

Special Issue: Ageing and Dress

EDITORIAL: Why ageing matters

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This special issue of *Clothing Cultures* is concerned with the relationship between ageing and dress or, more specifically, 'old age' and dress. Accepting the UN's definition of 'older persons' as those aged 60 and over (UN 2015: 1)<sup>1</sup>, the world's population of older persons is growing faster than any other age group and the speed at which it is ageing is increasing. In 2015, one in eight people worldwide were aged 60+, by 2030 it is anticipated that older persons will account for one in six people globally and by the middle of the twenty-first century one in every five people will be aged 60 and over. The proportion of the global population aged 60+ is predicted to increase by approximately 4.2 per cent over the next 15 years; jumping rapidly from 12.3 per cent in 2015 to 16.5 per cent in 2030, nearly double the 2.3 per cent increase that took place in the preceding 15 years. By 2030, over a quarter of the populations of Europe and North America are expected to be 'older persons' (UN 2015: 3).

While increased life expectancy is a global phenomenon, currently high-income countries<sup>2</sup> have the most rapidly ageing populations. Japan, Germany, Italy and Finland<sup>3</sup> all had populations in 2015 of which over a quarter were aged 60+: Finland in third place with 27 per cent, Germany and Italy tied at second with 28 per cent, while Japan's citizens aged 60+ accounted for approximately a third of its total population (UN 2015: 3) with those aged 65+ constituting well-over a quarter at 26.7 per cent (Yoshida 2016). However by 2050 it is predicted that it will not just be high-income countries whose populations will experience such a shift - in increasing numbers of middle-income economies, including China, the Russian Republic,<sup>4</sup> the Islamic Republic of Iran and Vietnam<sup>5</sup>, the proportion of the population aged 60+ will exceed 30 per cent (WHO 2015b: 43).

This change has not gone unnoticed or uncommented upon by those outside of governmental circles. The media narratives concerning this unprecedented turn in population demographics have often been alarmist and somewhat pessimistic in tone<sup>6</sup>. For example, UK newspapers - broadsheets and tabloids alike - have repeatedly framed the country's ageing population in terms of its presenting a financial burden on the rest of society due to increased pension and healthcare costs:

'How the aging population is a creaking liability for working population', *The Telegraph* (Wallace 2017)

'Ageing Britain: two-fifths of NHS budget is spent on over-65s', *The Guardian* (Robineau 2016)

'NHS [National Health Service] spending will increase by £109 billion over next 50 years as ageing population puts pressure on health services' *The Sun* (Hawkes 2017)

These stories belie the considerable economic contribution made by retirees and the over-65s to the British economy, both in terms of their spending and their oft-ignored labour. In the UK in the financial year 2013-14 approximately £61 billion was contributed to the economy by people aged 65 and over: almost £6 billion from volunteer work, £6.6 billion from child care and £11.4 billion from other informal care. £37 billion came from paid employment (Age UK 2014, Age UK 2017a: 18). Considering that Local Authorities during that same period spent £9.8 billion on social care (Age UK 2014), the notion that the over-65s en masse can be considered as constituting a financial liability is revealed as absurd.<sup>7</sup>

Even without such a resounding rebuttal of this neoliberal equation of personal value with financial contribution/burden, these headlines point to an unquestioning equation of ageing with physical decline and vulnerability; one which accepts the biomedical model of ageing as inviolable and which belies the fact that there are as many different experiences of ageing as there are ageing bodies. Further, rhetoric which presents resisting or fighting<sup>8</sup> such effects of ageing as a purported model of positive ageing contributes still further to an image of older people as burdensome: If only older people would take responsibility for and apply themselves to their own body project they could enjoy an old age free from (at least 10 of the visible<sup>9</sup>) signs of ageing. To do otherwise is to be wilfully neglectful and demanding of younger generations' attentions and resources. This suggests that successful ageing equates with invisible ageing; one where appearance is timeless and presents no troubling reminders of ageing's inevitability for all. As Katz (2002: 27) identifies, 'the ideals of positive aging and anti-ageism have come to be used to promote a widespread anti-aging culture, one that translates their radical appeal into commercial capital.'

In this framework to 'appear' old is a transgressive act and one which has attendant risks. For example, the wearing of an ill-fitting garment or one with a missing button or food stains - signs which in a younger person might be put down to slovenliness or indifference - in older people can quickly be read as signs of the onset of a pathological condition. This thus makes the maintenance of a good appearance an important element 'in preventing the malignant slide towards [the] depersonalisation' (Twigg 2010: 227) that such a diagnosis would herald and makes the act of dressing oneself one of both defiance and compliance. To dress for one's body's age defies pressure to deny that physical changes do occur with ageing, but one must nevertheless carefully navigate cultural mores regarding age-appropriateness - both in dress and behaviours - if one is to resist the ultimate threat of the biomedical model, being judged as lacking 'mental capacity'<sup>10</sup> or independent

personhood (Higgs and Gilleard 2016). More than ever dress is a means by which an individual demonstrates that they are 'a morally and culturally competent actor' (Topo and Iltanen-Tähkävuori 2010: 1685).

This special issue aims to contribute to the developing body of literature spanning dress, fashion and sociological theory which is concerned with unpicking the way in which the category of 'old age' is enacted within a symbolic economy of difference. More specifically it is concerned with challenging how this identity category can - and all too often does - serve to homogenise and diminish those thus labelled. Crenshaw's (1991) influential account of intersectionality - not as a 'totalizing theory of identity' (1244) but as a reaction to 'the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed' (1245) – provides a useful tool for thinking through how 'old age' can be conceived of as an othering label - in much the same way as 'woman' and 'Black' - despite its being an identity category those engaged in its normatising are destined to inhabit.

Such social power as evidenced in the delineation of difference 'need not be the power of domination' (Crenshaw 1991: 1242) rather it can function to reveal 'coalitions, or at least potential coalitions waiting to be formed' (Crenshaw 1991: 1299). This project is arguably what this special issue and each article herein works to extend. Each article implicitly accepts that 'age' is an organising principle of late modern societies, wherein an individual's chronological age typically determines their socio-legal status,<sup>11</sup> while rather more amorphous labels - such as 'child', 'adult' and 'old person' - are highly influential in determining the identities made available to those thus classified. This special issue illustrates clearly the fluidity of these categories, with all research participants described as 'older' but with what constitutes 'older' varying considerably: this editorial began with the UN's definition of 60+, however Sadkowska et al. describe their research participants, aged between 54 and 63, as 'older men'; McCoy and Schneider's surveyed square dancers are 'older adults', all over 50 and the majority aged between 60 and 80; using Fitzgerald Bone's (1991) definition of 'the mature consumer', DeLong et al describe their South Korean and American respondents all aged 50+ as 'older female users'. Townsend et al.'s 'older women' are aged between 62 and 67, while Mally establishes that the age of the fictional character of Mrs Exeter, who appeared in American *Vogue* for over 20 years age to speak to the interests of the 'well-off older [white] women', fluctuated from 'fifty to over seventy'.

The rationale behind their sampling is established by the authors, but what each paper demonstrates in its own way is that values, interests and passions transcend chronological age. That however 'older' is defined it conceals more than it reveals. Sadkowska et al. demonstrate that far

from being ignorant of the expressive potential and bodily pleasures offered by clothing, their sample of older heterosexual British men are sophisticated and informed 'fashion' practitioners, as evidenced – somewhat counterintuitively - by their desire to distance themselves from the label 'fashionable'. McCoy and Schneider's Canadian square dancers delight in the swirl of a skirt and flash of a thigh with a pleasure typically denied older people in public spaces, challenging the narrative that with ageing comes loss of libido and growing asexuality (Bradway and Beard 2015). DeLong et al. also provide evidence of the continued affective power of clothing, with both their American and South Korean respondents reporting that valued garments helped them to feel 'attractive', whether through its accentuating 'favourably perceived figure attributes' or through its expression of 'positive character traits'. So that the benefits of such affective influence might be maximised, Townsend et al. offer readers insight into their development of a new, user-centred approach to the designing of garments for older women, one that engages with a multiplicity of ageing bodies and which actively engages the end user in the co-design of clothing. While Mally's analysis of the rise and fall of 'Mrs Exeter' in American *Vogue* details some of the historical vicissitudes experienced by older - white, well-off - women seeking guidance and acknowledgement 'that aging brings changes to body shapes' and decries the dearth of such characters in contemporary clothing advice literature.

Ageing is inevitable - 'Die early or grow old: there is no other alternative.' (de Beauvoir 1972: 315) - and it is hoped that this special issue will be the first of many concerned with making the prospect of growing old a more alluring one. One which offers pleasurable embodiment, visibility and agency as just some of its aspects; and one in which clothing and dress practices offer unbounded means of self-authorship.

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<sup>1</sup> The "'oldest-old" persons' are taken as those aged 80+ (UN 2015: 2).

<sup>2</sup> High-income countries are defined by the World Bank (2017) for the 2018 fiscal year as being those whose gross national income (GNI) per capita is \$12,236 and over, while low-income economies are those which in 2016 had a GNI of \$1005 or less. The middle-income band is divided in two; lower-middle-income economies have a GNI per capita of between \$1,006 and \$3,995, while those considered upper-middle-income have a GNI of between \$3,996 and \$12,235.

<sup>3</sup> Japan, Germany, Italy and Finland are all ranked in the top 20 GNI by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Both upper-middle-income economies.

<sup>5</sup> Both lower-middle-income economies.

<sup>6</sup> Not helped in the UK by phrases such as the 'old age dependency ratio' (OADR) being used to describe the ratio of people of working age relative to those of pension age (ONS 2016). This notion of 'dependency' obfuscates the social and financial contributions made by those entitled to a State Pension, suggesting instead that their need support from current workers is due to some lack of foresight on their part.

<sup>7</sup> Far from constituting a financial drain, McKinsey & Co, one of the largest and most influential strategy consultancy businesses in the world (Adams 2015), predicts that consumers aged 60+ will soon 'account for nearly 60 percent of consumption in Western Europe and Northeast Asia' (Amed et al. 2016: 54), and that in the US the same age group will contribute 40 per cent or more of consumption growth between 2015 and 2030 (Dobbs et al. 2016: 8).

<sup>8</sup> See for example: '9 things you can do to live longer and fight ageing, according to a French expert', *The Independent* (Hosie 2017); 'Cheers to a long life: This is how red wine can "help fight the ageing process" - but how much would you have to drink?', *The Sun* (Parry 2017); 'The rise of the supercentenarians: five ways to live to 120', *The Telegraph* (Lytton 2017).

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<sup>9</sup> See for example L'Oréal's *Revitalift Repair 10* line of products which 'target 10 signs of ageing in one' (L'Oréal 2017).

<sup>10</sup> In the UK the Mental Capacity Act 2005 states that 'a person lacks capacity in relation to a matter if at the material time he is unable to make a decision for himself in relation to the matter because of an impairment of, or a disturbance in the functioning of, the mind or brain'. Interestingly the act goes on to state that 'a lack of capacity cannot be established merely by reference to [...] a person's age or appearance'. This is of interest here as it seems to suggest that before the 2005 Act these were indeed cited as reasons to argue that a person lacked mental capacity.

<sup>11</sup> In the UK, for example, an individual's chronological age is used to determine whether they should be in compulsory full-time education (aged between 5 and 16 years of age (Citizens Advice 2017)), whether they are an adult ('the age of majority' is 18 in the UK), whether they can be held accountable for their actions ('the age of criminal responsibility' is 10 in England and Wales (Gov UK n.d.c)), whether they understand their sexuality and the implications of sex ('the age of consent' is 16 (CPS n.d.)), whether they understand and can influence the rule of their country ('voting age' is 18 (White 2016: 3)), whether they can consent/withhold consent to medical procedures (doctors are advised by the General Medical Council that 'at 16 a young person can be presumed to have the capacity to consent' (GMC 2007: 12), their eligibility for specific welfare support (e.g. Housing Benefit for those under 35 and single is limited (Gov UK n.d.d), and their entitlement to a state pension, which is currently 63 years and nine months for women and 65 for men but is increasing to 66 for both men and women from 2020 and 67 from 2028 (Age UK 2017b).