

Gendered Narratives of Ageing in Britain since 1900

Pat Thane

Abstract: There are multiple, sometimes conflicting narratives of ageing. This article surveys those influential in British culture since *c.* 1900. There is a particular focus upon gender which is often overlooked in common narratives, especially the fact that women have long outlived men, on average, and are still the majority of people defined as ‘old’. This large age group, aged from their 60s to past 100, is subject to much stereotyping and generalisation, for example that they are all dependent ‘burdens’ upon younger people, and that they are incapable of learning new skills. This article challenges these generalisations by stressing the great diversity of the age group including between rich and poor, fit and frail, and highlighting their contributions to society and the economy through paid work, unpaid volunteering, care for aged and younger relatives including grandchildren and financial support for younger people.

Keywords: ageing; gender; discrimination; pension; protest; care; family; poverty

Note on the author: Pat Thane, MA (Oxford), PhD (London), FBA, Visiting Professor in History, Birkbeck College, University of London. Publications include: *Foundations of the Welfare State* (2nd edn. 1996); *Old Age in English History. Past Experiences, Present Issues* (2000); *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500*, ed. with Lynn Botelho (2001); *The Long History of Old Age*, ed. (2005); *Britain’s Pensions Crisis: History and Policy*, ed. with Hugh Pemberton and Noel Whiteside (2006); *Divided Kingdom: A History of Britain 1900 to the Present* (2018).

pat.thane@kcl.ac.uk

Introduction

Conventional narratives of ageing are notably gendered in that they so rarely refer to the unquestionable fact that old age is and long has been a predominantly female experience, in Britain and most other countries. For convenience, when discussing age statistics, I will define ‘old age’ as beginning at age 65, as is the common practice, though in reality the age at which ‘old age’ begins is problematic and perceived as diverse in individual and sometimes collective cases, as I will discuss later in this article. By the 65+ definition older women have outnumbered older men in Britain and females have had longer life expectancy than males from birth for as long as we have had official figures, almost certainly for much longer, perhaps always. Official statistics were first published in Britain in 1841, when average expectation of life at birth was 39 for males, 42 for females. It must be noted that at this time life expectation at birth was much reduced by high infant and child mortality. By 1901 the figures were, males 51, females 58; by 1991, when child mortality had much declined, 76 and 80.8 respectively.¹ By 2017–19 they had risen to 79 and 83.²

It is a curiosity of narratives of old age and ageing at most times, and of most public discourse on the subject, that this female majority is so rarely mentioned, though it is an issue that has been wrestled with throughout the many centuries that such narratives have existed. To put current gendered perceptions in perspective it is worth noting that men long found it difficult to admit that women had this advantage. In his day Aristotle was not alone in believing that it was ‘natural’ for men to outlive women, because the male ‘is a warmer creature than the female’ and women dried and withered earlier in life.³ In the thirteenth century Albertus Magnus agreed with him, but is said to have noted that, *per accidens*, women tended to live longer, because menstruation purified them of harmful humours, sexual intercourse took away fewer of their bodily fluids and they suffered less from the hazards of work.⁴ In eighteenth-century France, physicians asserted that men lived longer but were puzzled by the frequency with which females ‘went against nature’ and outlived them. Contemporary narratives of old age are often perceived as new products of a new situation in which more people live longer lives than ever before. In reality they often have long histories which can alert us to long continuities in attitudes to later life.

¹ OPCS (1991: table 2, 5), Thane (2000: 479).

² Marmot *et al.* (2020: 15).

³ Bulloch and Campbell (1980: 317).

⁴ Shahar (1997: 34).

Incomes of Older Women

More older women than older men live in poverty in the UK now and as far into the past as we have evidence. 18 per cent of all people over 65 in the UK were in poverty in 2020, by the internationally accepted definition of incomes below 60 per cent of the national median.⁵ In 2016–17, 17 per cent of all women over 65 were in poverty compared with 14 per cent of men.⁶ This has long tended to be true of women of all ages because they have always had fewer opportunities to work than men, take time off from paid work to care for children or older relatives, and have lower earnings than men when they can work, so can save less for later life. This leads to poverty in later life unless they are married to men with good incomes and savings or inherit wealth from their families or their husbands. Currently in Britain 27 per cent of pensioners are single women, 23 per cent are single men and 13 per cent live in couples.⁷ Most older women are single due to widowhood because women outlive their husbands and are less likely than men to remarry, or they are divorced, separated or never married.

The income difficulties of older women are compounded by the fact that the UK has the lowest state pensions of any high-income country, in 2018 they stood at almost half the average of the 38 high-income countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.⁸ Since they were first introduced in 1908 UK state pensions have never provided enough to live on.⁹ Currently only about 25 per cent of women pensioners receive the full state pension because they have not worked enough years to pay the full contributions. Following complaints about this, in 2007 the number of required contribution years was reduced from 39 to 30, but this does not eliminate the problem for many women.¹⁰ Those with no other income can supplement the pension with a means-tested benefit, currently Pension Credit, which provides an income just about adequate for survival; but, as is common with means-tested benefits internationally, currently, according to official statistics, 37 per cent of eligible people do not apply for it, because they are unaware of their rights, find the application too complicated or feel unable to due to pride.¹¹

Occupational pensions generally provide a more adequate income in old age. These are fixed in relation to earnings and years of work, so, again, women are disadvantaged by low earnings and/or by working fewer years than most men, or they are in

⁵ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2021).

⁶ Women's Budget Group (2018).

⁷ Age UK (2021: 5).

⁸ OECD (2018).

⁹ Thane (2000: 216–35).

¹⁰ Ginn (2006); Hollis (2006).

¹¹ Hollis (2006: 118–19).

low-paid, often part-time, insecure occupations which do not offer pensions.¹² Older women from ethnic minority backgrounds, especially Bangladeshi and Pakistani (generally the poorest minority ethnic communities in Britain) are most likely to experience poverty because they tend to work fewer years at lower pay than other women. Black, Asian and minority ethnic men of all ages are also on average poorer than white men, though there are considerable disparities among them.

Gendered disadvantages in later life are occasionally noted by politicians and official committees but they make little public impact and little is done about them. They are forgotten for example, when the current older generation – the ‘baby boomers’ – are attacked (generally unfairly, as we will see) for enjoying prosperous lives at the expense of the younger generation, as regularly occurs in the media.¹³ Some older people are prosperous, but by no means all, including most older women. Inequalities *within* the generations, including of gender and income, are as great as inequalities between generations.

Older Women Overlooked by Younger Feminists

The poverty of older women, indeed most needs and difficulties of older women, have also been neglected by women’s movements in Britain over the past century. Since the late nineteenth century women have campaigned on a wide range of significant issues: for the vote, for improved opportunities for employment and education, improved welfare especially for mothers and children, for equal pay, abortion, easier divorce, against domestic violence, rape and other forms of violence against women – and much else – but not for higher incomes and greater security for the large numbers of women in need in old age. This is partly because they have often been movements of younger women, and older women – also older men – until quite recently have been slow to speak up for themselves against discrimination and disadvantage, often seeming to internalise a common narrative that their needs matter less than those of younger people because their lives are almost over. This is discussed more fully in the section ‘Protest by Older People’.

By contrast the post-1968 women’s movement in the US did protest against discrimination against older women, perhaps because many older women suffered even more in the exiguous US welfare system than in Britain. They also suffered discrimination in employment. In 1968 a union of women air ‘hostesses’, as they were then known, won a court ruling under the Civil Rights Act against the airlines’ practice of

¹² Thane (2006).

¹³ Willetts (2010).

enforcing their retirement at ages between 32 and 35 – hardly ‘old’ ages, which may explain why they aroused more attention than the problems of women in their 60s and beyond. The airlines had rigid, stringent rules about their appearance at work and by the advanced age of their early 30s they were obviously unable to meet those standards.¹⁴ The US later abolished fixed retirement ages at an earlier date than most countries.

I am not aware of any equivalent protest in Britain until 2003 when Deanna-Maria Williams protested at being forced by British Airways to retire as a flight attendant at age 55, when she was still a fit marathon runner. Supported by 300 former colleagues she challenged this ‘ageist’ policy at an employment tribunal. British Airways promised to consider changing the rule in 2006 when an EU Directive against age discrimination would come into force. They did so, raising the retirement age to 60 (matching that of pilots), to rise to 65 after a further five years, claiming that their main reason was not gender equality but to close a deficit in their pension fund.¹⁵ Since 2011, enforced retirement at any age has been illegal in Britain, unless an employer can prove that someone is no longer competent, though the law is not always observed. It was introduced partly in response to the EU Directive and to encourage older people to remain at work as their numbers grew while younger workers were fewer due to a falling birth rate.

The State Pension Age and Women’s Protests

From 1940 until 2010 the UK state pension age for women was 60, for men 65. When state pensions were first introduced, in 1908, they were aimed at the very poor, were non-contributory, state-funded, means-tested, very low and paid to women and men at age 70. This was later by at least five or ten years than it was generally believed that poor older people needed support, but the Treasury wanted to save money and fewer people survived to age 70.¹⁶ The campaign for state pensions which began in the 1870s, led by trade unionists among others, was conducted almost wholly by men, and women’s situation was rarely mentioned. But the UK pensions introduced in 1908 were tax-funded and means-tested rather than National Insurance-based as in Germany from 1889, because the government realised that lower-paid workers could not afford insurance contributions. Also, they came to realise that most older people were female and could not pay contributions because often they were not employed or

¹⁴ Vantoch (2013).

¹⁵ *Guardian* (2006).

¹⁶ Thane (2000: 220).

were too low-paid and very many of them were very poor.¹⁷ The numbers and poverty of women helped to shape the first pensions, though this was not publicly discussed, and it was probably less influential than the poverty of older men whose cause was more vigorously promoted by campaigners. Women made up more than 60 per cent of the first state pensioners. National Insurance pensions at age 65 were introduced in 1925 and went overwhelmingly to insured men and their wives and widows – rarely to single women.¹⁸

In the inter-war years surveys of unemployment increasingly noted that women in employment were often forced to retire at earlier ages than men due to being judged too old in appearance for the job, especially in people-facing occupations where female (though not male) looks were believed to matter. This was so, for example, in retail, as it was for US airline stewardesses, sometimes at similar ages. Also, employers argued that, as they aged, women were more likely to be sick than men, for which there was some evidence though it was not widespread; and that their competence (never as high as that of men of course) declined faster, for which there was no evidence. In 1937 an official committee reported that at least one big London store dismissed women at 35. They could rarely stay on in such work past 45 or 50.

From 1935 women organised to protest. A woman who ran a small business in Bradford founded the National Spinsters' Pensions Association to demand state pensions at 55 for unmarried women, who were the majority of full-time female workers. Very many of them experienced early retirement due to discrimination by employers. This left them impoverished with no alternative income to minimal, stigmatising poor relief until they reached age 70 and qualified for the miserable state pension. They also pointed out that many single women gave up work to care for their ageing parents, then were left destitute when their parents died, unable to return to work because employers thought them too old and without a pension.

Many women, especially in the professions, were dubious about the campaign for fear it would encourage employers to retire women earlier than men, at 55. But a government committee recognised that there was a problem of women's premature retirement. The outcome was a compromise: pensions at 60 for insured working women (which would not include all women workers) and wives of insured men, from 1940, an age limit which continued until recently. The official explanation for the change ignored the 'spinsters' and the realities of single women's lives but argued that, on average, wives were five years younger than their husbands and it made sense for them to retire together.¹⁹ This was the outcome of a rare campaign by women against their

¹⁷ Thane (2000: 208).

¹⁸ Thane (2000: 194–235).

¹⁹ Groves (1986); Thane (2000: 284–6).

treatment in later life which gained them a marginal improvement. A government survey in 1940 revealed extensive poverty among retired people, male, and especially, female. It led the government to introduce small, means-tested supplementary pensions for the poorest.²⁰

In 1946 the range of working women and wives of working men who qualified for the pension was extended, following the recommendations in the Beveridge Report of 1942, but the pension remained too low for subsistence, lower than Beveridge intended.²¹ Women's pension age has since been raised to equal that of men as a result of an appeal against it to the European Court of Human Rights in 1990, in a very rare instance of a British man protesting against what he believed was a case of discrimination against men. He won and the UK government responded by arranging that, gradually, between 2010 and 2020, for women born between 1950 and 1955 and after, the pension age would rise to match that of men. This received very little publicity at the time, as is so often the case with issues affecting older women, especially compared with lively discussions at the time and since about raising the state pension age for both sexes because more people were living and remaining fit and healthy to later ages. Nor were women who were directly affected by the change informed until it was too late for them to prepare for a longer working life before they qualified for the pension, or to save for five years of unpensioned retirement. They have only quite recently discovered that their pension age is rising to match the higher and rising male state pension age, which rose to 66 in 2020 and is currently (in 2023) scheduled to rise further to 67 in 2026–8. They have formed a large, active campaign group to protest, Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI).²² Supporters do not object to the principle of gender equality in the pension age, but to the failure of successive governments to warn them about the change so that they could, financially and mentally, prepare for later retirement; their obvious personal difficulties associated with such a change were overlooked. They feel all the more concerned by the government's pledge to keep the pension age under constant review.

The report in 2018 on the alarming level of poverty in the UK by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Philip Alston, following his tour of the country, pointed out that poverty was particularly evident among women born in the 1950s, especially single women 'who consistently experience poverty at a higher rate than others'.²³ He reported that 'An abrupt and poorly implemented change in the state pension age for women from 60 to 66 has severely and unaccountably penalized those who were on the cusp of retirement and who had well-founded expectations of

²⁰ Thane (2000: 355–63).

²¹ Harris (1997: 451, 494–6).

²² <https://waspi.co.uk>

²³ United Nations General Assembly (2019: 15).

entering the next phase of their lives.²⁴ It is another extraordinary example of older women being overlooked by policymakers even in relation to a government policy which directly affects them. Alston added that since 2010, when the ‘austerity’ policies of the succession of Conservative-led Coalition and Conservative governments began, ‘life expectancy has stalled for women in the most deprived half of English communities and actually fallen for women in the poorest 20 per cent of the population’.²⁵ Male life expectancy followed the same pattern after decades in which it had steadily risen for both sexes.²⁶ The WASPI women have so far failed to persuade the government to change the pension-age requirements. Women who complained to the Parliamentary Ombudsman about the failure to inform them in due time about the change received minimal compensation of £500 and £750.

Age Discrimination

Women and men experience age discrimination, and have long done so in many areas, including in health care. Although medical care can keep many people fit and active, physically and mentally until later in life, all too often it has not been employed optimally for this purpose. Neglect and discrimination involving older people have a long history in medicine. William Beveridge in his influential Report on social insurance in 1942 expressed an all-too-common narrative when he wrote: ‘It is dangerous to be in any way lavish to old age until adequate provision has been assured for all other vital needs, such as the prevention of disease and the adequate nutrition of the young.’²⁷

In 1994 the government Medical Research Council complained about the lack of knowledge of and research into the health conditions of older people and appropriate forms of treatment, due to the ‘unfortunate exclusion of older people from major epidemiological studies’.²⁸ A survey for the Department of Health in 2009 found that over-65s still received poorer care after suffering a stroke than younger people and poorer mental health care, their problems often being under- or misdiagnosed. Women over 80 had markedly poorer access to investigation and treatment for cancer than women in their 60s.²⁹ Women are still called regularly for screening for breast cancer only up to age 70, although breast cancer is more common after age 70. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, following frequent cuts to health services, such operations

²⁴ [United Nations General Assembly \(2019: 17\)](#).

²⁵ [United Nations General Assembly \(2019: 16\)](#).

²⁶ [Marmot *et al.* \(2020: 18\)](#).

²⁷ [Beveridge \(1942: 92\)](#).

²⁸ [Medical Research Council \(1994: 23\)](#).

²⁹ [Department of Health \(2012\)](#).

as cataract removal and joint replacement were first to be suspended because they do not deal with life-threatening conditions. Delays to such treatments increased further due to the impact of COVID-19 on health services. These are medical interventions in conditions most likely to affect older men and women which have transformed many of their lives since they were introduced in the later twentieth century. Their capacity to function independently and remain healthy are severely impeded if such conditions are not treated.

There were signs also during the COVID-19 pandemic that younger people were given priority for hospital care over those over 65, although this was never officially acknowledged. Many people experienced long delays in gaining treatment for cancer and other life-threatening conditions due to the demands of the pandemic on the NHS. These cuts and delays also perpetuate social inequality among all age groups. Better-off older people can afford to pay for operations privately; most older people cannot, and they are left to suffer at home, with dwindling access to care from community services, which were already declining before the pandemic due to cuts to funding, then declined further.

The Equality Act 2010, implemented in 2012, made such discrimination in health and social care illegal but there is no evident sign of change. Presumably underlying these discriminatory practices is the narrative implied by Beveridge, and often explicit in the not-so-distant 1950s and '60s, that older people are not worth as much medical effort as younger people because they do not have long to live. Again, these inequalities receive little public notice, though in recent decades older people and their families have been more likely to speak up against them, as discussed in the section 'Protest by Older People'.

Family Care

The loss of health and care services, mostly needed by women since they are a majority of older people, puts pressure upon families to provide care, mainly upon women in families, including older women. Many women in their 60s are caring for parents in their 80s and 90s, or they and others still older are caring for frail male partners. The non-governmental organisation (NGO) Age UK found in 2019 that 25 per cent of family carers in the UK were aged 65 or over, while one in seven people, mainly female, aged 80 or above provided unpaid care, most often for a partner or a disabled adult child. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has found that one in five people in their 50s and 60s are care providers, including for grandchildren.³⁰ It is

³⁰ Age UK (2019).

often forgotten that family care for older and disabled relatives has a long history in Britain.³¹ It is generally willingly provided, but cuts to health and other public services in the 1980s and '90s and since 2010, then the impact of COVID-19 since 2020, have greatly increased the pressures on family care. This is especially the case with respect to care for relatives with severe health conditions, physical or mental, which family members lack the specialist skills to provide and for which they receive little expert assistance.

Protest by Older People

Since the 1990s older women and men in Britain have been more assertive than before in challenging disadvantage and discrimination. Partly this is the 1968 generation growing older, with experience of protest. Also, greater numbers of ageing women and men are better educated, more confident and less deferential than in the past. Assertiveness by older people led to some of the first official research into age discrimination, some of it sponsored by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), established in 2007, which was the first government body to include age discrimination in its brief, again owing much to protest by older people and their supporters.³² It led to the first legislation against age discrimination, introduced – more than 40 years after the first UK legislation against sex and race discrimination – when age discrimination in health and social care became illegal under the Equality Act, 2010. However, in recent years the EHRC has given less attention to age discrimination (at any age) than to other areas of discrimination.

The age discrimination clauses of the 2010 Act have not often been tested. However, in 2011 Miriam O'Reilly successfully brought a case for age discrimination against the BBC when she was sacked as presenter of a TV show in her 50s, explicitly on grounds of age and appearance, while her visibly older male co-presenter continued in the job. As we have seen, such discrimination was not new. Women were forced into early retirement between the wars very often on grounds of their appearance, as well as due to negative assumptions about their competence. Certain physical signs – facial lines, grey hairs – even in women in their 30s, were treated negatively, as signs of old age and incompetence for work – as similar signs in men were not. These attitudes continued through the decades, though they were rarely publicly discussed until O'Reilly's case aroused media interest. She won her case, the BBC reinstated her, but she felt that she experienced continuing discrimination, along with other women. She carried on

³¹ Thane (2000: 119–46, 287–307, 407–35).

³² EHRC (2007).

campaigning, but women often still do not protest publicly at discriminatory retirement, especially if they are paid off on condition of signing non-disclosure agreements as often occurs, so we have no idea how extensive it may still be. In 2019–20 the BBC faced further much-publicised challenges by women presenters, including China editor Carrie Gracie and TV presenter Samira Ahmed, against major inequalities between their pay and that of men doing similar work and paid up to six times as much. This also, of course, affected the women's pension entitlements. The BBC was forced to pay compensation and took steps to bring salaries closer to gender equality.

Protest against discrimination by a more confident older generation continues. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK government announced that all people over 70 were vulnerable to the virus and must self-isolate. This age generalisation caused an outcry by prominent people over age 70 who argued that they and many others were fully fit while many younger people were more vulnerable. It forced the government to relax the self-isolation rule, applying it only to people with serious health conditions. More generally, public protest by older people has stimulated efforts to promote positive approaches to the ageing of both women and men, stressing that frailty in old age can be prevented or delayed including through physical and mental exercise and healthy eating.³³ Positive concepts and practices of 'active ageing' and 'successful ageing' have emerged in Britain and internationally, mainly among better-off people.³⁴

The Search for Positive Ageing

These are not the first attempts to develop a narrative of competence in later life. The narrative of declining competence of all people past a certain age, which is applied to men as well as women though often at different ages, has a long history. It was seriously challenged in the 1940s and '50s in Britain, though there is no reason to believe that competence in later life was increasing at this time. Rather there was a major panic about the ageing of society – which sounds all too familiar now – because before the Second World War the birth rate fell to an historically low level and more people were living longer. There were widespread concerns about the looming 'burden' on a shrinking population of younger workers of payment for the pensions, health care and other needs of a rising older generation. The concerns stimulated some original and positive ideas and research, including questioning assumptions about the limited work capabilities of older people.³⁵ In the 1950s research in the new academic fields

³³ Walker (2014; 2018).

³⁴ Lamb (2017).

³⁵ Thane (1990: 283–305).

of industrial anthropology and industrial psychology showed that men (they rarely studied women, who were considered less essential to the workforce) could continue to work efficiently at least to their late 60s in a wide variety of occupations, including heavy manual labour, if they could control the pace of their work. A study of miners in a Scottish pit demonstrated that men in their 60s could perform as well at cutting coal as younger men; what caused them most strain and made them want to give up was the walk through the mine to the coalface, when the pace was set by younger, faster-moving men.³⁶ There were similar problems of deteriorating work efficiency among older men when the pace of work was set by machines or time bonuses fixed by management. When such practices were adjusted, older workers were highly efficient. It was discovered that older people could learn new skills, and keep up with modern technology, if they were given the training that was (and is) often denied to workers past a certain age.

Researchers also pointed out that when competence did decline with age it was compensated in most occupations by the greater skill, experience and reliability of older than of many younger workers. Also, that older, like younger, people varied considerably in their capacities and the speed at which they deteriorated, if at all. Researchers emphasised that where older people appeared conservative and inflexible about work and other practices it was often due to socialisation rather than the inevitable process of ageing, to society's low expectations of older people, which they often internalised, rather than to their actual potential.³⁷

The research emerging from the panic about ageing revealed much about the capacities and the diversity of older people which challenged pervasive stereotypes and encouraged hopes that people could work to later ages and help avert the crisis that was feared. The findings could have been applied to women as well as men, but what emerged was another gendered narrative. However, it became clear in the 1950s that the birth rate was recovering, the 'baby boom' was in full swing, so worries about the ageing society died away. The positive messages about later life were also largely forgotten and stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes and practices continued, including after 1968 when the birth rate again began a prolonged decline while life expectancy continued to rise, triggering another panic about the ageing of society.³⁸ It has since taken many years, and much protest by older people, for more positive views to emerge.

³⁶ Richardson (1953: 269–84).

³⁷ Le Gros Clark (1955); Thane (1990).

³⁸ Thane (2000: 475–80).

‘Growing Old Gracefully’

The old narratives persisted. Judging women ‘old’ at earlier ages than men due to physical signs which are represented as indicators of maturity and experience in men, increasing their prestige and authority at work and in society, has a long history. In seventeenth-century England women were conventionally labelled ‘old’ around age 50, men more often around 60. In response, women who could afford it often did their best to disguise the signs of ageing by colouring their hair, wearing cosmetics and dressing youthfully. Yet they were always, even in the seventeenth century, criticised by female contemporaries of similar backgrounds who believed that women should challenge negative male criticism, ‘grow old gracefully’, remain fit, active and dignified, but not give in to trying to look unnaturally youthful.³⁹

From the late nineteenth century, and especially through the later twentieth century into the twenty-first, the pressures and techniques for disguising the outward signs of ageing grew. The techniques became more widely available, no longer accessible only to the rich, creating an influential narrative of the desirability and feasibility of an appearance of eternal youthfulness, which reinforced negative perceptions of the appearance of ageing. In the late nineteenth century, a range of electronic treatments emerged theoretically able to steam away wrinkles and restore thinning hair, and the cosmetics industry began to expand. It expanded faster from the mid-twentieth century, along with hair dyes, increasingly ambitious and available cosmetic surgery, then Botox, at the same time as visual representations of a supposed, youthful ideal of female appearance at all ages became more pervasive in magazines, film and TV, then social media.⁴⁰ The temptation to use such methods for women who feared discrimination because of their ageing appearance – indeed could be bullied to do so, for example by TV producers – or through vanity, was and is considerable. However, giving in to the temptation has always involved facing criticism from other women for succumbing to unreasonable, male-dominated norms.

From another perspective it is said that modern methods of disguising ageing can give women more freedom to create their own identities in later life. Surveys by Mass Observation (MO) in the 1990s found some women valuing the flexibility now available to them concerning appearance and behaviour – provided they remained in good health – compared with previous more rigid codes about how women should look, dress and behave in their 60s, 70s and 80s. Not that such codes had ever been universally observed, as suggested above. Many of the respondents to MO stressed

³⁹ Botelho (2005: 113–74).

⁴⁰ Stark (2020).

how difficult it was to estimate the ages of other women because they were so diverse in appearance and behaviour at all ages.⁴¹

The Diversity of Later Life

Respondents to MO expressed awareness of the diversity of later life which is too often overlooked in public discourse. A long-established narrative generalises about and stereotypes ‘old people’, women and men, as though, past retirement age, people are, or should be, all the same in appearance and behaviour. A narrative that it is desirable for older women to aspire to disguise their ageing by constructing a ‘youthful’ appearance is one more stereotype. In reality the age group defined as ‘old’ by pension and retirement ages is the most diverse of all age groups, increasingly so as it has grown in size, as more people live to later ages and many stay fit and active later in life, while others do not. ‘Old age’ is an age span lasting from perhaps around 60 to past 100. It includes some of the richest and the poorest – from Queen Elizabeth II who was publicly active until close to her death, aged 96, in 2022 to people on Pension Credit, marathon runners in their 80s to the very frail. Richer women and men live and stay healthy longer than poorer people and white men and women on average live longer than many of those of minority ethnic communities; gender, wealth and ethnic disparities have increased as poverty and inequalities grew further from 2010. According to Michael Marmot, the leading British expert in this field, the differences in expected length of life at birth between the least and most deprived areas of England in 2010–12 were 9.1 years for men and 6.8 for women, in 2016–18 it was 9.5 and 7.7 years respectively, a clear deterioration. In 2016–18 women in the least deprived areas could expect to live on average to 86.3 years, men to 83.4, in the most deprived to 78.7 and 73.9 years respectively.⁴²

Another feature of diversity lies in different perceptions of when ‘old age’ begins. As we have seen, official definitions as represented in pension and retirement ages, change over time. Unofficial definitions can be very flexible. A 67-year-old woman responding to MO in 1992 wrote: ‘The old saying “you’re as old as you feel” has some truth in it and we all know people who are old at 40 and some who are much older but have an interest in life and an awareness ... who give an impression of comparative youthfulness, in spite of the lines and wrinkles.’⁴³ A 59-year-old woman felt ‘quite put out when the media describe anyone under 80 as “old”’: My 100-year-old mother has

⁴¹ MO (1992); Thane (2001: 219–26).

⁴² Marmot *et al.* (2020: 16–21).

⁴³ MO (1992: file B 60).

only just agreed to be called “old”.⁴⁴ Another woman wrote ‘I regard anyone under 40 as young. From 45–65 as middle-aged. Elderly under 75 and old as 75 plus. But, although I am aged 78, I do not think of myself as old but elderly. Perhaps because I am fairly independent and can look after myself.’⁴⁵ A 39-year-old female social worker observed of her older clients: ‘There are some cases where men seem to age rapidly on retirement and seem to feel their lives are over, whilst women if they survive the transition from mother to “mother-whose-children-have-left-home” often seem to gain a new lease of life. But one cannot generalise.’⁴⁶ These comments suggest that people live with everyday narratives of old age and ageing which differ from official regulations and are more diverse than academic discourse customarily recognises, and that these narratives are often deeply gendered as discourse around old age has been throughout history.⁴⁷

Ageing ‘Burdens’?

One more gendered narrative to be considered represents older people as ‘burdens’ on younger generations, who have to bear the financial and emotional costs of their pensions and other needs. This fails to grasp the substantial and growing contribution older people themselves make to the economy and society. Increasingly they contribute paid work because they need the money, as many do, including the WASPI women, or they enjoy their work and feel fit and active enough to continue past conventional retirement ages, assisted by the legislative abolition of the fixed retirement age. The number of over-65s in employment grew by 188 per cent from 1999 to 2019, from 5 per cent of all workers to 11 per cent or 1.31 million workers.⁴⁸ They also make valuable contributions through unpaid work. We have already seen how much they contribute as family carers. Outside the home people aged 65 to 74 are the age group most likely to engage in voluntary work in the UK, either informally helping friends and neighbours or more formally with voluntary organisations, often supplementing state welfare. 28 per cent of people in this age group served with voluntary organisations in 2018–19.⁴⁹ Voluntary work has always been an important feature of British culture. Historically, it is said to have been engaged in more by women than by men, since it was long one of the few public activities permitted to middle- and

⁴⁴ MO (1992: file B 2154).

⁴⁵ MO (1992: file B 2645).

⁴⁶ MO (1992: files B 2197, C 2070).

⁴⁷ Thane (2000: *passim*).

⁴⁸ ONS (2019).

⁴⁹ GOV.UK Community Life Survey (2019).

upper-class women, but we have no statistics.⁵⁰ Contemporary surveys indicate that this is still, narrowly, true, but many men find voluntary work a fulfilling use of their spare time in retirement.⁵¹ Its importance has grown since the 1980s as volunteers have done their best to compensate for cuts to public services, including local libraries, by staffing them without payment. It is estimated that in 2013 (the most recent available estimate), people over age 65 contributed £61 billion to the UK economy through employment, caring for others and volunteering, considerably more than they cost the revenue.⁵² This net contribution has certainly grown since 2013, as older people's employment, taxpaying and volunteering has increased.

But these calculations make no allowance for positive contributions that cannot be easily quantified. There is clear evidence that, far from selfishly spending their surplus wealth on expensive cruises and other pleasures while the younger generation pay for their pensions and care as has been suggested,⁵³ very many wealthy older people transfer substantial sums in their lifetimes to younger relatives before passing on their remaining assets at death. These transfers are not easy to trace because they are not officially recorded and may sometimes be regarded as tax evasion, though they can be seen as positive in intent and effect. It was shown in 2005, in a rare study of the topic, that 31 per cent of grandparents helped grandchildren buy a home; 16 per cent in their 60s and one-third in their 70s gave financial help to grandchildren, including paying university fees, and, increasingly as times got harder, to their children.⁵⁴ Older people gave, and give, in kind as well as cash. One researcher concluded that: 'Generally more Third Age parents were providers than recipients of help ... in contravention of depictions of older adults as "burdens" on younger generations.'⁵⁵ Not surprisingly homeowners with higher incomes were most likely to give to younger relatives.

As we have seen, older men are more likely than older women to have wealth to share. Women more often provide care. Growing numbers of older people of all income levels help their adult children to work by caring for their grandchildren, sometimes giving up their own work to do so, mainly grandmothers but also some grandfathers. In 2010 one in three working mothers relied on grandparents for child-care, mostly but not exclusively in poorer families.⁵⁶ In 2017 a survey by YouGov for Age UK found that 5 million grandparents in the UK, 40 per cent of all grandparents

⁵⁰ Prochaska (1980).

⁵¹ GOV.UK Community Life Survey (2019).

⁵² Age UK (2014).

⁵³ Willetts (2010).

⁵⁴ Grandparents Plus (2011); Grundy (2005: 233–55).

⁵⁵ Grundy (2005: 233).

⁵⁶ Griggs (2010).

over age 50, provided regular care for their grandchildren.⁵⁷ The number has grown and is likely to continue to grow as the costs of other forms of childcare have continued to rise in Britain to the highest levels in Europe.

Conclusion

Since the late nineteenth century knowledge about old age has grown through research in a range of disciplines, but much stereotyping, age discrimination and negative representations of later life continue, despite evidence-based challenges by researchers.⁵⁸ This exceptionally large, and growing, age group appears to be more stereotyped and generalised about than any other, despite its extreme diversity, as described above. Many people in the public eye defy the ‘helpless burden’ stereotype, not least Queen Elizabeth II and her husband Prince Philip, who predeceased her in 2021 aged 99, but it survives. There is a need for greater public awareness of this diversity, of the number of very poor as well as comfortably-off older people, of the good very many older women and men do for society and the economy through paid and unpaid work, alongside the numbers who are sadly frail and need much greater public support than they currently receive.

References

- Age UK. (2014), *£61 billion—the economic contribution of people aged 65 plus*. <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/archive/61-billion-the-economic-contribution-of-people-aged-65-plus/>
- Age UK. (2017), ‘5 million grandparents take on childcare responsibilities’. <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-news/articles/2017/september/five-million-grandparents-take-on-childcare-responsibilities/>
- Age UK. (2019), *Policy paper, carers (England)*. https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/policy-positions/health-and-wellbeing/ppp_carers_england.pdf
- Age UK. (2021), *Poverty in later life*. https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/policy-positions/money-matters/poverty_in_later_life_briefing_june_2021.pdf
- Beveridge, W. (1942), *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, Cmd 6404 (London, HMSO).
- Botelho, L. A. (2005), ‘The 17th century’, in Thane P. (ed.), *The Long History of Old Age* (London, Thames and Hudson), 113–74.
- Bullock, V. & Campbell, C. (1980), ‘Female longevity and diet in the Middle Ages’, *Speculum*, 55: 317–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2847291>
- Department of Health. (2012), *Implementing a ban on age discrimination in the NHS. Making effective, appropriate decisions*. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/212944/ban-on-age-discrimination (accessed 12 March 2018).
- EHRC (Equality and Human Rights Commission). (2007). <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en>

⁵⁷ Age UK (2017).

⁵⁸ Gullette (2004); Walker (2014); Roberts (2012).

- Ginn, J. (2006), 'Gender inequalities: Sidelined in British pensions policy', in Pemberton, H., Thane, P. & Whiteside, N. (eds), *Britain's Pensions Crisis: History and Policy* (British Academy; Oxford, Oxford University Press), 91–111.
- GOV.UK (3 September 2019), *Community Life Survey and Taking Part Survey 2017–18: Focus on volunteering by age and gender*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-and-taking-part-survey-2017-18-focus-on-volunteering-by-age-and-gender>
- Grandparents Plus. (2011), *Policy briefing paper 01. Statistics*. www.grandparentsplus.org.uk
- Griggs, J. (2010), *Protect, Support, Provide: Examining the Role of Grandparents in Families at Risk of Poverty* (London, EHRC and Grandparents Plus).
- Groves, D. M. (1986), 'Women and occupational pensions, 1870–1983: An exploratory study'. PhD Thesis (King's College London).
- Grundy, E. (2005), 'Reciprocity in relationships: Socio-economic and health influences upon intergenerational exchanges between third age parents and their adult children in Great Britain', *British Journal of Sociology*, 56 (2): 233–55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2005.00057.x>
- The Guardian* (23 March 2006). <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2006/mar/23/britishairways.occupationalpensions>
- Gullette, M. M. (2004), *Aged by Culture* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).
- Harris, J. (1997), *William Beveridge. A Biography*, 2nd edn (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Hollis, P. (2006), 'How to address gender inequality in British pensions', in Pemberton, H., Thane, P. & Whiteside, N. (eds), *Britain's Pensions Crisis: History and Policy* (British Academy; Oxford, Oxford University Press), 112–21.
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation. (25 March 2021) (York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation). <https://www.jrf.org.uk/press/risingchild-and-pensioner-poverty/>
- Lamb, S. (ed.) (2017), *Successful Aging as a Contemporary Obsession. Global Perspectives* (New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press).
- Le Gros Clark, F. (1955), *Ageing Men in the Labour Force* (London, Nuffield Foundation).
- Marmot, M., Allen, J., Boyce, T., Goldblatt, P. & Morrison, J. (2020), *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On* (London, Institute of Health Equity).
- Mass Observation. (1992), *Growing Older* files (MO archives, University of Sussex).
- Medical Research Council. (1994), *The Health of the UK's Elderly People* (London, HMSO).
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). (2018), *Statistics*. <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=PAG/>
- ONS (UK Office for National Statistics). (2019), *Labour Market Review, UK*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/december2019>
- OPCS (Office of Population, Censuses and Surveys). (1991), *Population Projections, 1989–2059*, series PP2 (London, HMSO).
- Pemberton, H., Thane, P. & Whiteside, N. (eds) (2006), *Britain's Pensions Crisis. History and Policy* (British Academy; Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Prochaska, F. K. (1980), *Women and Philanthropy in 19th-Century England* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Richardson, I. M. (1953), 'Age and work: a study of 489 men in industry', *British Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 10: 269–84. <https://doi.org/10.1136/oem.10.4.269>
- Roberts, Y. (2012), *One Hundred Not Out: Resilience and Active Ageing* (London, The Young Foundation).
- Shahar, S. (1997), *Growing Old in the Middle Ages* (London, Routledge).
- Stark, J. F. (2020), *The Cult of Youth: Anti-Ageing in Modern Britain* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

- Thane, P. (1990), 'The debate on the declining birth-rate in Britain: the "menace" of an ageing population, 1920s–1950s', *Continuity and Change*, 5 (2): 283–305. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026841600000401X>
- Thane, P. (2000), *Old Age in English History. Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Thane, P. (2001), 'Old women in twentieth century Britain', in Botelho, L. & Thane, P. (eds), *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500* (London, Longman), 207–31.
- Thane, P. (ed.) (2005), *The Long History of Old Age* (London, Thames and Hudson).
- Thane, P. (ed.) (2006), 'The "scandal" of women's pensions in Britain: How did it come about?', in Pemberton, H., Thane, P. & Whiteside, N. (eds), *Britain's Pensions Crisis: History and Policy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press/The British Academy), 76–90.
- United Nations General Assembly. (2019), Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights 'Visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland'.
- Vantoch, V. (2013), *The Jet Set: Airline Stewardesses and the Making of an American Icon* (Pittsburgh, University of Pennsylvania Press).
- Walker, A. (ed.) (2014), *The New Science of Ageing* (Bristol, Policy Press).
- Walker, A. (ed.) (2018), *The New Dynamics of Ageing* (Bristol, Policy Press).
- WASPI (Women Against State Pension Inequality). (2020), <https://www.waspi.co.uk>
- Willets, D. (2010), *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took Their Children's Future and Why They Should Give It Back* (London, Atlantic Books).
- Women's Budget Group. (2018), *The Female Face of Poverty* (London, Women's Budget Group).

To cite the article: Thane, P. (2023), 'Gendered Narratives of Ageing in Britain since 1900', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s2): 13–32.
<https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s2.013>

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
 The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk