of interdependent physiological and molecular processes exponentially increasing the risk of death. This view of the biological reality of age and ageing is itself open to criticism, locating ageing as a material process whose existence,

form and process can be studied and understood independently of the socially mediated institutions, processes or relations attached to it. The recently emerged 'geroscience' offers an even starker contrast, insisting upon the biological reality of ageing as a *sui generis* process 'controlled by molecular and physiological fundamental processes, such as macromolecular damage, metabolism, proteostasis, cellular senescence, chronic inflammation, epigenetic factors, and stem-cell regeneration' (Moffitt, 2020: 1). Within this paradigm, both 'ageing' and all age-associated diseases that render us mortal are equally judged the products of the 'inner' brute fact of ageing, irrespective of the social context in which those processes arise (Gems, 2022).

In the same issue of the review journal where Moffitt's paper appeared, Elaine Crimmins (2020) attempted to establish a degree of balance between the social and bio-medical influences on ageing. Drawing on data from the large US Health and Retirement Study (HRS), she argued that when biological and social hallmarks are allowed to compete on an equal footing with each other (in the statistical sense of each controlling for the influence of the other): 'Social variables (SES [socio-economic status], childhood health and hardship and adult trauma, psychological, and behaviors) explain 1.8 times the variance in mortality when compared to the ... biological variables' (Crimmins, 2020: 7).

Do such findings support the claim that age and ageing are as much the products of social as they are of biological processes? That ageing is neither pure brute fact nor socially constituted entity? If the phenomenological concept of bracketing out phenomena is to be considered akin to the statistical partialling out of variance from other variables, might the findings reported by Crimmins imply that the social influences upon ageing are every bit as explanatory and hence at least equally meaningful in shaping the realisation of ageing as biological indicators? And so, for the purposes of social gerontology and the sociology of later life, can the biological be effectively bracketed out, and the social representational and structural organisational aspects of ageing and old age studied in their own right and as matters of equal importance?

The problem with making such an assumption is that human ageing seems a more directly observable outcome – a visible entity – than a relational quality dependent upon its positioning as a part of the socially constructed lifecourse. Looked at as a purely individual phenomenon, a quality of a person rather than a characteristic of a group, ageing certainly appears to be more a material than a social phenomenon; it privileges a person's body – the corporeal – as its 'real' site and the source of its realisation, irrespective of the machinations of social life and 'the power relations in society' (Powell and Hendricks, 2009: 85). Research that seeks to represent the biological and social reality of age can be understood as addressing different aspects of the externality of ageing and old age, each helping to frame what ageing is. In this sense, both are equally and inescapably representations realised within the context of particular historical contingences. This contingency may be evidenced, in the case of social studies, in the shift from the early modern concerns over economic marginality to the late modern concern with cultural invisibility. It can also be observed, in the case of biological studies, in the shift from the early modern concern with distinguishing pathological from normal ageing to the dissolution of such distinctions in the geroscience of late modernity.

Does this mean that ageing and old age are at bottom inescapably contingent, necessarily social constructions, and best studied as social entities? If treated purely as objects of study – epistemologically if not ontologically – one could argue they are. This does not mean, however, that ageing and old age can be reduced to mere symbols, social kinds constituted through the institutions, language and social practices of a particular time and place. This surely was Husserl's point when he sought to distinguish between the reality of the life-world and that of science: the structuring by science of experience is agentic, collective and deliberate – and must be learned. The structuring of our life-worlds, on the other hand, is incidental, operating in part through our acquired habitus and in part through experiential learning. The social construction of ageing helps focus the study of ageing as a set of structured discourses and social practices, but nevertheless inescapably associated with the underlying brute facticity of ageing. It does not deny a place for ageing framed by the biological sciences but recognises that this constitutes an epistemological rather than an ontological choice. In short, the value of social constructionism lies not in any assumed dominance, but in enabling the study of ageing and old age to be pursued as social facts, important in themselves, bracketing out without thereby denying the reality of the corporeal.

For those who feel themselves ageing, no such structuring, whether biological or sociological, may quite capture their experience. If one grants, as de Beauvoir and Sartre have suggested, the basic unrealisability of ageing as a distinct subjectivity, a 'for itself' sense of me-ness, then ageing understood will remain a somewhat formless, illusive experience, rendered meaningful, at times, by recourse to one or the other of the competing symbolic frameworks operating within society at a particular time. While age may seem a structuring principle, evident in all living matter and in most human societies, it is by no means clear how firmly it serves as a structuring principle in shaping our lived experience. Arguably it is this ambiguity of experience, not between the biological and the social, but between the subjective and the objective, that remains unresolved, whatever version of social constructionism is applied in the social study of ageing and old age. This, more than anything, seems to ensure that the ongoing symbolic contestations over this particular social space will continue.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to revisit the social construction of ageing and the dominant position it has acquired within both the humanities and the social sciences. The idea that 'the very essence of aging is socially constructed' now forms an important component in ageing studies (Gleason, 2017: 1). Earlier developments in structural and interpretive sociological epistemologies have contributed to this emphasis upon 'social constructionism' that has arguably filtered through from the social sciences more generally into ageing studies. The effect of this development – and the related turn towards issues of identity, recognition and representation in ageing studies – have challenged the dominance of the 'biological' framing of age and ageing.⁸ This development has helped draw attention, both to the influence of social structure on the course of ageing and more recently to the impact of ageing and old age's social representation on older people's place in society and the passage taken into later life.

The concept of social construction has widened and been considerably developed since Berger and Luckmann's seminal publication, and the different positions subsumed under the term have become clearer. Its impact on re-framing age continues to prove productive, not least in examining the intersectional location of age, structural inequalities in later life and the critical importance of the social and cultural in determining the place of age within society. The downside to these developments is in attributing a greater potential for social change in the trajectory of ageing than can perhaps be realised. Over-assumptions of the social remediability (and reflexivity) of the 'brute facts' of ageing, and the consequent tendency to marginalise age's intimate connection with the body, avoids the confrontations with finitude built into our bodies and our brains.

Drawing upon the epistemological analyses of social constructionism – the distinctions between 'brute facts' and 'institutional facts' and the distinctions between institutional facts that are socially constitutive, those that are socially causal and those that are primarily representational – can help clarify what a social constructivist approach to ageing and old age is and what it can and cannot be. It has been argued that the value from effectively bracketing out one aspect of facticity (the brute or the institutional) to highlight the other is overall a helpful strategy, once that bracketing is acknowledged. At the same time, in pursuing these disciplinary endeavours, much about age and ageing remains unaddressed. No social representation (whether a social constructivist one, or one presaged upon the gero-scientific model or indeed some 'interactive kind') can hope to capture the lived experience and the unrealisability of age. The subjectivity of age can perhaps only ever be adequately represented outside these scientifically structured frameworks, through the nuanced imaginaries offered by the arts and humanities. In the meantime, the distinction between the socially constitutive and the socially causal seems an important consideration to hold on to, in recognising the multiple realities subsumed under the social constructionist approach. While ageing clearly possess an existence independent of social relations and representations, to deny any role for social causality in relation to ageing would be a mistake. Whether this justifies 'a new policy approach ... changing social institutions and individual behaviour ... [which] will have absolute benefits for both ageing people and populations' (Walker, 2018: 269) remains to be seen, but the creation of opportunities for a richer and wider social space for later life can hardly be gainsaid.

Notes

1 When, much later, Berger was asked to reflect on the impact of his book and its implications for social science, he stated: 'I would suggest that a theoretical blending of Max Weber and Alfred Schutz will still serve quite well' (Berger, 2000: 274).

2 A similar argument has been advanced by Ulrich Beck and his notion of social phenomena arising not as the outcome of deliberative policies and practices but as their 'unintended consequences' (Beck, 2000, 2002).

3 In a review of theory content in social gerontology papers published in the 1990s, Bengtson *et al.* (1997: S74) observed that 'social constructionist perspectives' dominated the literature.

4 'For old age is not natural in the same way that feeding and growing are in other words, the latter two can be considered as natural processes, while aging is not, being instead an inevitable affection of the body' (Galen, translated in Theoharides, 1971: 373).

- 5 This view is 'officially' endorsed when in their review of the sociology of ageing, Waite and Plewes (2013: xi) preface the report by stating: 'the importance of recognizing that aging occurs across the entire life span'. A more recent quote reiterates such a position: 'Throughout their lives, people move through time, advancing in age from one day to the next. While a person's chronological age forms a certain fixed point for defining age, the ageing process proceeds continuously day by day' (Enßle-Reinhardt and Helbrecht, 2022: 173).
- 6 Holstein and Gubrium (2007: 337) have put it this way: 'analysts acknowledge the existence of a life course (at least tacitly) and describe how the meaning of experience is constructed at different locations in this course. Their focus typically centers on how meaning is assigned to more-or-less discrete stages or phases of life along the age continuum, as well as to movement and change between stages'. Needless to say, the division of the lifecycle into distinct stages goes back many centuries (Sears, 1986).
- 7 The term 'bracketed out' is to be understood here as referring to the phenomenological procedure of excluding one 'reality' in order to focus upon another (*cf.* Schutz, 1962; Husserl, 1995).
- 8 It is worth noting how arguably one of the first proponents of a sociology of ageing, Matilda White Riley, considered ageing as a factor in the structuring of society rather than a function of society's structure (Riley, 1987). Though she clearly recognised the dynamic of change (individual, historical and social) over the lifecourse, her emphasis was upon the role played by age in shaping the social, not *vice versa*.

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