Book review

Sophie Hales

Ageing, Corporeality and Embodiment, by Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs. Anthem Press, 2014.

Fashion and Age: Dress, the Body, and Later Life, by Julie Twigg. Bloomsbury, 2013.

Gilleard and Higgs’s Ageing, Corporeality and Embodiment and Twigg’s Fashion and Age: Dress, the Body, and Later Life both address age, ageing and gender in the contemporary social context, where fundamental shifts have occurred in how the ageing process is now perceived (e.g., Katz and Marshall, 2003; Marshall, 2010; Tulle, 2008). Each book has been read from my perspective as a doctoral researcher conducting research into the lived experience of ageing and images of gender and sexuality. Therefore, the ways in which age, gender and sexuality are managed, negotiated and embodied to me are pivotal elements of the books. Present in both books is a consideration of the embodiment of age and gender and, as such, both books make a significant contribution to researchers with an interest in embodiment and embodied methodologies and representations.

Gilleard and Higgs focus on a debate surrounding how the body may be positioned within the study of ageing. The beginning of the book contextualizes the sociology of the body and ageing, respectively, within contemporary society by providing historical overviews of each area of sociological interest, highlighting the somatic turn in the social sciences from ageing as decline to ageing as a culturally informed phenomenon, which, they suggest, is rooted in the social movement of the 1960s. This section culminates in an evaluation of the complexities of the new sociologies of the body and ageing in today’s society. Theoretically, Gilleard and Higgs pursue, promote and provide an account of the challenges related to studying ageing as a simultaneously corporeal and embodied experience which is in continual dialogue with other elements of embodied identity such as gender. This provides a basis for studying the embodied dimensions of organization research.

Following the positioning of the body in its social context, Gilleard and Higgs examine the embodiment of other dimensions of identity, including gendered, racialized, disabled and sexualized identities. Specifically, Gilleard and Higgs assess how these identities have been embodied following lifestyle changes which occurred during and after the social movements of the 1960s, in particular the nuances of embodied identities and their relations and intersections with ageing and later life. Consequently, this lays a foundation for further exploration of the embodied process of ageing in relation to various aspects of identity and how each of these elements shapes, and is shaped by, the lived, embodied experience of ageing.

The remaining section of the book is concerned with the technologies of body work and how these technologies tend to be utilized in the contemporary social world. To establish the technologies of body work addressed in this book, they draw from the work of Francis Bacon (2002) and include fashion and cosmetics, the fitness industry and rejuvenative medical procedures.

By doing so, I felt that these areas, which have become embedded in contemporary culture, were re-conceptualized as key elements to be addressed in the study of identity more broadly, as well as in relation to ageing as an embodied process and, in particular, ageing as a fundamentally gendered process.

Empirically, Gilleard and Higgs successfully document and highlight the significance of the socio-economic shift that has underpinned the evolution of a consumer culture. In doing so, they articulate the importance of examining how consumerism shapes, and is shaped by, embodiment and body work associated with both ageing and gender. They thus emphasize how consumer culture can be used to ‘reveal the possibilities and the limits whereby the corporeality attached to particular forms of embodied identity can be either enhanced or undermined’ (p. 116). Consequently, Gilleard and Higgs develop Bacon’s typology of bodywork by examining

it through the lens of both ageing and gender, and situating it in a consumer oriented culture. This potentially provides a promising foundation for further studies of gender and age in organizational contexts.

A key strength of the book is the clarity of its conceptual contribution. In particular, the authors distinguish between embodied identities and embodied practices, identifying the former as ‘selective aspects of the corporeal appearance of the body or its corporeal functions that have come to define a distinct social position for the individual’ while the latter, although linked, remains focused on those activities that ‘orientate the body toward distinct social, cultural and personal identities and their associated lifestyles’ (p. 159). They provide a useful typology to be applied within specific organizational contexts.

Julia Twigg’s book Fashion and Age undertakes an examination of fashion as an industry which prioritizes youth, in relation to age and ageing within the current context of significant social and demographic changes. The key purpose of this book is to ‘explore the ways these two fields can be and are linked, using the territory of clothing and age to explore central questions in modern culture’ (p. 1). Specific questions explored in the book include how old age is understood, experienced and imagined given the current social and demographic changes, what role clothing and dress play in these processes, how older people experience fashion as consumers, and what part age plays in fashion transmission. Within the book, Twigg draws upon her own fieldwork, focusing on older women, media and fashion editors, and design directors in fashion retailers to thoroughly examine these questions. Her key focus is on the experiences of women which, in turn, highlights clothing, dress and age as gendered phenomena.

As a book clearly produced through extensive research and careful reflection, Twigg highlights the complexities of navigating gender and age at an embodied level and how pressure to maintain youthful ideals can manifest and be negotiated through the management of everyday, embodied practices. However, this takes into account not only the negating aspects of social pressures to remain youthful, but also that dress, as one of these embodied practices, ‘remains for many older women, despite its cultural limitations, a source of enjoyment and a site of aesthetic pleasure’ (p. 151).

Methodologically, Twigg uses narrative research techniques to facilitate the analysis of fashion and age throughout the life course rather than exclusively looking at older age. This allows for the changing perceptions towards fashion and clothing to be portrayed and evaluated. In addition to this, Twigg integrates visual data into the study by using photographs to support her points. Consequently, the benefits and challenges of incorporating photography into research can be considered by the reader.

For scholars of work and organization, Twigg’s book serves to emphasize important elements of research into later life, gender, embodiment and consumption. Her discussion of fashion through a focus on age repositions fashion in terms of clothing and dress as everyday practices which are negotiated throughout the ageing process rather than examining fashion as an elite industry which is inaccessible to many. In doing so, Twigg successfully dissects and evaluates the experience of, and the processes behind, everyday occurrences such as getting dressed and interacting with the media-led culture of consumerism within daily life. Consequently,

Twigg opens up research avenues that consider fashion, age and gender, which may be further explored within organizational contexts and/or the impact this has on organizational ideals, for example in relation to organizational dress and uniforms.

Further to this, Twigg’s book promotes the theme of clothing and dress in the constitution of social difference for empirical investigation. The book highlights how age makes up a key dimension of difference and practices which embody interpretations of age and social position.

Therefore, Twigg’s book provides the foundation for considering age and dress as key structuring principles within the social context. My personal attraction to this book was how this thesis integrates concepts of social class within a discussion of gender and age; as Twigg comments ‘dress acts to naturalize social divisions’ (p. 3). Ultimately, through the exploration of clothing and dress, this book brings into view a topic that has received little empirical investigation but makes up an aspect of life which holds great significance for the embodiment of age and gender, particularly, Twigg argues, for women.

Overall, both books make contributions to the theorization of ageing as a gendered sociocorporeal process, highlighting how we experience our bodies in the social, historical and individual, embodied context within which we exist, rather than how we are determined by our bodies. Gilleard and Higgs do so by examining broader social trends such as changing consumer and lifestyle habits, while Twigg focuses more on the individual’s lived experiences of everyday practices surrounding clothing and dress as an embodied representation of gender and age. While it is not the focus of either book to examine how the themes and trends discussed translate into the organizational context from the perspective of the workers’ experience of the labour process, each offers an insightful theoretically-rich foundation for organization scholars to explore the embodied negotiations of ageing and gender within work, as well as how the ageing process shapes, and is shaped by, the consumer market. Both provide inspirational starting points in this respect, individually, but particularly so as companion texts. Consequently, both are relevant to scholars with an interest in gender, age and ageing, and organization.

References

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