

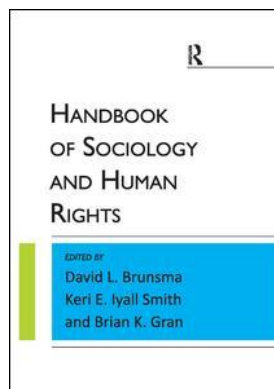
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.104

On: 20 Oct 2021

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Handbook of Sociology and Human Rights

David L. Brunσμα, Keri E. Iyall Smith, Brian K. Gran

Anging and the Life Course

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315634227.chTWO>

Robin Shura, Rachel Bryant

Published online on: 28 Feb 2013

How to cite :- Robin Shura, Rachel Bryant. 28 Feb 2013, *Anging and the Life Course from: The Handbook of Sociology and Human Rights* Routledge

Accessed on: 20 Oct 2021

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315634227.chTWO>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.



CHAPTER TWO

AGING AND THE LIFE COURSE

Robin Shura and Rachel Bryant

For sociologists, age—like gender, race and ethnicity, social class, and other characteristics typically construed strictly as attributes of individuals—is a feature of social structure that is both external to and coercive of individual experience (Riley, Johnson, and Foner 1972; Kohli 1986). Age carries particular statuses, expectations, and consequences in highly age-conscious societies that influence interaction, regardless of the individual (Chudacoff 1989). Age can also carry with it expectations for human rights. However, the acceptance of human rights instruments (e.g., UDHR, UNCRC) has not had explicitly noticeable effects on scholarship within the sociology of age and the life course (hereafter, SALC), particularly in the United States (Townsend 2006). Indeed, with some exceptions (see Townsend 2006), scholarship in SALC does not include significant explicit conceptual or methodological attention to human rights. This is not due to a lack of considerable sociological scholarship that draws attention to laws and policies and how they relate to age and aging (e.g., Binstock 2007; Rowe et al. 2010; Binstock and Post 1991), including issues of age discrimination (Quadagno and Street 1995), and scholarship on the political economy of age and aging (e.g., Estes et al. 2006). It may reflect the propensity to overlook realities of age segregation and ageism as robust features of social reality that bear on human rights, while being all too aware of the salience of kindred concepts within sociology regarding discriminatory structural segregation and cultural beliefs based on gender, race and ethnicity, or social class. However, attention within SALC to age segregation (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2005, 2006) and ageism (e.g., Butler 2002 [1972]; Dannefer and Shura 2009) is significant and synergistic with human rights concerns, and debates about generational equity (including rationing health care to “seniors”) within SALC are highly relevant (e.g., Binstock and Post 1991; Callahan 1987). These substantive areas speak to the ideological and structural manifestations of prejudices and systematic discriminatory treatment based on age. Yet even this scholarship has generally fallen short of making explicit, formalized scholarly connections to human rights.

This lack of explicit focus on human rights within SALC cannot be understood as due to a failure to make major empirical and theoretical gains or an absence of vigorous scholarship in SALC. “Human rights” largely has not been clarified

within SALC scholarship in terms of its conceptual, theoretical, or methodological relevance because this relevance has not, or not yet, been made widely known, articulated, and accessible across sociology. Further, we speculate that the lack of explicit focus on human rights within SALC may be explained by one issue that a diversity of approaches within SALC have in common: a reluctance to make strong and direct claims that social problems exist relevant to their subject matter, in favor of emphasizing descriptive and highly sophisticated analytical approaches using increasingly robust empirical data sources (e.g., see Kohli 2007 or Mayer 2009), or in favor of making refined theoretical contributions to the subfield that allege claims of problems within sociological scholarship itself (Dannefer 2011; Baars et al. 2006; Bengtson et al. 2009a, 2009b). Omission of explicit attention to human rights may be less specific to SALC and more broadly descriptive of perennial disagreements within the field about our roles as sociologists and the proper focus and locus of our work writ large.

The diversity of perspectives and issues within SALC speaks to a deeper, paradigmatic divide within SALC, as both conventional approaches to research and more critical approaches exist within SALC. Dale Dannefer (2011) alleges that the former are more represented than the latter. The dominance of conventional research within SALC in some ways makes understandable the lack of explicit attention to human rights, whereas the significant minority of critical perspectives within SALC unavoidably raises issues that have synergy with human rights concerns—for example, power, ideology, and conflict. And these paradigmatic divides do not touch on debates over whether there is a place for advocacy in sociological scholarship or human rights sociology.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF AGE, AGING, AND THE LIFE COURSE: KEY CONCERNS AND QUESTIONS

The sociology of age and the life course consists of very heterogeneous orientations to research, including subject matter, methodology, and theory. Even inconsistency in the language used to describe its subject matter—older adults versus elders versus the elderly; later life versus later adulthood versus old age; life course versus lifespan—suggests extreme heterogeneity of approaches, including disagreement within the field (Dannefer and Uhlenberg 1999; Thomas 2004; Settersten 2005). Interestingly, SALC includes gerontological approaches (research focused on late life) and research on the life course, which is broadly inclusive of midlife and later life as well as early life events and childhood. However, in part a legacy of section development within the American Sociological Association, and in part reinforced by divisions of major federal funding agencies (e.g., NIA versus NICHD), SALC typically does not subsume scholarship devoted to childhood. SALC research has in the past been accused of being rich in data but lacking in theory (Birren 1959). Perhaps in response to this criticism, several developments have ignited renewed theorizing and attention to theory within SALC.

The life-course perspective within sociology is deceptively singular, as a plurality of frameworks comprise life-course sociology. In brief, these include seeking to understand how early life experiences or events influence the courses of lives over time (e.g., Elder 1999; Elder et al. 2009; Crosnoe and Elder 2004); how life-course transitions (e.g., transitions from childhood to adulthood, from adulthood to later life/“old age” or retirement) relate to individual and cultural circumstances (e.g., Settersten and Hagestad 1996a, 1996b); how macro-level social structures produce regularity (homogeneity or heterogeneity) in these life-course patterns en masse (e.g., Kohli 1986; Brückner and Mayer 2005); and how these patterns vary over time and place. Through the mid-twentieth century, as cohorts navigated social structures highly regulated and organized by age as a key criterion for role entry and exit, people within these cohorts tended to experience key life transitions (e.g., entry into the workforce, family formation, retirement) at increasingly similar ages. This has created such strong age-linked patterns in human lives that the life course is described as “institutionalized” (Kohli 1986; Kohli and Meyer 1986; Mayer and Müller 1986). Yet shifts in these macro-level structures, as well as new data, raise the question of whether deinstitutionalization of the life course is occurring (Brückner and Mayer 2005; Dannefer and Shura 2007). Some SALC scholars emphasize aging as a process; others criticize a focus on “aging” as reification of the presumption that aging is a “natural” process and prefer to identify age as an influential social construct (Dannefer 1984).

A few substantive areas within SALC include population aging; aging policy and welfare state scholarship; health, ability, and aging (including health changes across the life course, health disparities, caregiving, long-term care, structure and organization of health-care services and aging, chronic illness, end-of-life issues); work and retirement (pensions, retirement policy, later-life employment patterns); intergenerational relationships; later-life migration; cumulating dis/advantage and aging; ageism; quality of life (including ethical issues about medical care and quality of life at the end of life); and gender, race, and social class and their relationships to age. For more robust overviews of substantive, methodological, and theoretical work in SALC, see recent handbooks by Robert H. Binstock and Linda K. George (2006, 2011), Richard A. Settersten Jr. and J. L. Angel (2011), Peter Uhlenberg (2009b), and Dale Dannefer and Chris Phillipson (2010). Additional key SALC areas and findings are elaborated in the following sections.

SUMMARY OF KEY METHODS

There is high value within SALC on quantitative data and sophisticated quantitative analytical techniques, specifically advanced forms of multivariate longitudinal and/or hierarchical modeling that are used to tease out such social patterns as trajectories of age-related trends and changes over time within populations in terms of health, wealth, well-being, and so forth, as well as to tease out cohort and period effects (e.g., Alwin, Hofer, and McCammon 2006). Other methods are also

utilized in SALC, with qualitative research generally less represented than quantitative work (for a hallmark exception, see Gubrium 1997), and with participatory and community-building methodologies much less prominent within SALC (for exceptions, see Blair and Minkler 2009; Shura, Siders, and Dannefer 2010). Yet a mainstay of SALC is sophisticated and rich analysis of population-representative data sets. More robust population-representative data sets are becoming available to study processes and patterns related to age and aging, particularly longitudinal data sets (Alwin, Hofer, and McCammon 2006; Kohli 2007). Within SALC, significant portions of strongly data-driven research can be considered social-psychological in orientation, with emphases on individual-level outcomes such as individual health and well-being (Hagestad and Dannefer 2001).

WHAT CAN HUMAN RIGHTS LEARN FROM SOCIOLOGY OF AGE AND THE LIFE COURSE?

Connections between human rights sociology and scholarship within SALC that has salience to human rights remain underdeveloped. Three SALC areas that are promising for integration are explored here: age segregation, ageism, and the extent to which age is an axis of differentiation and discrimination for human rights among groups and individuals across the life course. In relation to these three major areas, population aging, globalization, and debates within SALC about age-linked vulnerability are briefly considered. We present our ideas here not as an exhaustive treatise but as targeted and thought-provoking discussions that we hope may spur further consideration.

For human rights scholarship, inequality is a major concern. A pervasive feature of modernity is the reliance on age as a major basis of social organization across education, work, and other social settings. SALC scholars have examined the social phenomena of age segregation (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2005, 2006) and ageism (Butler 2002 [1972]; Dannefer and Shura 2009; Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2005); yet there is room for clearer articulation of how these areas of research may intersect with human rights. Age segregation, or the physical and social separation of groups within society based on age, is a systematic and structural feature of “developed” societies. In these societies, norms and expectations linked to age provide an often taken-for-granted guide to “age-appropriate” behavior and social practice, which is not the case in other societies (Rogoff 2003). Based on the rapid rise in age consciousness and the social salience of age as a key meaning-laden status of individuals in the early twentieth century (Achenbaum 1978, 2009; Chudacoff 1989; Rogoff 2003), age segregation is currently a widespread form of social segregation within most major social institutions. This pattern is reinforced by pervasive cultural beliefs that place high social value on some age categories, yet denigrate others. Age during later life is a major and concentrated target of devaluation. Cultural ageism, then, refers to the differential social value and meaning attributed to individuals and groups based on age and has particular salience to the nexus of SALC scholarship and human rights. Ageism and age segregation

share a mutually reinforcing relationship in society (Dannefer and Shura 2009; Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2005). This work in SALC has laid the groundwork for potential integration with human rights scholarship: inasmuch as other forms of social segregation and culturally patterned inequalities and prejudices (e.g., racial or ethnic segregation and racism, gender segregation and sexism) are concerns of human rights, there is an opportunity to integrate these important substantive areas within SALC more explicitly with human rights.

Age segregation creates various forms of social vulnerability for many in later life (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2006; Riley and Riley 1994). Evidence of age segregation within social networks is robust, indicating a large degree of homogeneity of age within people's networks of closest ties (e.g., Uhlenberg and Gierveld 2004), particularly in nonfamily networks (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2005). Ironically, age segregation endures within a historical period in which the effects of other forms of systematic social segregation (e.g., racial segregation) have been deemed harmful and unjust (Fry 2007), despite assertions that structural opportunities for older people are increasingly mismatched with their capacities (Riley, Kahn, and Foner 1994) and evidence of benefits of age integration for young and old (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2007; Uhlenberg 2009a; Uhlenberg and Cheuk 2010). Age segregation has placed some elders in particularly vulnerable social positions, especially since many older adults face concentrated loss due to death within their age-homogenous social networks (Dannefer and Shura 2009). This amplifies the probability of social isolation in late life. Issues raised by age segregation and ageism take on special significance as older people are becoming an increasingly large proportion of many countries' populations (e.g., Uhlenberg 2009a). Human rights scholars have an opportunity to build from these SALC findings in ways that frame increased social vulnerability and isolation in later life not as natural problems related to physiological aging processes but rather as socially constructed barriers to full human rights, barriers that limit or obstruct social participation and are reified through ageist social discourse, including ageist discourse within SALC.

An irony of ageism is that, except those who die relatively young, we will all inherit the relatively denigrated status that accompanies older age unless there is a cultural shift. This statement ought to evoke concern and a sense of the importance of tying ageism to broader sociological literatures about human rights that target other "isms" and concomitant forms of social segregation (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2005). For example, praising others for how "young" they are, or for trying to "stay young" in order to avoid social devaluation, reifies and reproduces ageism: it does not question or undermine the differential value attributed to human beings, human experience, and social reality based on age. It is heuristically informative to develop sociological parallels that make visible the cultural and structural realities of ageism. For instance, is the imperative to "stay young," which is largely celebrated in today's culture, similar to asking a woman to "be manly" or an African American to be "whiter"? Age hegemony, marked by the relative devaluation of oldness and valorization of some aspects of youth, becomes visible through such exercises. Sociologists who link human rights scholarship to age may benefit from considering the ways in which ageism is similar to, or different from, racism

and sexism. The connections between dynamics of hegemony and dominance, as well as inferiority and prejudice, as they relate to age and human rights need to be further studied and elucidated.

Human rights scholarship may benefit from a deeper examination of the extent to which age is an axis of differentiation and discrimination for groups and individuals across the life course. Analyses of shared or similar age-linked social vulnerabilities in early and late life, often indicated by “dependency,” are needed within human rights scholarship. This includes the need for attention focused on the rights and responsibilities allocated to individuals or groups based on age and the implications for how this changes as individuals grow older. Some basic, starting questions to explore potential linkages between SALC and human rights include the following: Which age groups have which rights? Do any social groups have “special,” age-specific rights? Who is responsible for protecting these rights? Which stakeholders (social groups or social institutions) rally against age-specific constructions of rights (e.g., for the old, for institutionalized elders, for adults, for the young) and why? Do some rights turn on or off at specific ages? If so, why? Such questions reframe basic considerations of human rights with a specific emphasis on how age as a social construct may explicitly relate to how human rights are socially constructed. These questions also remind us of the importance of examining power differences according to age: there is a need to consider how social vulnerabilities are shared by both the young and the old in society (e.g., Hagestad 2008; Uhlenberg 2009a).

The concept of the life course can inform human rights scholarship. Rights may change, formally or informally, based on age: a person’s rights may look different from different points in his or her life course (Janoski and Gran 2002). SALC may offer conceptual insight and methodological tools to research age-based variations in rights (e.g., voting) by forcing questions of the extent to which age is used to confer and constrain various rights across the life course and why.

Finally, SALC offers strength in terms of its methodological and analytical rigor, as well as some critical theoretical advances. In these areas, SALC might challenge scholars using human rights as a perspective or conceptual framework to hone methods and measures in analyses, identify robust data sources, refine measurement, and employ diverse theoretical perspectives rather than proclaim or reify an ideological line. It is not yet clear within SALC, or not clearly communicated to or by SALC scholars, what human rights sociology entails, what explicit or implicit theoretical premises it employs, what methods it considers primary, upon what forms of data it most heavily relies, and what prominent disagreements or debates may currently exist among scholars who identify as human rights sociologists. Communicating about the tools of human rights sociology, therefore, is a surmountable challenge, as human rights orientations may be seen as too activist and not as mainstream scholarship within SALC without clear theoretical and empirical justification. SALC can challenge human rights perspectives regarding making universal claims and exporting them without nuanced understandings of social-historical contexts that shape experiences and understandings of age.

WHAT CAN SOCIOLOGY OF AGE AND THE LIFE COURSE LEARN FROM HUMAN RIGHTS?

Unlike with some other socially charged and consequential social statuses (e.g., race, gender), unless one dies relatively early, one will experience all ages, replete with more or less social value and potentially with more or fewer rights, different rights, more or less protection of rights, more or fewer responsibilities for protecting others' rights, and even special rights relevant to specific stages of the life course (Bryant and Shura 2009; Foner 1974). Because few SALC scholars are actively engaged in such a perspective, human rights sociologists may make key contributions that will inform this area. Furthermore, age is often presumed to be helpful in determining an individual's competency, a presumption that some SALC scholars heavily critique and that has relevance to human rights. It may be socially acceptable to restrict full participation in specific rights based on presumptions about age-related deficits, even if formally and legally the specific rights in question are conferred irrespective of increased age. There may be a "rising sun" in the life course of human rights, in which various legal rights are not realized until "adulthood" (usually at the arbitrary age of eighteen), and some rights may become informally restricted with greater age (Bryant and Shura 2009). For example, both minor children and adults in late life may experience formal and informal limitations placed on their participation in medical decision-making. Are there counterexamples in which the young and the old possess comparatively stronger rights, or specialized rights, when compared to other age groups? An assessment of the United States suggests that young people benefit more from social rights, such as the right to education, compared to working-age adults, who typically possess weak entitlements to public health insurance unless they can demonstrate financial hardship or enter older age (e.g., Medicare, Medicaid). The contingency and transition, then, of human rights throughout the life course are areas ripe for SALC scholarship, and this research could potentially be bolstered with tools used by human rights sociologists. Further, how potential age-related contingencies that shape the use of human rights intersect with hierarchies of race, class, gender, and health could be fruitful areas to integrate with other sociological research devoted to human rights.

SALC scholars face the challenge of not reproducing ageist assumptions in their work and not taking age segregation or its purported social value for granted in their scholarship. One distinct challenge we pose to SALC scholars is to consider seriously in their scholarship the view of elders as active individuals with continuing capacities to play valued roles within myriad social institutions and in their communities (see, e.g., Shura, Siders, and Dannefer 2010), particularly at a time in history when rapid population aging has led some to recognize that older people may be the world's only expanding natural resource (Freedman 2007). We consider it an important heuristic exercise, and one with relevance to human rights, to pit the ageist assumption as a hypothesis against the hypothesis of "elder as capable," if only to shed light on the extent to which scholars often internalize status quo ageism and age segregation as inevitable, or even desirable, social realities. Prominent

messages within mainstream media often perpetuate ageist perceptions, including references to population aging that are almost always negative or even ominous and references to later-life policies that emphasize the social burdens and costs of an aging population rather than potential social benefits. In an increasingly globalized world, one with many rapidly aging populations, SALC and human rights scholars ought to consider the extent to which cultural ageism and the concomitant positive and largely unquestioned value placed on age segregation are being exported globally from the Economic North to the Economic South. Human rights sociology may offer useful insights and tools for meeting these SALC challenges.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948 by the United Nations, emphasizes the dignity and rights of all people, which includes people of all ages. SALC scholars give little explicit attention to age as an axis of social differentiation that has real implications for rights. The extent to which beliefs about aging and elders, the lack of prominent and socially valued roles for elders, and other practices and institutions relevant to later life uphold human dignity and rights is another possible perspective through which SALC scholars may benefit from increased attention to human rights. Whenever claims about “rights” and “best interests” are made on behalf of one group by another group, and the target social group does not have a direct, leading role in identifying its own best interests (and it is not clarified how the social division between such groups is justified in the first place), there is fertile ground for analysis from both sociological and human rights perspectives. Upon sociological examination, hegemony and disenfranchisement are likely to be found. Additionally, various substantive areas in SALC are ripe for further consideration of how age explicitly relates to human rights, including end-of-life issues regarding legal and medical decision-making, rights within institutionalized care settings, age-based inequality in social opportunities, debates about later-life policy (e.g., pensions and US Social Security), and specific rights-relevant contexts of midlife experience (e.g., incarceration and disabling conditions), to name just a few avenues of investigation. The sociology of age may be well served by not reifying intergenerational equity debates (e.g., Do children’s rights threaten adults’ rights? Do elders’ rights threaten the idea of rights belonging to adults at midlife and young people?). It is the task of sociology to adopt such questions and social phenomena as subject matter for sociological analysis and to apply appropriate tools of theory, measurement, and analytic rigor in the quest for answers. Combining strengths in SALC with strengths in the sociology of human rights could produce gains in these important areas.

CONCLUSION

The UDHR goal of upholding human dignity and rights, irrespective of age, provides one potential starting point for integration of SALC and human rights scholarship. Approaches to integrated research might begin from analysis of age-segregated and age-pluralistic communities and the value attributed to age therein and, from there, explore how all constituents could be afforded greater opportunities for

social participation and positive social value. Rather than raise a flag to rally for “older adults” to become the next social group on behalf of which human rights campaigns are framed, we call sociologists’ attention to the need to clarify methods and theories that might allow myriad fruitful substantive areas within SALC to be better integrated with human rights considerations and with pursuits of upholding human dignity across the life course.

Age—a powerful social force and social fact that is coercive of individual experience and organizes social life—may often not be explicitly framed as relevant to human rights by SALC scholars, and it may be overlooked by human rights scholars as a key axis of social differentiation and discrimination. SALC offers rich methodological and theoretical orientations, substantive contributions, and scientific rigor, all of which may be useful tools for research on human rights as they relate to age. SALC may illuminate how people experience human rights over their life courses and how other age-related structures or experiences interface with rights. Finally, SALC is a hugely diverse subdiscipline and can make vast contributions to human rights in regard to policy analysis, population aging, and intergenerational relationships, to name a few. Further communication about, and clearer elaboration of, the tools of human rights research within SALC circles—from clear conceptual definitions of human rights, to elaboration of theories that organize research of human rights, to methods and data in sociology of human rights, to clarification of the respective roles of conventional research, critical research, and advocacy-based sociology within human rights sociology—will most effectively promote increased integration of perspectives. This chapter is intended to suggest thought-provoking, yet limited, substantive ways to further such integration.