Geographies of age: thinking relationally

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Abstract

In contrast to recent treatment of other social identities, geographers' work on age still focuses disproportionately on the social-chronological margins; the very young and (to a far lesser extent) the very old, and rarely connects them directly. We outline the benefits of creating relational geographies of age, in order to build out from the recent explosion of *children's* geographies, and discuss three helpful concepts: intergenerationality, intersectionality and lifecourse. We suggest that participation provides one epistemological vehicle for getting beyond geographies which are mainly *adults'*.

Keywords: age, intergenerationality, intersectionality, lifecourse, relationality

Introduction

With regards to the study of race in geography, Alastair Bonnett (1997, 194) observed a decade ago that there has been 'a perversely intense focus upon the marginal subject-groups constituted within the Western and imperial imagination. The White centre of that imagination has not been discussed'. Following familiar parallel histories, research on gender in geography before the 1990s largely concerned women as its subject (Women and Geography Study Group 1997), and work on sexuality focused on sexualities at the margins rather than heterosexualities (Hubbard 2000).

The study of age in geography is also undergoing striking change, with a recent explosion of interest in children and young people following a far more limited interest in the very old. Yet geographers have still to break out of the tradition of fetishising the margins and ignoring the centre. While work on age might still be accused of being, in many ways, adults' geographies (Maxey 2006; Weller 2006), there are no geographies of adults in sight. In this paper we ask why, and suggest what relational geographies of age might look like.

The problem is not that geographers have ignored the situated, fluid and contested nature of age. The earliest geographical studies of childhood problematised the common association of qualities, capacities, roles and life experiences with fixed chronological age groups (James 1990; Winchester 1991). This conceptual mainstay has been developed over the last 15 years in different fields (e.g. Katz 1993; Panelli 2002; Valentine 1996). Attention to older

people's lives has been far patchier. Beyond mapping ill health and service provision, the critical literature on old age is miniscule. In the geographical work which exists, however, 'old age' has also been viewed as culturally variable and underpinned by a range of social and economic processes, lived experiences and spatial practices (e.g. Harper 1997; Harper and Laws 1995; Mansvelt 1997; Laws 1994; Pain et al 2000). Thus, drawing on ideas within the 'new social studies of childhood' (Holloway and Valentine 2000) and critical social gerontology (e.g. Bytheway 1995; Featherstone and Wernick 1995), it has become a mantra among geographers that:

> Age is a concept which is assumed to refer to a biological reality. However, the meaning and experience of age, and of the process of ageing, is subject to historical and cultural processes … Both youth and childhood have had and continue to have different meanings depending on young people's social, cultural and political circumstances.
>
> (Wyn and White, 1997: 10).

This shift from seeing age and lifecourse stages as socially constructed categories rather than independent variables means that space and place gain significance. People have different access to and experiences of places on the grounds of their age, and spaces associated with certain age groups influence who uses them and how. Further, people actively create and resist particular age

identities through their use of space and place (see Pain et al 2001; Valentine 2004).

Despite all this, age has been given a fixity which belies the suggestion of cultural variance and fluidity. Our very focus on children, and the development of a solid sub-discipline of scholarship around them, often seems at odds with how we would like to conceptualise their experiences. We might pause here to reflect *why* it is the very young who now have such disproportionate research attention in geography. Both older and young people inhabit the social-chronological margins, the argument goes, and in western societies are stereotyped as economically dependent, physically less able and socially excluded (Pain et al 2001). These sweeping generalisations belie the vast social, cultural and economic diversity among both old and young and in the patterns of their lives. However children, it seems from scanning recent geographical work, are far more accessible, appealing and rewarding as research subjects. The current explosion is a far cry from James' (1990) plea for not ignoring children. Even teenagers have been relatively neglected within all of this (Hopkins, 2006a, Valentine, 2003, Weller 2006). Yet the *aged* geographies, particularly of young and middle aged adults, are missing altogether (Maxey 2006). The politics of an exclusive focus on narrow identity groups – particularly those at the margins of society – are disturbing. For example, Burton et al (1996) demonstrate how the paucity of research on the particular experiences of teenagers of colour acts to label them as deviant. Equally, without situating older people clearly within the social and political relations that connect them (and which they share) with the

young, analysing issues such as the fear of crime runs the risk of imagining them as fearful, irrational victims (see for example Loader et al 1998).

One way forward, as we elaborate in the rest of the paper, is to create more *relational* geographies of age. If we think about and work with age as being produced in the interactions between different people, then it becomes more difficult to talk about geographies of children, older people or anyone else in isolation. For example, as Tracey Skelton illustrates:

The focus on children as individuals is potentially important as part of debates about their rights but in poorer communities separating children from inter-generational networks in the communities can have disastrous consequences. Such networks are often part of complex reciprocal relations that are invaluable at times of crisis or insecurity.

(Skelton, forthcoming 2007)

A second important consideration and core theme for our paper is *participation.* We suggest this somewhat cautiously, as despite recent proliferation of interest in human geography, it cannot offer a panacea for identity research. But if we accept that much work on geographies of age is planned, conducted, theorised and disseminated by young and middle-aged adults – and that our positionalities and perspectives are as aged as the experiences we are involved in researching - then participation in the form of co-research with non-

academics becomes a feasible way forward. We return to this point in our conclusion.

In the remainder of the paper, we highlight three concepts which geographers are beginning to adopt in their work on age which, together, undermine the narrow focus on the very young and the very old, and provide a framework for thinking about age relationally. These are intergenerationality, intersectionality and lifecourse. We want to be clear that these concepts are not new; they have a reasonably long heritage in other disciplines, and are beginning to be employed by geographers.

Intergenerationality

Relationality does not just pose interesting questions about age, but marks a fundamental change in the way we approach and think about it. Maxey (2006), Punch (2002), Skelton (2000, 2007), Tucker (2003) and Valentine (2003) are amongst those who have raised some important questions in this regard. This current interest in relationality and networks tends to focus more widely on families, generations and interactions, and situates people of particular 'ages' within these contexts.

Intergenerationality is a keystone of these more relational geographies of age, and has implications which merit far more attention than it has received so far. It refers to the relations and interactions between generational groups. Viewing intergenerationality as an aspect of social identity suggests that

individuals' and groups' sense of themselves and others is partly on the basis of generational difference or sameness. These identities are not fixed but dynamic, affected by the relations between different age groups or generations which may vary (Bytheway 1995; Edmunds and Turner 2002a). Interaction, isolation, divergence, conflict, cooperation and so on all have material effects on the experiences and quality of life of older and younger people in particular settings. A stance that intergenerationality is important in understanding the construction and experience of identity entails more than, for example, acknowledging that what it is to be a child is affected by people of other age groups. It also suggests that identities of children and others are produced *through* interactions with other age/generational groups and are in a constant state of flux. Therefore, children and childhood interact with others in family and community settings and so are *more than* children alone; studying them in context adds new layers to our understanding.

These interactions, relations and their outcomes are also dynamic, and the variability of intergenerationality in different situated contexts should be of great interest to geographers (see Pain 2005; Vanderbeck 2007). There are issues at a range of scales and sites that geographers could usefully interrogate, and small numbers have begun this task. The impacts of global age profiles and the intergenerational contract within nation states tend to be seen in very negative terms, although a critical literature is developing (see Harper 2005). Issues of social identity among and between generational groups at macro levels have also seen some critical attention outside of geography (e.g. Edmunds and

Turner 2002a, 2002b; Kerns 2003), including work on pensions and the 'cost' of different generations to others (Walker 1996). Local cultural differences within their global contexts have proven of interest to geographers focusing on generational patterns and change over time (Chant and McIlwaine 1998; Katz 1993, 2004). Most research interest has focused on these levels of nation state or family, rather than interactions and connections in public spaces/public arenas. Nonetheless several geographers' investigations into young people's use of urban spaces have raised, though not fully explored, issues of intergenerational conflict (Skelton 2000, Matthews et al 2000, Pain 2003). Tucker's (2003) work explores the concept of generation in relation to girls' spatial lives in more depth. More positive aspects of intra-community relations such as cohesion and learning are often missing from this body of geographical work, though Shirlow's work in Northern Ireland (e.g. Shirlow 2003) is an important exception. At all of these scales, intergenerationality tends to be constituted in terms of crisis, conflict and fearfulness, rather than ambivalence, cohesion or hope.

At the intra-family scale, a small but important body of work in geography on parenting and parent-child relations also provides a springboard for further work on the complex webs of generational relations, notably fathering (Aitken 2000, 2005, Hopkins 2006b), mothering (Holloway 1998, 1999) and families' time-space patterns (Jarvis 2005), as well as parents' and children's everyday practices in contesting the use of space (McKendrick 1997; Valentine 2004; Valentine and Holloway 2001). The emotional aspects of intergenerational

relationships have been explored recently by Ross et al (2005), who focused on the relationships between teenagers and their grandparents, emphasising their importance for young people's feelings of connectedness, the influence of change over time and the importance of particular events (such as parental divorce) in these relationships. Hopkins' (2006b) research on the relationships between young Muslim men and their parents, in particular their fathers, found that they often respected the hard-working nature of their parents' generation, and in so doing challenged the notion of generational conflict within ethnic minority communities. Work outside the global North also throws these issues into sharp perspective - see Young and Ansell's (2003) account of families affected by HIV/AIDS in southern Africa which identifies the complexities of intergenerational relations when traditional family structures are disrupted.

Intersectionality

To advance geographers' understandings and appreciation of age in different places and times, another mechanism is to adopt the concept of intersectionality. Crenshaw (1993) employed intersectionality to analyse the various ways in which gender and race influence the multi-dimensional nature of Black women's employment experiences. As she observes, her intention was

…to illustrate that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination

as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race of gender dimensions of those experiences separately.

Crenshaw (1993, 1244)

More recently, Brah and Phoenix (2004) have revisited debates about intersectionality, highlighting a range of important works across the social sciences that have sought to explore the ways in which various markers of social difference – gender, class, race, (dis)ability, sexuality, age, and so on – intersect and interact. Although some human geographers have also contributed to such understandings (e.g. Dwyer 1999, Nayak 2003), much work has still to be done with regard to the intersection of particular age, generational and other identities and their spatial specificity (see for example Hopkins 2007a). Clearly, the ways in which age is lived out and encountered are likely to vary according to different markers of social difference; the everyday experiences of people belonging to particular age groups are diverse and heterogeneous. A primary question is always *who else* older, middle-aged or young people are.

Two examples of youth geographies research demonstrate possible routes for taking intersectionality forward. First, Dwyer's (1999) work has drawn attention to the ways in which religious, ethnic and gendered identities intersect with age in the experiences of young Muslim women in the west. She highlights the ways in which young women's everyday identities were influenced by

ethnicised and religious discourses, and describes how they were also expected to reproduce the parental culture with a particular emphasis upon family honour (izzat). This work demonstrates the potential for both intersectional and intergenerational geographies of age to advance understandings of people and the places they inhabit. A second example from McDowell's (2003) research demonstrates how class, masculinity and place intersect with understandings of work to create particular experiences for working-class young men in the UK. Here, a series of intersectional influences on the young men – their performance of their masculine identities, their locality and class-based expectations and their familial experiences and outlooks – all combine to determine their employment prospects and future trajectories.

Relational geographies of age could usefully build upon such work. Different markers of identity may intersect with age in interesting and important ways, influencing for example how different generational groups perceive and relate to each other in different settings (see Arber and Ginn 1995; Bairner and Shirlow 2003; Edmunds and Turner 2002b; Katz and Monk 1993; Pain et al 2000). Some markers may intersect with age in very powerful ways; others may make age far less significant in relation. Geographers have much to contribute to existing work in the social sciences here, particularly in highlighting the significance of place and the importance of locality to intersectional and intergenerational experiences of age.

Lifecourse

A lifecourse approach involves recognition that, rather than following fixed and predictable life stages, we live dynamic and varied lifecourses which have themselves different situated meanings. The term lifecourse has 'been adopted as a way of envisaging the passage of a lifetime less as the mechanical turning of a wheel and more as the unpredictable flow of river' (Hockey and James, 2003, 5). Again, it is a well established concept in other disciplines, but lifecourse geographies, aside from important collections by Katz and Monk (1993) and Teather (1999), have not been addressed in detail.

There is much to be done from a geographical perspective in excavating pathways and experiences over the lifecourse, and examining the relation of different experiences across it. This more relational perspective has begun with recent work on transitions. Studies have focused on the increasingly problematic move from school to work (McDowell 2003) and from childhood to parenting (Bynner 2001), and explored the fuzzy (teenage) generational boundaries between childhood and youth (Skelton 2000; Valentine 2003; Weller 2006). As Jeffrey and McDowell observe, 'the transition to adulthood is perhaps more complex and contested that in any previous era' (2004, 131), and Jones notes that 'young people can become adult according to one criterion but not another' (2002, 2). Young people's ability to move through these transitions is likely to be influenced by their class position as well as their gender, race, sexuality, (dis)ability and locality. Along similar lines, the work of the developmental psychologist Arnett (2004) has shown how young people's transitions to

adulthood are becoming elongated. Arnett (2004, 8) has developed a theory of 'emerging adulthood' which is characterised as having certain fluid characteristics: an age of identity exploration, an age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in-between and the age of possibilities. As McIlwaine and Datta (2004, 485) note in discussing youth transitions in the global North and the South, 'the transition from childhood to adulthood is partial, inconsistent and contradictory' in both hemispheres. For these reasons, Punch (2002) pursues a contextual and relational approach to youth transitions, and what she calls 'negotiated interdependence', which might usefully be extended across the lifecourse.

Very few geographers have explored other lifecourse transitions, or indeed the lifecourse in its entirety. Examples which are likely to provide rich seams of understanding are the transition to and meaning of 'middle-age', experiences of retirement, and oral history approaches which link and relate the experiences of individuals and broader processes over time and space. Experiences of lifecourse transitions are also constantly changing (Arnett 2004); if some young people are obtaining 'adult' status later in life, what happens to their expectations and experiences of other lifecourse transitions? What do people perceive as key points in the lifecourse and what are their expectations of these? How do particular stages of the lifecourse differ over time and space? Here intergenerational and intersectional geographies come together, as familial relations and tensions as well as the range of markers of social difference influence and demarcate people's experiences of the lifecourse.

Participation: geographies with older people, children, and everyone in between…

If geography continues to be adultist, and the geographies it produces adults', then there is a need to think seriously about ways and means of making good our commitment to inclusion and to benefits accruing to 'researched' populations. Matthews (2005, 271) has recently argued that geographers' approach to children and young people must differ from our approach to women and people with disabilities, on the basis that 'most children are not in positions where they can routinely challenge the sustaining hegemony…[and are] unlikely ever to be part of the Academy' (Matthews 2005: 271). We differ slightly, as participatory co-research provides one way in which young people have been involved in academic work and social change, producing geographies of age which are shaped by a far wider range of aged perspectives (e.g Cahill 2007a, 2007b; Leyshon 2002; Maxey 2004; McIlwaine and Datta 2004). Lively recent debate about the limits to and dangers of promising participation has not dampened geographers' search for methods, theories and practices of participation that work (Cameron and Gibson 2004; Kesby forthcoming; Kindon et al in press; Mohan 2001; Pain 2004). As concerns older people, such debates and approaches for meaningful inclusion in the academy are barely present in geography (though well developed elsewhere; see HelpAge 2002 and Pain 2005). Nor have participatory approaches been used with adults *as* adults by geographers.

Participatory research approaches are well suited to relational knowledge creation. For example, participatory techniques have been widely used outside geography by groups of older and young people in intergenerational practice, where knowledge and/or social action outcomes are jointly created (Pain 2005). These are also used to develop common understanding of how other identities intersect, and to work through associated problems and seek solutions (for example see www.magicme.co.uk). Finally, as Andrews et al (2006) show in their call for the reinvigorated use of oral histories in human geographical research, there exist other interesting methods with which to explore intersectionality, intergenerationality, lifecourse within participatory approaches.

Conclusions: moving forward

A call for more relational geographies of age runs throughout this paper. This is one way forward, we suggest, *conceptually*. In this brief discussion of a new seam of geographical scholarship on age, and the large territory which remains to be mapped, we have argued that the three concepts of intergenerationality, intersectionality and lifecourse undermine the narrow focus of geographers to date on the very young and the very old, and provide a framework for thinking about age relationally. Further, rather than suggesting they are deployed in isolation, we have tried to show how they relate to each other. This means of conceptualising geographies of age is relevant to all areas

of the discipline, not just the social geographies of identity where most interest has focused to date.

Few studies within the discipline have made an explicit attempt to link these three concepts. However, there is some recent work which may provide a useful reference point for developing future relational geographies of age. Alongside Vanderbeck's (2007) recent call for a focus upon intergenerational geographies, Rawlins (2006) highlights important ways in which young girls' senses of identity and fashion are interwoven with their relationships with their mothers. Hopkins (2006b) discusses the importance of intergenerational relationships between young Muslim men and their fathers, their multiply intersecting identities (Hopkins, 2007a) and their location across the lifecourse to their experiences of everyday life.

These concepts are never neutral, but are contested and power-laden ideas in themselves which need some careful handling and exploration. They raise questions about who decides which identities, ages or generations are prominent in structuring people's experiences. Particular 'age groups' tend to dominate different settings under examination, as well as policy and research encounters (Pain 2005). Part of geographers' work might be continuing to challenge the stereotypes associated with particular ages, and explore how alternative ways of being an adult or a child disrupt fixed-age geographies further, including but not restricted to adult education, adult play, non-working adulthood, differential experiences of adultness, constructions of family, parenting and alternatives, child carers, child labour and prostitution (see for

example, Robson 2004a, 2004b; Van Blerk 2006; Young and Ansell 2003). Geographers have now produced many examples of the disciplining and regulation of children and childhood spaces, as well as examples of ageism in older people's lives; exploring some very different and often more positive alternative lives might provide a refreshing break for theory and empirical practice. Furthermore, relatively little work has drawn out the dynamic shape and experience of age and generational identities at different times and in different spaces, and the ways in which this relates to the politics of scale (Hopkins, 2007b).

A second important theme has been participation. This is one way forward, we suggest, *epistemologically* and *methodologically*, and participatory research approaches are well suited to relational knowledge creation. Participation provides another answer to the concerns recently voiced that children's geographies in particular have become descriptive with no end purpose (Horton and Kraftl 2005; Matthews 2005), and promotes a usefulness and relevance led by younger (or older) people - *in combination with*, rather than in opposition to, the development of exciting theory (see Beale 2006; Pain 2006). For many, too, participation into the academy involves more than research; it applies to teaching students (see Kindon and Elwood forthcoming), including older students from non traditional backgrounds, in our links with schools (Hopkins 2006a), activism within the academy (see Chatterton 2005) and other public and outreach activities.

In conclusion, it is time for analysis of age in human geography to take a more inclusive and holistic view, and at the same time to become more conscious of the politics of fetishising the social-chronological margins. As yet, analysis of age is a little way off taking its place among the other maturing approaches to social identities and difference in human geography.

Acknowledgements

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