

Ageing Positive? Not According to the British Public

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the British public's perceptions of age at the beginning of the new Millennium. While ageing is a topic that commands considerable political and policy attention there is surprisingly little empirical research on perceptions of age across the life course. Using both quantitative and qualitative analysis of data from the British Household Panel Study, a representative sample of adults in Britain, we examine how age, gender, education, and income shape people's perceptions of age and subjective wellbeing. We investigate the similarities and differences, within and across age-groups, in how people perceive the (dis)advantages of age. Not surprisingly, we find that health (including mentions of ageing bodies) is the most common domain cited in terms of disadvantages of the ageing process. In terms of advantages, the most frequent mentions concern freedom and experience. Freedom is cited particularly by younger and older respondents; whereas mentions of experience are rare among those age groups and peak among those in their forties. More generally, we find a disjuncture between the upbeat messages that positive ageing initiatives seek to propagate and way the public perceive the ageing process. We also find a more pronounced negative relationship between age and quality of life, than life satisfaction measures indicate. As expected, resources matter in terms of the benefits associated with stage of life. However, we find no support for widespread claims of a gender double standard of ageing. Our research contributes to the growing field of the sociology of age, which has been somewhat less theorised and well researched than the sociology of ageing, or gerontology. We contend that positive ageing is relevant across the life course, not just in later life.

This paper is about ageing from the inside. How do people view themselves at the stage of life they have reached? What do people perceive as the advantages and disadvantages associated with being the age they are and why? These questions are important because they help provide insight into a question that, as Hockey and James (2003) point out, is implicit in theories of the life course: how do we come to know that we are ageing and what does this knowledge entail? Remarkably little is known about how people perceive age at different stages of the life course. We also know very little about how perceptions of age relate to people's sense of self and subjective wellbeing.

The notion of a consistent self implies that people's experience of the past will be carried forward into their present. However, it is less clear how youthful experiences shape people's perceptions of their current age, and to what extent perceptions anticipate the ageing process that lies ahead. It seems likely that people's experiences of age are based on both the intractable realities of the body and the changing social obligations that age confers.

There is much existing research on how age is experienced at particular life stages such as youth and later life (e.g. Brannen et al 1994, Thompson et al 1990). There is a considerable amount of theory (much of it largely unsubstantiated) about ageing in times of reflexive modernity (e.g. Giddens 1991, Beck 1992). There is also a growing amount of cultural analysis associated with theoretical ideas about the 'embodied lifecourse' (e.g. Featherstone and Wernick 1995). Yet there is surprisingly little empirical research on perceptions of age across the life course. In this paper, using both quantitative and qualitative analysis from a representative sample of British households, we present new evidence about how age and ageing is

viewed at different stages of life. In particular we investigate how people perceive the benefits and drawbacks associated with their own age.

Ageing Positive in an Ageing Society

Ageing is a topic that is commanding considerable political and policy attention. Governments are concerned that there is an ‘impending crisis’: it is feared that population ageing will have an increasingly negative impact on the economy and welfare. For the first time in the UK, and indeed in most of the rest of the developed world, people can confidently expect to live well beyond the standard “three score years and ten”. Indeed the average life expectancy for those surviving to adulthood in the UK is 83 for women and 79 for men (United Nations 2000). The medical and technological developments that underpin longevity are, in many ways, a cause for celebration. However, when longevity is combined with a fertility decline that has fallen below population replacement level there is also cause for concern. A decreasing working population means that the dependency ratio is spiralling, with more dependents to every working woman or man. No wonder that there is keenness to promote ideas of ‘workability’ and depict population ageing as an ‘untapped opportunity’, whereby older workers are encouraged to remain active in the labour force for longer.

Our title, ‘ageing positive’ is the name given to an initiative by the UK’s Department of Trade and Industry. Part of its purpose is to boost more positive attitudes towards and among the elderly, particularly with respect to employment. The initiative may or may not be sustained. But the sentiment is certainly here to stay. Who wants to see negative ageing? Positive ageing is a core policy aim. One question however that this paper helps address is how far there is a gap between the

laudable aim to promote positive ageing on the one hand, and perceptions of age among British people, on the other.

Wellbeing and Age

The question of how chronological age is viewed in Britain in the new millennium is not only of policy concern, but is also relevant to the ever expanding, multi-disciplinary research efforts concerned with subjective wellbeing. A whole industry has grown up around measuring and analysing satisfaction, happiness and the quality of life. This was once the preserve of social psychologists, medical sociologists and gerontologists. Now, economists are joining the effort and have produced statistical models that attempt to identify how different factors, including age, enhance or reduce a person's quality of life (Blanchflower and Oswald 2004). Even the most sophisticated models are dependent on 'soft' measures that tap subjective feelings. Yet it is clear that the knock-on implications of people's feelings have huge ramifications for rather weighty concerns such as societal cohesiveness, health, and economic productivity.

What is known about ageing and subjective well being and what are the implications for public perceptions of age? Many researchers have challenged the expectation that later life would be accompanied by decrements in well-being (Ryff et al 2004). A literature once dominated by negative conceptions of ageing now expounds the positive. Two components of wellbeing are distinguished: hedonic (i.e. positive feelings such as happiness and contentment) and eudaimonic (self-development, growth and purposive engagement). Several studies have converged to show increases in life satisfaction with age (see Diener and Suh 1997). Overall, the average older age profile of 'hedonic' wellbeing is positive. This finding has led

some psychologists to focus on the adaptation processes that older persons employ to maintain their levels of happiness and life satisfaction. The notion that older people can be content with their supposedly less than happy lot is one that (presumably younger) researchers find hard to accept.

Other associations are less questioned. For example, wealthier people are consistently found to be happier than poorer people. Money can buy you happiness but not much and, above a modest threshold, more money does not mean more happiness (Helliwell and Putnam 2004, Layard 2005). Higher education is also positive. A review by Oswald of many studies in the US and Europe concluded that people who are married, white, better educated, but not middle aged, and have higher incomes are happier (Oswald 1997). This summary comment about age reflects the prevalent finding that the correlation between age and happiness is curvilinear; higher among the young and elderly, lower among the middle aged.

In their article on wellbeing over time, Blanchflower and Oswald (2004) explore further the U-shape in age and wellbeing both in Britain and the United States. Happiness and life satisfaction, in both countries reaches a minimum, other things being held constant, around the age of 40. They suggest that the uniformity of the u-shape relationship shows that ‘something systematic appears to be at work’. However they state that no clear explanation is available even in the psychology literature. They put forward, as a tentative possibility, the suggestion that this decline and then rise in wellbeing through the years may reflect a process of adaptation to circumstances; ‘perhaps by the middle of their lives, people relinquish some of their aspirations and thereby come to enjoy life more’.

Perceptions of age are likely to be related to but distinct from reports of wellbeing. Reports of wellbeing reflect a primarily internal state. As many have pointed out, most people tend to report being fairly happy (Diener and Diener 1996). This is consistent with the known socially desirable response bias in question-answer attitude surveys (Schuman and Presser 1981). There is a ‘whinge taboo’. Think of everyday conversations. If we ask people ‘how are you’ we expect to be told ‘fine thanks’. We become wary of those who trespass the norms and tell us about their traumas and tribulations. The bias against a negative response does not help explain the ‘u-shaped’ age variation in wellbeing, but it does suggest that such findings are likely to be based on very small variations in responses that are overwhelmingly positive. By contrast we expect people’s perceptions of age to be much more clearly differentiated, because age is a crucial marker of social identity across the life course. Age groups are also likely to differ considerably in what they view as the benefits and drawbacks associated with their stage of life.

If perceptions of age are indeed distinct from measures of life satisfaction, then we have no reason to expect a u-shaped outcome. Indeed, the scenario that both younger and older respondents will view age positively, whereas those in mid life will temporarily chafe under perceived age disadvantages lacks plausibility. There is a strong body of evidence about the negative associations that are attached to older age. In his BBC Reith Lectures, Kirkwood pointed out that, in marked contrast to racism and sexism, “It is absolutely staggering not only how much prejudice exists against age, but also how unaware of it we remain. On a regular basis we read, hear or ourselves make flippant, jokey or negative remarks about the state of being old” (Kirkwood 2001). Given such cultural stereotypes, there is strong reason for

hypothesising that people's perceptions of the ageing process will be less positive with advancing age.

Sociology of Age and Ageing

So far we have discussed age and ageing without clearly differentiating the two. Yet the two do have distinctive meanings. As Laz (1998) points out, the sociology of age is perhaps less well theorized and researched than the sociology of ageing. The sociology of ageing is largely synonymous with social gerontology, being focused on the process of becoming old and the experiences of older people. Until relatively recently sociology of ageing has had a distinctly problem-based focus. Now, under the influence of critical gerontology, there is much more emphasis on how different aspects of ageing are socially constructed and how there is enormous individual heterogeneity in the ageing process (see for example Baltes and Baltes 1990). There has also been a marked increase in interest in the images of ageing and cultural representations of later life, including research on body and self-image in everyday interaction and experience and identity in later life (Featherstone and Wernick 1995).

There are obvious overlaps between the sociology of ageing and the sociology of age and the terms 'age' and 'ageing' are used somewhat differently in different parts of the literature. However, one key difference is that sociology of age, unlike sociology of ageing, does not prioritise later life. Rather it is concerned with the way that age helps structure perspectives of self and society, from the 'cradle to the grave'. Riley's seminal article on the significance of age in sociology (1987) suggests that a sociology of age provides an analytical framework for understanding the interplay between human lives and changing social structures. In particular she argues that periods of rapid social change bring asynchronies to attention. As the numbers and kinds of people fail to fit the age-related roles available then structural strain occurs.

The DTI initiative on positive ageing could be seen as a direct response to structural strain. There is a mismatch, caused by our ageing population, between the numbers and kind of workers available and the corporate incentives that bias firms in favour of employing the young.

Since Riley's rallying cry there has been an enormous outpouring of research, particularly in North America, Europe and Australia, on the sociology of age. For example, there has been great interest in the variability of cultural age deadlines for education, work and family transitions (e.g. Setterson and Hagestaad 1996a and 1996b). The shape and form that societal age-maps take have many far reaching implications. For example, how do such age-maps help shape individual's perceptions of normative experiences and/or role preferences (both in their own lives and lives of others)? There has been mounting evidence that shows how age enters into and shapes everyday social interactions, serving as a 'diffuse status characteristic' that guides general assumptions about people's attributes and abilities (Boyd and Dowd 1988). As Elder points out, much remains to be learned about how age expectations and timetables are constructed, transmitted and learned (Elder 1998, p 947). Yet in order to make progress on this we need to know much more than we do about public perceptions of age. Such research is important because, as Dannefer (1996) indicates, in modern societies the social structure of age tends to become "mystified" so that "conditions that are the result of social organization or culture appear to be part of nature" (p 176).

In this paper we hope to help demystify what can otherwise mistakenly be seen as part of a 'natural' age structure, by addressing how people vary, both within and across age-groups, in how a particular life stage is perceived. In particular, we test two hypotheses that we discuss in turn: one that draws on theories developed from

historical demography concerning a new ‘map of life’ highlighting the importance of the ‘third age’; the other draws on feminist claims that there is a gender double-standard of ageing.

Life course theorists, such as Matilda Riley and Peter Laslett, have been instrumental in dispelling notions that age and ageing are experienced in similar ways from one generation to the next. Laslett, in particular, has been associated with developing theories about the ‘third age’ – the period beyond the breadwinning and childrearing years – as a time of great personal fulfilment, the apogee of life (Laslett 1989). The theory has been challenged and criticized for playing down the extent to which such positive life experiences are stratified by gender, class and ethnicity (e.g. Arber and Evandrou 1993). In this paper we examine how far notions of a third age resonate with the British public. Our hypothesis is that Laslett’s optimistic vision is unlikely to be supported and, instead, the British public will perceive advancing age largely in terms of disadvantages. However, we do expect human capital and material resources to matter, with those with higher education and greater income more likely to view their stage of life positively. It seems plausible that material and human capital, while being beneficial at all stages of the life course, will be particularly beneficial in later life, in part because life course advantages and disadvantages are known to be cumulative.

A second claim that we investigate in this paper is that men and women experience ageing differently. Is there a gender double standard of ageing? Susan Sontag (1978) suggests that getting older may be ‘less profoundly wounding for a man’ because physical attractiveness counts more in a woman’s life and, for women especially, beauty is identified with youthfulness. Others have noted that there are

few cultural images of older women available. For example, Arber and Ginn (1991) suggest that 'ageism does not affect men and women equally; for women it is combined with sexist attitudes'. Picking up on similar claims, the American political scientist Ron Inglehart (2002) suggests that in advanced industrial societies where there has been most progress towards gender equality, the mass media and advertising convey the message that only younger women are beautiful and devalue the social worth of older women. According to Inglehart, this is the reason why, in the World Value Surveys, women under 45 tend to be happier than men, but older women are less happy. While the notion of making such a specific inference from pooled data from 65 societies seems somewhat precarious, the point we wish to note is that the so called 'double standard of ageing' is not only frequently asserted, but it is also cited as an explanation for purported gender and age differences in subjective well-being.

Some qualitative studies have challenged the notion of a double standard of ageing (e.g. Fairhurst 1998). However, as far as we can ascertain, there is no large scale systematic investigation that addresses whether British men and women have similar or different concerns about the way their bodies age. It is evident that there is much demand for anti-ageing remedies that tap into older women's desire to combat the wrinkles and grey hair of age. While male cosmetics are on the increase, this is still a predominantly female market. However, there is a surprising dearth of evidence about the relationship of ageing and the social construction of older men and masculinities (Hearn 1995). Our investigation will help fill this gap.

We expect to find considerable diversity, both within and across age-groups, in how age is perceived. Both the psychological research on lifespan development and the sociological work on life course pathways emphasise that experiences of age are firmly situated and contextualised in changing life circumstances. A person's

experience of age is intrinsically bound up with a particular location in time and place. Consider the exhortatory phrase ‘act your age’. The reference to behaviours that are or are not appropriate, given a person’s years, will vary enormously within and across cultures. Moreover, societal perceptions of age change over time.

In this paper we analyse public perceptions of age at the beginning of the new Millennium in Britain. We have two main analytical goals. First we investigate how structural factors help shape people’s perceptions of age and subjective wellbeing. Chronological age and gender are our main focus of interest, but we also examine the way education and income (as indicators for human capital and material resources) influence perceptions of age. Second, we investigate the experiential aspects of ageing and how far different age groups perceive the (dis)advantages of age very differently, or whether there are shared perceptions, across different age-groups, of the way age facilitates and restricts experiences and opportunities. In our concluding section we discuss the importance of longitudinal data for analysing these issues more fully than is possible in this paper, and the challenge of disentangling ageing and cohort effects. We also tentatively draw out some implications from our findings for policies that aim to promote positive ageing.

Sample and Measures

The analysis uses data from the eleventh annual wave, carried out in 2001, of the British Household Panel Study, a representative sample of British households that was launched in 1991. The BHPS, initially consisted of a representative sample of 5500 households and over 10,000 individuals. These same individuals are re-interviewed each year. The original sample was drawn using a two-stage stratified clustered design of 250 postcode sectors from the small users Postcode Address File (PAF).

Details of sample characteristics, together with subsequent attrition and weighting can be found in Taylor et al 2005. Extension samples were added to the BHPS from Wave 9 onwards for Scotland and Wales. The aim (prompted by devolution) was to increase the relatively small Scottish and Welsh samples to permit independent analysis of the two countries. As our analysis is not concerned with cross-country differences, we have analysed the original British sample only. The cross-sectional weight (KXRWGHT) is applied to adjust for within-household non-response giving a sample N of 8518. The quality profile for the BHPS provides extensive statistics concerning sample representativeness across time (Lynn 2003). Even after eleven years, the BHPS offers a good cross-sectional representative sample of Great Britain, although the over-sixties are somewhat under-represented because of disproportionate attrition due to mortality. When it comes to examining the factors that influence people's perceptions of age we confine our analysis to the subset who gave a substantive answer. This yields an N of 8177 (4% of respondents i.e. 314 out of 8518 are excluded because they either refused to answer or did not answer the questions tapping perceptions of age).

Measures

Our key dependent variable comes at the end of the individual questionnaire. It is introduced by a brief interviewer preamble: Our final question is about your view of yourself at this stage of your life. Would you say that for you being aged (insert respondent's age) has mostly advantages or disadvantages? Respondents were recorded as perceiving their age as having mostly advantages, mostly disadvantages or (if volunteered) both advantages and disadvantages. A follow up question was then asked of all: "What are the main advantages or disadvantages of being aged

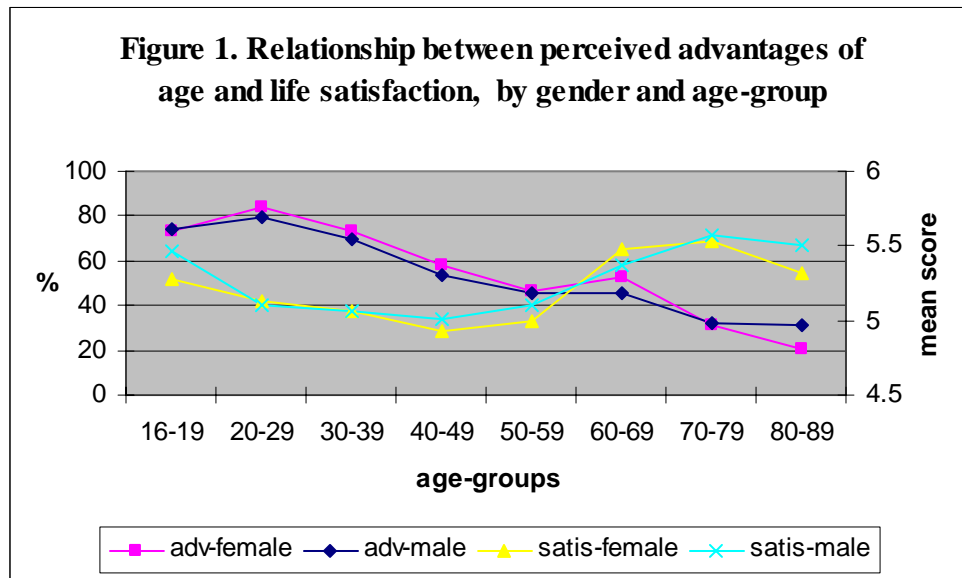
(insert respondent's age) as far as you are concerned?" The respondents' answers were recorded verbatim and interviewers were instructed to prompt once for "Any other?" The coding scheme was developed by the first author after reading through several hundred responses. Coding was undertaken by the field work agency (NOP) under the supervision of the BHPS team at Essex University. Up to four mentions were coded.

The measure of wellbeing is taken from the Wave 10 (year 2000) self-completion questionnaire which has a battery of life satisfaction measures concerning different domains (e.g. income, house, partner, job, social life). The concluding general life satisfaction question is used here which asks respondents to rate on a seven point scale 'how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life overall?' Our independent variables are age; gender; and highest educational qualification and income. Income refers to total household income from the month preceding interview, expressed as deciles.

Advantages of Age and Subjective Wellbeing

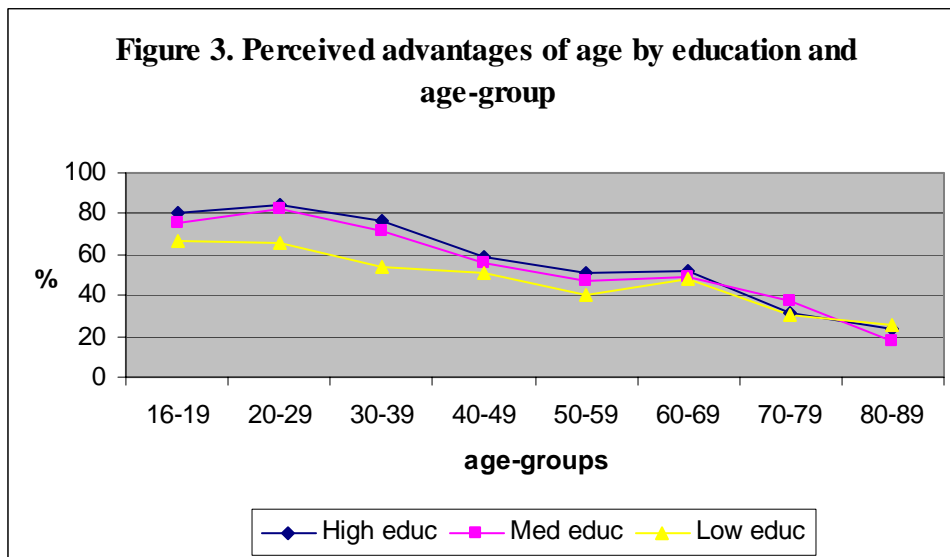
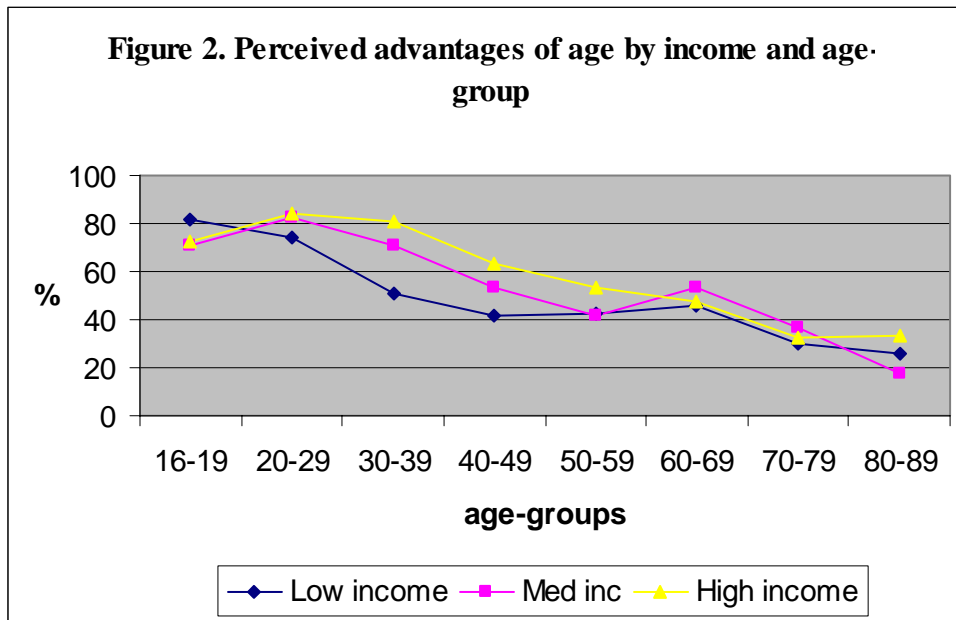
Over half of our sample (51%) felt that being their age had mainly advantages, less than a quarter (23%) felt their age had mainly disadvantages, and under one fifth (17%) volunteered that their age had both advantages and disadvantages. The remainder (9%) were undecided. "Don't know" responses usually increase with age, but this is not the case here. We include in our analysis those respondents who initially said 'don't know' to the closed question but then went on to cite advantages or disadvantages associated with their age. Figure 1 shows a pronounced linear decline in perceptions of advantages, across the age groups. The vertical axis on the left shows the percentage who perceive their age as having mainly advantages as

opposed to negative or mixed responses. For both men and women the perceived advantages of age decline sharply from a high of approximately 80% among those under thirty to a low of 30% among those over seventy.



It can also be seen from Figure 1 that most people indicate they are quite satisfied with their lives. The vertical axis on the right shows the mean score on a seven point life satisfaction response scale (where 7 is perfectly happy and 1 is not happy at all). Almost all the scores fall within half a point around point five. Our data are consistent with the claims in the literature that indicate that the age and life satisfaction relationship is curvilinear, with satisfaction highest among the younger and older ages and lowest among the middle aged (here from age about 30 to 59). While replication adds credibility to previous findings, what is striking is that almost everyone indicates quite high satisfaction. The curvilinear age-group pattern is significant (with large sample size, trivial differences are often significant), but hardly interpretable. What words or indeed experience could convey the difference between being quite satisfied (mean score 5) and very slightly more than quite satisfied (mean

score 5.5)? This is presentation trickery. If we had graphed showing the full scale range (1 to 7) then the relationship of life satisfaction with age would have hardly deviated from a horizontal line.



Thus while the British public, at all ages, are fairly consistent in expressing general satisfaction with their lives, older people see their age as having markedly fewer

advantages than do the young. It is hardly surprising that in our youth-orientated culture, older people perceive more disadvantages, but how far are perceptions mediated by people's access to material and human capital? Figures 2 and 3 show the results for income and education respectively. High and low income represent the top and bottom three income deciles, respectively. Educational qualifications are deemed 'high' for those with post A-level qualifications; 'medium' for O and A-level qualifications; and 'low' for those with those with qualifications below O-level, including those without any qualifications at all. Income does little to differentiate the perceptions of the youngest age group (16-29), whereas in midlife, when income is likely to be more stable, it matters considerably, with the high income group most likely to see their age as having advantages. In later life (60 years and above) income has little effect, presumably in part because income differentials are markedly reduced. The pattern of education is somewhat different. Education clearly matters greatly for whether young people are positive or not about their age; whereas, like income, educational qualifications do little to influence people's perceptions of age in later life.

Table 1 Predictors of Perceived Advantages of Age (logistic regression)

	Whole sample		Age 16-29		Age 30-59		Age 60+	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Sex	-0.12	0.048	0.05ns	0.12	-0.15 *	0.06	-.08ns	0.09
Age	-0.03	0.001	0.01	0.01	-0.04	0.004	-0.05	0.006
Education	0.08	0.015	0.2	0.05	0.1	0.02	.01ns	0.03
Income	0.06	0.009	0.02	0.02	0.11	0.013	.02ns	0.02
Constant	1.06	0.115	-0.3ns	0.37	1.13	0.21	3.21	0.45
N	8042		1850		4291		1901	
R2 (Cox & Snell)	0.113		0.016		0.068		0.046	

All coefficients are significant at $p < .001$ unless otherwise indicated

The results of a multivariate logistic regression are shown in Table 1. It can be seen that among the four stratification variables considered here (age, education, income and gender) age is by far the most important predictor when considering the sample as a whole. Among younger respondents (age 16-29) education is the dominant predictor whereas, among the middle aged, it is age and income that matter most. The regression shows that gender is not a strong predictor (there is a slight tendency for men to be less likely than women to report their age as having advantages). However, the regression confirms what we saw in Figures 2 and 3 that in the latter part of life (aged sixty and above) education and income are no longer significant in predicting whether age is seen as advantageous. Although age is a highly significant predictor of whether over sixties see their life stage as having benefits, it only explains a relatively small amount of variance (pseudo R square indicates that only 5% of the variance among the over sixties is explained).

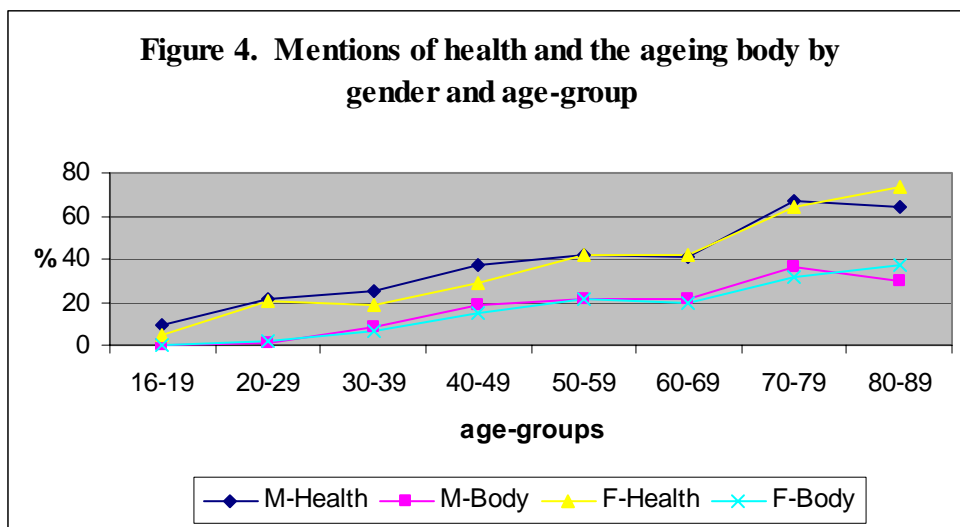
Unpacking Perceptions of Age

Table 2. Public Perceptions of Advantages and Disadvantages of Age

Advantages or disadvantages of being your age	%1 st mention	% 1 st Mention of age having mostly advantages	% 1 st Mention of age having mostly Dis-advantages	% 1 st mention of undecided (both/ don't know)	% of respondents mentioning (N)
Health	20.1	8.9	48.9	15.5	36.1 (2953)
Freedom	14.9	20.9	4.3	11.9	30.2 (2467)
Experience	16.7	22.9	2.4	17.6	23.6 (1932)
Likes/dislikes	10.9	8.4	17.8	9.6	20.5 (1675)
Money	7.5	8.8	3.8	8.4	17.7 (1450)
Work	8.5	7.9	12.3	5.9	17.3 (1413)
Family	4.6	5.5	2.6	4.5	14.2 (1163)
Future good/bad	2.7	4.2	0.8	1.4	6.9 (562)
Generally happy	1.8	2.3	0.4	2.3	6.4 (520)
Respect	2.7	3.0	2.1	2.8	5.6 (459)
Stability	1.7	2.7	0.2	0.9	4.2 (341)
Age not important	2.0	0.5	0.2	7.7	2.3 (191)
Other	2.7	2.2	3.2	3.3	7.8 (639)
Don't know	3.0	1.6	8.3	1.2	3.0 (245)
Total % (Base N)	100% (8177)	100% (4365)	100% (1821)	100% (1991)	- (8177)

The main domains that people mention when asked about the advantages or disadvantages associated with age are shown in Table 2. The first column shows the responses people cite first, with percentages adding to 100%. Thus one in five people mention health as the first (or the only thing) they cite. The next three columns show this percentage of first mentions broken down according to whether people responded that being their age had mostly advantages, mostly disadvantages, or were undecided (responding either both or don't know). Thus almost half of the people (48.9%) who saw their age as having mostly disadvantages gave health as their first reason; whereas less than one tenth (8.9%) mentioned health if they viewed their age as having mainly advantages. Health, dislikes, and work responses figure

prominently in what is most salient to those who view their age negatively, while freedom and experience are by far the most common first responses of those who view their age positively. The final column (on which the rank order of the table is based) shows the percentage of the sample who mention a particular response at all. Thus 36% of our sample mention health (the most frequently mentioned concern) whereas 64% (not shown) do not. As up to four mentions were coded this column does not add to 100%. Four domains are mentioned by more than one in five of the sample: health (36%), freedom (30%), experience (24%) and general likes or dislikes associated with being a particular age (20%). The next most frequent responses are money (18%), work (17%) and family (14%). These seven domains are analysed in more detail below.



The domains referred to in Table 2 are derived from a far more detailed coding frame that was developed to descriptively capture the content of people’s responses (for full coding frame see Taylor et al 2005). Health, for example, consists of seven codes: ‘Concerns of ageing body’ (16%); ‘Complaints about physical health’ (15%); ‘Good physical health’ (7%); ‘Positive body fitness’ (4%); ‘Problems with memory and depression’ (1%); ‘Good psychological health’ (0.5%) and ‘Other health mentions’

(1%). Because some respondents cite more than one of these health components, the percentages mentioning each add to more than the combined total for health (36%). From this breakdown, it is apparent that Health mainly concerns physical health. There is a strong linear age trend, with health mentions increasing with age, as Fig 4 shows. While health mentions often refer to functional declines of the body, there are also mentions of aesthetic deteriorations. Because of our interest in exploring evidence for a gender double-standard of ageing, Figure 2 separates out the subset who explicitly focus on the ageing body. The pattern is the same: concerns with the ageing body increase steadily by age, but there is no discernible gender difference ($\chi^2 = 0.03$ df=1 ns).

A qualitative examination of the verbatim responses do yield some interesting evidence that men and women may attribute their concerns about physical health and ageing bodies to different things. For example men are much more likely than women to mention decline in sporting prowess; whereas women are more likely than men to attribute lack of energy to caring for the family:

‘Every little injury from snowballing, mountaineering etc is coming back to haunt me’ (male, 25)

‘Just age - can't play football as well as I could; things take longer’ (male, 44)

Not as fit and active, I am stuck indoors with the children and they have to come first (female 31).

For older groups the responses become less gender differentiated, with the following responses being fairly typical for the sixty plus age range. While only a small minority mention the absence of sex, it is notable that this concern is shared by men and women alike:

‘You can’t do what you could before. You haven’t the energy or the mobility’
(man, 68).

‘Just getting older and slowing down’ (female, 82).

‘I can’t pull the birds no more. I can’t do the gardening or decorating’ (male,
76).

‘No sex. Not being able to get around properly and being a burden’ (female,
87).

Aesthetic concerns about ageing bodies cover a range of grievances including changing body shapes, hair loss or greying, and wrinkles. Yet there appears to be little difference between women and men in reporting of these issues. For some ageing hits hard, while others claim to be sanguine despite their concerns:

‘Not ageing gracefully, hair falling out, belly getting big’ (male, 35).

‘Bloody shock when you look in the mirror in the morning’ (female, 55).

‘I’m bald, fat, hearing is going, eyesight is going.. but I’m content’(male,
45).

‘Everything body wise is going South or getting bigger.. but I don’t care’
(female, 50).

As we saw from Table 2, health mentions are cited mostly by those with negative perception of their age; whereas the next two most frequently mentioned domains – freedom and experience - are mainly cited by those who view their age as positive. Freedom, like health, is made up from a combination of codes. As well as explicit mentions of ‘greater freedom’ (14.3%), there are mentions of ‘fewer responsibilities’ (6.1%), more leisure time (5.9%) and other mentions of leisure (5.3%) as well as some more infrequently mentioned codes, such as reaching legal drinking age. The dominant code is ‘greater freedom’ and common responses in this

category are ‘I can do what I like’ ‘I can please myself’ or ‘I don’t need to think about other people’. By contrast, experience consists of just one code ‘More mature/experienced’ (23.6%). While this breaks down into a number of different attributions made about causes and consequences of experience, the underlying theme is about increased confidence, feeling more at ease with themselves, and the lessons learned from experience.

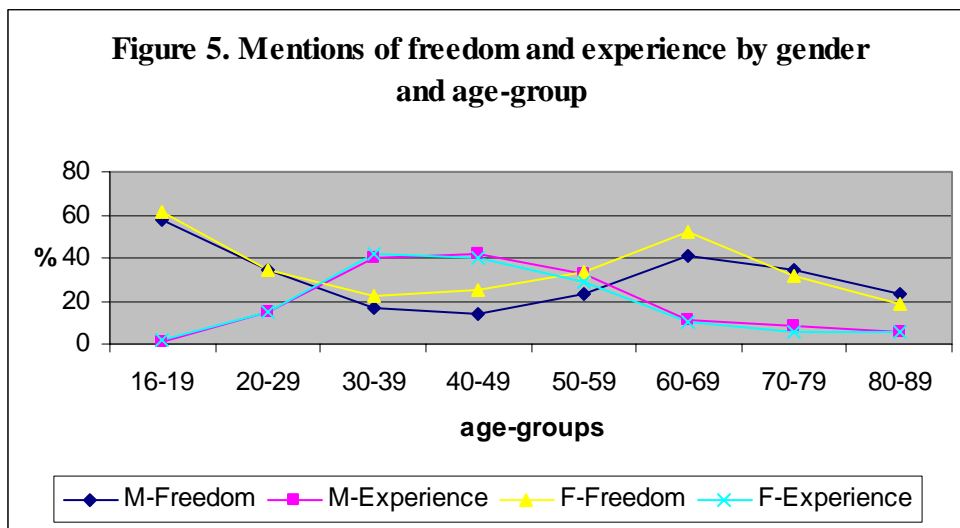


Figure 5 shows a markedly different age pattern in mentions of freedom and experience. Freedom is enjoyed particularly among the under 30s and those in their 60s: it is mentioned much less frequently by those in mid life or over seventy. Freedom is also more salient to women than men between ages 30 and 59, whereas there is no apparent gender difference in mentions of experience. Experience peaks during the thirties and forties, which perhaps helps compensate somewhat for the apparent decline in the salience of freedom during those years.

The verbatim responses shown below give some insights into the way that freedom and experience are differentially represented across the life course. In younger age groups, there is awareness that current freedom is in contrast to future responsibilities

of family and work. Older age groups, for whom child-rearing and employment are things of the past, are once more 'free' to enjoy leisure and a more relaxed pace of life. The gender difference in mid life in the salience of freedom may partly reflect women's appreciation of enhanced freedom as children grow older:

Free to go out and enjoy myself, no responsibilities (Female, 16)

Freedom; not tied down; social life (male, 19)

Kids are growing up, a bit more freedom and time for yourself (female 40)

Freedom of being able to go anywhere I want and having the family off my hands (female, 58)

Do what I want when I want, no governors to tell you what to do, no-one to answer to (man 57).

The responses concerning experience reveal little discernible gender difference.

Although young and old alike reiterate the adage 'older and wiser', there is some suggestion that responses change across the life course. In their 20s and 30s, people discuss confidence and life experience, whereas those in mid-life are conscious of being less concerned with the opinions of others and, at the same time, more patient and tolerant. Mentions of experience and wisdom increase markedly in mid life and continue into later life although, among the over sixties, mentions of wisdom are rare:

'I feel more confident now' (male, 20).

'Confidence, more knowledge, less naïve' (female, 29).

'More confident, do not worry about what people think' (female, 37).

'I've become patient and wiser, I handle stress better' (male, 43).

'I'm a lot more sensible & patient; more wise & easy going' (female, 52).

'Wiser; you can see things clearer and do not make the same mistakes as when you were young' (male, 62).

‘Experience and wisdom, you have learned so much through experience’

(female, 71).

The other main domains mentioned in terms of the (dis)advantages associated with being at a particular life stage are likes/dislikes of age, money, work and family. As we saw in Table 2, likes/dislikes and work tend to be cited more by those who view their age as having mostly disadvantages; whereas money and family are associated more strongly with advantages. Dislikes of age is often characterised by a sense of life slipping by, perceived loss of opportunities, and a sense of disappointment. The largest single category mentioned in work concerns ageism which, interestingly, is cited by both younger and older respondents, who see employers viewing people as too young or too old to be ideal for the job. Money is more often cited by those who see it as an advantage, with mentions including high disposable income, owning a house and secure pension. There is a surprising absence of negative age-related concerns about money. Family is most often mentioned in terms of the effect of children on people’s lives. One of the most consistent themes refers to the enjoyment of ‘watching children grow’. As, we have seen however, for women in particular, this is sometimes paired with the constraints children impose on freedom. Older respondents tend to talk positively of the role adult children and grandchildren play in their lives.

Table 3 Predictors of Most Frequently Mentioned Domains Concerning (Dis)Advantages of Age

		Health	Freedom	Experience	Likes/Dislikes	Money	Work	Family
Gender	Beta	.122*	-.269***	0.015ns	.028ns	.274***	.335***	-.77***
	(SE)	(.035)	(.050)	(0.056)	(.056)	(0.059)	(.060)	(.069)
Age	Beta	.0305***	0.051***	0.25***	-.017*	0.02*	.048***	.111***
	(SE)	(.007)	(.006)	(0.012)	(0.008)	-0.008	(.009)	(.011)
Age squared	Beta	.000ns	.001***	-.003***	.000ns	.000*	.001***	.001***
	(SE)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(0.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Education	Beta	.007ns	.007ns	.165***	.011ns	0.072***	.108***	.040*
	(SE)	(.016)	(.016)	(.018)	(0.018)	(0.019)	(.020)	(.021)
Income	Beta	.016ns	.031**	.029**	-.006ns	0.077***	-.009ns	0.01ns
	(SE)	(.010)	(.010)	(.011)	(.011)	(.012)	(.012)	(.013)
Constant	Beta	-2.67***	.175ns	-6.94***	-.539**	-2.83***	2.72***	3.96***
	SE	(.194)	(.164)	(.268)	(.184)	(.208)	(.213)	(.260)
R ² (Cox & Snell)		0.118	0.012	0.125	0.020	0.017	0.029	0.036
N		8042	8042	8042	8042	8042	8042	8042

* p <.05; ** p <.01; *** p <.001

In order to test whether people’s perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of their stage of life are conditioned primarily by demographics (age and gender) or resources (education and income), we present logistic regression models for each of the seven most frequently cited domains (See Table 3). We include age squared in order to capture the curvilinear age patterns. Age is by far the strongest predictor in all our models, with the one exception of money. It comes as no surprise that being male, well-off, and highly educated increase the odds of mentions of money because, as we saw in the qualitative analysis, mentions are mainly concerned with financial security. Gender matters in five out of the seven domains (the two exceptions are experience and likes/dislikes of age). Men are more likely than women to mention money, health and work, whereas women are more likely than men to mention family and freedom. Education is quite strongly related to mentions of experience and work and somewhat less strongly for mentions of money and family. Income, like education,

increases the odds of mentioning experience and money (although not work). Income also increases the odds of mentions of freedom. Thus, while resources do matter in terms of how people perceive the benefits of particular life course stages, it is chronological age, with all that implies in terms of ageing bodies, social expectations, and cumulative life course experiences, that matters most.

Discussion and Conclusions

So what can we conclude about public perceptions of age in Britain? There is a disjuncture between the upbeat messages that positive ageing initiatives seek to propagate and the way the public perceive the ageing process. It is also clear that our focus on perceptions of age implies a more negative relationship between age and quality of life than that derived from the standard measure of life satisfaction. The vast majority of people report that they are satisfied with their lives, and while this does dip somewhat in mid-life, the variance across the life course is slight. By contrast, there is a marked linear age decline in those who perceive their stage of life as having mainly advantages. These are different measures and it is not surprising that we get different results. However it is surprising that while most people see advancing age as bringing more drawbacks than benefits, and are overwhelming inclined to dwell on the inexorable decline of the body, this does not apparently reduce older people's general satisfaction with life. This is consistent with our suggestion that life satisfaction responses are subject to a whinging taboo. By contrast, a question about the (dis)advantages associated with their stage of life appears to be asking for information, rather than inquiring about internal states of wellbeing. These quasi-objective responses tap both the internal experiences and social perceptions and norms that combine to make up people's perceptions of age.

Not surprisingly, we do find that resources matter in terms of how people perceive the benefits associated with their stage of life. We had argued that because of the accumulation of life-course advantages and disadvantages, resources would matter more in later life than for the young in terms of whether people had positive or negative experiences of being their age. In fact the reverse is true and resources matter more for how younger respondents experience their age. Perhaps this is, in part, due to our particular measures of resources: income and education. Perhaps it is also because our older respondents, by definition, are survivors and anyone with serious mental or physical incapacities are unlikely to be interviewed. Despite such potential sample bias, the euphoric vision of the Third Age, as a time of great self-fulfilment and opportunity, is one that is only weakly supported by our data. On the whole older respondents are less likely to perceive their age as having advantages and are mainly concerned about functional declines of the ageing body.

Our data provide little support for the gender double standard of ageing. Both men and women see advancing age as a disadvantage in terms of decline in physical health. Indeed it is men, not women, who are most prone to mention health concerns, with young men, in their twenties and thirties, particularly concerned about declining physical prowess. Even when it comes to the aesthetics of ageing bodies, there is little to distinguish men and women's responses. Unfortunately, what can not be addressed with these data is whether a gender double standard is being eroded as gender roles change (Arber, Davidson, and Ginn 2003) or whether, as some socio-cultural researchers claim (e.g. Jaggar 2005), gender differences in this domain are somewhat exaggerated.

Our data reveal systematic differences both within and across age-groups in how people view their age. In particular, our analysis has shed light on what domains

are salient to people's assessment of whether their age bestows advantages or disadvantages. It is no surprise that health, including the ageing body, tops the list; but it is a surprise that freedom and experience are the next two most frequently mentioned domains, in terms of the advantages and disadvantages that age bestows. Moreover, the way age relates to mentions of freedom and experience is also unexpected and the interpretation is not straightforward, as we illustrate below.

For freedom, there is a strong affinity between the way our younger and older respondents value their relative liberty to do as they want. This is partly bound up with life-course stage, in that the young are aware that the burdens of family and work are still to come, whereas older respondents appreciate that such chores no longer constrain what they do. However, it is also possible that the focus on freedom by older respondents is partly due to a cohort effect, with people who came of age in the permissive 1960s era being especially likely to value individual autonomy. Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to distinguish between period, cohort, and ageing effects. In the longer term, longitudinal data can help illuminate how different cohorts perceive age differently and hopefully our study will serve as a benchmark for future research.

A disturbing finding was how very few people over sixty cite experience or wisdom as an advantage of their age. It may be that with the rapidly changing technology of the modern world, people's life-time of experience becomes obsolete. However, as Sennett (1998) suggests, it seems a flaw of our culture that as a person's experience accumulates it loses value.

Popular self-help books and marketing manuals have drawn attention to the new maps of life: people today take longer to grow up and longer to grow old than was the case for previous generations (e.g. Sheehy 1996; Tréguer 1998). Yet there is

a cultural lag between the social perceptions and norms of age on the one hand, and generational shifts in longevity and health on the other. A sociology of age can do much to help understand the ways that different cohorts age differently. A crucial part of such understanding involves charting the way that public perceptions of age change and how such perceptions relate to people's sense of self and wellbeing. There are systematic patterns of difference, both within and across age-groups, in the way life stages are perceived that are not explained by gender, age, income and education. For some, youth is a 'gold standard' against which other ages are compared unfavourably, but not for all. One important avenue for future research is to examine the different comparisons used in assessing the advantages of age. Current policy efforts to promote positive ageing will have to take on board not just the uphill task of countering negative stereotypes, but also the challenge of creating opportunities, in work and other domains of life, that boost the public's positive perceptions of age. An important implication of our analysis is that the efforts to promote positive ageing should be widened. Positive ageing is of relevance across the whole life course, not just in later life.

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