Individualisation and the third age

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Summary

Individualisation — as a theory of decision-taking by the individual engaged in living 'a life of one's own' — has emerged as an influential characterisation of contemporary Western society. This article sketches the basics of the Individualisation thesis and then considers how it might catalyse an adjusted conceptualisation of Laslett's third age term . This leads into a proposal of how research might be designed to explore these ideas further

Introduction

Individualisation has emerged as an influential characterisation of contemporary Western society. Promulgated in particular by Giddens (1991), Bauman (1992) and Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002), it is concerned with the way that social action is increasingly mediated through, and by, the individual person. It addresses, in other words, the nature of decision-taking by the individual engaged in living 'a life of one's own'. Bauman describes Individualisation as the proposition that human identity is being transformed from a 'given' into a 'task' and that it is the individual who is variously charged with "the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002: xv). There is, according to the theory, a new relationship emerging between the individual and society through an ongoing, multi-faceted and generally indirect process of reflexivity / feedback.

So, given the claim that society is set on a course towards an ever more intensive and pervasive Individualisation, what might be the implications for how we conceptualise and carry out research on the category of 'older people'? Might Individualisation Society provide a conceptual framework to add to the present repertoire of sociological approaches?

An important theme within the literature on social gerontology — going back to Elder's (1977) 'The Alienated' — has been to show how older people are generally labelled by their juniors and by officialdom as constituting a single category of dependants with little if any capacity for constructing a life of their own. In exploring the lived experience of actual older people, much critical attention is paid in particular to the apparent absence of choice highlighting the social exclusion and dehumanising effect of poverty, ill health, loneliness and so on. Where a sense of personal agency emerges in this vein of social enquiry is through invitations to groups of older people to voice their aspirations for an optimum quality of life (for example, Wiggins et al 2004; Gabriel & Bowling 2004; and Smith et al 2004). However, and whilst not wishing to undermine in any way the 'exclusion / aspiration' literature, the contention of the present paper is that older people — at least as defined below — are actually already living in the conditions of Individualisation Society. The details of their experience might differ from analyses of people of working age (see, for example, Sennett 1998: 'flexible capitalism' and Toffler 1980: the 'third wave'). Yet despite these differences of degree and type, older people could nonetheless be understood as being engaged in a world of Individualisation. This seems logical in part because, until the point of final decrepitude is reached, being an older person, especially for those living independently, is inevitably about having to make decisions and of continually monitoring their sense of social identity. Moreover, despite issues of disengagement, exclusion and ghetto-isation, older people will unavoidably be impacted upon by the general socio-

political conditions prevailing at any time, and insofar as these conditions conform to the idea of Individualisation Society, then older people will be unable to avoid having to engage to some extent with this dynamic. This reasoning is as relevant for individuals living in the dire circumstances portrayed in Elder as it is for those with high accumulations of educational, cultural and physical capital, it is essentially a matter of degree.

It is argued, therefore, that the study of the older person category could be supplemented by a framework of Individualisation Society. It would also follow that, insofar as older people constitute a component of Individualisation Society, and given the demographic trajectory (ageing society), the study of the experience of older people would also feedback to inform our understanding of Individualisation Society. By studying older people through the lens of Individualisation, we would be studying society in general.

This article begins by sketching the basics of the Individualisation thesis. It then reviews Laslett's concept of the third age before proposing how Individualisation might catalyse an adjusted conceptualisation of older people. This leads into a proposal regarding how research might be designed to explore these ideas further. In particular, how might we capture both the experimental / reflexive nature of the processes involved over time and the factors underpinning variations in personal experience?

Basics of the Individualisation thesis

Central to the concept of Individualisation is the notion that the individual is not only *able* to make choices in an ever expanding range of situations, but they are also *compelled* to do so. On the one hand, it is about opportunities for the pursuit of innovation and of improvements in individual as well as collective, well-being; empowered consumerism; and reconstructing one's social identities. It is a positive, enabling and democratic phenomenon. On the other hand, the same dynamic generates the conditions of omnipresent and ever-changing risk, perceived as new obligations or burdens, and new forces bearing down on the individual and on local life (see Beck 1992: 'Risk Society' and Giddens 1999: 'Runaway World').

Either way, the conditions of Individualisation Society permit and demand the active engagement by all individuals. In a seemingly growing number of domains — and for which there seems to be an ever changing array of options — individuals must devise strategies to implement their interim, flexible (and generally short-term: see Sennett 1998) life-plans.

Yet, given the ongoing transformation of many of the institutions of traditional society (the family, the role of the church, secure paid employment, etc.), strategy formation has to take place in, and because of, an environment of uncertainty, i.e. ever-incomplete knowledge. To quote Beck & Gernsheim (2002: xi): "Now the individual must be much more the rule-finder". Moreover, the accelerating pace of change (socio-economic, technological) means that the life chances presented to an individual will be precarious; individuals must keep choosing and must do so quickly if they are to survive, let alone thrive. Individualisation, in Beck & Gernsheims' words, creates "internalised freedom" (157), manifesting as a general, if potentially bewildering, imperative for self-determination.

The choice / uncertainty dynamic of Individualisation Society relates to the progressive loosening of social structure so that expressions of traditionalism "must now be chosen, and often invented" (25). They may be 'chosen' by individuals in building their portfolio of identities and lifestyles according to the array of domains in which an individual moves (tax payer, gender, ethnic identity and so on). Social structure becomes increasingly ambivalent.
The individual has to be understood as being "the author of his or her own life" (23). Each personal biography at any moment is an accumulation of life experiences as interspersed with everyday experiments.

In contrast to the idea of individualism, the choices available in Individualisation at any moment are, of course, neither limitless nor free of implications. The individual is impacted upon by factors of place and institution but the constraints are of a postmodern nature. The individual increasingly lives in conditions of 'freedom' whilst continuing to be dependant for his or her identity and optimal functioning on institutions and social interaction.

The (social, cultural-moral, economic, politico-administrative) environment has become very changeable. Beck & Gernsheim talk of pre-individualisation institutions being gradually replaced by 'institutional guidelines and regulations' (24). What they seem to be referring to here is an emerging politico-moral environment, manifest in various forms and domains, which, whilst being sometimes less formal than what we usually think of as an institution, nonetheless can steer, and interact with, individual experiments to construct 'a life of one's own'. Inequalities persist but increasingly as the Individualisation of social risk (39). The relationship between the individual and society seems to be one of perpetual flux.

The freedom and compulsion to choose — being "condemned to activity" (162) — means, therefore, that individuals find themselves having to take personal responsibility for the choices they make and for the consequences that follow. Examples of this, at the time of writing, include the debates over

personal pension provision and personal healthy-living regimes as well as the options available for household accommodation arrangements. Thus, the earnest pursuit of 'living a life of one's own' might represent not only a clarion call for a new Bohemianism and but also a framework for being a 'good citizen'. Individualisation as a characterisation of society informs both Right-of-Centre and Left-of-Centre politics; both are having to revise their stances regarding the welfare state and the limits of effective government intervention in general, especially in an era of advanced consumer capitalism. On the one hand, out-sourcing by the state — interacting with the demands from an increasingly pluralist and consumerist population — generates options for individual choice / responsibility. Yet it also represents a new mode of management of political affairs: directly through the interventions of the politico-administrative system and indirectly through self-regulation on the part of citizens (à la Foucault). In the domain of health, for example, enhancements in the physical quality of life and of longevity, together with opportunities (cultural and technological) to customise the performance and appearance of one's body combine to make the issue of personal health, fitness and beauty an Individualised task for all citizens. Society generates knowledge which manifests itself in institutional guidelines signalling to individuals how to "live a responsible life" (135).

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Thus, Individualisation is presented by its exponents as a characterisation of contemporary society in general. The proposition being made in this article, however, is that exploring how to respond to the opportunities and obligations to 'live a life of one's own' describes as much the lived reality of older people as it does those of working- / family-raising-age embroiled in Sennett's (1998) 'flexible capitalism'.

Aspects of the proposed framework are to be found within Laslett's (1996) concept of the third age. This is most striking in his discussion of the disappearance from society of role models for being an older person. It occurs, he argues, as a lag between the emergence of the third age as a real demographic phenomenon and its recognition and integration into contemporary culture and politics. In pre-Individualisation times, individuals would observe the experiences, outlook and assumptions of older people and thus be socialised into a role according to their social class which they would expect to conform when they too reached retirement age. The point of Individualisation Society, however, is that these social rules are no longer available or at least are being challenged from many quarters. Whilst the number of pioneers inventing successful personal strategies is on the increase (for example, older people reinventing themselves as amateur athletes and participating in popular marathons), British society is still lagging in a transient phase. It is not at all clear which identities society expects

third-agers to adopt (once the present rhetoric of the 'problems of ageing society' has been transcended).

For those of working age, Individualisation generates a rhetoric of flexibility, multiple roles and living with uncertainty — the abandonment of the long term view (Sennett). This was echoed to a degree in Laslett's presentation of the third age when he commented:

> "Creative activity is therefore demanded of the present society of those in the third age, and of those who are perpetually being added to their ranks. They, and only they, can elaborate the social patterns which may do something to help their successors" (92).

Quite what he meant by the term 'social patterns' is not altogether clear. If it suggests the eventual emergence of a new and 'better' social stability then this might be at odds with the logic of Individualisation. Rather, the 'third age as Individualisation' might be more appropriately thought of as a continual, dynamic condition of reflexive exploration whereby individuals devise and experiment with any number of portfolios of roles / identities varying according to personal factors, the conditions pertaining in each domain of activity and the course of each individual's third age.

Laslett's conceptualisation poses another problem for the present discussion in that it included an explicitly normative dimension. In defining the third age as a phase of 'personal fulfilment', Laslett emphasised its potential as a phase of life-enhancing creativity and development of self-expression. The Individualisation approach, however, encompasses the everyday lived experience of experimentation and decision-taking in which the mundane is as significant as the life-enhancing, and survival / coping activity as significant as personal development. Thus, third age in Individualisation would be constituted as much by a continual dynamic of searching in which interim solutions, ad hoc narratives, set-backs and day-to-day coping as by any sense of personal strategic purpose and linear progress.

The value of the third age term was, first, in differentiating old age into the phase final decrepitude / dependency (fourth age) and a that of 'active ageing' (third age) and, second, in decoupling the third age from a person's calendar age (although, Laslett, in order to pursue his statistical analysis, was nonetheless obliged to focus on the over-60 age group). In order to develop our conceptual framework, we would need to refine the third age term in a number of ways.

First, our definition would need to focus on the lived experience of being able / having to make choices as a perpetual condition or process. How does the individual consider their options, get information and advice, make decisions, reflect on subsequent experience, and revise their

knowledge and plans? How do they variously devise and implement the strategies and tactics —
whether humble or grandiose, interim or longer-term — by which to shape and give purpose to their
third age? The conceptualisation would need to acknowledge trials, revisions and dead-ends as
defining constituents of the third age.

Second, in order to emphasise choice-compulsion dynamic of Individualisation, the third age category
would have to exclude anyone whose circumstances placed overwhelming restrictions on their
capacity for decision-taking. They would have to capable of enjoying a minimum level of
independence which we might define in terms of personal mobility outside of the place of residence.
The dynamic could be further highlighted by focusing on the condition in which the experience of
personal exploration and strategic activity is particularly challenging, in other words, when the
individual is living on their own (in their own home or in sheltered accommodation that nonetheless
affords a degree of autonomy). If people living in the third age are at the vanguard of
Individualisation, then single people — widow(er)s, divorcees or bachelors / spinsters — are even more
so. Unable to lean on partners, to share with or defer decision-taking to significant others, single
people are the pioneers of third age Individualisation. They have more room for manoeuvre and to
reap the rewards of successful strategising but they are also the more vulnerable to failure.

Third, people over the age of 60/65 are popularly as well as officially labelled 'pensioners' and are,
thereby, a clear social category, not least in terms of current political matters such as pensions crises
and the financial demands on public health services. Yet, whilst attaining the age of 60/65 is
undoubtedly significant in a number of ways, there are many younger people who, out of choice or
compulsion, are living in circumstances little different from those of pensioners. Either due to reasons of
health or because of the reality of the job market, there are people younger than the 60/65 marker
who no longer can have any expectation of further gainful employment. Moreover, many in this
younger category are living on very humble financial means. This is to argue for widening the
category from 'older people with at least minimum personal mobility' to include those over the age of,
say, 50 years who cannot expect to work again (or perform other orthodox work roles, such as raising a
family). This interim definition would correspond with the general constituency of organisations such as
Age Concern, Over-50's clubs and Saga.

Admittedly, although this age range is coherent, it is also heterogeneous. For a 50-year old individual,
their teenage years will have lasted from 1968 to 1973 (the pop cultural revolution) whereas for an 80-
year old, the period would have been 1938 to 1944 (in effect, that of the Second World War). The
potential working life for the latter, moreover, starting in the immediate aftermath of the War would
have lasted until the mid or late 1980s (i.e. just beginning to feel the effects of Thatcherite ideology).
The politico-cultural environment framing the biographies of third-agers may vary, therefore,

according to cohort and social class. Consequently, socialisation will have resulted in many older people holding values of a somewhat traditional society (deferential, socially hierarchical, pre-consumerist) and a strong welfare state. Younger members of the category, on the other hand, will have had longer to reflect on life as a consumer as well as the ideology of politico-administrative decentralisation, flexible manufacturing and notions of Individualisation in general.

The time factor

Individualisation is closely related to another characterisation of emerging society, that of flexible capitalism which Sennett (1998) analyses in terms of the deregulation of time and space. The former regime was marked by often extended phases of routine and predictability; the Protestant work ethic generally prevailed, based on fine valuations of labour time and a future orientation. Yet, as Toffler (1980) notes, consumer capitalism is inherently paradoxical: in the production realm, individuals are socialised "to defer gratification, to be disciplined, controlled, restrained, obedient, to be a team player" (57); whilst as a consumer, the same person was encouraged "to seek instant gratification, to be a hedonist rather than calculating, to abandon discipline, to pursue individualistic pleasure", that is, to live in the short term. Increasingly, however, the conditions of flexible capitalism, by contrast, require individuals to live in a dynamic state of reduced predictability, and therefore generally to denigrate the value of thinking and acting for the longer term.

What happens, therefore, when an individual loses the work (however defined) component of their lives and enters the third age? Toffler observes that whilst some attune their lives to the 'rhythms of tomorrow', others flee into the past. In other words, the latter may be in the third age but they find it difficult to imagine a way of life truly different from what they had lived previously. Partly, this might be a reflection of life being about the accumulation of tested habit (Giddens), but it might also reflect the changing social signals about the expectations and requirements of being an older person. Thus, some empirical studies of older people suggest that people carry forward the work ethic of their pre-retirement life. Huber & O'Reilly (2004) in a study of 'expat' populations in Spain observe that although these individuals generally put less value on place (i.e. a modern deregulation of place), they nonetheless regard it as important to pursue an intensive use of time. Keeping busy seems to be important to them; even the organisation of social activities is described as serious work. They seem to be driven to use time efficiently in order continuously to shape their autobiographies into a meaningful narrative whole. By way of contrast, Biggs et al (2000) reported that members of 'retirement communities' (sheltered / gated accommodation) regarded themselves as being pioneers of a new lifestyle; they felt they were trying to define for themselves what a phase of 'personal fulfilment' could mean. Anecdotal material also suggests that individuals in the third age may well be experimenting

with 'flexibility'. For example, some individuals can be observed being highly selective in the social relationships they make so as to guard against being embroiled in relationships that might become unsatisfactory in the future; such individuals construct interim, ad hoc (i.e. loose) networks of interaction that leave their options open for future changes in strategy. They have already become short-termists in just the way that Sennett described the lives of those presently in the second age. Thus, whereas analyses such as that by Sennett tend to highlight the dysfunctional aspects of these conditions, at least some of the insights into 'third age flexibility' indicate the existence of other scenarios of a more liberating kind.

Towards a research design

Finally, what type social enquiry would enable us to test these ideas empirically? We would need to identify a number of domains in which the dynamics of third age Individualisation were being variously played out. By way of illustration, three broad and contrasting domains are briefly proposed here:

Domain 1: socialising strategies

The domain of what we could call 'strategic socialising' entails older people engaged in building and managing the components of their social life. This would include them reflecting not only on the type of encounters and relationships they wanted — or could expect — but also on the actions they would have to undertake in order to cultivate such activity. One would expect to explain variation through psychological factors (the individual's degree of innate gregariousness), biography (for example, their bereavement trajectory) and location-specific factors (provision of over-50 recreational groups, public spaces for informal social contact and local-level manifestations of social control). It would be particularly interesting to tease out a sophisticated analysis of socialising which went beyond the assumption that low / no socialising equates to social exclusion and that quality of life is directly proportional to the amount of socialising and the density of social networks (see studies of social capital). Recognising the 'supply side' of the equation, the third age Individualisation approach would also explore how individuals try to manage their array of social contacts over time. Individualisation Society theory would suggest that people increasingly operate in ever changing domains in which social relationships are important but often, of necessity and / or desire, of limited duration and intensity. How is this idea manifesting in the third age? The concept of older people managing their socialising life according to the conditions of contemporary society would also require us to consider their use of communications technology to mediate contacts (cell phones, the internet, letter-writing, etc.).

Domain 2: engagement with consumerism

Even if we avert research attention away from relatively prosperous individuals and the satisfaction of basic needs, al third agers will be acting at various levels as consumers of goods and services. Yet what types of consumer can be identified? On the one hand, anecdotal material exists to show that some individuals, even if they inherit capital from a deceased partner, feel themselves to be locked into pre-consumerist ethics ("We were never taught how to spend money"). On the other hand, can we observe hedonistic consumption among older people (even where their financial means are rather modest)? Could we even derive a typology of third age consumerism (for example, technophile, fashion slave, Romantic, deferential customer, combative customer)?

Domain 3: managing the physical body.

The body as a project of intervention in which the individual plays a major part is an increasing significant aspect of Individualisation Society. It incorporates fitness regimes, aesthetics of body appearance, dietary regimes, participation in chronic illness management (expert patient, self-administered complementary medicine) and so on. Individuals can elect (or feel social pressure) to produce certain types of body (a design capacity) or to manage aspects of bodily dysfunction. Either way, the individual has to seek and compare knowledge, acquire or learn how to use new technology and, generally, learn to treat their third age body as a project. Often, this can be an issue of folk / traditional versus scientific knowledge, or self-help versus 'contracting-out' to experts.

Conclusion

Individualisation Society is proposed as a framework that could illuminate dimensions of the lived experience of people in the third age. Individuals are engaged in constructing narratives to account for their actions (Goffman 1959 / 1971). An individual's (auto)biography will be based, at any moment, on multiple personal identities (each employed in particular domains). These identities will include those built around leisure and consumption activity, purposeful unpaid work, ethnicity and so on. They are constructed by drawing selectively on individual memory as well as on cultural stock of 'acceptable' explanations (that take the form of character types and patterns of motivations). In Individualisation Society, these cultural scripts have to be searched for (or stumbled over) and tested / developed continuously through individual experience in real-life situations. The repertoire of identities may also change over time. This, it is proposed is, or could be, as true for older people as it is for society in general. Third agers are involved in the on-going project of either trying to reinvent

themselves or to resist any challenges to how they have lived up to present, even while not only the social context changes but also their own physical and mental capacity changes.

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