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ORGANIZING AGE

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For Trudy

Preface

This is a book about age, or more precisely, how age is constructed. How does age insinuate itself into organizations, into institutions and into the meanings we make for ourselves and others?

I see age as a powerful master of social discourse, and a remarkable one given its taken-for-grantedness. It is a window on how we are. In focusing on age, we encounter a wide lexicon, such as infant, child, teenager, youth, elderly, old, senior, generation, aged, and pensioner. These are important social markers, indicators of position and status, and of where one is in a lifecourse. Thus, my interest is beyond age as just a number or correlate: it is with the way age is organized, politicized, regulated, used, abused, stereotyped, celebrated, stigmatized, struggled with, managed, and commodified.

I have written this book primarily as an accessible introduction to a fascinating field that crosses many disciplinary boundaries. It exposes the interpersonal and social games we play with age, and the extensive industry that has been built around age. I have lent considerably on social scientific literature, but first-hand accounts and popular representations all play a key part. I raise questions throughout the book—some of which I attempt to answer, others I am more hesitant about.

This book would not have happened without the encouragement of David Musson of Oxford University Press, and the patience and professionalism of Emma Lambert. I am grateful for Anna Fineman's help, while the book would have been a lesser product without the cogent feedback from Yiannis Gabriel and Carol Grossman. My thanks to you all.

<div align="right">Stephen Fineman</div>

Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

List of Boxes

1 Why Age?

BOX 1.1 MAKING NEWS

Business big shot: Richard Burrows, former Bank of Ireland governor

Moving from banking to tobacco does not, on the face of it, look an obvious career move—but Richard Burrows, a former governor of the Bank of Ireland (BoI) who is likely to be confirmed as the new chairman of British American Tobacco (BAT) this week, is better qualified to do the job than first appearances suggest [. . .].

Mr Burrows, 63, qualified as a chartered accountant before he joined Irish Distillers, best-known for Jameson Irish whiskey, at the age of 25. Within a year, he was managing director of the Old Bushmills Distillery, becoming chief executive of the entire business at the age of 32. [. . .] Sales quadrupled between 1989 and 2005, thanks partly to a long-running advertising campaign, which carried the famous tagline: 'The Smoother the Irish.'

No sympathy for drink-drive teenager

Gabriella Edmonson, the teenage driver who killed her friend after a drunken night out, has no excuse [. . .].

Gabriella Edmonson pleaded guilty to drink-driving 'My car, my rules . . . !' These four, glib words sum up the casual arrogance of a certain type of gilded youth, and they will haunt Gabriella Edmonson for ever.

Given the tragedy she caused, she deserves no less. The 17-year-old was one-and-a-half times over the drink-drive limit when she insisted on driving home from a nightclub in the early hours. [. . .]. One of her passengers, Grace Hadman, also 17, was dead; another, Joe Robinson, was critically injured.

Couple enjoy same holiday for 50 years

Michael Hirst, 79, and his wife Mary, 76, enjoyed their first trip to Malta so much that they have spent their holidays at the same hotel in the same resort for the last 50 years.

The couple, from Harefield, Middlesex, have been back and forth to the Hotel Phoenicia in Valleta, Malta, since 1959. Their holiday photographs chart the changes, as the structure of the building, pool, sun loungers and even the view from the balcony alters over time.

Their daughter Sarah, 47, shown as a little girl during the '60s and as a teenager in the '70s, now visits the island herself with her husband Richard, and children Lara, 12, and Giles, 8.

I picked these contrasting reports pretty much at random from the UK's *Times* and *Telegraph* newspapers.[1] The accounts are both ordinary and extraordinary. Ordinary in that, in style, they are much like the vast number of reports that display the journalist's craft: sharp portrayals of people and events that define or dramatize 'news', designed for rapid reading. Extraordinary in that each embeds a locater of meaning that we very much take for granted: age. To put it another way, what would it matter if we did not know that Richard Burrows in the first report was now 63, and was originally a chief executive at 32? Or that we were unaware that Gabriella Edmondson was a teenager of 17 when she killed her passenger, also 17? Or, in the last story, that we were ignorant of the precise ages of Mr and Mrs Hurst and their family members?

The texts would be coherent if we edited out the ages but, journalistic conventions apart, they would lack a bundle of associations that now come with chronological age. Even in this small sample, a clutch of age-related characterizations or caricatures is evident, such as: a particular age profile that validates the corporate 'high flyer' (first story); the fecklessness and recklessness of youth (second story); the benign charm and conservatism of the elderly, reproduced in and by their offspring (last story). The inclusion of age acts as a cipher or shorthand for socially constructed images—sentiments, stereotypes, expectations, prejudices—of what 'goes with' a person who is of a certain age in a certain setting. It attests to the potency of age as a shaper and divider of perceptions of others and of ourselves.

Chronological age is well infused into the cultural fabric and rituals of most societies. There are specific ages to be celebrated, others to feel anxious about or resisted. In the West, each decade 'reached' represents another significant notch in the lifecourse—for good or ill. Particular ages bestow certain eligibilities, social rights or privileges—such as for schooling, paid work, voting, driving, marriage, financial credit, social security, or pensions. Age is a political device (and a fairly crude one) for social structuring, and says something about one's position or status in society. It underpins the way state agencies distribute their services, according to whether one falls into the category of 'infant', 'child', 'adolescent', 'teenager', 'adult', 'middle aged', 'senior citizen', or 'elderly'.

Peering at cultures through an age lens reveals much preoccupation with chronologizing. We may accept this as simply a fact and go on to examine how age as a 'given' correlates with what we do or how we are (e.g. our health, abilities, preferences, performance). Alternatively—and this is my purpose in this book—we can ask why age has been socially constructed in the way it has. Why has it become such a master discourse, often a surreptitious backcloth to social divisions and key decisions in organizations, especially in the workplace? What are the moral and management implications of age grading on how our lives are shaped and how we shape our lives?

Age norms, although somewhat shaken in our postmodern times, still define what is proper or desirable conduct. They indicate expected levels of emotional and cognitive development, for 'young' and 'old' alike. Age norms demarcate the ineligible from the eligible, the promotable from the unpromotable, the proper from the improper, the clever from the dull, the odd from the eccentric, and the healthy from the sick. Many are converted into instruments of social policy: they are institutionalized. They are also convenient carriers of stereotypes. As enacted, chronological age, in these terms, is laden with political and moral import, reflecting particular contexts and times.

The implications of such a perspective are far from trivial. They expose age as a malleable resource that can be used or abused by those who manage or control others, framing our everyday assumptions as well as specific organizational practices, such as human resource management. Age is a potent organizer of our lifespace and power accrues to those who are able to shape age cultures and control the age agenda. The meanings of age categories such as infancy, childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age, are fluid, and depend on cultural and political circumstances. Age designations, accordingly, cannot be neutral or 'just a number': they compress and impress ways of feeling, thinking, and understanding about a person, issue, organization, or society. They seep into our identities, sometimes as pleasant infusions, other times as sharp erosions. Some can feel patently unfair or unjust and trigger resistance. As noted by Lawrence (1996), our feelings about age 'are saturated with ambivalence...Age is ordinary but holds intimate information about our lives, which makes it and everything we learn about it exceedingly personal, relevant, and potentially threatening' (21).

In this chapter, and those that follow, I develop these thoughts further. As the title of the book suggests, I am most concerned with how age operates within the everyday fabric of organizations. But I cannot divorce organizations from their societal and cultural context, where the 'organizing' of age is rooted: societal boundaries are porous. The academic material I draw on is widespread and multi-disciplinary: psychological, medical, sociological, social historical, organizational, gerontological, and management. There is no shortage of research of a positivist nature that takes age as a variable to associate with, or predict, some personal, organizational, career, or societal outcome, a stream of inquiry that has a long history. Some of this work has been helpful, but less so than critical ageing studies and critical gerontology—most of which is informed by a fairly small cadre of researchers. It is here that much of the qualitative, social constructionist work has taken place. Other sources I have used include popular literature (magazines, newspapers), television and websites, all absolutely key in defining some of the wider cultural images of age and ageing. Finally, wherever possible, I introduce

'live' illustrations, personal testimonies drawn from my own and others' fieldwork.

Historical constructions of age

Ancient depictions of the lifespan did not tally the years in annual sequence but tended to favour broad, but definitive, 'ages'. That is, life divided into a small number of distinct periods (Covey, 1989). They were to be found in writings of the time and accessible to the wider, often illiterate, populace through art and folk wisdoms—although how influential they were on actual behaviour is arguable (Aries, 1962; Burrow, 1986). An early rendition has been attributed to Solon. Solon was an Athenian statesman of some influence around 638–558 BC (Ehrenberg, 1973). His *Elegy of the Ages* combined social, cultural, and biological observations into ten ages (Cokayne, 2003). The first four concerned physical development from infancy to early maturity. Social obligations, such as marriage and children, defined the next age. In the sixth age, full maturity was achieved along with the first signs of physical deterioration. Language skills were at their best in the seventh and eight ages, while decline accelerated markedly in the final two ages, a gloomy prospect according to Solon:

He can still do much in his ninth period, but there is a weakening in his ability to think and speak. But it if he completes the ten ages of seven years each, full measure, death, when it comes, can no longer come too soon. (Cokayne, 2003: 60)

Solon's influence can, perhaps, be detected in a later, early fourteenth century, liturgical manuscript, *The Wheel of the Ten Ages of Man.* It symbolizes the ever circularity of the human condition in God's eyes. Christ's head is at the centre of the 'wheel', from which radiates ten spokes that end in finely painted scenes depicting various phases of 'infancy', 'youth', 'age', and 'decrepitude' (Bradley, 1920).

Though ten was the favoured division in these examples, early thought was mixed as to how many ages there were—three, four, six, seven, or more. However, the most popular numbers were far from arbitrary. They tended to reflect existing cultural knowledge, beliefs, or folklore, some inspired by the rhythms of growth and decay in nature. For example, three ages were common in the sixth century, associated with the biblical three wise men—one as youth, one as middle age, and one old age (Covey, 1989). A triadic division is also portrayed, vividly, in Hans Baldung Grien's sixteenth-century painting, *The Ages of Man and Death* (Figure 1.1). A grotesque figure of Death holds an hourglass showing the sands of time running out. He links arms with an old
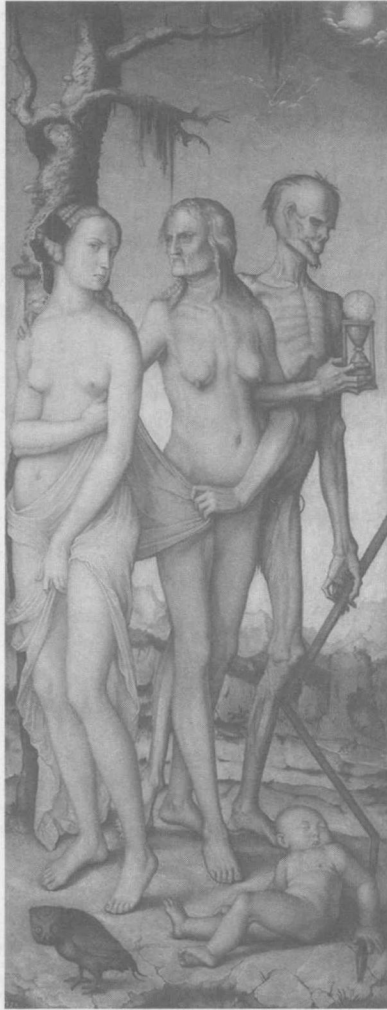
Figure 1.1 The Ages of Man and Death (Grien, 1510). Permission kindly granted by Museo del Prado

woman looking askance, while also overshadowing an infant and young woman—the other two ages.

Four ages—childhood, youth, middle age and old age—were in evidence in the Middle Ages, associated with the four seasons, the four elements (earth, air, fire and water), and the four 'bodily humours'—black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood—about which there was much curiosity (Dove, 1986). Major works of art also portrayed four ages, such as Anthony van Dyke's *Four Ages of Man*, and a similarly named series by the French painter Nicolas Lancret.

However, from the twelfth century, the number seven held particular significance. Seven was the number of virtues. There were also seven vices and seven planets (Burrow, 1986). Seven ages followed suit, dramatized by Shakespeare in *As You Like It*: the 'mewling and puking' infant; the 'whining schoolboy'; the 'lover sighing like a furnace'; the 'soldier full of strange oaths, quick in quarrel'; 'the justice in fair round belly'; the 'lean and slillper'd pantaloon with spectacles on nose'; and finally, cataclysmically, 'mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything' (Shakespeare, 2000).

The different ages were anchors for meaning, solace, and anxiety. They gave a picture of life as predictable and fixed and ordered in times that were anything but, and where illness or death could occur at any time (Burrow, 1986; Covey, 1989). As templates for age-related behaviour they could be somewhat idiosyncratic or contradictory. For example, the final ages were often regarded as times of marginalization and decay (e.g. pictures of individuals bent with crutches and canes). But other images were morally toned, depicting the old as greedy and avaricious—a salutary warning to those in, or approaching, the later stages of life. Yet still others portrayed advancing years as a positive period, where spiritual strength was fortified by meditation, reflection, and contemplation.

Getting organized with age

Buried 19 July 1762 Thomas Knaggs, son of Thomas tailor of Byers Green and Elizabeth, age 13, drowned, double fees.[2]

This early entry in an English parish register reflects the beginnings of a formal, chronologized culture. Recorded dates and age were becoming an important organizing principle (Kohli, 1986). Parish priests in seventeenth and eighteenth-century England were required to record births, marriages, and burials. After successive legal amendments, the parish register was a reasonably secure depository for birth dates, ages of marital partners, and age of death (Ashton, 2006). It provided population information for a state bent on levying taxes, regulating inheritances, and enforcing its moral agenda—such as preventing 'forbidden' marriages.

In early renditions of the register, even when the precise age of death was not recorded, the chronology of burial was a convenient instrument for taxation. Burial fees were, in effect, an immediate local tax, but the state intervened more directly in 1678 when it required all corpses to be buried in a wool shroud—in order to boost the crucial wool trade. Sworn entries to this effect had to be made in the parish register, with a £5 punishment (a

substantial sum at the time) for non-compliance (Rivoli, 2005). One North-amptonshire entry, for a deceased of some means, read as follows:

Affidavit was brought from a neighbouring minister that the aforesaid Frances Pickering was shrowded only in a winding sheet made of the Fleece of a good Fat Mutton.[3]

Only those too poor to afford a woollen shroud were exempt. Their entries were marked 'naked' in the register befitting their state of burial, although it was customary to confer some decorum by covering their body with hay or flowers (Olsen, 1999).

The legal niceties of age in the parish registers were significant social-economic inventions yet, in everyday life, notions of age were still vague or irrelevant. As Aries (1962) wryly notes:

A man of the sixteenth or the seventeenth century would be astonished at the exigencies with regard to civil status to which we submit quite naturally. As soon as our children start to talk, we teach them the name, their age and their parents' name. We are extremely proud when little Paul, asked how old he is, replies correctly that he is two and a half... Little Paul will give his age at school; he will soon be Paul _____ of Form _____. (15)

Should Aries' man have lived in late sixteenth-century England, his identity in his village would have been unlikely to have been defined by coordinates of his birth. More significant was his occupation (his 'byname'), his physical characteristics, or his original place of provenance. So a baker could be Jeremy Baker or, if he were short or red-haired, Jeremy Little, or Jeremy Red, or if he came from Bristol, Jeremy Bristol (Laning, 2000).

In pre-industrial times, age was not a differentiator of who did or did not work in the fields. Farm work required the efforts of all family members where physical strength, experience, and sometimes gender divided the work to be done—but not age. In urban settings, family members also blended in exercising their crafts, such as boot and shoe making, baking, blacksmithy, butchery, and carpentry (Chudacoff, 1989). A form of apprenticeship was key to on-the-job learning and, when there was no natural or willing heir, the apprenticeship could be extended to those outside of the immediate family. In Europe, the conditions of apprenticeship eventually came under state purview. A key piece of legislation in England was the 1562 Statue of Artificers which set out age parameters: all householders over 24 could take apprentices for at least seven years, and apprentices themselves needed to be 24 or older when had they completed their term (Wallis, 2008). The starting age was not regulated, but was typically mid teens (though 'teenager' is a modern, 1950s', construct).

The behaviour of covenanted apprentices has received a mixed press. Charles Dickens' *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices* reinforced a none-too-complimentary image of apprentices. Contractually, they were expected