

Karin Lövgren

”Se lika ung ut som du känner dig”

Kulturella föreställningar om ålder och åldrande
i populärpress för kvinnor över 40



Summary

Dissertation by Karin Lövgren

”Look as young as you feel.” Cultural conceptions of age and ageing in popular press aimed at women over 40.

Aim of the study – research questions

The subject of the study is cultural conceptions of age and ageing. The purpose is to examine how age and ageing are culturally ascribed meaning. The study deals with popular press targeted at women of 40 years of age and over, using age as a selling point.

My analysis of cultural conceptions has three vantage points. The first is interviews with people working in advertising and marketing and with people working with popular press (journalists and advertisement divisions at the magazine publishers). The second is a textual analysis of the editorial material, including visual material, and of the adverts in the magazines – including both texts and pictures. The third vantage point is interviews with middle-aged women on being in this part of life, on their thoughts of the magazines, the ads in them, and on consumption.

Based on data collected from these vantage points, I focus on what meaning age and ageing are ascribed. The following questions have guided the study:

- How are the receivers/consumers defined and constructed in terms of age by advertisers and magazine producers?
- What image of age is represented in the increasing number of publications aimed at readers in midlife with age as a selling point? What messages on ageing are to be found in the editorial texts and in the advertisements?
- How do women in the age the magazines address experience their ageing, and what do they think of the texts in the magazines and the messages in the advertisements? Readers/consumers are active co-creators of meaning in the mediated texts. What do they emphasize when they talk of their reading, compared to what is found in a content or ideology analysis?
- What role can the mediated representation have on how age and ageing is culturally constructed?

The study is motivated by the fact that age and ageing is relatively little researched with respect to media material aimed at middle-aged and elderly people. More research has been conducted on media material for adolescents. Commercial magazines targeted at readers with age as a selling argument are a relatively new phenomenon in Sweden. *More Magazine*, *O* and *Good Housekeeping* are models for the Swedish magazines.

Theoretical framework

Theoretically the study is a cultural study, focused on age. It is interdisciplinary and builds on theories and previous research from several academic disciplines and fields of research: primarily gender studies, studies with an intersectional approach, media studies and research on age and ageing. The theoretical point of departure is social constructionism – people’s actions and interpretations of these actions create reality.

A basic premise behind this study is that people understand and manage their circumstances with different categorizations – based on differences and similarities. People are distinguished from one another and brought together based on certain characteristics. Age – like gender, class and ethnicity – is a social category we make use of to understand ourselves and our circumstances (Blaikie 1999). These categories reflect power relations.

I use the concept of *doing* age – inspired by gender research’s concept of *doing* gender. The point of this is to emphasize action, how people understand and act in their surroundings based on an age or a generational thinking. To do age, involves placing oneself and others within an age order. One must relate to the “Other”, either in the form of other people of different ages or in the form of one’s self at “other” historical-biographical times. *Doing age*, does not take place solely in relation to age orders, but also involves acting out age in an age-appropriate and acceptable way.

I analyse *how age is done* in different ways and how age is imbued with meaning in relation to other ages. This emerges in various ways within the empirical material. Sometimes age is spoken about as something one *has*; and sometimes as something one *is*. In the dissertation, attention is given to how age is *done* through comparisons and contrasts with other ages and how a specific age is also made comprehensible through what it is not. Focus is also directed towards

the ageing process, the renegotiation and repositioning that takes place in relation to what meanings different ages are ascribed. Through this, it becomes possible to gain insight into borderlands where much takes place in relation to how age is given meaning.

Methodology

The data has been collected and analysed through a variety of qualitative methods: interviews and text and visual analyses. The interviews were informal and were of a conversational nature. They were transcribed and thereafter analysed. The analysis revealed different patterns and themes that are found in talk about age and ageing.

The text analysis focused both on what was narrated and how it was narrated, through both images and text. The analysis was applied both to editorial material and advertisements.

With respect to the advertisements, I have carried out a content analysis of which products were advertised in the magazines, who were depicted alongside the products and made an estimation of their ages. This was done to reveal which age relationships were reflected in the advertisements.

Two case studies of magazine advertisements have also been conducted. In the first, the most common product categories advertised were analysed – ads for anti-ageing creams. These ads were similarly constructed. Advertisements of this type follow a common formula and are less often researched in visual studies. Moreover, the Dove campaigns from Unilever were analysed. The aim here was to analyse changes in advertising work which have led to changes in the visual representation of age. Key to advertising is how gender is constructed. Both case studies disclose a staging of femininity by analytically focusing on age and ageing.

In the chapter on methods, I also write about the importance of age in the context of the interviews. This is often given less attention in the literature on qualitative methods than, for example, gender or class and status. The age relationship between the interviewer and the interviewees is also often neglected. Age relations should also be considered within reflexive thinking about method issues. In the thesis I discuss some aspects of age and its relevance for the interviews.

Results

In my dissertation the research questions above are answered in seven analytic chapters. The last chapter deals with questions regarding age and the meaning of representation. Changes in the cultural meaning ascribed to ageing are highlighted. Below the result is summarized under headings referring to the research questions.

How readers/consumers are constructed in terms of age

Those informants, who work with marketing, describe advertising work as creative, artistic and inventive but also as restrained by profit demands resulting in fewer path-breaking campaigns, while centralized decision-making about advertising is becoming increasingly common. The advertising industry is global, which has consequences for the employee's work and for how ads are formed. Profitability demands have led to leaner organizations, which strengthens age segregation within the industry. Several of the interviewees attested to the fact that age discrimination against older persons working in advertising exists.

Today different demographic and economic conditions exist in relation to earlier periods. A large cohort, born during the post-war period and up until the beginning of the 1950s, is entering a category that is defined as synonymous with old age – pensioners. This group is described as relatively affluent and as those who were the first to grow up in a consumer society. Market forces pay increasing attention to them. One of several indications of this is that commercial magazines are directed to this age group. In Sweden, several magazines within the middle-aged women's magazine genre were launched in 2006. That which can be regarded as a market interest in the older can also be interpreted as a continued interest in one and the same cohort that has been addressed since they were teenagers.

Age is a factor that is used to define target groups. As a basis for marketing and segmentation, age is not loaded in the same way that class or ethnicity are. Age is routinely used as a target group factor, reflected in the fact that age is used as a variable when presenting statistics on media use and consumption habits.

Until now, the young have been the primary target group. They have been regarded as important to reach since they are in the midst of shaping their consumption habits.

Who is defined as elderly varies. Within marketing, those over 50 are regarded as older consumers. As such, the category “older consumers” is broad and encompasses large differences in resources and consumption patterns. Thoughts about the older consumer’s behaviours and preferences are based in part on descriptions of consumers who are already defined as older, and in part on prognoses about how groups who are not yet in the older category will come to behave.

When the market addresses potential consumers based on old age, it is not as elderly people these are described but in circumlocutionary characterizations that delimit the target group. In this context age is associated with cultural values that can be regarded as positive. Descriptions are inclusionary; for example, target groups are addressed as 40+ or 50+. In this way, everyone over a certain age is included in the possible fellowship, regardless of generational or cohort differences. In Sweden, it is common to define generations based on the decades in which people are born, for example the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, etc. rather than in relation to significant events that shape the conditions of people’s lives and influence the values they form. This Swedish practice is, in fact, incorrect according to sociological theories on generations or cohorts.

Along with target group descriptions, different acronyms are constructed that summarize the categorizations of people based on demographic and economic variables. The constructed epithets often allude to different forms of popular culture and are complimentary, as in “*mappies*” (mature, affluent, pioneering person) or “*opa!*” older people, active lifestyle.

Words such as *new*, *curious*, *modern*, and *active* are used within marketing. These are words that indicate adaptability and that one, regardless of age, is aware of what is fashionable and is keeping up with the times. These words can be interpreted as signalling *youthfulness* which becomes a recurring cultural value. Youthfulness has connotations with health, beauty, activity, curiosity and ability to change – all of which are positive cultural values. Youthfulness should not be confused with actual youth or with being young. Young people are described as unsure, vulnerable and pressured by social ideals of beauty. In contrast to this, middle-aged women are described as mature, experienced and self-confident. A middle-aged woman knows what she wants.

Negative connotations of being regarded as elderly are toned down. Instead, *experience* and *maturity* are emphasized. These two words

appear repeatedly as cultural key words for dimensions of ageing that are regarded as good.

Senior, veteran and pensioner are words that are avoided in marketing when elderly consumers are addressed. Instead, other categorizations and circumlocutions are used.

The interviews with those working within advertising revealed that young people have been the obvious target group because they have been regarded as mouldable, impressionable, and not stagnant like the elderly. In contrast to young people, the elderly have been regarded as more fixed in their ways and less open to change and innovation.

In what can be called double discourses, young people are described as media critical and media aware and as such as less averse to advertising. However, they cannot be reached through traditional forms of media. In contrast, the elderly are described as critical to advertising, more difficult to influence because they are stuck in habits and as having firm opinions. However, they can be reached through traditional advertising formats such as print ads in the popular press. Purchasing power and advertising format cooperate to lure the market to turn to older target groups.

Within the advertising industry, there is also the view that the elderly want to be young, so a youthful address in an ad reaches both those who are actually young and those who are mentally young. A paraphrase that is made in marketing contexts is the statement “young regardless of age”, or “mentally young”. Here, age is presented as a question of attitude or approach. An interpretation of this could be that time tables and schedules for the life course are dissolving, and that people today are freer with regard to norms for age-adequate behaviour. “Young regardless of age” can be understood also as confirming youthfulness as a cultural value.

In late modernity a fragmentation of what ageing means is also taking place. Both being young and being elderly are described as increasingly diversified experiences in the interviews with those working in advertising. Individualism and lack of predictability are growing. Marketers must examine and map out potential target groups even more thoroughly to define these and how they might be reached. In this opposite movement, age is given a higher degree of meaning. The more the market diversifies and addresses different target groups, in terms of age and gender for example, the more meaningful

age becomes. Different media formats and products are niched in towards consumers of different ages.

The consumer society is the interpretive framework that age is *done* in relation to. It is brought forward that the elderly must be given power and influence since they have money and time for consumption. Age is used as a euphemism for economic resources and affluence. Economic arguments are used to make visible what were earlier less represented categories, as middle-aged and elderly women.

Messages about age and ageing found in the texts and visual material The middle-aged women's magazines seek to find a balance between being entertaining and easygoing and communicating knowledge – from tips and tricks, to advice on health and personal development. The magazines use humour as a strategy to distance themselves from the negative connotations associated with being seen as elderly.

Middle-aged women's magazines also seek a balance in the visual representations they display. On the one hand, glamorous role models are visually depicted; on the other hand, so too are representatives of the readership group, so-called "common people". The glamorous representations appeal to one's ability to fantasise and dream. The models pictured are all well preserved and live up to beauty ideals and norms of thinness. They appear to be younger than their chronological age. This enforces an ideological message of the importance of looking young. Images can also appeal to the reader's identification with and recognition of the message. This visual representation helps anchor the media texts among the target group.

The magazines' visual representations of women show relative diversity in how they depict middle-aged women. Here there are pictures of people in an age group that has previously not been visually represented, but has been invisible and therewith discriminated against.

The magazines also balance their rhetoric. I refer to this as a reflexive ambivalent rhetoric. Different perspectives and perceptions are presented and discussed in the magazines. This results in double, contradictory messages and ambivalent articles. That is, the text is both *reasoned* and *reflexive*. The text can thus appear to be nuanced but also evasive, *ambivalent*. The magazine texts operate from within a *commercial logic*. The magazines strive not to offend their readers,

and instead they try to appease different opinions in relation to various issues. Sometimes this results in the texts giving a split impression, with double messages and an ambivalent attitude towards ideological issues.

The magazines' images of the meaning of age can be described as kaleidoscopic, to borrow a concept from folklorist Rørbye (1998). This can be interpreted as permissive, but also as an expression of a late modern attitude according to which definitive, final answers are not possible. The popular press assumes a searching, reflexive attitude.

Magazines use age to address their readers. Age is also used to make the magazines' content more topical, relevant and urgent. Articles take their point of departure from the readers' age. People who are interviewed in the magazines are primarily in the same age group as the readers, and so are the models that are used. However, the importance of age is also toned down; age is just a number, to grow older today is not what it was in earlier times. Today it is permissible to remain young. It is emphasized that age is not important, but that it is lifestyle that makes the difference. Some of the magazine texts could be interpreted as invocations, whereby the magazine actively assumes a role in creating a new image of this phase in life. Those of the so-called 1940s generation (see above discussion of how cohorts are defined in Sweden) are celebrated and are described as active and transforming their circumstances. The middle-aged woman is celebrated and confirmed in the middle-age magazines texts. She is described as active and transforming her life. This is done through positioning her as different from the elderly women of earlier generations - she is continuously youthful - and also by emphasizing that she is a good consumer. The ambivalence here is notable. She is recognized as being beautiful, but is at the same time expected to work on her body and her looks in order to fight ageing.

Young people are depicted in the interviews and in the magazine texts as searching for their identity. Also middle-aged women are described as searching once again for their identity. Middle-age is presented as a crossroads to the future and is described as a time of mature opportunities. Hereby middle-age forms a parallel to adolescence, when a young person liberates him or herself from an original family to seek an autonomous identity. At some point during middle-age, a woman is to once again liberate herself from a family - this time, the one she has been responsible for. Magazines directed at

middle-aged women position this as a time to find and finally be one's real self.

The editorial content of magazines and the advertisements in the magazines collaborate. Different forms of active cooperation between the advertising department, advertisers and editors take place. This collaboration is strengthened through patterns in editorial content, in the form of the visual presentations as well as texts and the language of adverts. There is a high level of intertextuality between advertisements and editorial content.

A common category of products that is described in editorial material is skin care products, particularly anti-ageing products. Advertisements for these products constitute one of the most common genres of advertisements. The ads follow a common formula: a woman's portrait and the rendering of a product's packaging together with a short copy text and powerful taglines. The advertisements apply a repetitious rhetoric.

It must be possible to distribute and display adverts in many different countries, with only small local adaptations, which leads to more similar designs. The visual dominates the ad. Visual elements are given a growing importance. The cultural conceptions that are alluded to in the advertisements are established and non-controversial. Such conceptions are repeated again and again, thereby confirming and strengthening the message. Advertisements for skin care products imply that it is important to counteract the signs of ageing and to strive to look as young as possible. The advertisements use different forms of rhetoric to create credibility and give an impression of effectiveness. Advertisements affirm improvement and transformation through a promise of what the product can achieve. They must therefore shape dreams and fantasy, but also include dimensions of realism and authenticity to convince the consumer of the product's effectiveness and that it is worth spending money on. To look as young or as well-preserved as possible is a woman's responsibility. When a cream is described as something that gives her vicarious care or as something that she can treat herself to – that she is worth it – this communicates an image of women as being dedicated to other people's needs and as placing their own needs second.

The message of age and ageing that is communicated in the advertisements stresses that health is the individual's responsibility. She has a choice when it comes to caring for her body, as is the case with

respect to caring for her appearance in order to look as young as she feels. Age is rendered two different interpretations: chronological or calendar age and cognitive or mental age. In the rhetoric of the adverts, she feels younger than her chronological age. This in turn gives the impression that being younger is what is desirable.

What women say about ageing, magazines and advertisements

In talk about age a number of interpretive repertoires are repeated that provide a framework for how people can understand themselves and their circumstances. One of these is an interpretive framework within which age is endowed with meaning through contrasts. A second interpretive framework relates to ageing as an unavoidable process of deterioration and decline. A third repertoire emphasizes inner-ageing. This refers to self-assurance, calmness, confidence and that with ageing one comes to know what one wants and what one is willing to stand for. This framework is activated as a possible conscious standpoint to be taken and is highlighted as one of the positive dimensions of ageing. To no longer experience the same demands for caring and presence that was required when one's children were small is presented as a freedom. This phase of life, when women can focus on themselves, is described in positive terms.

The interviewees describe ageing as something one accepts. However, the women also talk of something that is in a sense paradoxical. They describe ageing as something that is more acceptable today. By this, they mean that it is possible to be youthful as an older person in contrast to earlier times when one was regarded as a little old lady already in early middle-age. If anything, to be seen as or defined as elderly, can be interpreted as less permissible. The norms for age-adequate behaviour have changed. Today, ageing appears as more demanding, not least because one must work with one's outer appearance in order to look youthful.

The women speak with melancholy about no longer receiving compliments on their looks, and they describe with sorrow signs of physical ageing. They describe invisibility that according to them comes with growing older. There is ambivalence here: with age, women also feel they need not worry as much about what others think about their outer appearance, and in this lays liberation. The notion of feeling invisible as a middle-aged woman is repeated in both the interviews and in the magazine texts.

Discourse about the importance of looks emphasizes that middle-aged women are more satisfied with their bodies and appearance than younger women. They have matured, become more confident and have accepted themselves. A second notion is also reflected in the magazine texts and advertisements and in the women's descriptions of being of this age – one doesn't recognize one's self in the mirror. Discrepancies between inner and outer age grow as one ages.

The women express knowledge of the genre when they talk about reading the magazines. They describe the magazine texts with their focus on solutions and possibilities as positive. The messages presented by the magazines are accepted as an offer and an opportunity and as such, the women appreciate it. They are not regarded as normative, ideological messages.

The image of women in the magazines is regarded as confirming and reflecting reality. The magazines have a framework that meets with the readers' expectations of the genre. The meaning of the texts is interpreted in relation to how the readers regard and describe the framework – as entertaining small talk or as “candy”. The magazines' tone of address is appealing. They are looked upon as a friend, a trusted conversation partner. Reading can engage the women as they are able to identify with what is being written about. The content is considered relevant and important also because it focuses on others in a similar age group or life phase.

Representation of middle-aged women

With the introduction of a popular press that addresses older age groups than earlier, using age as a selling point, a shift in how women are represented has taken place. It was earlier posited within marketing contexts that elderly people regarded themselves as younger than their chronological age and that they identified with younger people. Elderly readers have been addressed with images of and texts about younger people. Magazines for those in middle-age represent something new in relation to this. In the magazines, it is emphasized that middle-aged women want to read about themselves, that they do not identify with younger people but with their peers. They wish however to see themselves represented in a youthful way. One is “too young to be old”, as it is expressed in magazine texts and in advertising campaigns. The magazines are active in these questions. The launching of magazines for middle-aged readers can be

understood as an explicit attempt to represent middle-aged women. At the same time, ideological messages are communicated through this representation about how one is to be as a middle-aged woman. One should look young and appear young.

Contemporary culture is characterized by its visual nature. Thus, visual aspects gain greater importance. Messages in media and advertising strengthen one another. When a message is also presented in the form of a visual image, this reinforces the ability to influence a reader’s self-image and regard for what the norm is – what a middle-aged woman should look like and which signs of ageing a middle-aged body can or is allowed to show. Appearance norms become a part of people’s self-understanding. If these shift so that a 40-year old woman should visually be seen as ten years younger, a 50-year old woman should look 40, etc. this involves a risk of increasing stigmatization of signs of natural ageing. The importance of visual communication means that how the body is clothed and staged involves sensitivity to signs of ageing that must be masked. The magazines take part in this, both through offering advice on how this masking shall be done, and through presenting ideals and norms for how one can and should look in one’s fifties. A continued pursuit of youth does not mean that ageing or old age is instead endowed with other, more affirmative meanings. Rather, there is a risk that those who are unable to live up to these ideals will be singled out.

There is also a risk that other meanings of ageing are not made visible or represented. However, I have shown that age in terms of maturity and experience, inner qualities of ageing, are also represented in the magazine texts and even in the advertisements. Images of ageing are contradictory.

The analysis shows that small alterations or shifts in the representation of age have taken place but these shifts are not as comprehensive as to be described as a break with earlier tradition.

Those working in the industry have assumed that people identify with individuals who are younger than themselves. A more nuanced view of this assumption underscored that this concerns cognitive age identification and that older models with a youthful presence can be effective within a marketing context. Some of the large multi-national producers of skin care products have launched advertisements with models that are older than 20-30 years, which is a change in which age categories are otherwise used within this genre. Through the choice of older models, the reigning norms for visual representation of

age have been altered. Usually, younger people dominate the visual landscape. Still, the implied assumption in advertisements is that the reader will be drawn to use the product to prevent age-related changes. Focus lies not with the problem of ageing skin, but on the solutions to this. Such rhetoric is reminiscent of the narrative found in the magazines. Texts and advertisements address possibilities. This can be interpreted as being related to the fact that the texts and advertisements specifically address middle-aged women. If one wants to get to a woman's wallet, this cannot be done by describing her skin as defective. However, it can be achieved by promising improvement. Advertisements also speak specifically about the future. Even if all advertisements operate on the basis of promising change and improvement (Sturken & Cartwright 2001), there is an implication here in how ageing is presented. By assuming a future, ageing skin is not relegated to decline only. A promising tomorrow also waits.

The question is how the representations of middle-aged women should be interpreted. Middle-aged women do not have a social power of position, but appear to be in an age category that must orient itself to the risk of being made invisible with age. At the same time, they are ascribed relative power through being positioned as having money for consumption. Representations of middle-aged women must be understood in relation to the social distribution of power and influence.

Magazines have the potential to change and introduce other possible images of what age and ageing can mean. In this sense, magazines have an utopist function – they can describe other possible interpretations of being older. The result of focusing upon hormonal, biological explanations or attitudes in the magazines is a disregard for structural explanations of a political or economic nature. Consequently, the texts preserve the status quo and thus have a conservative role (compare how Radway 1984 interprets the reading of romance novels). The magazines emphasize that it is important to look and appear youthful. Moreover, they distance themselves from their readers being regarded as elderly. In this way, the elderly phase is accentuated as one of weakness, illness and loss of status. The so-called fourth age becomes more taboo-filled through being contrasted with the third age of midlife (Blaikie 1999).

Advertisers are described by the informants as conservative and as having a great deal of power over the content of the magazines and their publication. At least since the mid-1980s literature on market-

ing has declared that it is time for “the market” to pay attention to older target groups, yet it was not until the beginning of the millennium that commercial magazines for those groups were introduced in Sweden. The changes are slow. Views of the older consumers are being reoriented while a stereotyped image of this group as uninteresting simultaneously lives on. The advertising industry was presented in the interviews *both* as creative, commercial *and* as conservative, which can be interpreted as a partial explanation for the slowness that characterizes the change in opinion regarding the importance of age. In the interviews, advertisers were ascribed great power over what and who is represented in advertisements.

That the consumers themselves have power over what is represented also emerges as a description. In other words, there is a never-ending circle of reasoning, in which responsibility and power over the content of media is constantly located elsewhere.

The images presented by the media and in advertising also contribute to create understanding and interpretative frameworks for human experiences. It is not least of all for this reason that it is important to analyze the ideological messages in these.

In discussions about the power of advertising, the popular press and representation, the media are ascribed a great deal of power. Scapegoat thinking emerges that assigns responsibility to the media for different social and cultural conceptions. This is a simplified means of thinking about a complicated interplay. Cultural notions are articulated in the media and therefore it is worthwhile to scrutinize the media. The media contribute to creating cultural conceptions and their ideological message must be investigated as one of several places wherein ideologies are expressed and maintained. Scapegoat thinking runs the risk of preventing other explanations or understandings of age to be considered.

Each media representation is but one of many that interplay. They cannot be isolated from other contemporary media messages. That the media and some advertisements today describe the elderly in a new way is connected to them being described as a well-to-do category. There is a connection between market forces and representation. I would, however, like to recall the reader’s attention to how cohort descriptions and age explanations are interwoven with one another. The market has followed the same large cohort as it has aged. Cohort size and relative prosperity are more important than the age of the cohort’s members.

Even if positive representations of a category can not change social values related to that category, it is nonetheless important that the media presents a reasonable image of, in this case, middle-aged and older women. A lasting change in cultural conceptions of ageing is tied to economic conditions and resources, political decision-making, the state of the market and demography. Mediated representations are important, not least because they reflect social values, but to change the cultural understandings of age, ageing and the elderly demands more than “only” changes in representation in the media.

The age concept

In my study I have shown how the age concept is imbued with different meanings and definitions. I have also shown that it is intertwined with other age-related concepts such as generation, cohort, state or life phase. Age is a complex concept. Despite sharing a chronological age, people can find themselves in different life phases, in different biographical generations.

Marketers as well as the media’s innovative introduction of new age-related categories in the form of acronyms or creative circumlocutions and euphemisms bears witness to a need to communicate about age without being limited to chronology. Age is divided into chronological, physiological/biological, social and cognitive/mental age. In my study I have shown the connection between the need to delineate new possible target groups, defined according to where the ability to consume is assumed to lie, and an apparent regard for age as both a possible factor by which to segment a market and as a useful categorization for marketing. I have also shown the complexity of *doing* age as revealed in the empirical material. Its meaning is negotiated and re-negotiated – it is referred to, toned down, written about and denied. Age is an elastic concept – it can be stretched to continually incorporate different dimensions. Paradoxically, the concept seems to be inadequate at the same time as there appears to be an everyday consensus about what is meant by age.

Also within research, a number of age-related concepts have been created to operationalise studies and to sharpen analytic thinking. It is clear that there exists a need to specify the content of the concept of age and to distinguish different dimensions of what is intended with its use.

One of the problems with the concept of age is that it is used both as a description and as an explanation. How age is used as an explanation is interwoven with different *cultural values* or *conceptions*. That women are culturally made older than men at a younger age is due to how the measurement – time that has elapsed – is evaluated, interpreted and understood. The physical dimensions of women’s ageing, according to which menopause becomes a marker that defines women as elderly, shows the connection between fertility, sexuality, gender and age and how women in our culture are constructed as more a body than men are.

The many different concepts and descriptions can be understood as indications that the age concept does not cover or answer the needs people have to communicate about age and aging. This regards both market needs – directed by increased sales – and people’s everyday needs to understand themselves and others. One solution to the dilemma of the broad and shallow significance of the age concept has been to introduce more concepts to delineate these different dimensions.

Personally, I would like to conclude that it is critical and important that age is included among other power relations and categorisations. To further the analysis, a dissection is required, a dismantling of what one is aiming at, what is taken for granted, and what is not stated but implied; that is, how we culturally construct meanings of age and ageing.

In conclusion, my study deals with the tension between change and continuity in cultural constructions of age and ageing. It shows that “age” is constructed and re-negotiated with many different meanings.

Translated by Caroline Sutton.