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Future Identities: Changing identities in the UK - the next 10 years

DR13: What will the age profile of the population mean for notions of identity in the next 10 years?

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Context

UK demographic change over the coming decade will continue, marked by a rise in the percentage of older people, a fall in percentage of children, and an increase in the median age of the UK population. In the first three decades of the 21st century the proportion of children (under 15) will fall by nearly one tenth to 17% of the population, while the percentage of older adults, (over 60), will increase from 20% to 27%. The median age of the UK population will reach 41 by 2030. This will coincide with the move of the large UK post-war birth cohorts into late middle and old age (Leeson, 2013; Harper, 2012; Howse, 2013).

This changing age composition, or demographic ageing, of the UK population is being driven by falling fertility and increasing late life longevity. The UK Total Fertility Rate¹, generally described as the number of children born to women of child bearing age, has remained below replacement (2.1) since the 1970's². Cohorts of women born from 1958 onwards have had on average fewer than two children per woman (Jefferies, 2008; Tromans et al., 2009). The traditional two-child family remains the most common family type, with the average family size for women who have completed their childbearing in 2010 being 1.91 children. This is projected to remain below two over the next decade, with around 17% of women childless, 18% having single children and 38% two children on completed family size³.

Life expectancy increased by two years per decade in the second half of the 20th century. Some demographers have suggested that since 2000 half of those born each year can expect to reach 100 (Christensen et al., 2009; Vaupel et al 2003; Leeson, 2013). Given this, and new scientific advances allowing life extension, the common experience of young people by 2022/2025 will be the knowledge that they will probably live to be a century old (DWP, 2011). Similarly, men in mid and later life will expect to live to between 85 and 92, and women between 88 and 96, depending on social group. (Harper et al 2011), Many will live far longer⁴

It has long been recognised that population ageing has implications for the society, economy and polity of the UK (Harper, 2006). It is impacting upon the labour market, saving and consumption, families and households, networks and social interaction, health and welfare services, housing and transport, leisure and community behaviour. In addition, the knowledge of both longer lives and the ageing of the population is influencing not only social and economic policy and political decisions, but also the attitudes and behaviours of individuals (Harper, 2004).

Of particular interest to identity are the changes in family structures and roles and the labour market. Within families, past changes in fertility and mortality are leading to an increase in the number of living generations, and a decrease in the number of living relatives within these generations. Longevity is increasing the duration spent in certain kinship roles, such as spouse, parent of non-dependent child, and sibling. Falling fertility has reduced the duration of others,

¹ The average number of children a hypothetical cohort of women would have at the end of their reproductive period if they were subject during their whole lives to the fertility rates of a given period and if they were not subject to mortality. It is expressed as children per woman.

² While births from mothers born overseas, and from British born mothers of ethnic minority background, increased the TFR of the UK in 2011 to near replacement (1.97) it is likely that this will fall back over the next decade as these mothers reduce their TFR to the British norm.

³ Projected future family size: Assumptions on the future fertility of women in England and Wales underpinned the 2010-based National Population Projections published by ONS in October 2011. The projections of family size for cohorts who have not yet finished their childbearing come from the birth order probability model (a method of projecting forward current trends in birth order) that was used to produce the fertility assumptions for the 2010-based population projections.

⁴ Life expectancies are based upon historic data from the Office for National Statistics and the Human Mortality Database (www.mortality.org). Projected life expectancies based upon 2008-based ONS principal projections. All life expectancies are period life expectancies

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such as parent of dependent child, or even the opportunity for some roles, such as sibling. Within the labour market, concerns over both high elderly dependency ratios as the proportion of those who are post employment increases in relation to those still in work, and the up-coming skills shortage as the number of younger workers entering the labour market falls, has led to a rethink of retirement policies, leading to longer working lives and a more gradual entry into retirement than has been the norm over the past few decades (Harper, 2010).

Paradoxically while the boundaries of age-based social categories are becoming more fluid, chronological age has also become more institutionalised, with a formalisation of age in many transitions – for example, age of criminal responsibility, age of sexual consent, leaving school, consent to surgery, access to contraception, participation in economic employment, right to vote (Hockey and James, 2003). Furthermore, while public and legal institutions are generally lowering the age threshold into full legal adulthood, individuals are delaying many of those transitions which demonstrate entry to full adulthood. In particular, continued increase of age at first marriage, at leaving the parental home, and at first childbirth delay full economic independence from parents, formal adult union through marriage or committed long-term cohabitation, and parenting. Within the family, delayed transitions in younger life lead to subsequent transition delay for the both individual and other kin members. For example, delayed birth of first child may lead to long intergenerational spacing, and a later transition to both parenthood and grandparenthood. Similarly, extended economic dependence on parents not only delays the individual's full transition to independent adulthood, but also delays their parents' transition to parenting non-dependent children. While there are clearly a variety of forces operating, it can also be argued that awareness of ever lengthening life spans have given individuals at all ages, the time and the liberty to delay these transitions as they progress through adulthood. These are impacting upon changing identity as experienced by the individuals and the changing societal views of different age groups.

1. Identity and age

This driver review considers two separate but linked levels of analysis: (i) changing identity as experienced by the individual; (ii) the changing societal views of different age groups and the impact of this on wider society. In other words social identity is both that which is unique to the individual and that which is shared and collective (Hockey and James, 2003).

In exploring identity in relation to changing age structures, we shall consider identity across the life course and how this changes with age, mediated by cohort and period effects⁴, and role transitions such as full-time work and parenthood (Benson and Elder, 2011; Burton, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007c). In particular, there is a general acceptance in the sociology of age, that `people in different cohorts age in different ways (Riley, 1987). Thus as we look ahead to 2022/25 we need to acknowledge that we may identify certain generational traits which will also influence the identity of adulthood.

This driver review takes the currently defined life stages – childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, mid-life, and old age, and proposes that new 21st century stages are emerging, in particular that of emerging adulthood and older adulthood. However we stress that increasingly these life stages are being delayed, extended and blurred, and that the life course is likely to become even more fluid over the coming decades.

⁴ Research has demonstrated how age identity and perceptions of self are linked to social status (race– ethnicity, gender, social class) These interactions are covered elsewhere, and age and cohort only will be considered here.

2. Childhood

The identity of “child” can be perceived and experienced on different levels. While “child” is a developmental stage involving biological and social changes as the individual moves towards adulthood, “children” refers to the collective experience of a peer group, cohort or generational group; “childhood” refers to the experience of and identity of the social and developmental space occupied by children which continues as different generations move through it. Since the publication of Aries’ (1962) historical monograph *Centuries of Childhood*, it has been widely (although not universally) recognised (Cunningham, 2006; Hendrick, 1990; Heywood, 2001; Mills, 2000), that *childhood* is not a naturally occurring phenomenon; ‘a universal biological stage in the life course’, but the product of values, discourses and practices and, as such, is socially constructed (Aries, 1962; James and Prout, 2007; Kehily, 2010; Lowe, 2012; Shanahan, 2007; Thurtle, 2005).

The 20th century, has been defined as the ‘century of the child’ (James and Prout, 1997) with the development of a child-centred society awarding ‘the child’ and ‘the interests of the child’ a prominent place in the policy and practices of legal, welfare, medical and educational institutions. At the same time, however, the very concept of childhood has become problematic, with concerns over the impact of globalisation on children (Cole and Durham, 2007: Cole and Durham, 2008; de Block and Buckingham, 2007’ Fass, 2007; Finn et al., 2010; Stephens, 1995), the “marketisation and medicalisation” of childhood (The Good Childhood Inquiry, 2007) and questions over the division of responsibilities for children’s wellbeing between the family and state (Cunningham, 2006). Two paradoxical themes have emerged – “innocence” versus “crisis”. On the one hand the ‘innocent child’ (Cunningham, 2006; Jenks, 1996) requires protection from modern physical, biological and intellectual threats; on the other modern western society is seen to place children under increased surveillance and pressure, producing anxiety and contaminating children’s experiences of childhood (Palmer, 2006). This has led to the notion of “childhood in crisis” (Cole and Durham, 2007; Cole and Durham, 2008; de Block and Buckingham, 2007; Fass, 2007; Finn et al., 2010; Furedi, 2001; Hardyment, 2007; Palmer, 2006; Stephens, 1995; UNICEF, 2007)⁵. In addition there are also tensions between the innocence of the child and the growth of children’s rights, played out in the conflict between families and the state over upbringing and wellbeing of children.

The next decade is likely to see a continuation of these themes, as population ageing continues to reduce both the proportion of children in the UK, and childhood as a proportion of experienced life, and to change life transitions and family structures, as outlined above. In terms of life transitions, childhood appears to be the only one which is not expanding. If anything, children are transitioning out of childhood into adolescence at earlier ages, with the targeting of children at younger ages for adult fashion and material consumption goods and the lowering of responsibility. Children are also becoming competent at younger ages, for example in the areas of sexual maturity and contraception, and of criminal responsibility (Alderson, 1993; James and James, 2004; Jenks, 1996).

Over the next decade there is likely to be an emphasis on children’s “citizenship”, on children’s “voices” being recognised and acknowledged (The Children Act, 2004; Prout and James, 1990; Zhao, 2011), and on an increase in children’s rights. This may lead to a significant shift in the

⁵ A recent UNICEF report (2007) on the well-being of children and young people in 21 industrialized countries ranked the UK at the bottom of the table in their assessment of child well-being and the US second from bottom. The report focused on six areas: material well-being; health and safety; educational well-being; family and peer relationships; behaviours and risks; and young people’s own perceptions of well-being.

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balance of power within families, with childrearing increasingly becoming a matter of negotiation between parent and child, a process that will be increasingly monitored by the state and other agencies. In contrast, stands the notion that later parenthood, which demographically is likely to increase over the next decade, leads to a romantic and naive image of the “child”, held by more mature parents who have chosen childbirth as their own commitment to full adulthood (Wyness, 2000). This may lead to conflict with the state who wish to increase their role in child rearing as part of the “child citizen and rights” movement and in order to guarantee the nurturing of future responsible adults.

3. Adolescence and emerging adulthood

Adolescence has long been recognised as being on the cusp between childhood and full adulthood. Law rather than biology determines when adulthood and the accompanying personhood is reached: a special social status at “age of majority” with assumption of adult rights and responsibilities (Lee, 2001). While we do not delve into the psychological literature on identity formation as it is beyond our remit, we can note that many sociologists draw on Erikson’s proposition that identity formation is the key developmental task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Erikson, 1972; Marcia et al., 1993). However, it is now recognised that on-going identity development continues in the years beyond late adolescence and young adulthood (Kroger et al., 2010).

Contemporary views of adolescence focus on concepts of maturity, stabilisation of personal identity, transition from education into employment, role of unemployment and the delaying of life transitions. Extension of education and increasing youth unemployment has added to these social transformations (Serracant, 2012). Media images of youth are generally negative in terms of being problematic and deviant, perpetrators and victims of crime and violence (Best, 2011; Henderson et al., 2010; Levinson and Wien, 2011; McDowell, 2012) and this influences both public opinion on youth and the identity experienced by youth itself. The years from age 18 to 25 are often presented as a dark and dreary period of the life course, wracked with anxiety and unhappiness, overwhelmed by bleak life prospects for entering the adult world. In addition there is a promotion of the construct that they are the “unlucky generation”, with authors in the 1990’s, 2000’s and currently describing this life period as one of “no work, no family, and no future” (Booth and Crouter, 1999; Putman, 2000; Schulenberg and Zarrett, 2006; Twenge, 2006). This is despite the fact that each of these cohorts has faced more advantages and more global opportunities than any other previous generation.

The delaying of life transitions at older ages, including a lengthening of working ages, is likely to continue over the coming decade, impacting on youth employment opportunities especially for those without skills. In addition, rates of family breakdown are likely to increase, again in some literatures associated with longevity and the new opportunities for those in mid and later life in the light of increasingly healthy life expectancy. The literatures on divorce and economic disadvantage both reveal themes of accelerated young lives, with some arguing (Benson and Furstenberg, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007b; Johnson et al., 2007a; Johnson and Mollborn, 2009) that hardship in family and economic domains is associated with feeling relatively older and self-identifying as an adult in the late teens and twenties.

However, the delaying of the traditional transitions into adulthood - finishing education, becoming financially independent from parents, stable employment, formal adult partnerships such as marriage, and parenthood- is also encouraging a new identity, that of *emerging adulthood* - a new life stage between the end of adolescence and the attainment of young adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2004; Arnett, 2006). Until the latter decades of the 20th century, reaching age 25 meant being well-settled in adult life, with a stable job expected to last for decades to come, a marriage, at least one child, and a mortgage. Now young people’s transition to adulthood and in particular birth of first child, now extends to the 30s (Benson and Elder, 2011). Over the next decade, the trend towards later adoption of the markers of full adulthood, is likely to continue.

Emerging adulthood is an unstructured time of life. Indeed it has been postulated that Erikson’s “identity crisis” now mainly occurs in emerging adulthood, rather than in adolescence (Arnett,

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2004; Arnett, 2006; Côté, 2000; Côté, 2006). While children have their lives structured by their families and school, and adults by family roles and work commitments, most emerging adults have ceased residing with their families of origin but have not established new families, nor yet committed themselves to stable long-term work (Schulenberg and Zarrett, 2006). This makes emerging adulthood an exceptionally self-focused time of life (Arnett, 2004).

Public images of this emerging – or some might say latent – adulthood focus around young people's "selfishness," and their alleged unwillingness to "grow up" (Robbins and Wilner, 2001). Emerging adults are seen as viewing their entry into adult responsibilities with ambivalence (Arnett, 2010). However, the extension of the adolescent experiences of helplessness, indecision and apprehension into the late 20's, may be replaced over the coming decade with more confidence and assertion, and a growing feeling of expectations, rights and entitlements which will stem from this new cohort's childhood experiences (Twenge, 2006).

4. Full adulthood

Full adulthood will increasingly become a fluid period, marked by a merging of life course transitions, chronological age, individual experiences and cohort characteristics. In 2022/25 so-called Generation X will be in young adulthood, late 'baby boomers' will comprise middle age and the early 'boomers' will be moving from older adulthood to old age as they begin to approach and then turn 80.

The arrival of the first child and the life stage of "parenthood" is often considered to mark the transition to full adulthood. For many, **young adulthood**, defined by marriage or committed unions, child bearing, and independent living from parents now starts sometime during their 30's and may be as late as mid or even late 30s. This is likely to continue across the next decade.

For many the arrival of the first child will be viewed as the emotional anchor of adult relationships. In this context the child becomes the treasured investment of this mature relationship, the emotional anchor for the couple that turns choice into permanency and commitment (Wyness, 2000). It has been argued, for example, that these older couplings invoke a romantic and naive view of children, and that changing family structures arising from trends in fertility, specifically the delay in parenthood and subsequent small nuclear families, will continue to place the child as the centre of such relationships and thus for many at the centre of achieving the identity of full adulthood. That just under one fifth of all women will remain childless means that this is a partial representation.

There is also evidence that that the long term trend of increasing institutional support for age-structured employment careers has halted (Loscocco, 2000). Younger people are less likely to spend their careers in jobs that provide increasing rewards and security for longer tenure. Increasingly workers of all ages will experience far more variable and flexible patterns of career progression and termination. Indeed, these cohorts in young adulthood over the next decade will have very different education, labour market and health experiences. They are already growing accustomed to a less rigid labour market (Gallie, 1998) with greater access to part-time and flexible working patterns, and the need for continual updating of skills and retraining.

In addition by the next decade, a growing number of young people will understand that they have a good chance of living to over one hundred years of age (DWP, 2011). It has been argued that this realisation of extended longevity may encourage a mixing of traditional life 'careers', such as education, work and retirement leisure, and that this cohort will increasingly decide to undertake life long education, interspersed with sabbaticals for caring and leisure (Harper, 2009).

Middle adulthood is a period of having older still dependent children, combined with older dependent parents, and full time working commitments. Over the coming decade it is likely to extend across the ages of 45 to 70 years. Indeed, we have seen the consistent pushing back of midlife. During the inter-war years it was 30-50 (Dawson, 2009). Now midlife, that period which sees a transition from dependent young children, to dependent adult children, combined with full time work, does not start for many until the mid 40s to 50s – and over the coming decade is likely to last throughout the 60s and into the early 70s. In addition, the growth in reconstituted families mean that women, and in particular men, are forming new families in their forties and fifties – thus confounding clear transitions between the stages.

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The end signs of middle adulthood will be grandparenting and retirement. Grandparenting has changed and will continue to change. During the 1970s, births by mothers in their early 20's enabled them to become grandmothers in their 50s. However, by 2025 with two birth cohorts of delayed births, the average age of first becoming a grandparent will shift into 70s. Similarly, retirement is likely to shift steadily upwards into the late 60's and even early 70s for a growing number of people over the coming decade.

Middle age has been described as a time of comparing goals to accomplishments (Ward, 2010). This stage is simultaneously framed positively, as a period of optimal performance at work and generally satisfying intergenerational relationships in the family, and negatively, as a time of transition involving decline (Lachman, 2004; Toothman and Barrett, 2011). Introducing further fluidity regarding the edges of middle age is the dramatic extension of life expectancy and delay of disability in the twentieth century – suggesting an elongation of middle age and subsequent postponement of old age.

Of particular interest will be the reformulation of late midlife (Wiggs, 2010). Current midlife individuals are approaching their own old age at a time when old age is being redefined by society in the light of changing demands for longer working lives, personal responsibility for retirement and health. The next decade is likely to see changes in the period of life between child rearing, and menopause for women, and entering older adulthood with the arrival of grandparent hood and formal retirement from economic activity (Toothman and Barrett, 2011; Utz, 2011, Ward, 2010; Wiggs, 2010). Indeed, there is evidence that younger women today wish to delay or altogether skip the inevitable life transition of the menopause, and that with drug therapy this may increasingly be possible (Arnold, 2005; Utz, 2011). This is likely to continue over the coming decade. There is also growing tendency of ageing adults to maintain younger subjective age identities is a form of defensive denial by which they can dissociate themselves from the stigma attached to growing old (Uotinen et al., 2003).

With the ageing or delaying of life transitions, most individuals in mid-life will still be active parents and partners and full contributors to community and economic life, as they were when they were in their 30s and 40s. These individuals will have different aspirations for their later life, and the financial incentives and disincentives for economic employment versus retirement will undoubtedly have changed (Harper, 2011). Indeed given the multiplicity of roles, and diversity of life course experiences, most individuals will spend much of their middle adulthood years moving back and forth between a spectrum of responsibilities with no sense of an abrupt transition into older adulthood at a specific age, as is common today with full-time retirement. Indeed, the author recently interviewed a woman in her 50s who was simultaneously a granddaughter and grandmother, parent and child, worker and carer, and wife.

5. Older adulthood

The term older adulthood reflects the new discourses of later life and whether these are appropriate for the 21st century going forward. In particular, the definitions of “healthy, self-reliant and autonomous” replacing concepts of “infirmity and vulnerability” as descriptors of these stages have become more prominent. There has been a delaying and merging of boundaries between midlife and old age so that independence extends for longer, and frailty is pushed to the end of life. There is thus a growing recognition of older adulthood as a transitional period often of several decades before the frailty of old age adulthood arrives.

There is a societal desire at present to understand what is “normal” in late life (Fealy et al., 2012; Jones and Higgs, 2010). In particular, many of the theoretical constructs around age and identity were developed at a time when normal life spans were much shorter, and older adults a small proportion of the overall population (Erikson, 1950; Schuller, 1989). Increasing life spans have led to a recent interest in the former somewhat neglected area of changes in and experiences of identity in older ages. Over the coming decade, the integration of stereotypes into self-perceptions of age, the changing cultural location of older people, and the role of consumer culture, the media and the state in the production of late life identities will become increasingly important (Gilleard and Higgs, 2011). Later life can now be seen in terms of lifestyle and identity rather than being primarily a reflection of previous occupation, and will increasingly be defined as much by intergenerational dynamics and consumption as by health (Gilleard and Higgs, 2009).

The emergence of a “3rd Age” or Troisième Age – originally defined as early old age - arose with the ageing of the “baby boomers” whose life time advantages of health and prosperity in the post war years had enabled them to extend the period of life between leaving economic employment and frailty. Originally defined as those aged 60-75, it was followed by the 4th Age – a time of frailty and dependency starting in the mid 70s and lasting until death (Laslett, 1991). By the turn of the Millennium, however, life expectancy was increasing at such a rapid rate, with a corresponding delaying of disability, that the “4th Age” was being pushed back into the mid 80s. Thus the 3rd Age, or older age adulthood, which was between 60 and 75 when first defined in the 1970s is likely to have shifted to between 70 and 85 by 2022/25. This will reflect both a shift in both working ages, and the onset of disabilities, and will be compounded by the likely removal of age entitlements from people aged 60 years. The new 3rd age is increasingly likely to comprise a time of leisure, part time work, volunteering grandparenthood and care for grandchildren, particularly in times of domestic crisis such as children’s divorce, and leisure. The emergence of the vertical or bean pole family has increased the likelihood that an individual will become a grandparent or grandchild, and remain in this role for several years and it is estimated that three quarters of all adults will become grandparents (Dench et al., 1999; Giarrusso et al., 1996). However this life stage will also be accompanied by an increase in frailty and chronic conditions, though still probably heavily mediated by drug and other therapies, a signal to this baby boomer cohort, that they cannot delay senescence forever.

6. Old age adulthood

Older adulthood is a period of increasing frailty and dependency and will be reached by an increasing number over the coming decades, and we must not underestimate the role that disability and ill health may play in late life identity at extreme old age (Bowling et al., 2005; Mock and Eibach, 2011; Teuscher, 2009). By 2026, while life years free from disability will have extended, life years with disability are predicted to have doubled (from 1.8 to three years 2010-2026) (Jagger et al., 2009). Indeed the proportion of years from 65 lived with a disability will actually increase as longevity increases. Personal identity will thus more commonly include the experience of disability.

There is now some agreement that morbidity compression is occurring, and that current increases in life expectancy may lead to an increase in disability prevalence, but a fall in the severity (Manton, 1982; Jagger, et al. 2009). Over the next decade it is increasingly unlikely that the compression of morbidity will continue given the very long lives now predicted. Indeed, it seems highly probable that the science which is driving life expectancy will also drive disabled life expectancy and more individuals reliant on medical and scientific interventions for longer periods of their lives.

Current views on the experience of old age identity range from Foucauldian theories of power, surveillance and normalisation (Phelan, 2011; Powell and Biggs, 2000) to attempts to capture the diverse individual and collective strategies older people use to maintain agency and control in later life (Wray, 2003). Many agree, however, that the 20th century emergence of consumer society and the growth of individualism, has created the experience of contradiction in identity and able-bodiedness for many older people, leading to beliefs that their bodies have somehow betrayed them (Gilleard and Higgs, 2010) and resulting in an acceptance of ageist stereotypes of old people as frail, forgetful, shabby, out-of-date and on the edge of senility and death (Featherstone and Hepworth, 2005; Gilleard and Higgs, 2005; Twigg, 2007). There is now recognition of the pervasiveness of such stereotypes in defining identity, and that this influences not only behaviour (Horton et al., 2008), but also acts as predictors for key outcomes such as mortality (Infurna et al., 2010).

The implication of such findings is that individuals integrate stereotypical information into their self-evaluations of age(ing) when confronted with stereotypes (Kotter-Grühn and Hess, 2012). Indeed, the age that people feel may be a more sensitive indicator than chronological age of mental and physical wellbeing (Bowling et al., 2005; Gilleard and Higgs, 2002; Mock and Eibach, 2011; Weiss and Lang, 2012). Research on subjective age has shown that most older adults feel significantly younger than their chronological age. One of the proposed mechanisms for this subjective age effect is that distancing oneself from an age group that is associated with decline in functioning helps older adults maintain a positive view of themselves. Moreover, they perceive themselves as being more similar to middle-aged than to older adults. These findings highlight the motivational processes that might contribute to the discrepancy between chronological and subjective age in older adults and the psychological function of this discrepancy. Feeling younger might allow older adults to maintain a positive view of themselves despite age-related losses (Weiss and Freund, 2012). Similarly, old age identity may be fluid, as life crises, such as illness, redundancy, and bereavement, may lead to feelings of old age, which diminish as the individuals comes through the crisis (Clarke and Warren, 2006).

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The other side is the striving to establish and preserve their precarious membership in the not old," category as individuals struggle to reconcile their beliefs and experience of older adulthood as a time of activity, health, and happiness with their ever-present fear of declining health and the realities of widowhood and the loss of youthful attractiveness (Hurd, 1999; Lundgren, 2010).

In some cases older people reject others who are old, holding contrasting images of older people as 'those like us' and as 'others' (Townsend et al., 2006). As de Beauvoir stated, more than at any other age, old age is an 'unrealisable' age in which the old person experiences themselves as a subject but are perceived as an object by outsiders. The experience of ageing involves a dialectical relationship with other people in which ultimately the old person is obliged to accept the external image of themselves (de Beauvoir, 1977).

Over the past century, acceptance of finality has been replaced with the cultural construct of human frailty: a notion that death and decline can be reversed, cured (Harper, 1997). Thus rather than see the infirmity as but a common experience of all human life, the frailty of older people is seen as setting them apart from younger persons. However, the connection to death in defining identity during this life period is also important, both in terms of others seeing older people as near to death and thus to be feared (Hazan, 1994) and because, as individuals approach death, they become less satisfied with their ageing and report feeling older (Kotter-Grühn et al., 2009). As societies age it is important that the full potential length of active adulthood is recognised, enabling most individuals to remain fully active and contributory while they are able. However, it is equally important that a period of morbidity and disability at the end of life, is recognised as the reality of old age, and that - old age is as an integral part of adulthood.

7. Conclusion

If the 20th century has been seen as that of the child, then the 21st century will be that of older adults. In terms of the impact of these shifting and emerging identities on broader society, this driver review has argued that both expressed and experienced identity across the life course influences the life time behaviour of populations. General capacity varies across the life course flowing from a period of youth dependency, through high productive potential in adulthood, returning to a decrease in capacity in old age adulthood. When we are young adults we produce and consume and when we are older we reduce our production and consumption. As a consequence within contemporary UK, the young and old are often viewed by society as constituting an economic burden, while those in mid-life are seen to have the potential to support society. As the age composition of the UK shifts over the coming decades, so public policy will have to respond. Thus depending on the age structure of the UK population, the combination of children, young and older adults, so populations will have different expressed identities and behave in different ways. In addition, the delaying of life transitions and the subsequent fluidity of the life course will have major implications for future public policy, which will need to adapt rapidly to the demands these changing group identities are bringing. Shifting demographics alongside this redefining of life stages and their expressed identities will over the coming decades require adaption of public policy as the identity of the population transitions, depending upon its age and life stage-composition.

The age-integrated family, with members stretching from birth to well into their 80's and 90's, is likely to be a growing phenomenon (Harper, 2004). Increased age integration in the workplace is also likely (Harper and Thane, 1989). If policies are developed for mature societies, there is a possibility of increased age integration throughout society, and of increased interaction between successive cohorts over the coming decade. Such policies include removing age discriminatory practices, encouraging age integrated behaviour and creating a space for the full recognition of the eventual frailty, and finality, of old age.

Despite the media interest around possible generational conflict engendered it is argued by this changing age composition of the UK population, the evidence for such conflict is limited. As argued elsewhere (Harper, 2006), one of the developments of mature societies is the opportunity for greater age integration within families and wider society due to the increase in multi-generational relationships. As a result, younger individuals experience intergenerational relationships at the micro-level. Through this intimate kin based knowledge of older relatives, older people are no longer the "other", but individuals they have contact with and knowledge of and whom they see benefiting from state welfare programmes in the UK. However, whether the coming decades are able to support the traditional intergenerational contract or develop adapted forms in the UK is unclear.

Changing societal views of different age groups and the impact of this on wider society will not only be defined by age profile and demography, but through a combination of this with the experiences, attitudes and behaviours of the various cohorts. While there is interest in what the ageing of the UK population means for its collective identity, there is nothing inherent in chronological age and we must be wary of confounding age with cohort and life course, and implying that societies with large numbers and proportions of those in later life consistently act in certain ways owing to their age profile per se. Rather, while age integrated mature societies will display certain characteristics due to their demographic profile, there are also the complexities of cohort and period effects. We need to acknowledge that each cohort brings with it specific life dimensions, dynamics and life histories, and each time period introduces

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particular institutional and structural contexts. The exciting opportunity for the UK's maturing society over the coming decades is the possibility of age integration throughout society, and of increased interaction between successive cohorts. Mature societies are not societies which have large numbers and proportions of old people, they are societies in which people live longer, and may have the flexibility to enjoy each life stage for longer.

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