

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Age-identities and the celebration of birthdays

Journal Item

How to cite:

Bytheway, Bill (2005). Age-identities and the celebration of birthdays. *Ageing and Society*, 25(4) pp. 463–477.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]

Version: [not recorded]

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1017/S0144686X05003831>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

25th volume celebration paper

Bill Bytheway's paper, 'Demographic statistics and old age ideology', was published in Volume 1 of Ageing & Society (part 3: 347–64). Bill was the Editor during 1997–2001.

Age-identities and the celebration of birthdays

BILL BYTHEWAY*

ABSTRACT

In a paper in the January issue of this volume of *Ageing & Society*, Eric Midwinter argued that 'much can be learned from re-drawing the demographic map with social rather than chronological contours'. This opinion reflects a widespread view among social gerontologists that chronological age is an 'empty' variable, even though it is central to the construction of social identities, both in bureaucratic contexts and in less formal social interaction. This paper draws on material stored in the *Mass-Observation Archive* at the University of Sussex, England. A large panel of 'ordinary people' was asked to write about 'growing older' in 1992 and about 'birthdays' in 2002. An analysis of the ways in which they revealed their age demonstrates that the revelation of chronological age is unproblematic in certain contexts that are deemed appropriate. Difficulties arise as a result of the association of age with various more nebulous statuses such as 'middle-aged' and 'old'. The implications for the concept of 'the third age' are discussed and it is concluded that social gerontology should pay more attention to the theoretical significance of chronological age and age-identity and less to age statuses.

KEY WORDS – social identity, chronological age, birthdays, experience.

Introduction

In celebrating the 25th anniversary of the launch of *Ageing & Society*, it is appropriate to focus on the phenomenon of birthdays. The annual cycle structures many aspects of social life, not least the production of academic journals and the personal experience of growing older. Insofar as gerontologists have attended to chronological age, the tendency has been

* Centre for Ageing and Biographical Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK.

either to use it in delimiting samples for empirical studies or, paradoxically, to argue that it is of little relevance to the study of age. Christine Fry (2003), for example, has commented, 'Interestingly this supposedly empty variable is an essential criterion in rationalizing the enormous populations of contemporary industrial capitalist states' (2003: 274).

Most gerontologists maintain that the focus of gerontology is the ageing process in all its many guises. It is in this context that chronological age is supposed by many to be 'empty'. Chronological age is however a basic variable in demography, and one which underpins much rhetoric, policy and practice (Bytheway 1981). National statistics are used to demonstrate the ageing of the population, to raise issues and on occasion to create alarm. The population pyramid is repeatedly drawn, creating an image that effectively demonstrates the age-sex distribution of a population. Many gerontological texts begin with statistical material that details the 'older population'. In all these instances, chronological age is a defining measure of age. But even in these applications the variable is under attack. In his paper marking the 25th volume of *Ageing & Society*, Eric Midwinter (2005: 17) argued that 'much can be learned from re-drawing the demographic map with social rather than chronological contours'. He cited the work of Michael Young who, in decrying the regimentation of modern society, wrote:

A whole apparatus of control, now encrusted with tradition, has been hung onto the bureaucratic reckoning of age. Everyone is conscripted into a linear system of measurement in order to make the cyclical replacement more precise, with no conscientious objection tolerated. The registration by age becomes one of the most significant facts about people: the book determines when they are supposed to enter school, leave school, marry, drink, vote, smoke, get called up for military duty in a real column, draw a retirement pension, and a great deal else in between the registered birth and the registered death. All the marchers carry on their backs a tag with this most important number on it. Every year you add one to the number. It is as if you wear a watch with a limited life, which starts at zero and is then set forward once a year until it reaches its final number and stops. Society compels people to display the watch on demand as if it were a pass they always have to carry (Young 1988: 109).

Both Young and Midwinter dreamt of a world free of clocks and calendars. Ten years ago, in a similar way, I floated the idea that gerontologists might set to one side the word 'elderly' and the concept of old age (Bytheway 1995: 115). Subsequently, in a cogent and influential article, Molly Andrews (1999) challenged the implicit 'temptations of agelessness' that had led researchers such as myself into an apparent denial of age and difference. On the contrary, she argued, 'people see value in the years they have lived; without them they have no history, they have no genuine self'

(1999: 316). In short, 'years lived' directly creates a social identity that should not be dismissed lightly. What then should gerontologists make of chronological age and its annual up-grading? Is it an empty variable or a key element in the self-concept of the ageing individual?

Age-identity

This article draws on my current research into the significance of birthdays in adult life, to discuss how chronological age is relevant to the study of social identities and the experience of ageing. It argues that chronological age should be a central theoretical concern for social gerontologists. In his discussion of social identity, Richard Jenkins (1996) drew a clear distinction between the concepts of individual and collective identity: whereas the former is associated with a growing literature on self, biography and embodiment, the latter reflects a concern with categorisation, stereotyping and group consciousness. The former tends to feature *difference*, whereas the latter *similarity* (1996: 19–20). So, for example, 'I am 70 and you are 65' establishes individual difference, whereas 'we are senior citizens' refers to a shared identity. In the literature on identity, age is often used as an exemplar but rarely is it the focus of analysis and discussion. For example, at the beginning of his book, Jenkins argues that the presentation or negotiation of identity can shake 'the foundations of our lives', and directly addresses the reader:

Imagine, for example, the morning of your 65th birthday. With it, as well as birthday cards, will come retirement, a pension, a concessionary public-transport pass, special rates every Tuesday at the hairdresser. Beyond that again, in the promise of free medical prescriptions and the beckoning Day Centre, hover the shades of infirmity, of dependence, of disability. Although it will be the same face you see in the bathroom mirror, you will no longer be quite the person that you were yesterday. Nor can you ever be again (Jenkins 1996: 2).

It is significant that this illustration of the power of age-identity is set unambiguously in the context of individual experience. It demonstrates how age can affect an individual on the morning of the birthday. Disappointingly, however, after this evocative account of the importance of the 65th birthday, age reappears in Jenkins's book only in lists of the dimensions and categorisations upon which collective identities are based.

There are two broad social contexts in which individual identity is significant. One is that of bureaucratic procedures for establishing and testing the unique identity of the individual; the other is the less formal act of making personal introductions and connections. This paper focuses on the latter but, in regard to age, it is important to appreciate the overlap

between the two. Contemporary bureaucracies often suspect claims to identity. Consider, for example, the current proposals to establish an identity card in the United Kingdom. It is proposed that data held on a *National Identity Register* should be linked to a card held by the named person that holds ‘personal information such as name, address, date and place of birth’ (Home Office 2005). The inclusion of the date and place of birth enables checks to be made against the individual’s birth certificate, the document that has been central to the confirmation of identity in the UK since the *Births and Deaths Registration Act 1836*.

So Michael Young was right in arguing that registration by age, following the registration of birth, has become a constant feature of the relationship between the individual and the state, but it is not only through the routine registration of births and bureaucratic practice that chronological age is now a universal element in an individual’s social identity (Chudacoff 1989). The question often asked is not ‘How old are you?’ but ‘How old were you on your last birthday?’ which reflects the fact that most people’s birthdays are celebrated by family and friends. This is clearly evident in the marketing of the accoutrements of the celebrations – cake, party, balloons, cards and gifts.¹ Nonetheless, age is often perceived to be a sensitive topic in informal relationships, and as a fact that people are only willing to reveal when the situation is appropriate. How then do people react when asked to reveal their age? There is something to be learnt from an analysis of how people manage this when writing about themselves. In one edition of the magazine *YOURS*, for example, 89 per cent of 218 short ‘find a friend’ advertisements included age (Bytheway 2003: 41–2). For this purpose, at least, the revelation of age is deemed appropriate; another is when writing for the *Mass-Observation (M-O) Archive*.

The Mass-Observation Archive

This *Archive* is held by the Library of the University of Sussex. Its well-established routine is to issue directives three times a year to a panel of ‘ordinary people’. Currently there are about 350 members. Each directive invites the panel members to record, in writing and anonymously, their thoughts about specific aspects of contemporary life and current historical events. Members are recruited mainly through networks, newspaper articles and radio appeals. The members are not required to respond to every directive and they are, of course, free to withdraw whenever they choose. Nevertheless, the *Archive* staff place a high priority on maintaining a personal and continuing relationship with each of their correspondents

TABLE I. *The age-sex distribution of the 186 respondents to the Birthdays directive*

Age group (years)	Women		Men	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
20–29	3	2	0	0
30–39	8	6	2	4
40–49	15	11	4	9
50–59	34	24	5	11
60–69	32	23	7	16
70–79	42	30	18	40
80–89	7	5	9	20
All ages	141	100	45	100

(Harrison and McGhee 2003). In 2002, at least 120 had been contributing for over 12 years.

Whilst no claim is made that the panel is representative of the UK population, the recruitment of new members aims to maintain a broad and diverse cross-section of ‘ordinary people’. Being a member of the *Mass-Observation* panel is, however, a stimulating but demanding and unpaid experience and inevitably, despite persistent efforts to maintain the panel’s diversity, some sections of the population are over-represented, including women and older people. Table 1 presents the age-sex distribution of the 186 respondents to the 2002 directive on *Birthdays*, and shows that 82 per cent of the women and 87 per cent of the men were aged 50 or more years.

Currently all directives issued by the *Archive* begin with the following reminder, ‘As usual, please remember to start your reply with a very brief mini-biography: your M-O number (not name), sex, age, marital status, town or village where you live and your occupation or former occupation’. The intention is to provide the reader with a readily available basic description of the correspondent (and most comply) (Shaw 1998: 3; Sheridan, Street and Bloom 2000: 61–62). As an example, one, randomly selected, correspondent in the summer of 2002 headed her response: ‘W571. Female aged 64. Married. Ex-sales assistant. 1 daughter, 2 grandsons. Cottingley, near Bingley, West Yorkshire’. The code number, W571, provides anonymity and a unique identity. W571 then specifies, as requested, her sex, age, marital status, village and former occupation, and then volunteers information about her daughter and grandsons, presumably to complete the perceived essentials of a ‘very brief mini-biography’.

With regard to the report of age, it is significant that she chooses not to enter a term such as ‘middle-aged’ or a broader numerical categorisation such as ‘60-something’, but rather writes ‘aged 64’. It seems safe to

assume that this refers to 64 ‘completed years’ or ‘years at previous birthday’, reflecting the convention that age is measured in completed years. Note the ways in which the mini-biography can be checked for internal consistency. An ‘ex-sales assistant’ with two grandsons is quite likely to be 64 years of age, but it would be odd if a ‘trainee sales assistant’ aged 24 referred to grandchildren. If, at the aged of 64, she were to be a trainee (rather than an ex-) sales assistant, then she might be tempted to mention previous work (e.g. ‘formerly school cook’) in order to produce a biography that appears more consistent.

The mini-biography gives W571 a social identity that both maintains anonymity and creates a clear image of an individual. As categories, her age and the name of the village (in contrast to sex and marital status), are so narrow that readers of the same age or who have lived in the same village may see this as a surprising coincidence. Indeed it is possible that someone who has lived in Cottingley might be able to identify her. She was free to locate herself as living in the wider district, Bingley, but living in Cottingley is presumably an important element of W571’s identity and she willingly volunteers its name.² In this way the mini-biography can be interpreted as a personal introduction. Within the structured context of anonymous writing and the guidelines of the directive, W571 introduces herself to the unknown reader with a mini-biography that includes age.

The responses to three directives

This paper reports an analysis of the responses to three directives that invited members of the *M-O* panel to write about birthdays, celebrations and growing older. In June 2002, a directive on *Birthdays* posed questions about their celebration and how these related to age, and 186 panel members responded. Twelve years earlier, in the winter of 1990, a directive on *Celebrations* asked correspondents to describe and comment on all celebrations in which they had participated during the previous 12 months. It ended with a few questions specifically about their last birthday. A 1992 directive titled *Growing Older* covered personal experiences as well as more general beliefs about the ageing process.³

Revealing chronological age

The opening instruction of the *Birthdays* directive referred specifically to the correspondent’s last birthday. It included six bulleted queries, beginning with: ‘when it was’ and ‘how old you were’. The first invited

TABLE 2. *How age was represented in responses to the query about age at last birthday*

	Women		Men	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Cardinal number only	74	52	26	58
Cardinal number + years (old) ¹	29	21	5	11
Ordinal number	23	16	4	9
Date-of-birth only	0	0	2	4
No age	15	11	8	18
All responses	141	100	45	100

Note: For example, 53 years or 53 years old.

correspondents to respond with a date, and the second with a statement recording their age at the time of their last birthday. W₅₇₁ responded with the following (exemplifying the relaxed literary style of many of the *M-O* correspondents): ‘My last birthday was on September 25th 2001, and I became 64 years old. It was a Tuesday and I did the normal work for that day, vacuumed, dusted, but as it was a lovely sunny day, sat out in the garden as well’. This first sentence locates her last birthday historically by specifying a particular date, and then repeats the information about age that she had given in her mini-biography. Typically, most correspondents included their age in a short introductory sentence such as this.

Four different ways were used to represent age (Table 2). More than half (54%) gave their age as a cardinal number, *e.g.* ‘My birthday was on 7th September – I was 79 so I’m nearly 80’ (G₁₄₁₆). Of the 86 others, 27 referred to the ordinal number (*e.g.* the ‘50th’ birthday) and 34 stated that they were ‘x years old’ or ‘x years’. All these replies are consistent with the inference that they were indicating their chronological age (as measured in ‘completed years’) on the occasion of their last birthday. Two men provided only their date of birth, revealing age without declaring it. Finally 23 correspondents did not specify their age. Possibly they did not think it necessary to repeat it immediately following its report in their mini-biography. Thus no problems were evident in how these correspondents revealed their age, and all conveyed it numerically. Most did not elaborate: they moved on to address the next queries about their last birthday. A minority however added brief but revealing comments. A few, like W₅₇₁, used verbs of transformation to represent the change that comes with birthdays, *e.g.* they ‘turned’ 40 or ‘reached’ 60. Some stated that on the specified date, they ‘celebrated’ their birthday. One, in a similar positive vein, reported that she had reached the ‘grand old age’ of 55. In contrast, a few older correspondents alluded to the negative side of age, as with: ‘It

is something of a reminder of the onslaught of being really old' (R450, male, 76 years).⁴

Questioning age-identity

Although much of the *Birthdays* directive focused on celebrations, a number of the correspondents, having revealed their chronological age, chose to question the identity that they thought it implied. This was done in two ways, one being to raise reservations about the number itself, the other to question the age-status that the number might imply. Regarding the number, one man wrote that becoming 83 'quite astonished me as I don't feel anything like what that implies' (G2134), and another claimed that although he wasn't worried about 'being in a new decade', 'it did seem odd writing 60 for the first time at the top of this page' (D1602). A 69-year-old woman wrote: 'Actually I have always to work out my age, as I tend to believe I am not really as old as that!' (B2154). This implies that she knew she was 69 years old but did not 'believe' it: to make sure, she had to work it out (presumably by checking her date of birth). In contrast, another woman of a similar age described a more challenging reaction: 'It was my 67th birthday but although I was born in 1934, I have decided to be at least 10 years younger and, depending on how I feel, I declare between 54 and 57' (N399). In this statement she indicated that, whilst she accepted her date of birth, she was free to 'choose' her chronological age. For these correspondents, it was the number itself that they felt was inappropriate.

Others, rather than claim that the number was 'wrong', questioned the implied identity and suggested alternatives. So for several correspondents the problem was the word 'old'. One challenged the word with the somewhat tired cliché that she was '78 years young', and another woman conveyed the idea that the expected transformation into being 'really old' had failed to occur: 'I can't believe I am 70 and I didn't particularly want to be 70. I used to think that 70 was really old but now that I have reached that age I realise that it isn't old at all!' (J1890) The image of being 'really old' was also challenged in the following impassioned response:

My last birthday was on the 29th July 2001 and I was 70. Don't do it! – I know what you're immediately thinking. Your (hopeful!) impression of me *was* a lady of uncertain years, cheerful and robust. Now you see me as a little old lady in a button-thro' summer dress (floral) done up to the neck and a woollen cardigan, stout shoes and old-ladies hair style AND I'M NOT! I'm 5'3", 9 stone 12 lbs wearing high-heeled gold mules, a blue cotton skirt and low-cut top. I'm lucky that my hair is pure white, quite thick, well cut and conditioned; and I'm still beating admirers off with clubs! (B1898).

She imagined the reader would initially picture her as a 'lady of uncertain years', implicitly ageless, but, upon revealing her age, she could see

the reader picturing her as a 'little old lady' rather than the more exotic image that she held of herself. Her age prompts the wrong image and creates a false identity. In effect she declares: 'Forget my age and picture me as I am!' She was not denying her age but rather the image of 'little old lady'. Two younger correspondents were similarly unhappy with the idea of middle age. One, for example, described how she was 'not looking forward' to her 50th birthday: 'It is a serious sort of age: you can no longer get away from the fact that you are definitely middle-aged' (S2207). In contrast to these doubts about age-identity, two other correspondents reacted by accepting that they became 'officially' old with a particular birthday (one woman referred to her 60th birthday, one man to his 65th).

Finitude

Some of the cited observations focused on the celebration and significance of birthdays. What was striking in the responses, however, was the frequency of references to finitude in relation to the ageing process (Bytheway 2003). Rather than the challenges posed by ageing bodies or living in an ageist world, what comes over most strongly is that birthdays are seen as marking the progression towards the end-of-life. The following three extracts are representative of many more that were strikingly similar in expressing this idea:

After all, consider it: a birthday simply ticks off another step nearer the grave (C110, male, 68 years).

But, of course, the fact that now a birthday is a milestone on the way to the grave is extremely uncomfortable – not much discussed, but all too present in my mind (D996, female, 75 years).

I am speeding onwards towards my death, and there are lots of things I want to do. I never used to think about death, as I do now. Birthdays are another year nearer to it (W571, female, 64 years).

All of these respondents picture age as a journey leading them to the grave. The journey is measured partly by steps and milestones and partly by the passage of time; whichever, birthdays are the trigger to enumeration. Several other respondents, without referring to 'the grave' described birthdays as milestones. Despite the negative tone of most of these observations, the journey is not seen as characterised by hazards, illnesses, disabilities or physical decline. Death is not described as something that is the end-result of a steady, age-related reduction in strength, mobility and wellbeing. Rather it is the end of a journey, an end that many of the respondents were anticipating.

Age statuses

Ten years earlier, in 1992, the panel was sent the *Growing Older* directive. This began: ‘How old are you? What do the categories “young”, “middle-aged”, “elderly” or “old” mean to you? Where would you position yourself?’ The first of these questions was worded identically to the age question in 2002.⁵ The two questions that followed focused on the correspondent’s sense of age. The correspondents of course could have challenged the validity of the four age categories listed for responses to the second question.⁶ They were in effect being tested on how they identified themselves with respect to age and growing older. Starting with the women, the youngest declared: ‘I am 33 and horrified to find that according to the media, I am no longer young. I find it difficult to think of myself as middle-aged, but I suppose I must be’ (C41). It is interesting that she should berate the media and then, in the next sentence, capitulate. Another at 35 believed she would be middle-aged when 40, and a third, at 37, thought she was ‘still young’. The next, having reached 40, was initially defiant but also then conceded to being middle-aged:

I am 40 and still feel young, so there! Forty is one of those watershed ages though, which everyone sees as irreversibly grown-up, even ‘mature’. I can’t honestly think I’m a kid any more and it is difficult to come to terms with that fact. ... I refuse to adopt a middle-aged tag. Officially I suppose I am middle-aged – only a minority live beyond 80 (C2207).

In this complex statement, the correspondent began by orienting herself to her early life: ‘still’ young and having been ‘a kid’. Faced with the indisputable evidence of having reached the ‘watershed’ age of 40 (half the expected 80 years), she attempts ‘honestly’ to think of herself as grown-up and mature, whilst still resisting the ‘tag’ of ‘middle-aged’. Four other women, all in their early forties, although no longer claiming to feeling young, were ambivalent about being middle-aged. One only felt so when she was depressed; another commented that ‘I dread being labelled ‘middle-aged’ (S1399); and the third observed: ‘Well I’m middle-aged now, but I know I’m not!’ (A1706). The fourth was the only one to express problems with the number, but even she conceded to expectations regarding middle age: ‘I’m 45 years-old and have to keep telling myself I’m over 40 as, at times, I certainly don’t feel my age (nor I think do I act my age!). ... I suppose I class myself as going into middle age (and always will)’ (R860).

The phrase ‘going into middle age’ is a way of associating herself with the beginning rather than the end of a phase of life. In all these commentaries, there is a clear sense of fear. On reaching 50 years-of-age,

defiance took a different tone: ‘At 50, I suppose I am well into middle-age now but I don’t feel any different inside from when I was 18 apart from having more experience of life’ (W633).

At 55 years-of-age, W571 adopted a different position. Accepting rather than resisting middle-age (‘I still feel middle-aged’), she was more concerned with what was to come. At 60, she observed that she will have to resign herself to being ‘elderly but not old’. Another adopted a similar attitude to ‘the watershed of 60’, but a third woman, in her late fifties, continued to resist the label of old: ‘I get quite put out when the media describe anyone under 80 as “old”’ (B2154). Once again the media are criticised for the inappropriate use of age labels. Having just passed that particular watershed, another correspondent exclaimed: ‘I’m 61 and I can’t believe it – I still “feel the same inside” as I did when I was 20’ (N1592). Note the echoed claim of the 50-year-old correspondent who felt the same as when aged 18. Similarly, another in her early sixties maintained a middle-aged identity, positioning herself in relation to older people: ‘I am 63 and I suppose I still consider myself middle-aged – probably because I know a lot of people over 75 whom I call elderly or old’ (W2244).

In contrast to these claims, two women resisted the temptation of younger identities. One declared: ‘I am 67, and infuriated by the way people keep saying, “You are only as old as you feel”. If I am as old as I feel, I am 97. I have always felt older than I am’ (G1041). Similarly, a 61-year-old, being ‘a pensioner’, considered herself ‘elderly’. These two ‘realists’ were the exception, but other older women were phlegmatic. One, for example, wrote: ‘I am now 71 and will be 72 on 21st June 1993 (this year). ... Trying to position myself, I realise that all these categories are useless and misleading’ (C2570). Overall the men were less ambivalent than the women about their age. Nevertheless, the youngest, at 43, although he began with a challenging tone like his female age peers, then conceded to the youth-centred agenda:

Personal age at time of writing – a few days short of 44. I don’t really like categorising and making assumptions about age. I think that ageism is as dangerous as any other form of stereotyping. Chronologically I suppose I am ‘middle-aged’, but (I am told!) I look young for my age, and I don’t think that I behave in a stereotypical middle-aged way (C2256).

Similarly, another, aged 62 years, was irritated by popular stereotypes: ‘I frequently read of people in my own age group being described as elderly. It irritates me immensely. I just do not think of myself in such a fashion, getting on a bit maybe, elderly, never!’ (H1543). Two aged in the seventies accepted that they were no longer middle-aged. One wrote: ‘I shall be 73

next birthday in February and now accept that I must describe myself as elderly – no longer middle-aged – although that is how I see myself most days’ (H2269). So some men, like the women, distinguished between how they presumed they were supposed to describe themselves and how they felt.

The 1992 directive’s questions about *Growing Older* began by inviting the correspondent to construct an age-identity. Among 46 correspondents, only one man did not reveal his chronological age and only one woman expressed concerns about identifying with the number. In contrast, most were reluctant to identify with age categories such as ‘middle-aged’ and ‘elderly’. Even though they acknowledged a popular belief that age statuses are defined by chronological age, they actively resisted the application of these statuses to themselves.

Conclusions

The *Mass-Observation Archive* provides evidence of how people write about their age. Despite being a substantial operation (more akin to a large survey than a qualitative study), the submitted observations have a quality and depth that are rarely achieved by other methods of collecting people’s views and discourse. As remarked by one researcher, ‘The anonymity which makes it difficult for researchers to cite the contributors to *M-O*, to express gratitude or feel confident that they have treated them with sufficient respect, is the other side of the coin which enables the *M-O* to deliver such rich material and is inseparable from the social and emotional bases of thought’ (Shaw 1998: 10). Similarly, Harrison and McGhee (2003) referred to the inter-textuality of the *Mass-Observation* project as a ‘dance’ between researchers, archivist and correspondents. They described persuasively the sense of intimacy that is experienced when reading a correspondent’s writing – many handwritten – in the *Archive*’s reading room. Many wrote at length when conveying their feelings about growing older and describing the emotions engendered by ‘special’ birthdays.

Most of these writers accepted their chronological age as a ‘fact of life’. The annual cycle, made up not only of birthdays but also of the seasons and various festivities, paradoxically conveyed to them both a sense of continuity and indications of change. The celebration of one birthday in adulthood may seem much the same as the previous one, but time is cumulative: ‘If last 25 November was the day of my 31st birthday, next 25 November will then mark my 32nd’ (Zerubavel 1981: 113). It is common knowledge that life is finite. Before 65 or so, death is popularly seen in Britain to be premature and tragic; at over 90, it is the end of ‘a good

innings' or even a 'blessed relief'. It follows that for most people, growing older is a journey during which wheels turn, watersheds are reached and birthdays are milestones (or, more oppressively, the annual tick from Michael Young's metaphorical watch).

From a detailed discursive analysis of how people talk about age when approaching their 50th birthday, Nikander (2002) concluded similarly that: 'The material analysed in this study provided ample examples of the active language practices whereby participants made sense of and conceptualised specific milestones like turning 50 and the ageing process in general' (2002: 213). She was particularly interested in quantification, and concluded that it was used 'both to generalise the importance of age and to downplay its personal significance' (2002: 78).

Likewise the *Mass-Observation* correspondents were willing to acknowledge the validity of the count of years when declaring their age, but they were uneasy about the age-identity that this might be construed to imply. They find ill-defined labels such as 'middle-aged' and 'elderly' less attractive and more difficult to manage than chronological age. At least birthdays are predictable and seemingly non-negotiable. You are free to arrange a celebration, an excuse for a party or a reunion, or you may deny it any importance and treat it like an ordinary day. In contrast, the transition to the 'elderly' tag is much more problematic. Most correspondents recognised that such terms constituted a vocabulary that reflected age categories, but most resisted the implied transitions as unwelcome and inappropriate changes in social identity. Some simply dismissed such terms as meaningless and irrelevant.

Returning to the concept of the third age, one of its attractions may be that it is numerically defined. Being in the third age is not seen to be equivalent to being in the last age.⁷ Its appeal is enhanced by the element of choice which does not apply to birthdays. Without dwelling too much on what might follow, people can adopt the identity of the third age with enthusiasm, in much the same way as most can celebrate their next birthday in the expectation that it is not their last. Entering the third age is simply part of one's continuing journey through life which, if you like, passes a stone that marks 'ages' rather than miles. Insisting that the definition of the third age is free of chronological age is of course a way of challenging the ageist inclination to construct age-bars. It is not incompatible however with an insistence that chronological age, as a key element in current social identities, should be central to gerontological research – the count of years directly maps the course of a life on to the course of history.

In conclusion, this analysis of material from the *Mass-Observation Archive* reaches contradictory findings: people do not find chronological age

problematic – whenever it appears appropriate, they are willing to reveal it – but many consider the implied age-identity inappropriate and unwelcome. In part, this is because that identity categorises them in ways that are not valued and are perceived by some to be ageist. Many researchers similarly accept that chronological age creates an identity that facilitates the organisation of their enquiries, even though they recognise that it may promote ageist stereotypes. Like Eric Midwinter, we can choose to campaign for it to be abandoned or, like Molly Andrews, we can begin to think differently about what chronological age represents. Whatever, chronological age should be a central theoretical concern of social gerontology.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, the website <http://www.birthdaycelebrations.net>.
- 2 It is of course possible that W571 might read this paper. Or you, the reader, might draw it to her attention having recognised her from this description. If this happens I hope, W571, that you find the paper interesting. I am greatly indebted to you and all the other correspondents for your contributions to the *Mass-Observation Archive*. It is an invaluable resource for researchers. Further details of the *Archive* are available at <http://www.massobs.org.uk/>
- 3 I have analysed and reported on the 186 replies to the 2002 directive in Bytheway (2004).
- 4 The unique reference codes are given to enable readers to check or collate the extracts with other Mass-Observation datasets.
- 5 The 2002 directive was not designed to be a follow-up and was drafted without any knowledge of the wording of the earlier directives. For this reason, it is of some significance that the age question was included at the beginning of both enquiries and, apart from the tense, was worded identically.
- 6 The analysis of responses to the 1992 directive is limited to the 46 who also responded in 2002.
- 7 Significantly, two correspondents, in 2002, wrote to declare the hope that their previous birthday would not be their ‘last’ as implied by the unfortunate wording of the directive.

References

- Andrews, M. 1999. The seductiveness of agelessness. *Ageing & Society*, **17**, 3, 301–18.
- Bytheway, B. 1981. Demographic statistics and old age ideology. *Ageing & Society*, **1**, 3, 347–64.
- Bytheway, B. 1995. *Ageism*. Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Bytheway, B. 2003. Visual representations of late life. In Faircloth, C. A. (ed.), *Aging Bodies: Images and Everyday Experience*. Altamira, Walnut Creek, California.
- Bytheway, B. 2004. *Many Happy Returns? Birthdays and Lived-through Experiences in Later Life*. School of Health and Social Welfare Research Report, The Open University, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, 29–53.

- Chudacoff, H. P. 1989. *How Old are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.
- Fry, C. L. 2003. The life course as a cultural construct. In Settersten, R. A. (ed.), *Invitation to the Life Course: Towards New Understandings of Later Life*. Baywood, Amityville, New York, 269–94.
- Harrison, K. and McGhee, D. 2003. Reading and writing family secrets: reflections on mass-observation. *Auto/Biography*, 11, 1–2, 25–36.
- Home Office 2005. *Identity Cards: The Next Step*. Cmnd 6020. Stationery Office, London. Available online at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/identitycards/index.html>.
- Jenkins, R. 1996. *Social Identity*. Routledge, London.
- Midwinter, E. 2005. How many people are there in the third age? *Ageing & Society*, 25, 1, 9–18.
- Nikander, P. 2002. *Age in Action: Membership Work and Stage of Life Categories in Talk*, Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, Helsinki.
- Shaw, J. 1998. *Intellectual Property, Representative Experience and Mass-Observation*. M-OA Occasional Paper 7, Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex, Falmer, Sussex.
- Sheridan, D., Street, B. and Bloome, D. 2000. *Writing Ourselves: Mass-Observation and Literacy Practices*. Hampton, Cresskill, New Jersey.
- Young, M. 1988. *The Metronomic Society: Natural Rhythms and Human Timetables*. Thames and Hudson, London.
- Zerubavel, E. 1981. *Hidden Rhythms: Schedules and Calendars in Social Life*. University of California Press, Berkeley, California.

Accepted 17 March 2005

Address for correspondence:

Bill Bytheway, Faculty of Health and Social Care, Open University,
Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6BR

e-mail: W.R.Bytheway@open.ac.uk