THEORISING AGE IN CRIMINOLOGY: THE CASE OF HOME ABUSE

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Introduction

The starting point of this paper is that 'age' is undertheorised and generally viewed as unproblematic in criminology, particularly when compared to the consideration which has been given to 'race', gender and sexuality. Beyond the empirical level 'age' is not always meaningful, and it is rarely unpacked theoretically. My aim is to demonstrate that studies of the relationship between older people and crime would benefit from a more critical approach, including explicit consideration of ageism. A number of theoretical perspectives which contribute to this task are discussed. Old age is the main focus of attention here, as youth crime and victimisation both receive more attention and are better developed conceptually. However, the idea of 'age' needs to be considered in broad terms to shed light on what we mean by 'old age'.

While proposing a case for theorising age in criminology in general, my focus will be on what has come to be known as 'elder abuse' - the domestic abuse of older people, often by carers, taking place in the home or in residential institutions. Though it is far from being a widely recognised 'social problem' on the same scale as child abuse or domestic violence against younger women and men, elder abuse has been growing in importance as an issue for academics and policy makers (Bennett, 1993; Biggs et al., 1995; Eastman, 1984, 1994; McCreadie, 1991, 1996; Social Services Inspectorate, 1993). However, it has largely been overlooked by criminologists, the debate so far being located mainly in medical and social welfare disciplines.

Elder abuse: defining the problem

A recent theme in criminology has been questioning the definition and construction of 'crime' and 'victims' (Muncie, 1996), raising the question why elder abuse has to date rarely been viewed as criminal (either in legal or consensual terms, or as an object of criminological interest) in the same way as, for example, street mugging. Many discourses engage with elder abuse, but the criminal justice discourse is perhaps the quietest (although, in the UK, the Law Commission recently supported specific protective measures).[1] At present the approach to understanding and treating elder abuse tends to be medicalised, operating within a very different policy agenda when compared to issues such as sexual and racist violence.

Definitions of elder abuse are highly contested, but most include the physical, sexual, psychological and financial abuse of older people, usually taking place in a domestic or institutional context (McCreadie, 1996). There is disagreement about the location of behaviours which 'count' as elder abuse, official definitions tending to site it as a family problem involving informal carers (Social Services Inspectorate, 1993), while many others have argued that it is also a problem in social and medical care institutions, and some argue for the inclusion of harassment and violence from the wider community (Biggs, 1993). There

are related issues about the causation of elder abuse which will be discussed further in this paper.

Despite the 'almost obsessive concern with definitions and numbers' of most studies (Whittaker, 1996), it is difficult to define elder abuse more precisely, and even more so to measure its prevalence. Given the much narrower boundaries of the majority of crimes, elder abuse is extremely wide ranging, tending to be defined by its age-specificity rather than the particular nature of incidents of abuse. However, it is not clear why some incidents of theft or sexual assault against older people might become represented as *non* age-specific (at least in their classification as a certain type of crime), while others become labelled elder abuse. From a theoretical point of view it is difficult to justify the separation. There are not necessarily differences in terms of the incidents themselves (McCreadie, 1996). The distinction is largely based on certain normative assumptions about crime - about where the incident takes place (homespaces), the trust one might otherwise expect from the perpetrators (relatives, acquaintances and/or carers), and the agencies which might be expected to deal with it (medical and social work professionals rather than the criminal justice system). It might be noted that similar distinctions between the rape of women by strangers and by known men have not served the victims of home abuse well.

Setting aside the complicated and unresolved issue of what 'is' and 'is not' elder abuse, there are various types of abuse, broadly categorised according to the nature of abuse, the usual victim/perpetrator relationship and location. While individual victims may experience any or all types of abuse, these latter variables may differ greatly between incidents and require different strategies of intervention (McCreadie, 1996). Measurement is fraught, and not only because of these definitional issues (Ogg and Munn-Giddings, 1993). However, what is known strongly indicates that the risk of victimisation overshadows risks to older people from crimes such as theft and physical assault in public space which are the usual focus of attention. It is important to point out that the risks of both domestic and street crime are highly concentrated amongst certain sub-groups within the older population.

Theorising age

All this raises the problem of what we understand by 'old age' in the context of elder abuse. This may seem an empty question at first glance. The meaning of old age and elder abuse are commonly taken for granted - 'elder abuse is something that happens to old people'. But if the definition of elder abuse/non elder abuse is not based simply on a false division of space, the processes leading to these crimes must differ significantly and need close examination. The use of the term 'elder abuse' suggests that crimes in this category are *caused by or related to* a common factor, in this case the old age of the victim.

Rather than dismantle 'elder abuse' as a focus for study, my aim is to argue that there *are* important generic issues which justify the identification of these crimes as age-specific. However, my argument is that a more critical approach to age is needed in criminology, one which focuses on the ways in which 'old age' itself is socially constructed, is represented and is used by certain interest groups, and which takes account of the implications of this for discourses around victimisation. The issue of elder abuse illustrates this need well because it presents a very different scenario to (and overturns) received criminological wisdom about older people. First, it presents us with an age-specific crime which is likely to be a significant risk for older people, and second, it presents us with the knowledge that older people may be perpetrators as well as victims. While the nature of elder abuse as a subject for criminological study demands more careful conceptualisation of 'age', the general points made here are intended to be transferable to other areas of inquiry.

There are at least three ways in which age can be theorised. The first is arguably the most common approach taken by criminologists to date, but is problematic: 'age' is used largely as a descriptive category. The empirical nature of much work on older people has led to some difficulties in interpretation (Mawby, 1988; Midwinter, 1990). Age is treated as little more than a chronological progression towards a predictable and unique stage of life (old age) which gives older people some commonality of experience. It is sometimes assumed uncritically that this commonality underlies, or at least has some significant bearing on, patterns which have been suggested by research about risk of crime and fear of crime for people in different age groups. Across the social sciences 'age' tends to be represented as static, and 'old age' in particular is portrayed as having negative connotations of mental and physical decline, and

social and spatial withdrawal (Bytheway, 1995; Harper and Laws, 1995). These ageist ideologies around old age identity, which I return to later, both affect and are reflected by criminological research as one of the agents which actively construct victimhood.

Secondly, on questioning the relevance of age we might abandon it as an analytical category or a meaningful framework. To some extent recent literature from social gerontology leads us towards this conclusion. However, I will be arguing that a third and preferable option is to reformulate what we mean by 'age' in order to draw it more rigorously into victimisation theory, including coming to focus on age relations and ageism.

In furthering this third objective, a number of theoretical perspectives are relevant to criminological research on old age. In the remainder of this paper I describe each of these perspectives, and to illustrate their value I consider their impact on theorising elder abuse.

Four theoretical perspectives

1. The identity perspective: the social construction of 'old age'

In recent years social gerontologists have taken on issues around old age and identity from a social constructivist standpoint. A literature has developed which emphasises the deconstruction of the lifecourse as a series of static and predictable stages and accepted notions about old age (Biggs, 1993; Bytheway, 1995; Featherstone and Wernick, 1995), and instead views the meaning of old age as varying widely across cultures and over time and space.

A useful division can be drawn between chronological, physiological and social age (Arber and Ginn, 1995). Firstly, chronological age refers to the number of lived years. Statutory age barriers delimit the identification of age groups, retirement being the first such common identifier of who has become 'old'. Chronological age is itself a social construction - for political economists, the enforced lack of labour value of older people underpins their low status in western societies (Townsend, 1981; Walker, 1987). Secondly, physiological age, a medical construct - due to wide variation in the onset of ill health and physical decline, which are by no means inevitable for all, people's state of health may be more important in being labelled or in feeling 'old' than their actual number of lived years. Physical ageing as an identifier of old age has been called the 'mask' of old age, a sign to others as well as oneself, behind which one's inner 'true' identity lies (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995). Thirdly, and related to these ideas, is social age: the attitudes, expectations and norms about appropriate behaviour, lifestyles and characteristics for people who are older. In other words, the meaning of our old age is determined for us by other people - 'we wear labels that *other* people assign us, with or without our knowledge and/or our consent' (Laws, 1994). It has been argued that the socially and economically constructed aspects of old age are far more influential on the condition of older people's lives, and the problems they face, than chronological or physiological age.

Old age may be identified on a variety of bases, then, but ultimately by the gaze of others. Despite the supposed development of 'new' identities of old age in postmodernity (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1989), old age is predominantly viewed in western societies as a condition with negative connotations, involving inevitable changes for the worse: a time of decline physically and mentally, and of social and spatial withdrawal. Hence all ageing bodies are identified with failing physical and mental ability, and with society's fear of decline and ultimate death (Harper, 1997). In reality, only around a third of people aged 60 and over have some form of disability, only a small minority ever need any level of social care (McGlone, 1992), and for most death is experienced as sudden trauma rather than gradual decline (Fries and Crapo, 1981).

The implications for academic study of the realisation that the meaning of 'old age' is highly variable and produced by culture are significant. Comprising a fifth of Britain's population (Social Trends, 1996) and an age bracket spanning more than forty years, older people are a huge group about which to generalise, encompassing differences of gender, class, race, nationality, sexuality, ability, income, health status, and so on. These arguments are complex and I return to them later in the paper. What they do inform us is that we need to examine our position as theorists/researchers very carefully when it comes to defining and speaking about old age.

What are the implications of these arguments about old age identity for elder abuse, a tangible problem involving older people? In seeking to explain elder abuse, most commentators have dwelt neither on the social and economic construction of old age, nor on the power relations which surround it (perhaps because the literature has developed largely in a practitioner-oriented rather than a theoretical framework). Age itself, as an empirical category, tends to be viewed as sufficient to account for victimisation. It has been argued that conditions brought on by being old (eg disability, dementia) lead to a difficult and stressful relationship between the carer and the older person, which can lead to abuse. It is this tendency for elder abuse to be medicalised - essentially viewed as a biological phenomenon, something to be treated by doctors, and to be understood through the physiological changes and decline that are seen as inevitably accompanying old age - which has kept it off social science and criminological agendas.

This position has been criticised, as discussion of causation begins and ends with the individuals involved or the family or caring unit, suggesting that difficulties involved in the caring role itself are enough to generate abuse (Biggs, 1996). As well as failing to describe or understand most carer-cared for relationships (Aitken and Griffin, 1996), it maintains an untenable position of what 'old age' means, equates old age with disability (and disability with difficulty), and blames the victim - the position that physical or mental health conditions lead to 'difficult' behaviour which 'initiates' abuse (Penhale, 1993). While the carer-stress model has been extremely influential in shaping policy responses, much research now points to relationship problems which long pre-date abuse. Bringing elder abuse into criminological theory demands an equally critical approach. In particular, viewing old age predominantly as a social category is a prerequisite to theorising issues of the victimisation of older people. In a similar vein, criminologists have highlighted the social construction of youth to critically examine 'juvenile' delinquency (Pearson, 1983).

From a social constructivist perspective, there is some room to argue that age itself is irrelevant to understanding what has come to be called elder abuse. In criminological research more generally, it can be suggested that we have so used age as a proxy for more fundamental structures such as 'gender', 'income', 'health' or 'location', that if we peel these away 'old age' often means very little at all. This line of reasoning has been applied by Midwinter, for example, who has suggested that the relationship between older people and crime is a 'tenuous link', and even that old age might be abandoned as a frame of reference if we are to avoid the dangers of 'self-fulfilling victimology' (Midwinter, 1990: 51-53). In the case of elder abuse, there are positions which hold that the abuse is not primarily about old age at all, but about certain damaging relationships which have continued into old age. This applies mainly to abusive situations within the family. For example, elder abuse is sometimes simply marital violence which has continued into old age (Vinton, 1991), a parallel which is discussed in more detail below. Rather than blaming the stresses of caring for an older person, some authors blame existing personality problems of the caregiver (Pillemer and Finkelhor, 1989), or broader socio-economic stresses faced by the family (Penhale, 1993); all may be exacerbated by the victim's move into old age and a caring situation, but the latter are not seen as the primary causes of abuse. Again, the level at which such explanations focus has effected a family approach to resolution in many policy approaches (Biggs, 1996).

My argument here, however, is to retain 'age' as a theoretical category, as it has salience for criminology in general and elder abuse in particular. 'Old age' acquires more explanatory power if we focus on the power relations which surround it.

2. Power relations and age

There is a need to set findings about risk and fear of victimisation more explicitly in a broader socio-political context (Pain, 1995). With reference to domestic violence against women, Walklate (1995) describes the progression of theory; from explanations about individuals' relationships within the family ('blaming the victim'), to theories about femininity and women's economic, social and physical vulnerability ('understanding the victim'), to setting violent events within a context of patriarchal relations and masculinity and questioning why offenders behave the way they do ('structuring the victim'). Assuming that theorising age in criminology might fruitfully follow a similar trajectory, it has barely reached the second stage at present. For example, while older people's fear of crime elicits sympathy and has been blamed upon the low social status and generalised feelings of insecurity which elderly people experience in

Western society (Kosberg, 1983; Maxfield, 1987), researchers contend that the risk of crime against older people is very low; that it has greater impacts because older people tend to take it more seriously (Mawby, 1988). There has been little appraisal of age-specific and age-relevant risks of crime at this end of the age spectrum. In parallel, explanations of elder abuse tend to focus on individual relationships, or family relationships, but rarely consider structural inequalities (Aitken and Griffin, 1996). 'Age' itself is never really unpacked nor built into explanation.

Age relations become relevant when we examine the vulnerability to crime which is reinforced by economic and social conditions which may especially affect older people. Just as work on gendered violence has shifted the focus of attention onto patriarchy and women's structural vulnerability (Stanko, 1987), what remains salient here is not old age itself, but rather ageism. Ageism does not feature highly in discussions of victimisation, or at most is mentioned as one of a list of -isms. The term tends to be insufficiently theorised and is often applied carelessly (Biggs, 1993). Rather than referring to oppressive behaviours towards older people, ageism involves culturally prescribed sets of norms about appropriate behaviour at various stages in the life course (Bytheway, 1995). These stages may not have clear beginnings and ends, nor be experienced in the same ways by people sharing chronological age. Ageism does not just apply to behaviours against older people by younger people - people of all ages are subject to rules and norms about age-appropriate behaviour, and these are expressed at many levels: from the state, the media, peers, families and oneself. The relationship between power and age is highly variable, and constantly shifts over time, space and social context.

Clearly ageism can be applied to explain elder abuse and what is known of its patterns: the generalised social, political and economic marginality which older people may experience as a consequence of attitudes to old age is germane to their construction as victims. It can be seen in the situation of victimisation in the home/family context, where older people experience a lack of power, where they may be dependent on younger carers with more social and economic capital, and where intervention from outside is difficult. It is also evident from a social policy perspective when the state makes virtually no response whatever to the problems of elder abuse - the situation in the UK before the early 1990s; continuing difficulties with getting elder abuse onto agendas has been blamed on the low status which older people occupy in western societies (Penhale, 1993).

Rather than constructing elder abuse as a problem of physical vulnerability (an essentialist approach to the problems of old age), the social, political and economic are a more appropriate theoretical focus. There is danger, however, in any static and dichotomous explanations. Social constructivists have tended to shy away from the significance of the 'visible body' (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1995), but elder abuse is undeniably 'about' physiological ageing and aged bodies. The very notion of 'physical vulnerability' can not exist in a vacuum, but necessarily has social meaning - bodily changes make you vulnerable to what? - from whom? - and why? Just as it is unconvincing to argue that 'gender' floats free from lived bodies (Butler, 1990), these are artificial distinctions. We need to be looking more closely at why aged bodies have acquired a particular set of cultural meanings (Harper, 1997), why closeness to death, mental decline, social ineptitude, economic redundancy and spatial withdrawal are associated with the physiological changes of later life and (for some people) the dependency that follows. We should ask why older people have acquired 'otherness' when 'old age' is the only 'minority' attribute which is certain to come to the majority.

It would be wrong to represent older people simply as having a tendency to victimisation or oppression, not least because of the enormous diversity amongst the older population. Crime is often represented as 'an age war, with young offenders preying on innocent older victims' (Mawby, 1988: 101), but for some types of crime (especially those further from the public eye, such as fraud) offenders themselves tend to be older. A number of studies suggest that over half of all domestic abusers of older people are themselves aged over 60 (McCreadie, 1996). In relating social or economic power to the victimisation of older people, we need to accept the theoretical challenge of explaining older people's offending behaviour too. We also need to recognise, again, the differences between older people. In terms of economic fortunes, older people have polarised dramatically in the late twentieth century (Walker, 1993). In terms of social characteristics, gender, race, class, income, or ability might provide better explanations (and better barometers of power or lack of it) than age alone. There is a need to retain a critical grasp on the concept of 'ageism' as well as 'age'.

There are further problems with a power relations framework which become apparent when looking at the pattern of individual cases of elder abuse. Research on elder abuse has grappled with the idea of the 'dependency' of potential victims on their abusers creating power differentials. Early research isolated this 'dependency' on carers as the main impetus for abuse (Eastman, 1984), but recent UK studies suggest that the victim's degree of dependency on the abuser is not in fact related to the likelihood of abuse. Some studies show non-abused older people to be more dependent than those who are abused, while others suggest that the abuser's dependence on the abused is a more important factor (Ogg and Munn-Giddings, 1993). It can be difficult to tell in close relationships who is dependent upon, or more powerful than, whom (and should this be assessed in physical, financial or emotional terms?). Abuse may arise from the powerful situation of the carer, but it may also arise from the powerlessness of the carer in a trapped situation. These problems underline the complexities in theorising age. Further, in this context, there is a need to unpack why 'dependency' is construed by society as so negative (Aitken and Griffin, 1996). It has been suggested that the model of abused elder as dependent on abuser has currency for policy imperatives, fitting with particular care in the community strategies adopted in the early 1990s (Biggs, 1994) - another example of policy 'solutions' defining the problem (Manning, 1987).

3. Feminist perspectives

The third theoretical perspective which might inform how age is dealt with in criminology comes from feminist scholarship. This approach is clearly related to the last section on power relations, but tends to prioritise gender in explanation. Old age is increasingly becoming feminised (Arber and Ginn, 1995) - almost two thirds of people over 60 are female, and the proportion increases with chronological age. Therefore, it has been argued, the older population remains vulnerable to certain types of crime, especially domestic violence (Pain, 1995). Accordingly, if the domestic victimisation of older people is understood in a power relations framework, patriarchy is (at least) a joint suspect with ageism. Parallels have been drawn between ageism and sexism elsewhere, as feminist modes of inquiry, analysis and theorisation provide useful lessons for the conceptualisation of age (Arber and Ginn, 1995; Laws, 1995). Ageism involves not only a different set of cultural stereotypes of older women (mostly more negative than those of older men), but a different set of relations between older women and social and economic welfare and policy, and different gendered relationships between age and crime.

Feminist criminological analysis has much to inform us about elder abuse, in particular the theorisation of other forms of domestic violence (Vinton, 1991). Many parallels have been drawn between elder abuse, domestic violence against younger women, and child abuse. All take place in the private domain, involve victims who often have long term relationships with and some degree of dependence on offenders, and are largely hidden and under reported. In each case society has been reluctant to admit the problem exists, and there are great difficulties with intervention, including victims' reluctance (often for good reasons) to request help. All have been drawn into the 'cycle of violence' theory - there is some evidence of cases of elder abuse where once-abused children are violent towards now dependent and frail parents (Penhale, 1993). All three types of violence can be analysed in terms of particular sets of power relations around age and gender.

Hence theorising age parallels the theorising of gender to some extent. Age as well as gender structures *what* behaviours become criminal, and *where* certain behaviours become defined as criminal (Stanko, 1988). Importantly, a high proportion of elder abuse victims are female, and offenders are usually male (McCreadie, 1996). Some studies have shown older men to be equally at risk (Pillemer and Finkelhor, 1988), though these are in the minority. Men also tend to suffer different types of abuse (they are more likely to be abused financially, for example), while older women are more likely to suffer sexual and physical violence (Pillemer and Finkelhor, 1988; Sengstock, 1991). The greater tendency for victims of elder abuse to be female is partly explained by the sex composition of older people, and partly by the gendered risks of home violence (Pain, 1995), but women may be made additionally vulnerable by poverty, their housing situation, and a lack of specific public health care policies which address their needs (Aitken and Griffin, 1996).

It has been suggested that the distinction between elder abuse and domestic violence against younger women is extremely hazy: that some or perhaps most 'elder abuse' is simply

domestic violence which has continued or which has been triggered by changed circumstances. Whittaker (1996), while not viewing elder abuse simply as marital abuse, discusses elder abuse almost exclusively as a problem of socially constructed gender relations rather than one of socially constructed age relations. She talks of 'resistance to the idea that elder abuse is predominantly a male problem' amongst academics and policy-makers, as acceptance demands taking account of a feminist approach to theory and practice (Whittaker, 1996: 151). A lack of awareness of the gendered nature of elder abuse has certainly characterised policy formulation to date (Biggs, 1996). It has generally been analysed and treated separately owing to the focus of much feminist research on the problems of younger and middle aged women and the fact that most elder abuse research has been done by men (Aitken and Griffin, 1996).

However, while modes of feminist inquiry and analysis are both useful and relevant to the victimisation of older people, there is a danger in assuming that age is much 'the same type of thing' as gender. Uncritical application of one body of knowledge/theory onto another never works out well, and there are problems with simplistic parallels between elder abuse, domestic violence and child abuse. In the case of elder abuse as a primarily male-on-female phenomenon, much evidence shows complex variation in patterns of abusive relationships. Perhaps most challenging is that women commit a considerable proportion of instances of abuse too: McCreadie's (1996) summary of recent research suggests that on average two thirds of cases of elder abuse are carried out by men. [This could, of course, be argued in relation to domestic violence and child abuse too, without challenging patriarchy as the basic framework of explanation. Kelly (1991) has stressed that women do not live outside patriarchal ideology and practice, and might be considered as perpetrators of oppression too, especially over the groups they tend to have power over (children and older people) in the sites where they are likely to hold more power (the home).]

Elder abuse in formal or institutional care is the most likely of all to involve a female abuser, as carers as well as clients are overwhelmingly female (Jack, 1994). Aitken and Griffin comment that this is 'a scenario which defies gender stereotypes and is therefore addressed through the pathologizing of the individual - a move commonly used in relation to women who are regarded as transgressing gendered boundaries - or not addressed at all' (Aitken and Griffin, 1996: 11). Their own work in Northamptonshire supports the existence of a male-dominated pattern of abuse in informal care (within the home), finding that abusers are most often male, more often sons than husbands, with a sizeable percentage either distant relatives or non-relatives. They stress that men have a greater tendency to be abusers despite the fact that far more informal carers are female, and despite the better support from family, friends, employers and social services that male carers generally receive. The location of abuse, be it in public space, the home, or an institutional setting, and its social construction as gendered space is central to explaining who abusers are, who victims are, and why it happens. The complexity of gender and violence is perhaps best approached by another of Aitken and Griffin's conclusions, that a central tenet of a feminist standpoint has been to avoid dichotomous thinking - many commentators 'tend to construct either/or scenarios when both/and might be the more appropriate way of thinking about elder abuse' (Aitken and Griffin, 1996: 54).

To some extent comparisons of elder abuse with child abuse have been useful in raising issues of ageism in the family, and particularly effective in making the case for a similar level of policy effort to tackle elder abuse (Penhale, 1993). However, the comparison is an ageist one which is inclined to infantilise older people and locate them as passive victims, reproducing commonly-held stereotypes of old age and inviting paternalistic responses (Biggs, 1995; Vinton, 1995). Child abuse is generally seen as the greater and more shocking crime, owing to cultural precedents which dictate the responsibility of the family and society to care for and nurture children (Penhale, 1993). There is no similar expectation about older people, and nor does the state currently have the same role in protection. Child abuse and elder abuse are both underlain by age, but very different power relations are involved - arguably more complex in the case of elder abuse - and leading to very different outcomes. Different explanations as well as solutions are required. Overall, then, particular conceptual difficulties set elder abuse apart from other forms of 'family violence' (Ogg and Munn-Giddings, 1993). Some set elder abuse apart as different in that it often includes forms of exploitation other than physical aggression (Biggs et al., 1995), but feminists have been making this point about domestic violence for years (Kelly, 1987): all types of systemic violence have harassment and lesser forms of abuse associated with them (Young, 1990).

While the differences and similarities with domestic violence and child abuse are being explored, very little is known, at an empirical or theoretical level, about the relationship of elder abuse with racist abuse. Pointing to parallels between community abuse and harassment of older people and racist abuse and harassment, Biggs (1996: 67) has asked why 'elder abuse has been positioned in such a way, isolated from parallel debates on violence and exploitation in contemporary British society'. Little is known about the effect of race/ethnicity on elder abuse. Older people from ethnic minority backgrounds may experience different family structures or cultures of caring to those assumed by mainstream policies, which may affect the incidence of abuse, and a different relationship with social services and health care delivery which may affect detection. They may suffer additional vulnerability to racist abuse from formal carers (Aitken and Griffin, 1996).

Less often considered still is the relationship between the abuse of older people and the abuse of people with disabilities (Ogg and Munn-Giddings, 1993). This is despite definitions of elder abuse assuming some kind of physical or mental impairment on behalf of the victim which necessitates a caring situation. What little research has been carried out suggests that disability (or *ablism*) creates a higher risk of attack (Galey and Pugh, 1992). Ablist violence may be experienced by people with disabilities of any age group, and not all abused older people are physically or mentally disabled (though clearly in studies of institutional abuse they tend to be); and where they are, as previously discussed, explanations for abuse in particular cases often pre-date disability. Disability may be seen, then, as a compounding factor in vulnerability, but it is also interconnected with old age at a theoretical level, as ageism is connected to society's response to disabled bodies.

In theorising age, it is important to stress differences as well as similarities; it can not be seen simply as an 'add-on' to race, gender or class (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995), though it tends to be added to lists of 'others'. This approach is common enough in criminology ('fear of crime is a problem largely for certain groups - women, black people, people on low incomes, older people, etc.'). Seeing older people as 'other' or 'them' as opposed to 'us' is especially problematic, as most of us expect to become old (Bytheway, 1995). Recent developments in gerontology have asserted the varied experiences of old age according to differences in gender, class, race, sexuality, ability, marital status and so on (Conrad, 1992), and it is important to focus on these diversities and their inter-connections. While all identities are mutually constituted, they also need to be analysed separately so that we are sure what we are talking about.

4. Postmodern perspectives

Finally, theorisation of age has something to learn from postmodern perspectives, which have some important contributions to make to the theorising of subjectivities (Laws, 1995). Issues of difference and diversity are given a central position in postmodern accounts of ageing. At the societal level, old age - whether it is defined in chronological, physiological or social terms - is historically and geographically specific (Conrad, 1992; Laws, 1995). Moreover, at the level of the individual, identity is contested and malleable terrain, 'always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others' (Malkki, 1992: 37). The different ways in which people experience and associate age, crime and their own identity provide a key area for future research. These are not solely 'postmodern' ideas; many are related to developments elsewhere, especially those I have discussed from feminist and social constructivist approaches. What I want to highlight here in particular is the issue of representation.

How is 'age' represented, and how do we represent and position age groups? The issue of elder abuse demonstrates that 'old age' is contested territory, both for ageing individuals, their carers, and for academic researchers and policy-makers. Issues about representation of older people as victims of crime in the media have been subject to more critique (Fattah and Sacco, 1989; Pain, 1997a). However, there are also important issues of representation in academic theory, especially the ways in which it represents subjects, reinforces divisions and difference, and secures norms and conventions as unquestioned social facts (Duncan and Ley, 1993). With regard to age this relates to our expectations about older people as physically declining and socially dependent, and therefore as predisposed to having a particular relationship to crime.

Postmodern feminists in particular have discussed how to avoid sexist (and the same might apply to ageist) research by including other voices in academic analysis, challenging the authority of authors and accepting a plurality of views (Hekman, 1990). This leads to questions over methodology, in particular the positioning of authors in the construction of texts. Perhaps these methodological issues are more problematic still in research on ageing, where researchers are almost exclusively young or middle aged adults. Qualitative research has been proposed as one way of allowing older people to speak for themselves and interpret their own lives, rather than inferring this from empirical indicators (Murphy and Longino, 1992). In other areas this has proven important in drawing out the diversity of older people's experiences and in reformulating understanding of the nature of 'old age' as an explanatory variable (Gubrium and Sankar, 1994). Qualitative research can also offer different perspectives on victimisation and fear amongst older people (Pain, 1997b), though the approach has not been widely applied. Elder abuse research in particular has been dominated by quantitative analyses, and many sources point to the need for in depth research on individual cases to explore how abuse is structured and experienced within the context of people's lives, what it means to them and how they cope with or resist it (Aitken and Griffin, 1996; Whittaker, 1996).

There is no methodological or epistemological panacea for these problems. Representations of old age are part of the 'problem' of old age which is constantly being constructed and reproduced, and criminological discourses which construct victimhood in particular ways are no exception. Care needs to be taken not to take the meaning of 'old age' for granted or to reproduce stereotypes uncritically. Bytheway (1995) warns of the dangers of seeking to represent older people 'positively' - though it may be tempting as a political strategy - as this still proposes commonality between them which may be unfounded.

Conclusions

In this paper I have discussed some recent theoretical developments in the social sciences on old age as a constructed social identity, and made suggestions as to how these might inform criminological theory. This perspective suggests that age is not enough in itself to 'explain' the victimisation of older people or, for that matter, their offending behaviour. In some fields of criminological inquiry there is room to argue that 'age' is less relevant than has been assumed, in that it is closely intertwined with other personal and social variables and identities. However, I have argued that examining the power relations of age, and in particular coming to focus on ageism, is a more fruitful way for criminologists to approach 'age'. I have also suggested that gender is closely connected to age in determining patterns and experiences of victimisation, and that feminist perspectives can usefully inform the development of theory on age. Finally, postmodern perspectives highlighting issues of representation and authority need to be acknowledged in both research and theory. The issue of elder abuse, relatively new to criminology, has been used as an example here. However, the generic theoretical issues explored are salient to other areas of victimisation, fear of crime, offending and crime prevention.

Note

1. There are arguments for and against the criminalisation of elder abuse (the creation of a particular category of crime), complicated by issues around the definition of 'abuse' and 'old age', and about the causation of abuse. Should elder abuse be dealt with as one catch-all crime, or simply as physical, sexual, financial exploitation of which the victims happen to be older? Moves towards this type of protection were recommended by the UK Law Commission in 1995. The Department of Health too provisionally supports the idea that abuse of older people be treated separately, as due to societal ageism 'there is a tendency to give attention to the problems of young people when all are considered together' (Social Services Inspectorate, 1993: 1). However, Biggs (1996) argues the benefits of elder abuse having been viewed to date as a social welfare rather than criminal justice issue. Because of its complexity, it is not always easy to say who victim/perpetrator is, and while he recognises the need to provide elders with protection if they need it, he suggests that criminal proceedings are not always the best way to deal with abuse. [Back to text]

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