

# **Archaeology, and Genealogy: Developments in Foucauldian Gerontology**

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## **Abstract**

There has been a rise in recent years of a theoretical current entitled 'Foucauldian gerontology'. This theory has attempted to understand how age and aging are socially constructed by languages used by professions and disciplines in order to control and regulate the experiences of older people and to legitimize powerful groups (Katz, 1996; Biggs & Powell, 2000,, 2001 and 2002; Powell & Biggs, 2000). What has not been introduced is Foucault's potential contribution to research methodology. The paper introduces some of the methodological tools and insights from the scholarship of Michel Foucault, locates concepts of archaeology and genealogy and highlights the importance and impact these have for social gerontology in the USA, UK and Australia. The paper reviews the attempts researchers have made in applying Foucault's methodological insights to an understanding of professional power, changing discourses and aging.

## **Introduction**

There has been a rapid acceleration in the social science literature that covers theoretical work under the aegis of "Foucauldian". In the discipline of Social Gerontology, this trend has covered epistemic developments, albeit a small body of knowledge, in social aspects of aging cutting across the borders of Canada (Katz, 1996) and the United Kingdom (Biggs and Powell 2000; Biggs & Powell 2001; Powell & Biggs 2000; Powell 2001). In terms of a Foucauldian contribution to research methodology in Social Gerontology there has been a conspicuous silence despite some notable exceptions via discourse analysis (Gubrium, 1992). Further, Gubrium (1992), Katz (1999) and McAdams (1994) have attempted to use personal stories or narratives from older people in order to make sense of issues such as "dementia" - deriving conversation and story-telling from older people themselves. Despite this, there has been a relative silence of using Foucault's rather unique methodological tools as applied to aging studies. It could have to do that Foucault's writings are complex and aphoristic to the extent that Foucault's approach was so "unmethodological" that his only apparently methodological work *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) was really only a parody of devising a systematic methodology. So, why use Foucault to investigate social aspects of aging?

It is through the process of "historical investigation" that social researchers can understand the present which takes aim at understanding Foucault's potential use of method to understanding social formations relevant to adult aging. If 'historical inquiry' is to be used, researchers should "use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest" (Foucault 1980, 54). Historical

critique should be used to shatter ‘taken for granted’ assumptions surrounding aging. The point of Foucault’s (1973; 1977) use of historical inquiry is to use ‘history’ as a way of diagnosing the present and current social arrangements. In order to understand the use of history as making sense of the present we must introduce and analyse two concepts which are fundamental to applied gerontological research are introduced: ‘archaeology’ and ‘genealogy’.

## **Understanding Foucault**

Foucault’s own approach to the study of discourses and institutions were both in methodological terms labelled as ‘archaeological’ and ‘genealogical’: the former involved isolating orders of discourse which laid down the conditions for articulating ‘truths’; the latter had more to do with non-discursive mechanisms of power which shaped the way individuals saw the world and acted within it. For example, the various discourses that make up a community care assessment from social policy and consequent professional statements (paperwork, assessing and monitoring) express the archaeological approach. However, another example focusing on genealogy reveals the architectural organisation of residential care focuses on the spatial dimensions of such an institution and the organisation of such institutions are geared to care workers’ surveillance and monitoring of older people’s behaviour (Powell and Biggs, 2000).

In general, Foucault uses these methodological “tools” to disrupt historical discourses at the same time as giving discourses and the non-discursive domains a power/knowledge re-configuration. ‘Discourses’ are sets of physical, behavioural and cognitive practices that generate knowledge of bodies, experience, phenomena and subjectivity. In *The Birth of the Clinic* Foucault’s (1973) archaeology describes how physical examination practices in medical clinic led to a way of using an ‘inspecting gaze’ that enabled physicians to develop an understanding of pathology and the body which in turn led to the development of medical power and scientific ideas pertaining to the body and Powell and Biggs (2000) add also ‘aging’ to the consolidation of such ‘expert’ surveillance. The connection of ‘power’ is also important to note as it exists in and through discourses and relationships. Such discourses gave the developing professional practices such as medical profession disciplinary power over the aging body by rendering it an object to be understood through surveillance (Powell and Biggs, 2000; Powell, 2001). Similarly, Foucault’s (1977) genealogical work entitled *Discipline and Punish* analysed the way in which the institutional prison system developed through ‘panopticism’. The panopticon was a prison design by Bentham in which the spatial foundation of the prison had cells built around the periphery surround a central tower from all the cells, and subjects (prisoners) could be viewed. The very arrangement of the individualized cells ensures that those put under surveillance are hidden from each other, they can only watch themselves even when the tower is not watching them. As Foucault (1977, 200) points out ‘the panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognise immediately ... Visibility is a trap’.

The next section looks to the relevance of archaeology for an analysis of social policy statements concerning professional power and old age.

## **Archaeology and Aging**

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault (1972) utilises "archaeology" as the analysis of a statement as it occurs in the historical archive. Foucault further points out that archaeology "describes discourses as practices specified in the element of the archive" (1972, 131), the archive is "the general system of the formation and transformation of statements" (1972, 130). The use of an archaeological method explores the networks of what is said and what can be seen in a set of social arrangements: in the conduct of an archaeology there is a visibility in "opening up" statements. For example, Brooke-Ross (1986 cited in Langan and Lee, 1988) shows how private residential care as a form of visibility produces statements about the medical needs of older people while statements about aging produce forms of visibility which reinforce the power of residential care (Allen et al, 1992). Such visibility and discursive configuration is shored up with resource allocation too. Hadley and Clough et al. (1996) claim the numbers of residential care places in the UK stood at 536, 000 in the mid 1990s. They also claim that the financial cost of residential care stood at £8 billion per year - hence the consolidation of statements pertaining to aging reinforces the need for such institutions such as residential care and the high revenue they generate.

In this context, statements and visibilities mutually condition each other – inter-dependent on each other. Furthermore, Biggs and Powell (2001) claim historically social work as a visible social practice produces negative statements about older age whilst managerial statements about assessment reinforces the power of the professional and decreases the power and voice of the client (Biggs and Powell 2000).

In gerontological research, archaeology can attempt to chart the relationship between statements and the visible; describe 'institutions' that acquire authority and provide limits within which discursive objects may exist. If we take these in turn we can illuminate its use to social gerontology. Firstly, the attempt to understand the relation between statements and visibility focuses on those set of statements that make up institutions such as residential care – 'instructions' to care workers, statements about time-tabling of activities for older people and the structure and space of the care institution itself (Powell, 1998; Powell & Biggs, 2000). Knowledge is composed of statements and visibility. In the example of residential care cited by Powell & Biggs (2000), we need to attend to both of what is said (theories of social work education and caring) and what is visible (building, corridors and singular rooms). The crucial point is that a Foucauldian approach can draw our attention to the dynamic inter-relationship between statements and institutions, through use of archaeology and genealogy. Secondly, the attempt to describe "institutions" which acquire authority and provide limits within which discursive objects may act, focuses again on the care institution which delimits the range of activities of discursive objects (Powell, 2001).

## **Genealogy and Ageing**

Foucault acquired the concept of "genealogy" from the writings of Nietzsche. Genealogy maintains elements of archaeology including the analysis of statements in the archive (Foucault 1977 and 1982). With genealogy Foucault (1977) added a concern with the analysis of power/knowledge which manifests itself in the "history of the present".

As Foucault (1982) points out, genealogy concerns itself with disreputable origins and "unpalatable functions". For example, Biggs and Powell's (2000, 2001) genealogy of psycho-casework and care management points to the

origins and functions of social work as a scientific and managerial profession are from benevolent than official histories of professional practice with older people would make believe. As Foucault (1982, 109) found in his exploration of psychiatric power: 'Couldn't the interweaving effects of power and knowledge be grasped with greater certainty in the case of a science as 'dubious' as psychiatry?'.

Nevertheless, there are a number of research studies which give rich insights into the power of institutions over subjects that aging studies can learn from. For example, Armstrong's powerful work (1983) uses Foucault's genealogical method to analyse the development of the 'Dispensary'. This was a place for the screening, diagnosis and treatment of people thought to have tuberculosis providing a new form of health care within the community at end of 19th century. The Dispensary was located firmly with the community and its function was to identify, probe and monitor disease and its manifestation within the reaches of the community. Such an institution was set up not only to pathologise local populations but also as a form of social control. As Nettleton (1995, 236) argues 'as surveillance extended into the community the emphasis began to shift from those who were ill to those who were potentially ill'.

More recently, Bloor and Macintosh (1990) have used a genealogical approach to explore community care. They claim that health professionals operated within discourses that define acceptable standards of 'parenting', and 'lifestyles'. Working-class mothers regarded such professionals as being involved in social control making judgements about homes and family behaviour. Such professional practices are thus seen as being involved in social as well as health surveillance. Such professionals also adopt a 'therapeutic gaze' which as Porter (1996, 68) claims 'constitutes people as psycho-social beings and involves observation, interpretation and redefinition of their behaviour'. Similarly, May (1992) has explored nursing's development of holistic care as contributing to the rise and consolidation of disciplinary power of the nurse over the patient through therapeutic surveillance.

Nettleton (1995) has described studies which adopt Foucault's methodology as exploring 'the differential ways in which bodies are regulated, understood and constructed' (1995, 233). She locates a progressive movement towards the construction of the 'whole person' as the object of care 'gazes' and through a change towards risk orientated practice (Biggs and Powell, 2001). Nettleton (1992) in her Foucauldian analysis of dentistry identified how professional practices which were used to elicit information and profiles about populations came to be linked to dental techniques and practices used at individual level constructing the object of dental study. Thus epidemiological data about the nature of teeth consolidated the dentists gaze on visual inspection of the mouth and teeth. The object of study in the nexus of 'microphysics of power', a capillary form of power reaching to the very minutia of detailed profiling of an individual tooth and collection of teeth. Through history, the knowledge base of dental practice has shifted to include survey data about social circumstances, beliefs and their effects on dental care. Professional power emphasised supporting and negotiating strategies in communication with patients in order to alter and shape behaviour. What Nettleton (1992) is highlighting is that the object of dental care as being reconstructed as a subjective participating person.

From this, there are two aspects of Foucault's concepts relevant to an analysis of institutional power and aging: firstly, is the assessment of

changing ways of constructing knowledge and professional practices (i.e.) from social worker to care manager (Biggs and Powell, 2000); secondly, is the identification of the objects/subjects that are problematized through shifting discourses that embody changing professional knowledge bases and practice (Powell, 2001).

What is clear is that genealogy establishes itself from archaeology in its approach to discourse. Where archaeology provides gerontology with a snapshot, a slice through the discursive nexus, genealogy focuses on the processual aspects of the web of discourse – its ongoing character (Foucault 1982). Foucault (1982) did attempt to make the difference between both methodological concepts explicit:

*'If we were to characterise it in two terms, then 'archaeology' would be the appropriate methodology of this analysis of local discursiveness, and 'genealogy' would be the tactics whereby, on the basis of the descriptions of these local discursivities, the subjected knowledges which were thus released would be brought into play'* (Foucault 1982, 85).

Foucault is claiming that archaeology is a systematic method of investigating official statements such as policy documents. Genealogy is a way of putting archaeology to practical effect, a way of linking it to current gerontological concerns. For example, genealogy disrupts the non-discursive focusing on institutional power. To exemplify this, Clough (1988) completed a study of elder abuse at an institutional 'residential care' home in England. Many staff had neglected older residents including neglecting to bathe residents; punishing those residents leaving hot water running in bathrooms; opening windows for air; and staff removed blankets from residents leading to pneumonia and subsequently many deaths.

In a similar context, Goffman (1968) wrote about how spatial arrangements of 'total institutions' (prisons) operate to provide care and rehabilitation at an official level and capacity, underneath the surface, however, such institutions curtail the rights of its prisoners:

*'Many total institutions, most of the time, seem to function merely as storage dumps for inmates ... but they usually present themselves to the public as rational organizations designed consciously, through and through, as effective machines for producing a few officially avowed and officially approved ends'* (Goffman 1968, 73).

Furthermore, as Powell & Biggs (2000) point out, a genealogical argument as relates professional power works to:

*'... uncloaking these power relations [and] is characterised, by Foucault, to set out to examine the 'political regime of the production of truth'* (Davidson, 1986: 224).

The effects of the relationship between 'power' and 'knowledge' would include the tendency for professional power to be reinforced by the sort of questions professionals ask and the data they collate on individuals and populations (Nettleton, 1995; Powell, 2001). By the same effect, various social policy positions point professionals to seek out certain forms of knowledge which tend to reinforce the position of that policy and its associated discourses in relation to the object form of study (Biggs and Powell, 2001). As part of this

process, certain powerful voices increase their legitimacy, whilst other voices become silenced and de-legitimised (Biggs, & Powell, 2001).

The genealogical gerontologist can illuminate that such statements of choice have a contingent origin by revealing professional practices which are detrimental to the policy statements. At the same time, the voices of professionals become louder and older people's voices become softer in the landscape of power/knowledge and the politics of social relations. Vousden (1987 cited in Hadley and Clough, 1996) claimed that professionals destroyed the positive identity of many older people in such a repressive residential regime:

'It is self evident that when elderly, often confused residents are mad to eat their own faeces, are left unattended, are physically man-handled or are forced to pay money to care staff and even helped to die, there is something seriously wrong' (Vousden, 1997, 19 quoted in Hadley and Clough, 1996, 76).

Hence, the power/knowledge twist of professional 'carers' was detrimental to older people's "quality of life" in residential care. Such care action was a powerful and repressive mechanism of disciplinarity used to indent and strip the identities of residents. Biggs & Powell (2001) claim a Foucaultian approach highlights such professions retain a powerful position in UK care policy not only in terms of what they do but what they say:

*'Foucault identified discourses as historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth. They function as sets of rules, and the exercise of these rules and discourses in programmes which specify what is or is not the case - what constitutes 'old age', for example. Those who are labelled 'old' are in the grip of power. This power would include that operated by professionals through institutions and face to face interactions with their patients and clients. Power is constituted in discourses and it is in discourses such as those of 'social work', that power lies'* (Biggs & Powell, 2001, 97).

## Conclusion

This paper has set out an initial assessment and contextualization of Foucault's potential methodological contribution to social science in general and social gerontology in particular. Archaeology and genealogy are highly relevant to the analysis of social policy, professional power and surveillance and social construction of individuals as objects/subjects: archaeology has been useful to assess historical narratives which bring light to discursive formations that have produced fields of knowledge pertaining to professional power and the shaping of social phenomena for objects of study; genealogy is the attempt to uncover the historical relationship between truth, knowledge and power. As was hinted at earlier through the analysis of the work of Nettleton (1992), power/knowledge is produced through 'struggles' and 'negotiations' both between and within institutions such as dentistry. Indeed, by using such distinctive methodologies of archaeology and genealogy reveals relations of power and power relationships between professionals, institutions and subjects of study while demonstrating the relevance to uncovering discourses relating to construction of knowledge about the nature of individuality and control of such knowledge bases.

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