

An Ethnographic Inquiry into Shifting Discourses of Diversity and Social Inequality in France

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NOTE: The Mid-Career Fellowship application form may have been updated since this proposal was submitted.

Abstract

The proposed research addresses the real world problems associated with anti-ageing culture through the mobilisation of an innovative theory and methodology, that both captures responses to anti-ageing pedagogies that teach us 'how not to be old', and enables the articulation of alternative voices and images through the production of a film that teaches us 'how to be old'. To date, Cultural Gerontology has sought to counter the psychosocial harms that attend the construction of 'old' as a stigmatized identity, by generating alternative representations. However, these ambitions are undermined by a very particular understanding of representation that assumes that representations elicit predictable re- sponses and which fails to take into account the ways in which representations of ageing are embedded in socio-cultural celebrations of youthfulness which have an affective appeal. The proposed research moves the site of inquiry from representations to their wider contextual framing. It does this through a cross-fertilization of ideas from the Humanities and Social Sciences. Metafiction, a self-conscious fiction that draws attention to its own production, and the politics of recognition, which regards frames as po- litical acts of recognition constituting socially desirable selves, are combined to produce a theory and practice of Metafictive framing. This is mobilized in a three-staged empirical project involving feminist- identified women in i) a reflexive identification of the framing devices, and their complex responses to them, in the television show *How Not to Grow Old* , ii) the co-production of a self-conscious pedagogical film *How to Grow Old* and iii) an analysis of other women's responses to the film. The intention is to identify attempts shaping our responses to anti-ageing and to share different articulations of 'learning to be old' as a means to interrogate and interrupt the workings of anti-ageing discourse, its psychoso- cial harms, and the reproduction of neoliberal rationalities working through it.

The Research Idea *The innovative thesis of the project*

Currently Cultural Gerontology works to counter the psychosocial harms of anti-ageing through the production of alternative cultural representations. This approach is limited

because it ignores the wider, pedagogical contexts of representations and affective dimensions of interpretations. The proposed research enacts two novel moves. Firstly it positions anti-ageing as a pedagogical technology at work in a current neoliberal reshaping of women's selfhood as consumer citizens. Secondly, it situates hegemonic pedagogies squarely within the lives and intellectual, political, affective relations of older, midlife and younger women to explore how responses/ 'positioning' to anti-ageing are formed, informed and lived. These moves are achieved through an innovative framework developed for this research -metafictive framing produced from the cross-fertilisation of Humanities (literary theory) and Social Science (politics of recognition). With specific attention paid to complex iterations of feminism, I will work with feminist-identified women of different ages as co-researchers, analyzing anti-ageing culture (the makeover show 'How not to get old') and as co-producers to produce an 'alternative' instructional film on 'how to get old'. The creation of this different representational space enables the articulation of our reflections on the complexity of negotiating a 'livable life' in anti-ageing culture. This articulation is vital as the denial of voices and self-accounts reinforces prevailing neoliberal values and logics. However, if giving an account of ourselves is important, this research argues that attention to how those accounts are constructed and themselves responded to, is crucial to the interrogation of the workings of anti-ageing and the reproduction of neoliberal rationalities.

Background *Current research reference points and their limitations*

Representations are an important site in the opposition to ageist culture. The UN Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing called for a counter to denigrating representations and stereotypes. In response Cultural Gerontology scholars have engaged older people in the production of 'alternative' representations of age with the aim of reducing bias in viewers (i.e. The New Dynamics of Ageing Programme & Look at Me! Project). There are two limitations. The first stems from a difficulty in generating alternative representation. Richards et al (2012) found that their women-generated images reproduced hegemonic perceptions of ageing as carnivalesque/melancholic. They concluded that feminist-identified women, not the 'ordinary' women of their study, would better occupy defiant or different positions to age, to create stronger alternative imagery. This has not been tested. I question if and how feminism can be mobilized to create alternative representations and to ask what representations may look like through that mobilization. These questions are salient given that recent

reconfigurations of feminism normalise practices of anti-ageing by linking them to an emancipated identity. The second limitation falls from a tendency in Cultural Gerontology to regard representations as negative/ positive. This binary assumes that representations produce discrete interpretative encounters with predictable responses. I draw on Media Studies' emphasis on the intersubjective and situated nature of representations and to the complexity of our responses to them. However, Media Studies' focus on technologies of governance (media effects) suggests there is more work to be done on the affective dimensions of interpretation (Skeggs and Woods, 2011)

The Focus *How the research provides a fresh approach to real-life problems*

Why do we need learn how to be old? Anti-ageing culture, which teaches us how not to get old, produces three sets of problems. The first is the psychosocial impact of a stigmatized identity on older people: age discrimination, social isolation and poor health inter alia. The second concerns the psychosocial impact on the 'not-old', currently under-researched, but involves the disavowal of a 'future self'. The third set relates to the intergenerational conflict when young and old are placed in an antagonistic relationship. Women's overrepresentation in elderly populations and deep-rooted socio-cultural anxieties about ageing women, make this a gendered problem. This research uses intergenerational working to articulate a much-needed critical position to anti-ageing culture to help address these problems. However, uniquely, this research regards these problems as part of the problematic way that anti-ageing secures a neoliberal shaping of a 'new femininity' characterized by sexual knowingness, a youth-aspiring body and active participation in consumer culture. As the 'new femininity' works to hand women's lives over to the market, values based on interdependence, vulnerability and care give way to celebrations of agency that is realized through sassy, sexualized consumption. This fuels ageism. As this involves appropriations and distortions of feminist notions of empowerment, and attempts to disrupt communication between women at different stages of the life course, it is timely to reclaim feminism as it is lived and to hear voices of feminist women in an attempt to interrupt and challenge the neoliberal shaping of 'new femininity' and its rampant individualization

Theory & Evidence Base *How these innovatively challenge and improve on incumbent approaches*

A way forward is to shift attention from representations to their framing. This project creates an innovative framework- 'metafictive framing', produced from literary theory and Judith Butler's work on recognition. For Butler, frames are invisible clusters of social norms orientating our interpretations by producing 'a field of perceptible reality'. Crucially, it is in this field that normative notions of a 'recognisable' self are reproduced against those denied full selfhood (misrecognized). My task then, is to 'break the frame' to extend recognisability to the old/aging. I draw on literary theory's metafiction to achieve this. Metafiction is the theory and practice of self-conscious fiction that draws attention to its own production (e.g. an author enters their own novel to share ideas with the reader, as they do so the 'illusion' of fictional worlds is broken, leaving the reader to question the fictional/ non-fictional binary). A cross-fertilization between this and Butler's frames produces 'metafictive framing'. This presents frames as cultural fictions for analysis; a presentation that destabilises the legitimacy of representations by foregrounding framing devices. As a practice, metafictive framing involves making representations in order to make critical statements about representation through self-conscious reflexivity. The frame then, becomes the site of critical consideration and action, and through Butler's recognition becomes a site where our affective, psychosocial investments in socially approved identities can be reflected upon. This is important because we are each located in a culture that rewards anti-ageing with selfhood: an aspect ignored when representations are regarded as negative or positive

Methodology *How different disciplinary inputs will interact in empirical inquiry*

Frames foreclose a multiplicity of voices, so metafictive framing works to express different/ differing articulations of embodied, affective and political experiences and interpretations. Accordingly this research design privileges talk. It has three stages. The first stage addresses talk in response to an anti-ageing makeover show. Makeover shows are unique cultural products – their immediacy, liveness and intimacy prompt affective responses in viewers (Skeggs and Wood, 2011). Not only do shows talk to viewers in their direct address to be young, but viewers talk back to take up shifting positions to the show's dominant discourses. Wood's (2009) text-in-action method captures this by recording viewers in the process of viewing. I utilize this method, but expand upon it to draw older, midlife and younger self-identified feminist

women into an analysis of the show and into reflective discussion about their responses through focus groups, workshops and interviews. The second stage, involves the women bringing their critical responses into the production of a 'pro-ageing' film. The film following the principles of metafiction, is created to make critical comment on the act of representation. In the third stage, the film, in its launch, will be subject to a variation of text-in- action, as we reflect on the way it is received and 'responded' to by a diverse audience. The research will be orchestrated through feminist methodological principles and an ethic of care framework. These work to encourage mutual recognition, respect and the breakdown of 'expert' and 'lay' knowledges in participatory research (Ward and Gahagan, 2010)

Output *Mechanisms for academic dissemination*

Dissemination takes the form of journal articles, conference papers and posters, academic social media, a film launch, and the project's own site and twitter feed. Papers are expected to address the harms of anti-ageing culture; the links between anti-ageing and current sexualisation debates; metafictional framing as audience research; feminist positionality in anti-ageing culture; and the importance of voice and talk in a neoliberal climate. Indicative target journals include Ageing and Society, Feminist Media Studies, Media Culture & Society, International Journal of Cultural Studies. Drafts and abstracts will be shared on academia.edu and the project's own site (wordpress) with twitter feed. Shorter pieces promoting the project will be written for British Sociological Association membership journal 'Discover Society' and social media sites of Media, Culture and Communication Association (i.e Critical Studies In Television). Conference presentations will include British Society of Gerontology, International conference of Cultural Gerontology, ISRF Annual Workshop, and the Annual Media, Culture and Communication Association Conferences over 2015-6. The Brighton University Social Science Festival will house the film's launch to members of the public and those from women's and feminist and other interested groups, with invitations sent to political figures involved in projects opposing degrading representation of women and the invisibility of older women in mainstream media (e.g. Brighton's M.P Caroline Lucas).

Relevance *How ISRF's goals may be furthered by the research*

ISRF is committed to the development of cross-fertilisation and interdisciplinary expertise and methods to create new modes of inquiry into real-life problems. My work shares this commitment through an interdisciplinary focus produced by building bridges

between Cultural Gerontology and Media Studies. However, following the spirit of ISRF ambitions, this proposed research is developed in the acute awareness that its interdisciplinary promise could be reduced to the provision of a corrective steer: Cultural Gerontology benefits from the theoretical rigour found in Media Studies, especially around the intersubjective and situated nature of representation. For its own part, Media Studies can address its critical neglect of age as a socio-political location and identity through closer working with Cultural Gerontology. Where this proposed research furthers the ISRF goals is by considering the spaces produced by building interdisciplinary bridges. In this case the spaces contain the affective, complex negotiations with neoliberal values, reconfigurations of selfhood and citizenship realized through the market, and a corrosive silencing of critical, collective voices. Attending to these involves a shift in focus from representations to their framing, which to be held to a new critical light has demanded a new framework that brings voices, positioning and affective relations into the self-conscious productions of new, divergent framing of different stories. It is hoped that this will offer different ways of learning about our ageing, help us develop different relations to our own older selves and older people around us in the wider goal of interrupting neoliberal logics.