Health and social inequalities in later life: the enduring role of class

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An ageing world

[Nothing] is more likely to shape economic, social, and political developments in the early twenty-first century than the simultaneous aging of Japan, Europe, and the United States … The human life cycle is undergoing unprecedented change. To preserve economic security, we must adapt the social institutions built around it to these new realities.

The Commission on Global Aging (1999)

“If you aren’t scared about the enormous generational storm we’re facing, you must be on a particularly high dose of Prozac” (Kotlikoff, 2004)
Demographic aging brings with it a systematic transformation of all spheres of social life ... beneath even the daunting fiscal projections, lies a longer-term economic, social and cultural dynamic ... What will it be like to live in societies that are much older than any we have ever known or imagined?

*The Commission on Global Aging (1999)*

- But what about compression of morbidity and improvements in living standards? How is the experience of ageing changing?
- And the opening of a ‘third age’ space, post-retirement, post-parenting and pre-dependency.
- But the resources to enjoy a ‘third’ age, are strongly related to socio-economic position – how do class inequalities operate post-retirement?
Contrasting images of ageing: reflections of class?

A political storm is brewing over proposals to raise the state pension age to 67

(BBC News 2005)
Methods
The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (www.elsa-project.ac.uk)

- A panel study of people aged 50 and older, six waves of data available, alongside baseline (wave 0) data, and seventh wave about to start.
- Sample drawn from Health Survey for England, living in the private household sector and with periodic sample boosts.
- Face to face interview every two years since 2002, with a biomedical assessment carried out by a nurse every four years.
- Detailed content on: demographics, health, physical and cognitive performance, biomarkers, wellbeing, economics, housing, employment, social relationships, social civic and cultural participation, life history.
- Here using five waves of data covering eight years (2002 to 2010).
- Longitudinal multilevel growth models, observations (level 1) nested within individuals (level 2).
- Sample divided into five year age groups, giving overlapping cohorts.
- Focus on frailty (Rockwood Index) and affect (CES-D).
Frailty and compression of morbidity
Modelling frailty trajectories by age cohort

No change:
70 year olds in 2010/11 have the same level of frailty as 70 year olds in 2002/3 and the same trajectory.

Frailty index

Age

70 year old in 2002/3

70 year old in 2010/11

70
Modelling frailty trajectories by age cohort

Optimistic scenario:
70 year olds in 2010/11 are less frail than 70 year olds in 2002/3 and are on a shallower trajectory
Modelling frailty trajectories by age cohort

**Pessimistic scenario:**

70 year olds in 2010/11 are more frail than 70 year olds in 2002/3 and are on a steeper trajectory.
Frailty trajectories by cohort
Frailty trajectories by cohort and wealth

Least affluent

Most affluent

Predicted frailty score

Age

50 60 70 80 90

Poorest quintile

Richest quintile
Frailty trajectories by cohort and wealth

- Least affluent
- Most affluent

Predicted frailty score vs. Age

- Poorest quintile
- Richest quintile
Wellbeing and age related transitions
Age and negative affect
(CES-D score adjusted for gender and ethnicity)
Age and negative affect: explaining the relationship
Age and negative affect: explaining the relationship

The diagram above illustrates the predicted score for negative affect across different ages, with lines depicting the effects of gender and ethnicity, marital status, and health. The x-axis represents age, ranging from 50 to 85 years, while the y-axis represents the predicted score.
Age and negative affect: explaining the relationship
Age, negative affect and wealth
(CES-D score adjusted for gender and ethnicity)
The impact of work and retirement on health and wellbeing

- Model transitions into retirement compared with those still working, for those aged 70 or younger and who are economically active.
  - Examine effect of route into retirement (routine, voluntary, involuntary).
  - Examine effects of wealth on retirement.

- Model continuing to work post state pension age compared with those who retire.
  - Use propensity score matching to deal with selection effects.
  - Examine whether work circumstances matter.
Depression and type of retirement transition

Change in depression score compared with those remaining in work: age and gender standardised

Regression model
Depression and type of retirement transition

Change in depression score compared with those remaining in work:
age and gender standardised

Regression model
Impact of working post-retirement age on health

Propensity Score Matching

Change relative to those who retire
Impact of working post-retirement age on health

Change relative to those who retire:
Propensity Score Matching

Change relative to those in low quality work.
The operation of class in later life
How can we understand class in later life?

- Inequalities research typically operationalises class with a measure of occupation, so those of working age have been the main focus.

- Class is largely theorised in terms of the impact of labour position on material and psychosocial factors, which in turn impact on relevant outcomes.

- Psychosocial explanations emphasise work conditions (control/autonomy and effort/reward) and relative social position.

- But, occupational class may no longer adequately capture (processes of) stratification in societies where consumption and practice – reflecting social and cultural capital – have become significant markers of status.

- This may be particularly pertinent to those post-retirement, for whom (former) occupation may have less direct salience, highlighting the need to consider processes of stratification beyond labour relations.
An empirical investigation of theoretical pathways

Class and Education

- Work and work quality
- Social connections
  - Social roles and participation
  - Cultural practice
  - Health behaviours
- Wealth/pension

Material circumstances

Social status

Health and wellbeing

Strong =
Moderate =
Weak =
The distribution of non-pension wealth

Mean level of wealth within population deciles, and percent of total non-pension wealth

- Decile 1: £000
- Decile 2: £000
- Decile 3: £000
- Decile 4: £000
- Decile 5: £000
- Decile 6: £000
- Decile 7: £000
- Decile 8: £000
- Decile 9: £000
- Decile 10: £000

100% of total non-pension wealth

18% of total non-pension wealth

12% of total non-pension wealth

43% of total non-pension wealth
Social mobility: odds to be in a professional or managerial class for four age cohorts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class of origin</th>
<th>Year of birth</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi/un-skilled manual</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skilled manual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrative/Skilled non-manual</td>
<td>1.86*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manager/professional</td>
<td>2.76</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Bold figures p < 0.05, *p < 0.1
Concluding comments

- Strong relationship between age and outcomes of interest.
- Some ageing effects vary by cohort.
- Age and transitions:
  - Marital status (divorce and widowhood);
  - Health/disability;
  - Wealth;
  - Retirement status/route (voluntary);
  - All class related.
- Cohort and generational change:
  - Occupational structures;
  - Pension arrangements, retirement choices/opportunities;
  - Marriage choices,
  - Health,
  - Socioeconomic status and consumption.
Concluding comments

- Significant class inequalities that continue into later life and persist (possibly grow) across age cohorts.
- Occur for almost all outcomes of interest, intermediate and distal.
- Evidence supportive of both material (wealth) and psychosocial (social status) pathways, and of connections between pathways.
- As paid work becomes a less ‘solid’ marker we need to rethink approaches to stratification—subjective social status:
  - A reflection of the outcomes of processes of stratification;
  - Influenced by each of occupational class, wealth, social participation, social roles, and culturally-informed practice;
  - Reflecting the operation of different forms of ‘capital’ in different ‘fields’ of social interaction (Bourdieu).
- Implications for policies to address ageing that currently neglect class inequalities; and the need to address proximal effects and inequalities within the post-retirement population.
References


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