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Ageing and modernization theory

Marie-Helene Thomas

ABSTRACT—Societies are moving towards a greying-nation at the fastest rate the world has ever seen with increasing numbers of centenarians each year. Current life-expectancy rates indicate that a person can expect to live 20 to 30 more years past the age of retirement. However, the modernization theory argues that the value of older people in society is decreasing with modernity and as a society moves away from tradition and towards a youth-oriented ideology, older people are left behind and deemed to be less important. Research is demonstrating that, with modernity, the concept of filial piety in Asian countries is declining, which results in an increase in older individuals living by themselves and feeling neglected as opposed to being respected or celebrated in old age.

Keywords: Ageing, modernity, modernization theory, ageism, elderly, filial piety

Ageing

Ageing is an aspect of life that is inescapable. The rich, the poor, the black and the white, everyone is fated to undergo this process. According to Woodward (1991), an ageing population has become a worldwide phenomenon with centenarians constituting the fastest growing segment of the population, resulting in a growth in the study of human ageing. Age is a socially constructed category and differs culturally and historically across different societies. Ageing is defined as having four criteria: ageing is universal (occurring to all members of the population); ageing is progressive (a continuous process); ageing is intrinsic to the organism; and ageing is degenerative (Bond et al. 1993).

There are varying approaches to ageing depending on the angle

from which it is being analysed and measured. For instance, chronological age is the amount of time a person has been alive, the days, the months, the years. This age is factual and cannot be disputed. On the other hand, the biological or physiological age of a person refers to how old they appear and is based on lifestyle factors such as diet, exercise and stress levels. Chronological age is out of one's control, while biological age can be influenced by how an individual chooses to live (Basaraba 2018). Another approach to measuring ageing is social age, where a person is defined in terms of their social role and where they fit within a social setting (Barak and Schiffman 1981). For example, when teenagers reach the age of 21 their social age changes because they are able to consume alcohol legally. Regardless of which approach is being used to measure a person's age, the classification of "old age" is never desired. Old age is often feared because it is associated with the idea that our time on earth is running out. For this reason, youth, beauty and goodness are the core concepts of modern culture believing in the notion that youth will fade and beauty is fleeting and the idea that "a stereotypically attractive appearance must be a youthful appearance" (Featherstone and Hepworth 1993, 312). In spite of the fact that there is an abundance of old people who are beautiful, beauty remains connected to youth.

There is a widespread assumption that the bodies of older people are too painful to look at because this evokes the awareness of our fated mortality. Furthermore, one major source of pride for modern cultures is the ability to control nature through scientific and technological endeavours. Therefore, the ageing population is seen as a symbol of failure; that science has failed in its quest for mastery over nature (over the physical degeneration of old age) (Holmes and Holmes 1995). Another aspect that modern societies value is independence but old age is associated with incompetence and dependency (Hurwicz 1995). In addition, people living in modern societies see themselves as things to be sold and employed successfully in the market but older people do not fit into this scheme and are seen as no longer useful (Holmes and Holmes 1995). Finally, due to the physical changes that mark their bodies, older people in modern consumer-oriented societies lack the ability to engage in the consumption lifestyle that characterised their lives during their youth (Schwaiger 2006).

Ageism and modernity

In 1963, the term “ageism” was coined to define “a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin colour and gender” (Biggs 1993, 85) and in 1968, the term “gerontophobia” came into existence. Ageism is the notion that it is acceptable to talk about people mainly in terms of a chronological category as opposed to taking into account their needs, desires and capabilities (Stott 1981). Two different dimensions of ageism will be discussed in this paper; the first part lays out the aesthetics of ageism while the second part reviews the socio-economic dimensions of ageism.

Ageism is similar to sexism and racism in that it, too, is a form of oppression. However, there is an important difference, namely, that everyone has the potential to eventually grow old which is why challenging ageism should be in everyone’s interest. However, in spite of this fact, ageism is now more common than ever. Ageism causes younger generations to perceive older people as being of a different species. By identifying older people as inhuman they reduce their own fears concerning death and ageing (Biggs 1993). Jon Hendricks (2005) asserts that even compassionate ageism, often known as the phenomenon of “poor dear,” is as dehumanising as its negative counterpart because both portray people through a stereotypical lens. Some common acts of ageism express condemnation for older individuals who still engage in sexual activity or to elders who dress in styles supposedly inappropriate for their age (Donnellan 1992). Jean Coyle (1997) sums up three main sources of ageism. Firstly, individual sources such as frustration, aggression, rationalisation and death anxiety. Secondly, social sources including modernization, competition and segregation. Thirdly, cultural sources such as differing values and orientations, language (words used to describe old people more often than not have negative connotations) and humour (jokes made about older people marginalise them further).

Modernization theory argues that older people in modern times are not as respected and valued as they were in the past. Cowgill and Holmes (1995) argue that the concept and definition of old age is relative to the degree of modernization that a particular society has undergone. Modernized societies have a higher proportion of older people

due to the reduction in birth rates and the increase in lifespan due to technological advance. On average, 3 percent of the total population of pre-industrial societies were over the age of 65 while in modern societies, 13 percent are. Sanitation, medical diagnostic skills and preventive medicine change the vital statistics of a population. However, life-extending medical advances may be a mixed-blessing for the older population because in the past if they were alive it was because of their own strength whereas in modern societies they are often kept alive by modern medicine. It is argued that in modern societies,

... we are now developing a generation which is over-burdened with the care of old people who no longer have any relationship to the rest of the world, who are using up family funds, hospital beds and social resources (Holmes and Holmes 1995, 270).

Furthermore, the aged earn more respect in societies where they constitute a low proportion of the total population because rarity can equal value.

Modernization theory suggests that societies that are modernizing favour the young. In the Renaissance, old age was respected and seen as the most desirable period of life filled with wisdom and experience (Bond et al. 1993). In societies rich in ceremonial and religious rituals, older people held positions of responsibility and authority. Since they have lived a long life, they act as mediators between this world and the supernatural world. While the aged have a greater advantage in more stable pre-industrial societies, in complex consumer societies, the information and knowledge held by older people has become obsolete causing their social participation to decline thus losing their family and social status (Holmes and Holmes 1995). While youth and innovation are celebrated, the skills and knowledge of older generations become redundant (Bond et al. 1993).

It is argued that modernization fosters age consciousness, especially through the mass media. Research done in 1988 showed a lack of older people present on television. In the United States, old men appeared every twenty-two minutes while old women appeared every four to five hours. This was similar in advertising where even though the role required an older person to play the part, the agency often refused to use those over fifty. On the other hand, whenever they did appear it

was usually with the purpose of complementing the main characters. Moreover, they were usually portrayed as ill, miserable, lonely, forgetful and enfeebled. In the instance that an older person appeared able and youthful, the audience tended to interpret this as a comical exception to the rule (Biggs 1993). Many negative images arise from the media, which portray older people as victims of poverty, neglect and crime. This leads to their being viewed as weak and vulnerable as opposed to resilient and resourceful (Donnellan 1992). Negative stereotypes of old people that are displayed in the media create a form of symbolic stigmatisation, which gives the experience of growing old a negative meaning (Featherstone and Hepworth 1993). Furthermore, stereotypes of ageing work to marginalise older people. Even stereotypes that are positive create a sense of inferiority and vulnerability, such as “little old lady” (Hocky and James 1993). This exaggeration of false representations leads younger generations to believe in certain characteristics of old age that vary greatly from what is actually experienced. A Harris Poll conducted in 1975, showed that often times younger people in the United States identified several factors they believed to be characteristics of old age, whilst the older people themselves stated that they were not experiencing these factors (Biggs 1993).

The final argument that modernization theory puts forward as a potential cause of increased ageism in modern life is the retirement policy, which is a recent invention (Holmes and Holmes 1995). In pre-industrial Britain people stopped working when they were no longer able to but in modern societies people stop working when they reach a specific retirement age. This is a shift from a functioning view of ageing (pre-industrial societies) to a chronological view (modern societies) (Bond et al. 1993). In addition, pre-industrial societies tended to see a shift from one societal role to another once a person reached old age and the prestige of the role usually increased (i.e. from a hunter to a counsellor). However, in modern societies there is no role or position available for older people once they retire (Hocky and James 1993). Cowgill and Holmes (1995) explored the relationship between the status of older people and modernization in fourteen different societies. The data collected generally supports the idea that there is an inverse relationship between the two. Therefore, according to the modernization theory, it is the changes brought about by modernity that result in the increase in ageist attitudes towards older people.

Ageing in Asia

Ageing in Eastern and South-eastern regions was traditionally viewed in honorific terms, where older people gained status and respect as they aged. However, research has shown that older women in Eastern and South-eastern cultures are affected by modernization. It should be noted here that although there are several factors which have led to the transformation of Asian societies, since this paper is exploring the arguments laid out by the modernization theory, the following examples are cases of older people who have been influenced by the specific changes brought about by modernization as argued in the theory.

Women in India say that, in the past, they were respected by their grandchildren but, nowadays, exposure to modernity and formal education have caused young Indians to view their grandparents as old fashioned (Goodman and Harper, 2008). According to Pedro de Magalhaes (2011), studies in China show that 58 percent of disabled older people in Hong Kong claim not to have anyone to share their problems with. Similar findings have been found in Guangzhou where the clients of the Home-Based Elderly Service Programme have said that although in urgent situations they can seek assistance from their children (usually the eldest son), they do not receive routine attention or care because their children do not live with or even near them. They usually only get to see their children in cases when the older individuals are hospitalised due to prolonged injury. The main issue these older people are faced with is loneliness. Modern technology has made it so that people are now living longer than ever but many are living with chronic disease or permanent illnesses, which means that they are highly dependent on others. Family members in China are forced into the tough decision of whether to send their aged parents to homes for the elderly or to take care of them themselves, which can lead to much stress.

In Malaysia, the majority of older people are taken care of by their family members but this trend is changing due to demographic and social changes resulting from modernization, rapid development, urbanisation and rural-urban migration (Goodman and Harper, 2008). It is argued that the belief in filial piety in modern industrial society is weakening and that this change in values will have a signifi-

cant impact on the care of the elderly and welfare in Malaysia. One case study has shown that a 33-year-old woman has constant conflict with her ageing mother regarding how to bring up her children. She prefers to be more strict and teach her children important values at an early age while her mother wants to talk to the naughty grandchildren in a loving way or spoil them (Asia Pacific Centre 2000).

As Japan immerses itself in modernity the lives of the older generation become greatly influenced by the youth-oriented ideology that is common to modern nations. One major consequence is a decline in the value and status of older people in Japan as well as a weakening of the oriental filial piety obligation. This is because religious traditions in modern societies are not so effective and beneficial towards the aged. This results from a particular set of values, a particular level of technological development and a particular form of social organisation that is future-oriented (Holmes and Holmes 1995). As Japanese women age they must rely on their daughters and daughters-in-law to support them and care for their wellbeing. This request is viewed by many as appropriate and fair because all they are asking for is to receive what they have given, the “generalised human care involving body management and emotional support” (Lebra 1979, 338). However, in Japan, filiocentric dependency from parents, which has long been the norm, is being threatened by modernization, which influences patterns of intergenerational support (Holmes and Holmes 1995).

Modernization has brought about educational opportunities that have reversed the traditional cultural ideology by teaching Japanese youth the value of individual choice, leaving filial piety to the affective bond of kinship. Furthermore, the modern system of education that was introduced at the turn of the century strengthened the sense of age stratification and increased ageist attitudes (Wada 1995). Perhaps it is for these reasons that in 1973 Japanese women aged seventy-five and over had the highest suicide rate in the world (Lebra 1979). Therefore, a nation that was once seen as a utopia for the old is witnessing more and more elderly people being abandoned and living alone.

Conclusion

The dissatisfaction that older people have regarding their aging selves is worsened by ageist attitudes that exist in modern societies.

The majority of people are afraid of old age and death and for this reason they display ageist attitudes. Placing older people in a different category is an attempt to avoid the inescapable fact that they, too, will one day age and die. Modernization is identified as one of the sources of ageism. Modernity brings about ageist attitudes for various different reasons. First of all, older people are not as valued and respected as they were in pre-industrial societies. One of the reasons for this is the growing number of older people as a result of the increase in life expectancy, thanks to technological advances and the decrease in birth rates. Furthermore, societies that are modernizing favour the young placing value on youth and innovation while neglecting the knowledge of older generations. In addition, the mass media fosters age consciousness by reshaping the perceptions that younger people have with regard to older people. This results in people becoming more aware of the stigma attached to old age, which in turn leads to an increase in ageist attitudes. Finally retirement policy, which is a modern invention, has created a shift from a functioning view of ageing to a chronological one where older people are made redundant when they reach a certain age as opposed to when they are no longer able to contribute practically to society. For these reasons, changes brought about by modernity have led directly to the increase in the ageism shown towards older people.

The weakening of filial piety in Asian societies brought about by modernization has had a direct impact on the ageist attitudes that exist in such communities. If the life of an older person is one that people can look forward to, particularly in supposedly utopian Japan, then the division between the young and old will decrease and there will not be such a fear of old age. It is apparent that modernization has led to the decrease in family status and social value of older people and for this reason the prospect of entering the stage of old age is one that is gloomy and dark. The reason ageism is more prevalent in modern societies has to do with the fact that older people are seen as being useless and unworthy of attention. Things were different in Asian countries because older people were more respected and there was a time when individuals claimed that the age of retirement was the best period because this was when they could spend their days relaxing and playing with their grandchildren. However, due to the influence of modern youth-oriented ideas resulting in the weakening

of the concept of filial piety, older people in these nations can expect to be neglected in old age.

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