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What's so critical about it? An analysis of critique within different strands of critical gerontology

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Abstract

Shortly after emerging in the 1980s, critical gerontology became a recognised part of mainstream gerontology. Under the umbrella of 'critical gerontology' sits a number of orientations that draw attention to how ageing is socially located, while foregrounding the importance of values in ageing research. Nevertheless, as critical gerontology is not a clearly defined field or orientation, inconsistencies in the use of 'critique' among critical gerontologists has been fermenting internal tensions. In this paper we draw on recent debates on critique as a form of discourse that aims to criticise a deficient social order with the aim of helping to bring about a good society, to identify four discourses of critique. These include the discourses of immanent critique and of transcendent critique, critique that focuses on tensions between these two, and critique that builds on constructive combinations of immanence and transcendence. We add to these an extra level of depth by distinguishing how critical discourse is applied in each case. We use this framework to identify the discourses of critique deployed in variants of critical gerontology. Here, we distinguish political economic, lifecourse, humanistic and culturalist approaches within critical gerontology and assess how each of these applies a discourse of critique. We find that these gerontological perspectives draw on a variety of discourses of critique and make use of varying degrees of engagement with critical discourse. The paper concludes by discussing how critical gerontology may develop as a reflective forum commenting on and integrating insights offered by its own varieties of critique and connecting these with macro-social analyses.

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Introduction

Contemporary critical gerontology emerged in the 1980s as key gerontologists began to draw on critical theory in their work. This move was stimulated in part by a recognition of how the economic recession and welfare retrenchment of the 1980s affected the lives of older people (Bernard and Scharf, 2007), and in part as a reaction to a sense that the increasing availability of extensive data sets on older populations was leading to a dominance of empiricist and positivist thinking in gerontology (Hendricks and Achenbaum, 1999, Bengtson, Rice and Johnson, 1999). Consequently, researchers with a background in critical theory identified a series of problems in social gerontology¹. Their chief concern was that social gerontology had paid insufficient attention to theory, which “meant that research questions have often been informed by an uncritical reliance on images and assumptions about ageing drawn from popular culture or from ... outdated [social theoretic and behavioural discourses]” (Baars et al., 2006: 1, 2). Added to this were concerns that social gerontology had accepted poverty as an inevitable part of old age (Phillipson and Walker, 1987: 1) and was too uncritical of institutional ageism (1987: 12).

As critical gerontology set out to respond to the deficiencies of social gerontology and provide a more critical framework, this meant that the main orientations structuring critical gerontology were developed and shaped as a response to these problems. For example, critical gerontologists criticise social gerontology for emphasising micro experiences and ‘personological’ explanations to the neglect of macro or sociological explanations (Estes et al., 2003, Dannefer and Kelley-Moore, 2009); social gerontology has failed to keep pace with social change that has transformed the meaning of race, class, ethnicity, gender and intergenerational conflict and their impact on the experiences of older people, and tended to impose pre-theoretic value commitments that serve to oppress older people (Holstein and Minkler, 2007, Estes, 2001); finally, social gerontology tends to reproduce stereotypes of older people which obscures the differences between older age groups (Walker, 1981, Keating and Phillips, 2008). Added to these critiques is a sense of the damage provoked by the criticisms of demographic change that cast older people as a burden on society (Bernard and Scharf, 2007). It was against this background that critical gerontology developed its own frameworks (Wellin, 2018). Critical gerontology has been characterised in terms of neglected issues and perspectives (Baars, 1991: 220), as ranges of perspectives focusing either on structural or humanistic aspects of ageing (Minkler, 1996, Bengtson, Putney and Johnson, 2005: 15), as a way of thinking (Keating and Phillips, 2008) or a commitment to ‘values’ (Phillipson and Walker, 1987: 12).

Despite the difficulties of defining critical gerontology, it has developed into an established perspective within gerontology, where it evolves by identifying its own shortcomings and developing responses (Bernard and Scharf, 2007, Keating and Phillips, 2008, Gilleard and Higgs, 2000). However, a telling point was raised by Dannefer et al (2008) who suggest that critical gerontology has failed to articulate a positive vision of the social good for older people. Notwithstanding the growing body of work that aims to develop critiques of policy and practice that focus on the promotion of ‘ageing well’ and positive approaches to the lived experience of later life (Foster and Walker 2015), the point remains that critical gerontology has yet to settle on ideas of the good that might steer critique and work to bring about a better society for older people. As Dannefer et al (2008) rightly point out, critique cannot confine itself to using negative and critical language; the objective of critique has to include opening our eyes to new and potentially better ways of living in ageing societies.

¹ Here we take social gerontology to refer to the broadly descriptive mainstream social theories of ageing such as disengagement theory, age stratification theory and activity theory

Questions about the role of critique in critical gerontology came to the fore in a special issue in the *Journal of Aging Studies* and a symposium of responses published the following year in *Ageing and Society*. While asking 'What is critical about critical gerontology?', the editor of the special issue both noted that critical gerontology is informed by various critical theories, and is animated by a critical perspective (Ray, 2008: 97). The term 'critical' in this special issue is used to refer to membership of a community of critical scholars, a scepticism towards medical/empirical or descriptive approaches to ageing, taking an interest in power, advocating social change, challenging discrimination, and engaging with a politicised older population. However, the idea that a critical gerontologist is a member of a community was questioned by Marshall (2009) who points out how many contributions to gerontological debate have little critical import, and is scathing of the moral connotations implied by the invitation to join this club (2009: 652). For Higgs (2009), critical gerontology suffers from the use of outdated critical theories or from incorporating critical theories in ways that sever links with ongoing debates about the nature of critique. This is similar to a point raised by Dannefer's (2006) who characterised the relationship between critical theory and critical gerontology as one of 'reciprocal co-optation'. Dannefer describes co-optation as where:

an idea or principle is accepted, but is reframed to fit within the assumptions of one or more pre-existing paradigms. Therefore, its power is diluted at the same time that it is heralded as a new contribution (Dannefer, 2006: 103).

The suggestion that critical gerontology is neither properly critical nor empirically gerontological should raise more worries than it has. The danger is that cross disciplinary fertilisation may lead to the formation of knowledge that is not properly incorporated into any particular discourse. Critical gerontology shares this agnosticism towards critique with Sociology, where critique has faded out of sociological theory to become the preserve of social theory (Delanty, 2011). But this just underlines the complexities in amalgamating critique to any other discipline, and the need for clarity where disciplines purport to take on a critical attitude.

The objective of this paper is to explore the role of *critique* in critical gerontology, and to ask in what way is critical gerontology 'critical'. Critique has taken on many forms, from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* to Latour's assertion that critique has run out of steam (Latour 2004). Most tellingly, a number of scholars have questioned the conceptualisation of critique as a basis for enlightenment (Sonderegger and de Boer 2004). These criticisms have force but, as Latour recognises, are open to abuse and self-contradiction. In this paper, critique is conceptualised as a systematic approach to discourse that aims, with awareness of its own fallibility, to distinguish emancipatory forms of knowledge and considers claims to 'criticality' to be as open to critique as any other claim. Taking a critical stance on something may mean finding fault either from an external viewpoint, by comparing an idea or claim with relevant others; or internally by examining the consistency or coherence of a claims logical structure. *Critique* is focused on achieving beneficial social change. It aims to achieve this by discussing and describing new or neglected ideas of the good society. These are ideas that critique claims illuminate deficiencies in, and misapprehensions fostered by, the existing (deficient) social order (Cooke, 2006: 9, 10). Critique, therefore, is more than being critical. It means mobilising a critical discourse using a narrative that at the same time exposes the need for change and can motivate social actors to try to bring about this change.

In the following we begin by unpacking what we consider the discursive strands within critical gerontology before outlining four discourses of critique as identified by Cooke (2006) and Strydom (2011). We further open up these discourses by distinguishing the depth to which a discourse may draw on critique. This provides a nuanced discourse analytical frame with which to explore the operationalisation of critique. We then apply this frame to four variants of critical gerontology. We

conclude by discussing how this framework provides critical gerontology with a way to identify the different critical orientations of its own discourses. Our aim is to further debate by enabling critical gerontology to release its own critical potential.

The Critical Gerontological literature

Which theories come under the umbrella of critical gerontology? Clearly, the political economic perspective is the cornerstone of critical gerontology (Minkler, 1996, Baars et al., 2006: 2) but there is less consensus on other views. To some extent, no other 'perspective' can be exclusively linked with critical gerontology; rather, critical gerontology may refer to analyses that are sensitive to power, ideology, inequalities of race, class, gender and sexuality, and the idea that ageing is socially constructed (Baars et al., 2006: 5-7). Nevertheless, in this paper we focus on four sources of critical gerontological perspectives. These include political economy, lifecourse theory, and culturalist and humanist perspectives as these have been linked with critical gerontology by at least some commentators (see Marshall and Bengtson, 2011). However, we recognise that many writers do not include all of these, and many contributors to these perspectives may not see themselves as 'critical' gerontologists.

The political economy of ageing integrates a variety of theories to produce an overall critical approach to ageing research. This perspective follows Marx's analysis of the recursive effect of the economy on social class structures in society and Weber's analysis of the importance of social status and political power. As we will see below, this perspective is easily reconciled as a form of critical gerontology because it provides compelling analyses of the arrangements and ideas that stabilise the existing society, and criticises these arrangements in light of an analysis of how a different (more socialist or collectivist) social order might better support the needs of older people.

The idea of the 'lifecourse' provides gerontology with both a concept and a theoretical perspective. As a concept, the 'lifecourse' sees ageing:

as a sequence of age-linked transitions that are embedded in social institutions and history. As a theoretical orientation, the lifecourse perspective sensitizes researchers to the fundamental importance of historical conditions and change for understanding individual development and family life. (Bengtson et al., 2005: 493)

The lifecourse perspective emphasises interconnections between the developmental nature of ageing, the interrelated social, psychological and biological nature of these changes, and the effects of society and culture on these processes. This perspective locates the individual lifecourse in historical context, which enables researchers to examine the connections between cohort, culture and ageing. This also provides the lifecourse perspective with its critical dimension. Since it locates the individual life course in historical context, the lifecourse perspective lets researchers compare ideas and practices used by one cohort with those of others, and can thereby reveal practices and cultures that support or thwart the realisation of the good for any particular cohort.

The culturalist perspective involved taking up advances in cultural studies, and applying these in the context of ageing. Gilleard and Higgs (2000, 2006) take up a culturalist approach by combining a weak form of postmodernism, sensitive to communication and culture, with a sociological approach to social structure. Using these tools, Gilleard and Higgs (2000: 2) separate ageing from old age recognising that ageing refers to a social and cultural process which is nevertheless structurally organised by the state. The culturalist perspective looks into questions of identity, governmentality, and how "the cultural space in which people live is broader, more complex, more contradictory and

in many ways richer than ever before" (2000: 7). This perspective enables researchers to explore the centrality of ageing to the cultural makeup of modern societies (Twigg and Martin, 2014).

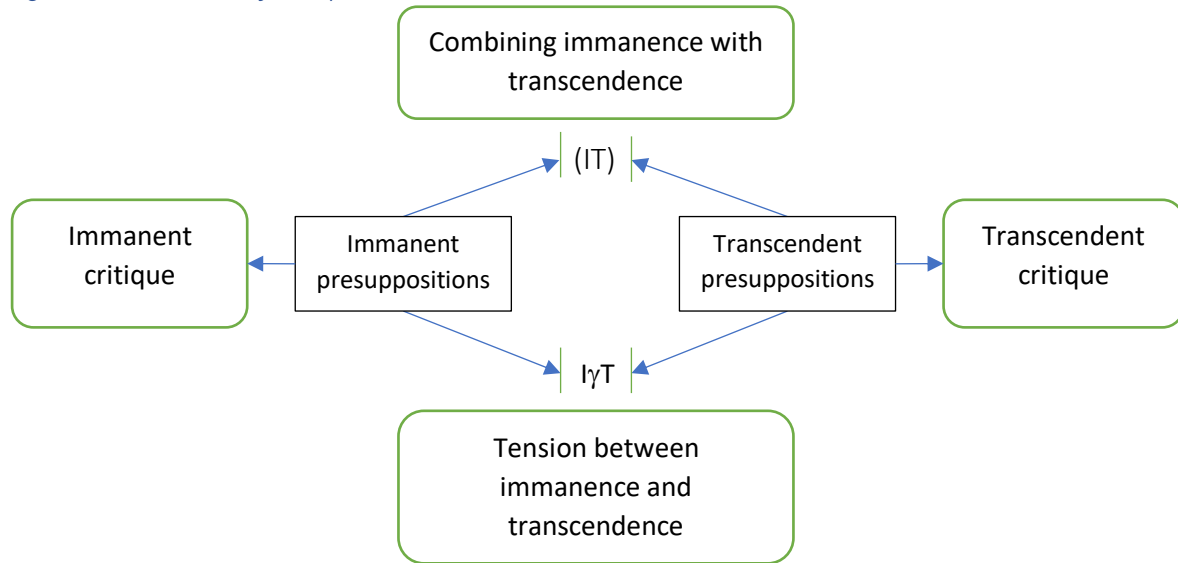
Finally, the fourth variant of critical gerontology we examine can, following Minkler (1996), be categorised under the general heading 'humanist' as it addresses issues of meaning in the lives of older people. In this sense, humanism spans constructionism and hermeneutics and is well developed in feminist and intersectionalist analyses. For Gubrium and Holstein (1999: 288) constructionism is about understanding and examining "experience from the subject's point of view", and they use this framework to demonstrate the plurality of narratives on ageing. This humanistic orientation focuses on meaning "in the lives of older people. It asks us to explore 'what makes a good life in old age, and how a society can support multiple alternative visions of a good old age' (Holstein, 1995)" (Minkler, 1996). We recognise there are overlaps and tensions between these perspectives and some authors would not view themselves as members of the critical gerontology camp but these four broad overviews act as a heuristic device for our analysis

Evaluating critique in critical gerontology

Critical discourse proceeds from the idea that "certain kinds of social arrangements may prevent human beings from realizing their potentials as human beings" (Cooke, 2006: 1). Two of the most interesting recent contributions on critique have been made by Cooke (2006) and Strydom (2011). Both identify varieties of critique by distinguishing critical discourses that are bound to contexts from forms that transcend contexts. Both Strydom (2011) and Cooke (2006) distinguish four variants of critical discourse. Strydom (2011) offers the more theoretically robust conception of critique, which he presents in relation to social theory whereas Cooke (2006) presents this discourse within a political philosophical register. Despite arriving at these in different ways, the four discourses identified by Strydom (2011) and Cooke (2006) share significant overlaps allowing us to draw on both.

Strydom (2011: 97, 98) develops a concept of critique based on a distinction between everyday and immanent presuppositions, and ideal pragmatic or regulative presuppositions. On the one hand, we all use presuppositions that we draw from the cultures we share with people who have similar backgrounds, cultures, outlooks or experiences. These cultures contain particular, sometimes unique, ideas or practices that may be very difficult for people from different cultures or backgrounds to understand. A good example may be the unique experience of community, in which the specific history and practice of 'our' community gives rise to an identity that is simultaneously deeply felt and incomprehensible in its particularity to outsiders. On the other hand, there are certain presuppositions that people sometimes have to accept, that contain an idealised dimension which incorporates rules or ideas that transcend contexts. A radical example is identified by Apel (1987) who argues that nobody can reasonably make an argument about anything without, at the very least, presuming that they exist and that they live in a real world. This makes it impossible to argue as Descartes does that 'I think therefore I am' since to even use language to formulate this statement is to accept that there is a community of people with whom one shares a language about a real world (or to commit a performative self-contradiction). Equally, any appeal to an idea like justice, solidarity or freedom involves calling on a concept in view of its capacity to transverse contexts.

Figure 1: Discourses of critique



Key: () is a mathematical symbol that denotes a combination of enclosed factors. γ is the Greek letter Gamma and is used in physics to denote shear strain or surface tension

Strydom draws his distinction into a conceptual framework by locating discourses of critique in relation to the status of presuppositions. Here, we draw on Strydom (2011: 167) and Cooke (2006: 14-15) to map out discourses of critique (see figure 1). For both Strydom (2011) and Cooke (2006), a discourse of critique draws either on ‘immanent’ or culturally bound presuppositions or on idealised or ‘transcendent’ presuppositions. These presuppositions can be drawn into discourses of critique in different ways. First, immanent critique draws heavily on immanent presuppositions emphasising the importance of a shared background. Second, transcendent critique may draw on transcendent presuppositions and focuses on the validity and usefulness of ideas taken from beyond or outside of society. Alongside these, two other discourses of critique can be identified that draw immanent and transcendent presuppositions together in some way. Hence, third, a discourse of critique may seek to combine immanent together with transcendent presuppositions. This type of discourse focuses on the shared or reflected elements of immanent and transcendent presuppositions, and is symbolised using mathematical notation for a combinations of factors “()” in the diagram above. Fourth, a discourse of critique may seek to highlight the disjunctures between immanent and transcendent presuppositions. This discourse focuses on conflicts, contradictions and tensions existing between actual and idealised presuppositions. In the above diagram, we symbolise this connection using the Greek letter for Gamma, “ γ ”, as this is used to symbolise shear stress or strain in mechanics.

Immanent critique

Strydom (2011) and Cooke (2006) both identify a discourse of critique that focuses on the presuppositions shared by people in a particular cultural milieu. This discourse focuses on the cultural models, social norms, and aspirations that are shared by a group or society and develops critiques from a perspective internal to this culture. Thus, Cooke (2006: 14) draws a distinction between current states of affairs, and “how things would be, if only we were able to realise our own deepest hopes and aspirations” (2006: 15). Thus, this discourse identifies the ideas that would shape the collective existence of a group who could release their own potential, and uses these ideas to

criticise their actual practice(s). Given this internal viewpoint, immanent critique takes a relativist position on the evaluation of progress, denying that a view from outside of a particular socio-cultural milieu can claim to offer a valid critique or assessment of the claims and aspirations of the culture.

In his analysis, Strydom (2011: 169-175) underlines the variability and creativity of immanent critique through an analysis of the works of Walzer, Rorty and Boltanski. For Strydom, Walzer (1987) develops a form of interpretivist critique, where the critic aims to reinterpret received cultural traditions in order to transform the social, whereas Rorty (1989) develops a very different form of critique better understood in terms of Heideggerian world-disclosure; or generating a new vocabulary or metaphor that reveals new ways of dealing with existing social problems. The critical sociology of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) operates in a different way again, since it postulates a symmetry in the descriptive and evaluative power of scientific discourse and popular or everyday discourse, critically exploring how people mediate immanent and transcendent dimensions in everyday situations in those spaces where they are called on to explain themselves. For Strydom (2011), this represents an example of immanent critique because critique is rooted in the cultural or social context of those involved.

Transcendent critique

In a sense, diametrically opposed to immanent critique is a commitment to ideas that transcend contexts. For Cooke (2006: 15), this discourse “appeals to a transcendent, final authority”. Strydom (2011) associates Rawls with transcendental critique since his constructivist framework is based on “a consensual procedure of justification, [which] involves the construction of normative principles *beyond* society which allow a criticism of social institutions” (2011: 168, emphasis added). Cooke labels this an *authoritarian* discourse to emphasise how it relies on constructions of ideas of how things should be “as determined by some transcendent power or idea whose authority is unquestionable” (Cooke, 2006: 14), and to bring out the concept of the good operative in this discourse. Strydom’s is a weaker interpretation which emphasises the externalist and objectivistic dimensions of this discourse. In any case, those drawing on this discourse contrast existing norms with the norms that would be authorised by a transcendent authority. The transcendent authority legitimating critique may be based on a rational logical procedure, or a transcendent power. Critique either evaluates norms or practices using independent or external criteria (i.e., the rational evaluation of the law), or sets out the norms and arrangements that a society would exhibit if it incorporated transcendent ideas (i.e., those of the bible, natural law etc.), and identifies the gap between these norms and arrangements and actually existing norms.

Between the immanent and transcendent discourses of critique there lie two main variations in how these discourses may be brought together. On the one hand, a critic may seek to combine immanent with transcendent concerns. On the other, a critic may explore the tensions or conflicts that obtain between immanence and transcendence.

Combining immanence with transcendence

The idea that it might be possible to combine immanent and transcendent forms of critique was initially developed by Habermas (1979) as reconstructive critique, and focuses on identifying ideas or norms that are acceptable beyond particular contexts. Using this discourse of critique, the critic draws attention to ideas of the good that:

are not merely expressions of our deepest hopes and aspirations (although they are that too); they represent hopes and aspirations that everyone, everywhere should have if they are to be able to fulfill [sic] their potentials as human beings. (Cooke, 2006: 15)

Cooke labels this the 'context transcending position', while Strydom calls it 'immanent transcendence'. As Cooke points out, this discourse focuses on identifying concepts, norms or ideas that communicate with concepts or norms held by people everywhere. It assumes that there are underlying presuppositions that are shared by everyone and are given shape and direction by cultures and ideas that transcend context. Immanent transcendent critique focused on uncovering transcendent structures within immanent practices. Habermas (1984, 1987) explored this by examining the connection between practices of argumentation that arise out of linguistic communication, and thereby the interconnections between transcendence and immanence. The main idea is that within everyday communication there lies a potential for emancipation that comes out in efforts to reach an understanding. More generally, context transcending critique seeks to clarify and illuminate the positions of participants engaged in difficult social struggles. In this discourse the critic sees it as their role to foster communication and dialogue among participants, to identify and remove blockages to communication, and to deepen their appreciation of each other's situation so that they can develop a discursively achieved consensus. Essentially, the role of the critic is to enable a broadening and deepening of communication by, for instance, advocating on behalf of excluded groups, facilitating dialogue where necessary, or critiquing in order to deepen or expand, an existing public discourse.

Between immanence and transcendence

The final discourse of critique identifies the tensions or conflicts between immanent experience and transcendent ideas:

Changes in perceptions of needs and interests are deemed changes for the better because they bring us closer to how things should be as determined by certain (linguistically mediated) social conventions, practices, and codes of behavior. (Cooke, 2006: 14)

Here, a difference is drawn between projections of the good defined by convention and actual practice. The essential point is that a discourse encapsulating either a cognitive or normative projection of the good society is used to evaluate and critique groups, the wider population or to justify inculcating ideas in others. This implies exploring the conflicts that emerge when an idea or norm held by groups within society are upheld as shared across society, and pushed on others including those with no connection with this discourse.

Developing this discourse in relation to social theory, Strydom (2011) labels this as explanatory critique, which he associated with Foucault, Bourdieu and critical realism. These are critiques that emphasise the importance of ideas in shaping social life. Foucault's genealogical critique "aims to show the process by which something is constructed [through relations of power] as opposed to being natural or taken for granted" (Delanty, 2011: 81). This involves revealing how the subject's positioning in social locations creates the conditions for the possibility of the subject's own self-understanding; revealing the role of discourse in applying and organising the social world; and critically examining the role of discourse in governmentality, or as a form of power that disperses power away from state and institutional actors. Hence, genealogical critique seeks to provide destabilising accounts of the social world to stimulate self-transformation (Strydom, 2011: 187). For Bourdieu, people are situated in the social world by their adoption and assimilation of the cultures of this world in their habitus, which again structures and is structured by the dispositions and perspectives of the actor. Critique is aimed at unveiling the power of the prevailing discourse and how it shapes habitus (Strydom, 2011: 178). Critical realist social science emphasises the importance of ontology in attending to the manifestation of conflicts, and enquires into the actual things and events bringing about these conflicts and their underlying generative mechanisms. This perspective

allows critical realism to provide a critique that “demonstrates the mechanisms that make consequences possible” (Delanty, 2011: 77) and to provide an explanation based critique of ideology (Strydom, 2011: 192). Overall, in this discourse, culture and discourse are understood as exerting power over the social, and critique is aimed at revealing how culture limits or structures action, by structuring and limiting the autonomy of the subject. The role of the critic is to unveil the power of hegemony and of discourse, or to explain the structures motivating the acceptance of ideology, with the objective of disrupting or destabilising the social world, enabling social change.

Discourses of critique

The four discourses outlined above may be further sub-divided in terms of their application. We identify three layers in the use of a critical discourse. First, a critical discourse may be developed and refined in connection with a specialised theoretical discourse; second, a critical discourse may draw ideas or analytic schemes from specialised critical discourse and use these in relation to empirical work (see Danafer, 2009); third, a researcher may draw inspiration from, and identify with, a critical tradition in developing their work. Combining the description of critical discourse with this observation that authors may use critical discourse in different ways, leads to the discourse analytic framework set out in Figure 2 below. This framework separates the type of critical discourse into how this discourse is adhered to in an analysis. A strong adherence to critical discourse is one that makes systematic use of, or reflects on the nature of, a critical discourse. One would expect that this kind of critical work would make at least passing reference to key figures in the relevant critical tradition. A weak critical discourse may take up ideas developed in the relevant critical canon, and apply (or co-opt) these for empirical or analytical purposes. We take a critical perspective as an application of a critical frame commensurate with a mode of critique.

Figure 2: Discourses of critique

Form of critique	Status of critique		
	Strong critical discourse	Weak critical discourse	Critical perspective
Immanent	Walzer Rorty	Hermeneutics Interpretivism	Relativistic Interpretivist, disclosive, revelatory
Transcendent	Luhmann Rawls	Systems Principles	Evaluative Impartial
Combining immanence with transcendence “(IT)”	Habermas Apel	Communication/ Discourse	Reconstructive Advocative
Tension between immanence and transcendence “IYT”	Foucault Bourdieu Bhaskar	Discourse/ Power	Deconstructive Unsettling

Walzer and Rorty represent key authors within *immanent* critique. These authors developed forms of hermeneutics and interpretivism as frameworks that may be used to uncover or reveal norms and meanings shared by a particular social group. A variety of adjectives may be used to describe this discourse as a critical perspective. Central to this perspective is the importance of the value associated with a rich and extensive cultural tradition. Thus alongside relativistic and interpretivist, as a critical perspective, immanent critique is can also be described as disclosive or revelatory.

Second, social theory has witnessed a pragmatism of *transcendent* critique so that it is no longer intimately tied with the view of a divine or transcendent being. Rawls (1971) and Luhmann (1995) may be noted as the developers of particularly interesting versions of transcendent critique. A weak use of this mode of critique takes ideas, observations or procedures that have little direct bearing on social experience, and uses these to inform analysis. As a critical perspective, this mode of critique is characteristically impartial, providing observation based evaluations. Third, forms of critique that explore the tension *between* immanence and transcendence have been developed by such notable figures as Foucault (1984), Bourdieu (1991) and Bhaskar (1978). Co-opting these modes of critique may (but are by no means confined to) allow the exploration of the role of discourse and power in stabilising unequal social relations. As a critical perspective, this discourse focuses on deconstructing accepted discourses, unsettling or irritating social conventions. Fourth, efforts to *combine* immanence with transcendences are intimately lined with the critical theories of Habermas and Apel. While a systematic application of this mode of critique may involve a close examination of their work, weaker modalities may focus on the role of communication and discourse in the construction of knowledge in society. Finally, the effort to combine immanence with transcendence is commensurate with a critical attitude that focuses on reconstructing the elements of everyday cultural experience that link up with broader ideas or principles organising society and in turn shape particular experience. A perspective that focuses on reconstructing these connections is also interested in advocating on behalf of groups and experiences neglected or overlooked in policies, or in extending and deepening a discourse to ensure all relevant voices are included in deliberations.

Obviously, in practice, researchers may draw on two or more critical discourses. In the following we use this conceptual map of discourses of critique to analyse the way in which critique is used in critical gerontology. To avoid confusion, we will use a shorthand when discussing the two types of immanent/transcendent critiques. We will use “(IT) critique” when discussing the combined immanent/transcendent critique, and the shorthand “I/T critique” in relation to the tension and disjuncture filled immanent/transcendent critique.

Critique in critical gerontology

Political economy

Originally introduced in the 1980s as a critique of the role of the state and market in constructing old age dependency (Phillipson, 1982, Walker, 1981, Townsend, 1981), political economy moved on to critique pessimistic or apocalyptic constructions of ageing (Estes and associates, 2001, Phillipson, 1998) and, more recently, to criticise the globalised political economy of ageing (Walker, 2005). The critical orientation of political economy has meant it has sought to exercise a “value-committed approach to social gerontology – a commitment not just to understand the social construction of ageing but to change it” (Phillipson and Walker, 1987: 12, see also Estes and associates, 2001: 31). This implies a commitment to changing the constructions that foster injustices and inequalities.

The political economy perspective was initially developed in critical gerontology as a way of demonstrating how older people were positioned by social policy. The approach sought to explain how policies situated older people, and how this positioning naturalised expectations of what it was to be older in society. This commitment led proponents to focus on tensions between immanent and transcendent elements of ageing. That is to say, dependency critique explored the experience of older people in light of social policies and in relation to policy aspirations, thereby stimulating an unsettling of the transcendent ideas structuring these experiences. Phillipson (1982) used this approach to examine the discourse of capitalist development and how this discourse situated older people. Walker (1981) set his sights on the neglect of the issue of poverty in gerontological research, and the use of uncritical (or ‘acquiescent’ (Townsend, 1981: 6)) functionalist theories of ageing. Like

Phillipson, Walker drew distinctions within the older age groups and between older and younger people to demonstrate the differential impact of policy. Townsend (1981) provided contextual detail through an analysis of how political economy produced dependency in residential care. These critiques drew their critical punch from deconstruction, operating by comparing and contrasting the claims of policy with the experiences of older people who were living within the policy environment. Thus, for example, Townsend (1981) refers to the “restrictions” on the “lifechances” of older people (1981: 6), and the age inappropriate “enforcement” of the “willingness” to work (through workhouses) (1981: 8); while Walker (1981: 74) discusses how “elderly people are treated as a distinct homogeneous group who have [...] adjusted to the ageing process”. The implication is that older people should be given the same lifechances as the rest of the population, and should not be negatively positioned by a cultural-institutional discourse.

In later years, the political economic critique shifted to the role of the state in shaping the lives of older people and the impact of inequality on later life (Phillipson, 2005: 503, 504). Critiques of the role of the state in structuring the place of older people developed earlier Marxist critiques (Phillipson, 1982) into more systematic political economic frameworks (Estes and associates, 2001). The Estes model of political economy of ageing is a multi-level analytical framework designed to examine political, social and economic conflicts shaping the lives of older people. This framework draws its critical capacities from four theoretical areas – conflict, critical, feminist and cultural theories (2001: 34-39) which are deployed within a theory of political economy that theorises connections between capitalism, the state and the sex/gender system (Estes and associates, 2001: 1, 2). Estes (and associates, 2001) combine analyses of social processes shaping the lives of older people with analyses of the discursive formations taking shape around these processes, to explore crisis tendencies in the state. The Estes model is clearly an attempt to develop a more communications theoretic framework which uses a combined immanent and transcendent mode of critique. The difficulty Estes comes up against is that this framework relies on the theorist being able to describe the dimensions of observable power struggles in detail and then contrast these with descriptions of experiences. For instance, Estes (2009) analyses the effect of a new ideology (what she calls “[a] frame of *apocalyptic deficits*” (2009: 309)) on the state provided pensions for older people in the US. Using her multi-dimensional framework, Estes discusses how the deployment of this frame served to undermine the legitimacy of the welfare state, even going so far as exploiting the legitimacy problems inherent to the welfare state. While Estes’ framework highlights the effects of an emergent ideology on state institutions, it reduces the experiences of older people to statistical descriptors, thereby limiting critique to the destabilisation of existing narratives. So, despite the use of a communications theory, the reliance on Habermas in his Marxist phase together with a delimited analysis of public communication and discourse leaves Estes using IyT critique.

Moves to an examination of political economy in a globalised environment and critiques challenging pessimistic views of ageing continue to draw on this externalist tension focused critique. But at this level, critique becomes unstable. The globalisation of ageing focuses on a shift “from the mass institutions which defined the first phase of ageing, to the more individualised structures [...] which increasingly inform the second” (Phillipson, 2005: 506). While focusing on how cultures and institutions structuring the lives of older people are transformed in their global environment, the globalisation of ageing incorporates concepts aimed at emphasising the interests and autonomy of older people and the resources of global discourses. Thus, here again, political economy draws on the IyT discourse of critique.

Other critical frames that fall within a broadly political economic perspective include variants of feminist analyses. Feminist gerontological critique originally emerged with the effort to draw

attention of the role of women in the economy, and the unpaid work carried out by older women (Calasanti, 1986), and the connection between the weak position of women in the labour market with the post-retirement experiences of women (Estes and associates, 2001, Bury, 1995). More recent research has highlighted the ways in which gender theory has been blind to older women's experiences (Krekula 2007), and has theorised the "intersections" of relations of gender inequality with those of age (Calasanti 2010). Early feminist contributions to critical gerontology led to an expansion of the political economic perspective to take account of the unequal positions of women and ethnic minorities in the labour market, and how this shaped their experience of retirement. Among the directions in which feminist gerontology developed is as a political economy. Central to these is the analysis of the social, political and economic location of care (Sevenhuijsen, 1998 : 72). The feminist ethics of care developed out of feminist critiques of dominant philosophical traditions that constructed care in relation to moral principles emphasising generality and impartiality. In contrast, the ethics of care situated care in an interdependent, relational ontology, where individuality is understood as formed in and through relations with others (Sevenhuijsen, 1998, 2000, Tronto, 1993). The ethics of care is as much a political as a philosophical project. Proponents of the feminist ethics of care contend that the dominant care ideology undervalues care, and seek ways of recasting the care discourse:

In the ethics of care, the central moral issue is not 'what am I obliged to do, in general terms?' but 'how should I deal with dependency and responsibility?' The political corollary of this is government policy which creates necessary conditions rather than imposing obligations. (Sevenhuijsen, 1998: 111)

The ethics of care, therefore, are about situated, bounded and responsible relationships, rather than formal and abstract rules guiding action (Sevenhuijsen, 1998: 108). In gerontology, this perspective provides frameworks with which to assess the social and institutional conditions enabling people to live well together (Barnes, 2012: 5). As a form of critique, the feminist ethics of care again drew on a weak form of the IyT discourse as it seeks to deconstruct and destabilise discursive settlements using new ideas, pressing for a rethink of the location of care in society.

A concern with the weak form of critical discourse is that insights produced by taking ideas from critical theories together with empirical analysis may not become fully incorporated into any one discourse. While political economy has been eclectic in its use of critical theory, it has formed into a distinct discourse so that new ideas, perspectives and analyses can be incorporated into a political economy discourse. Thus, Estes et al. (2001) use critical theory to form an analytic political economy perspective, and do not develop an avowedly critical theory.

Culturalist

The culturalist view on ageing is forthright in developing a tension infused critique of ageing. Drawing principally on Foucault's genealogical critique, the culturalist perspective de-naturalises taken for granted assumptions about ageing and later life by demonstrating how age related cultures have developed around particular subjectivities that are themselves social constructions (Katz, 2009). This perspective achieves this by identifying and tracking the development of discourses around ageing, and examining how these discourses made conceptions of the self-possible. Emerging as a critique of political economy, the culturalist critique argued that political economy positioned older people in relation to political and policy discourses, but neglected the agential capacities of people who are older (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000). This perspective emphasised the capacities of older people to refashion later life (particularly the 'third age') to suit their interests, and how changes in consumption, lifestyle, and identity introduced discursive formations

that situate older people in new ways and with new tool kits with which to live their lives (Twigg and Martin, 2014). These cultures generate the conditions for the possibility of new subjectivities for older people, altering their capacities as agents, which in turn effects wider cultural and societal formations (see Gilleard and Higgs, 2000, 2006, Jones et al., 2008, Formosa and Higgs, 2013).

As a critical enterprise, the culturalist approach differs from political economy insofar as it is addressing conflicts and tensions between immanent experiences and transcendent ideas. Exploring the interaction between immanence and transcendence, Gilleard and Higgs (2006) show how the material circumstances of the older population enable older people to become more engaged in society and culture. Unpacking how the meaning of retirement is now also bound up with practices of consumption, Gilleard and Higgs (2006: 17, 18) focus on the transcendent categories of class, cohort and community as the main context transcending categories that contextualise later life. They then explore the tensions that emerge as the diversity of the older population challenge and transform transcendent categories. Culturalist critical gerontology therefore uses the strong variant of IyT critique insofar as culturalist critical gerontology uses frames and schemas developed by Foucault and Bourdieu to critically examine the interplay between immanent and transcendent concepts (Katz, 2009: 97-98).

Lifecourse

The lifecourse perspective has not set out to develop an explicit critique of ageing, but nonetheless has developed a form of critique that chimes with the combined immanent transcendent approach. Dannefer and Uhlenberg (1999) describe how the lifecourse perspective arose out of a culturally sensitive analysis of the experiences of age cohorts over time. In essence, this perspective provided a cultural corrective to the naturalistic tendencies of cohort analysis (1999: 311, 312). As a variant of critical gerontology, the lifecourse perspective seeks to denaturalise the cultural and structural dimensions of ageing (Bengtson, Elder and Putney, 2005: 500). Critique here focuses on the processes and events that may be rooted in evolutionary, biological, or individual life-span time, and illuminates how these impact ageing. The objective of critique is, then, to specify the cultural dimension that gives rise to the processes and events, denaturalising these dimensions, and making them amenable to manipulation and reconfiguration.

Unlike the Habermasian variant of reconstructive critique identified above, the lifecourse perspective is not interested in attempts to clarify normative grounds for critique. Instead, its focus is much like the cognitive sociologies of Eder (2007) or Strydom, that is, the shared (cognitive) preunderstandings that enable humans to co-ordinate action. The lifecourse perspective is agnostic about the ethical commitments of subjects, and is only interested in how the events and experiences that make up a lifehistory influences outcomes. This perspective proceeds by gathering data on the experiences, positions and attitudes of people at various points over the course of their lives, and connecting these with broader social and cultural processes in order to identify how aspects of life events, cultural, social or economic processes, policy orientations, or indeed, biological processes interact. Its critiques focus on the particular configurations of social and cultural practice and policy management of life events that shape people's experiences of ageing. For instance, lifecourse epidemiology examines the link between health over the lifehistory and the accumulation of risks to the health of older people. This literature demonstrates that the onset, duration and magnitude of exposure to risk effects, emphasising the extent to which different combinations of adversities may culminate to increase the risk of health effects in later life (Ferraro, 2011).

Critique is highlighting the practices linked with negative outcomes, so that these practices become candidates for management and change. This perspective is simultaneously sensitive to the historical

and structural circumstances in which the individual lives (the contextual or immanent dimension), and identifies, with increasing precision, the ways in which historical and contextual factors interact with the social structural or cultural dimension (Dannefer and Kelley-Moore, 2009). Relevant contextual factors in an individual's lives that interact with the transcendent dimension are identified primarily through the development of exhaustive and robust datasets. Interestingly, the conception of the good guiding lifecourse critique is not linked with some reflective and discursively specified agreement on the concepts of the good life specified by people given the chance to shape norms effecting their lives. Here, the good is inferred through the abductive logic that links manageable events or practices with adverse outcomes. The good is merely the better life achievable by way of a social or cultural advance so that the lifecourse perspective risks slipping towards prescribing positivist and technical solutions

This perspective does not use the (IT) discourse in either a strong or weak critical theoretic mode. Instead, the lifecourse perspective uses this discourse in the sense of a critical perspective. By drawing on a combined immanent with transcendence critique as a critical perspective, the lifecourse perspective is able to apply this discourse in a creative and flexible way.

Hermeneutic perspectives on ageing

Within critical gerontology, many researchers have been developing various humanist approaches to ageing. These are perspectives that focus on "questions of meaning, or lack of meaning, in the lives of older people. It asks us to explore 'what makes a good life in old age, and how a society can support multiple alternative visions of a good old phenomenology'" (Minkler, 1996: 470). This concern with meaning and lived experience is formulated in the context of a scientisation and objectification of the experience of ageing (Minker, 1996, Phillipson, 1998). Researchers drawing on this perspective have taken up phenomenology (Gubrium and Holstein, 1999, Longino and Powell, 2009), identity theory (Biggs, 2004), narrativity, and issues like gender and the ageing body to explore meaning and the experience of ageing (Venn et al., 2011, Biggs, 2001). The basic orientation of this approach is interpretative and Weberian, that is, "trying to understand the meaning of a social action from the viewpoint of social actors" (Longino and Powell, 2009: 376).

The hermeneutic perspective adopts immanent critique as it articulates the meaning and experience of ageing. As an example, Gubrium and Holstein (1999) discuss research showing the changeable way in which age is used to frame situations involving older people, highlighting its role in helping to interpret situations. Biggs (2004) examines how some older people express their identity to disclose the layered nature of ageing identities, but restricts analysis to revealing the existence of such knowledge, without also exploring its socially constitutive effects. The upshot is to highlight the cultures and aspirations hidden within the lived experiences of older people, and to explore how these cultures might be supported and encouraged to enable older people to be themselves. The difficulty is that critique is limited to the context in question.

But hermeneutic perspectives are not restricted to immanent critique. Feminists have used hermeneutic perspectives to develop different versions of immanent/transcendent critique. For example, Ray (1999: 172) calls for "a more critical feminist gerontology, by which I mean a gerontology which questions, challenges, contests, and resists the status quo". By questioning and unsettling accepted assumptions and norms feminist and intersectionality theory reveals the assumptions and power relations structuring everyday interaction to extend our understanding and thereby disrupt existing orders (Krekula, 2007, Calasanti, 2005). These efforts to destabilise existing to generate new ideas that may compete with existing beliefs position feminist and intersectionalist critique as an example of the weak variant of IyT critique. However, feminists have also been

developing forms of (IT) critique. Ray (2007) argues that narrativity may not simply be the subject of study, but can also be used to change how people think and feel about ageing. Feminists have also been calling for more use of this discourse of critique to explore how the experience of one group may be presented to others to bring about a broader cultural change (Freixas, Luque and Reina, 2012).

Conclusions

This paper has explored how critical gerontology draws on a number of variants of critical discourses in developing its critiques. In contrast with those for whom critical gerontology “resists codification” (Wellin, 2018: 12) we demonstrate that critical gerontology can be codified in terms of discourses of critique, and by doing so, reveal the variety of forms of critique used in critical gerontology. As we have seen, the different strands of critical gerontology draw on very different discourses of critique. Although developing many of its categories using strong variants of (IT), political economy has tended to operate using weak forms of IγT critique. This contrasts with the culturalist form of critical gerontology in which proponents have made conscious efforts to harness the insights of the IγT discourse of critique. Interestingly, the lifecourse perspective has developed a discourse that sets out a combined (IT) discourse without drawing on any of the associated specialised discourses. Therefore, it appears to us that this strand of gerontology draws mainly on an (IT) discourse as a perspective informing critique. Finally, the hermeneutic strands of critical gerontology make use of a variety of discourses of critique. Here, contributors have used strong variants of immanent critique along with both (IT) and IγT critique in their weak forms.

The discourses of critique that are adopted by critical gerontology demonstrate significant variability. One of the implications of these observations is on the connection between critique and macro-social analysis (compare Delanty, 2011). Much of the critique offered in critical gerontology focuses on micro-social processes. The disruptive and destabilising IγT critique drawn upon by culturalist, hermeneutic (particularly feminist), and political economy function by drawing micro social analysis into connection with macro-processes to highlight disjuncture and the operation of power. Similarly the immanent critique used in the hermeneutic tradition expands our consciousness of lives and cultures by revealing everyday practices. Our analysis suggests that critical gerontology operates without a core tradition, relying instead on the capacities of adherents to weave together from the literature’s tapestry and illustrates the importance of recognising the basis of critique within the different critical gerontology discourses.

Critical discourse proceeds according to an analysis, however implicit, of the political orientation of the time (see Strydom, 2000: 257, 262-266). Changes in critiques of the state offered by political economists were based on changing perceptions of the political settlement and the role of the state, while for example, the feminist ethics of care directly targets the ethical and normative basis of the politics of care in societies that have devalued care. These discourses are based on complex connections with actors acting in different locations in society at the time. The shifting politics of ageing can also mean that researchers who felt no connection with critique may suddenly find their area becomes of critical importance or, in the case of lifecourse research, that their research may inadvertently be articulating forms of critique. Thus the connections between research and critique may not always be that clear to those of us engaged in research. But these complex connections underline the need for critical gerontology to clarify the effects that changing circumstance has on critique.

The connection between critique and gerontology rests on the possibilities for generating a kind of society that better incorporates the needs and interests of older people. Critique may play many

roles in this regard, beginning with opening up the possibilities of later life by paying close attention to the everyday lives of older people following immanent critique; to expanding cultural and social norms by adding new models of later life using critique of the tensions between immanent experience and transcendent ideas (I γ T); or following the integrated immanent transcendent critique (IT) unpacking and nurturing the ideas that communicate with experience in lifeworlds everywhere and iteratively developing these into new transcendent categories. Each mode of critique brings about effects on culture, with a critical gerontology aiming to expand and sensitise culture to the lives of older people. Ultimately, a reflexive critical gerontology that plays a role in fostering, encouraging and cross fertilizing discourses of critique will facilitate the formation of older societies. But it can only do so by developing as a reflective forum which is clear about the basis of its various critical impulses, integrates insights from these critical strands and connecting these with macro-social analyses.

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