

A close-up photograph of a woman with short dark hair, wearing dark sunglasses and a blue top. Her hands are raised to her forehead, and she has a serious expression. The background is a solid blue color.

**The uncertainties of old age:
The need for new approaches and
new paradigms**

Paul Higgs

What are the new circumstances of old age?

- Instability of the term 'old age'
- Increased longevity and longer retirement
- Shift in the role of the state
- Shift in the role of the citizen
- Importance of the global dimension
- Cultural changes in what later life means
- Research not only encounters new challenges but also enters new areas

Challenges for research

- Emergence of new expectations of health in later life
- Cohort ageing especially baby boomers
- De-standardisation of the lifecourse
- Significance of the 'somatic society' at later ages
- Transformation of normative expectations
- Intergenerational equity / conflict
- Dealing with increased contingency and risk

Age and the challenge of contemporary circumstances

- Traditional studies of age and ageing treated ageing as an invariant, universal phenomenon
- The realisation that longitudinal and cross sectional observations of ageing did not match rendered such universalism suspect
- Nevertheless time and history were seen as qualifying not undermining the idea of ageing – i.e. cohort differences simply ‘bigged up’ ageing

The 'cultural turn' in social gerontology

- Questioned the dominance of 'age' as a variable
- Moved away from observing to questioning the normative social trajectory of later life
- Cohort and period no longer qualifiers of 'ageing process' but were of interest in themselves

The new paradigm of generation and the Third Age

- New focus upon 'the third age' rather than old age,
- Laslett based his thinking on 3rd age around demography (and rising standards of living) rather than social change
- Gilleard & Higgs proposed a rethinking of the third age as a 'generational field'
- Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural field' and associated 'habitus'



Generational habitus

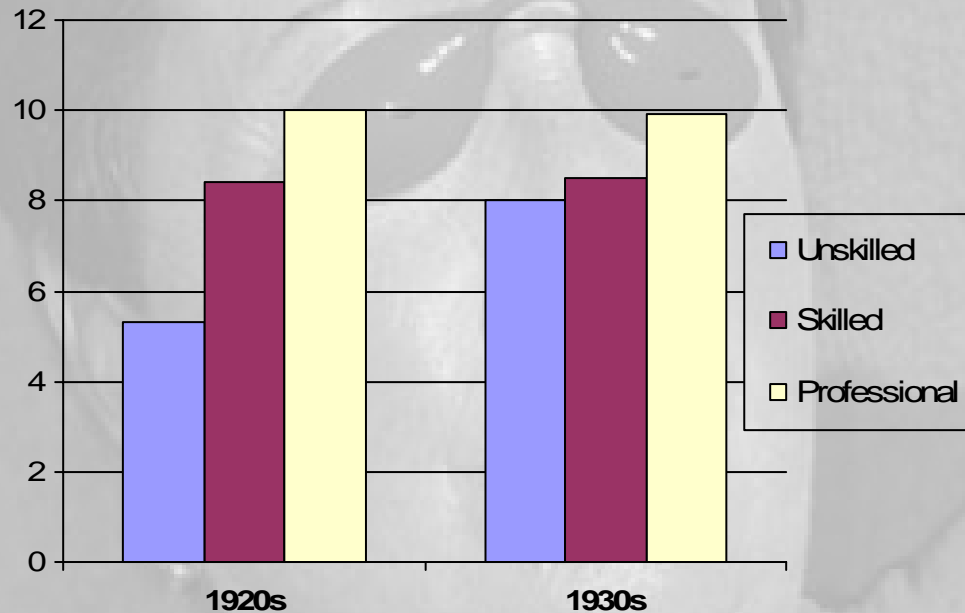
- Social differentiation and youth culture
- ‘generational schism’
- Importance of lifestyle
- Role of consumer society
- Focus on agency and choice rather than ascription and standardisation

Quantitative approaches to exploring a generational approach

- Lifespan longitudinal data to explore 'cohort' trajectories
- Quasi-cohort data to examine 'period' effects
- Cross sectional exploration of intra- and inter-cohort differentiation

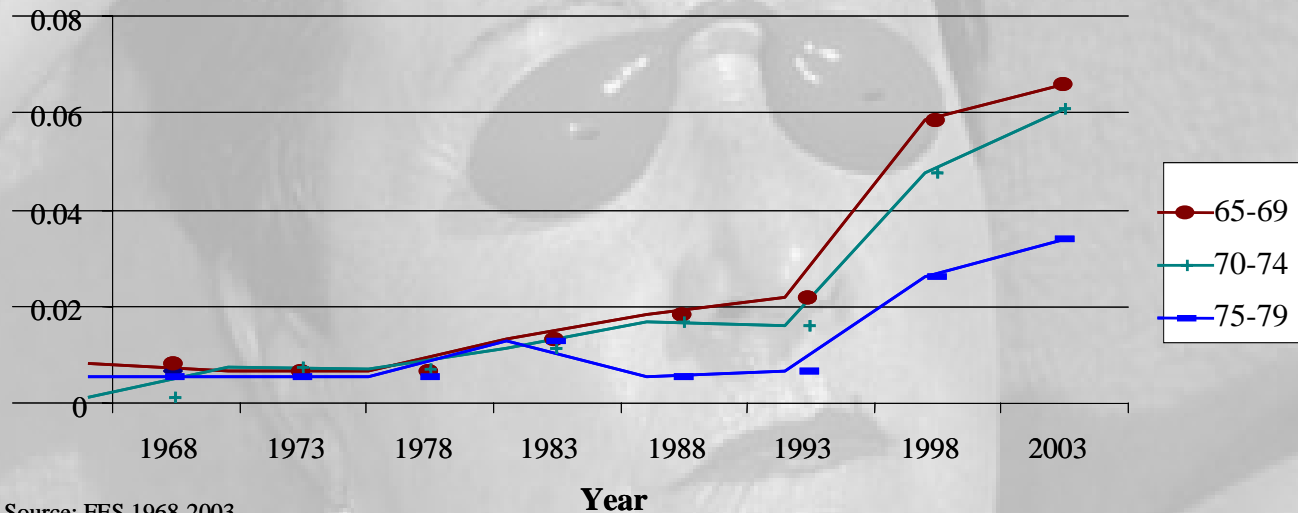
Boyd Orr study: The role of class of origin versus cohort on consumption in later life

Mean scores on the Boyd-Orr 18 item Index of Third Age Consumerism by Class of Origin and Birth Cohort.



Family Expenditure Survey (FES)

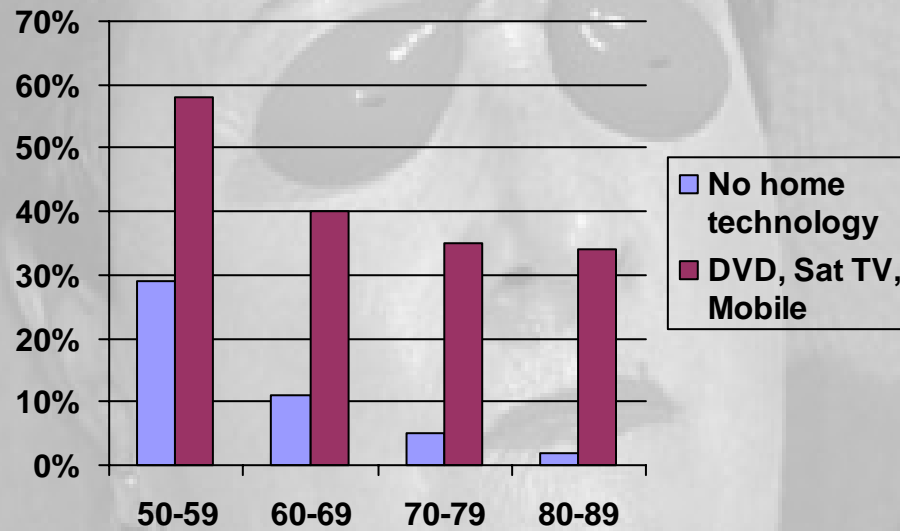
Share of household expenditure on holidays by age group, cohort and period



Source: FES 1968-2003
Evandrou et al., 2006

ELSA study on Internet Usage

Use of Internet by Age group and by level of ownership of other home technologies



Qualitative research

- Changing expectations of health in later life
 - knee pain
 - part of ‘ageing process’
 - abnormal development in the context of ‘fitness’
 - ‘anti-ageing’ medicine
 - incorporated into the ‘will to health’
 - difficult boundaries
 - conflicts between ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ ageing

Retirement and the Third Age

Early retirement - 'not' old

“Yes. I think so. I mean what I thought when I was thinking about retiring ... I mean I've not sort of fantasised about it as it a way out, I just always thought I didn't want to get like my dad and die a year after I'd retired, you know! “

Interview 07

Maintaining status in retirement

New dilemmas around old issues

- “But if I could actually do something I don't know, fundraising or something like that, and got paid for it, I wouldn't mind doing that, on my own terms and when it suits me, but I don't think I'd want to go back full-time or consultancy.”

Interview 03

New challenges

- New ageing populations
 - Terminal childhood conditions now surviving into midlife and beyond eg CF
 - Increasing life expectancy of people with severe disablement
 - Ageing of populations with conditions caused by medical negligence such as Thalidomide
 - Need to be seen as areas of gerontological research
 - Overlaps with medical sociology?

Conclusions

- Ageing is no longer straightforward
- Techniques and approaches need to embrace the contingent aspects of later life
- Attention needs to be given to the emergence of new cultural dimensions of ageing particularly generation and lifestyle
- Research is dealing with a fast moving target and needs to respond accordingly