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## Age-Inscriptions and Social Change

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### Abstract

This special issue introduces the concept of age-inscription. It accounts for the ways that transitions, expectations and markers around age and life-course stages are modified in interplay with social change. This new concept is necessary, we argue, because age-inscriptions correspond to more indeterminate and transitional levels of changes in aging trajectories and life stages than the concept of norms. Inscriptions lie between rules, laws, and norms on the one hand, and individual feelings, emotions, and actions on the other. They are at least slightly shared between individuals, and, thus, somewhat more standardized than individual behavior, but not as standardized and shared as norms. This introduction lays out the reasons why age-inscriptions happen, as well as the primary ways by which they are formed and generated. We conclude by arguing that contemporary age-inscriptions are fashioned in relation to a longer life course encountered by a new generation, an increasing temporalization and institutionalization of the life course, and high levels of mobility and migration.

**Keywords:** *aging, life course, migration, age-inscription, institutionalization, social change*

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# Age Incriptions and Social Change

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## Introduction

Because age is a central principle of social organization, aging trajectories—in their temporality, social meaning, and relatedness—are highly sensitive to social change. Based on her research on aging in the former East Germany (GDR), Tatjana Thelen (2005) discusses a new aging trajectory: grandfathers provide child care for their grandchildren. Within this context, grandfatherly childcare accorded with neither gender norms of male and female roles nor with traditions of care from grandparents, as institutional forms of child care were widely available in the GDR. After German unification, however, the economic collapse in East Germany primarily affected the sectors that employed men, who were subject to early retirement and thus had more free time than their female spouses. Furthermore, the younger generation faced more precarious work and scarcer state childcare support than previous generations. Grandfathers with time on their hands stepped in to take care of their grandchildren while the young and middle-aged generation of parents worked odd and variable shifts.

Surprisingly, despite the importance of grandfatherly care in allowing mothers and fathers to work, this care was not acknowledged by the men and not a topic of discourse. Thelen commented that it was their wives, the grandmothers, who were willing to speak about kin caring arrangements and from whom she learned of the significant role played by grandfathers. The grandfathers were not proud of their new roles; therefore, they refused to expound on them in conversations with the anthropologist. Thelen notes, “it is possible that these caring grandfathers are only a transitional model, at a time when the socialist value orientation in favour of wage labour and the model of the working mother still exists” (2005, 185).

Through this example, along with the articles in this special issue, we introduce a concept that captures this indeterminate and possibly transitional level of social change in culturally prescribed aging trajectories and life stages, which we call *age-inscription*. In this special issue, we theorize age-inscription as the way that transitions, expectations, and markers around age and stages in the life course shift in practice. These inscriptions are based on individual and familial emotions, experiences, and restrictions, as well as on actions of reflecting on and responding to processes of institutional and societal change. We suggest inscription is positioned in between rules, laws, and norms on the one hand, and individual feelings, emotions, and actions on the other. Inscription, always in the making, is more standardized than individual behavior. It emerges when some people are doing, believing, and feeling in similar ways. However, it is not, and often not yet, as standardized and shared within society as a norm.

Inscription arises out of personal and familial experiences as people quickly respond to situations to which existing norms do not provide adequate answers or provide contradictory answers. There is a gap or a lag between norms and practices. Inscription is a response to the practical conflicts and problems caused by conflicting or increasingly irrelevant norms. It has effects on persons in that it can become embodied in

everyday habits and routines. As in Thelen's example, the age-inscription of caring grandfathers was not dominant and the principals were not eager to articulate it. But it did affect grandfathers' bodily practice: they overtly expressed affection for their grandchildren, picked them up from school, cooked for them, and put them to bed (Thelen 2005). Consistent with our understanding of inscription as non-dominant and experimental, we consider age-inscription's habituation in bodily practices to be flexible and subject to change. Furthermore, age-inscription has material effects.

Inscription falls within the continuum between shared norms, on the one hand, and individual actions, on the other. It is less formal and explicit than a norm. It can emerge when several people do similar things—like the grandfathers who do not see this pattern as a duty. Norms, in contrast, are discussed in patterned, formulaic discourse, although usually they are evoked at moments of norm violation. They are shared knowledge about how people should behave. Age-inscription, in contrast, is not dominant or hegemonic. It can be contested and negotiated, competing against other understandings and even against social norms, but it is sometimes so invisible and unarticulated as to escape social censure or commentary.

Processes we call age-inscriptions are happening due to the fact that every society is in motion. They often take place when discrepancies between norms and behavior occur: if there were neither change nor conflicting norms, age-inscriptions would not occur. This is why they always indicate processes of change. Conceptualizing inscription as a processual moment in between norms and individual behavior implies possible dynamics in all directions: it could start as individual behavior that is gradually shared by others. If it spreads, it could gradually develop into a social norm. Of course, this dynamic could, and does, happen in the other direction, as when shared norms come to contradict one another and become less dominant and less shared inscriptions. What we examine as an inscription today can, in the future, become more articulated and even dominant and hegemonic as a social norm, or it might fade into the background as part of the transition to yet another social norm. The concept of inscription is needed to indicate a level of articulation and practice which is not socially normed and, even more importantly, not necessarily discursively organized.

Our term *age-inscription* derives from *kin-scripts*, which Carol Stack and Linda Burton (1993) developed some decades ago to theorize the ways that kin create scripts for the life courses of their members. Through this concept, they emphasize the temporality of multiple life courses and the ways that each life course affects the life courses of others, a finding that they frame with the term *kin-time*. The work that is needed to sustain a kin group over the generations is called, in their terminology, *kin-work*, and the ways in which various people become recruited to do *kin-work* they call *kin-scription*. In their contribution to this special issue, Franziska Bedorf and Julia Pauli add the concept of *kin-place*, or sites such as houses where kin-work occurs, the physical space enabling certain kinds of care and socialities across the generations and serving as a kind of *lieu de mémoire* (Nora 2001) for kin groups. In anthropological and sociological research, including our own work (Dossa and Coe 2017), the concept of kin-work has been mainly used because it resonates with other feminist literature on the recognition of women's household labor, and even more specifically, women's care work (cf. Alber and Drotbohm 2015, 4). Although we draw on Stack and Burton's concept of kin scripts, unlike them, we want to emphasize the ways scripts are coming into being, and being made and formed, rather than the ways that existing scripts are being negotiated in practice. As a result, we use the term *inscription* rather than *script*, to emphasize the processual quality by which scripts are made in practice.

Grounded in a praxeological approach, our understanding of inscription does not resonate with the way the term is used in philosophical scholarship inspired by Jacques Derrida, in which it is part of mimesis

and the production of the double body (see a summary in Irwin 2010). Our aim is also not to detect differences between scripts guiding performances and the back-stage in the sense of Erving Goffman, but to figure out how people's feelings, actions, and changing assumptions are producing new ways of understanding aging processes.

Age-scripts and the related process of inscription are not exclusively related to aging but to any phase in the life course. The growing literature on youth provides many examples that could be re-read through the concept of age-inscription. We would even argue that in addition to the age-scripts and the aforementioned kin-scripts Stack and Burton (1993) have discussed, other kinds of inscriptions could be mentioned, such as for instance gender-inscriptions. However, in this issue, we limit our reflections to age-inscriptions that are happening around the life phases of aging. This allows us to capture and analyze the processes of social change with regard to aging, as people and groups find cultural hegemonies around age stages inadequate, insufficient, or no longer practical. In the discussion below, we elaborate on our concept of age-inscription, highlight the processes by which they occur, and illuminate some of the reasons why they are happening now.

### Age-Inscription, Social Norms, and Hegemonies

Since early debates on age-class societies, anthropologists have documented the variety of norms, rituals, and practices around the stages in the life course and the ways that age-grade related norms are central to the construction of political power and social organization in those societies (Bernardi 1985; for an overview of the literature see also Alber and Häberlein 2010). Additionally, mainly focused on Euro-American societies, sociologists have analyzed changes in normative expectations of different age stages or, more generally, within life-course regimes. These age norms work in hegemonic ways, often implicit in social organization, verbal expressions, and cognitive categories. Sometimes they are not even articulated, but rather are what Pierre Bourdieu called *doxa*, to refer to what is so taken for granted that it can be assumed without saying, as "common sense." Tabea Häberlein (this issue) argues that images of the intergenerational contract, which she sees as a dominant norm all over the world, are often *doxic*—that is, viewed as taken-for-granted and natural.

Silence about the norm, as well as its alternatives, can be an indicator as well as a maintainer of *doxa*. John Borneman argues that the

inability or refusal to name a practice relates directly to the severity with which it breaches the norm; silence keeps practice in the realm of *doxa*, defined by Bourdieu as "that which is beyond question" (1977, 169). Bestowing a name would objectively recognize a practice that is best regulated by keeping it unmentionable; namelessness thus prevents the development of a language for description that might bring individual practices into public discourse. (1992, 295)

Such norms detail how people should act in the different phases of their life course in order to be recognized as being at a particular stage, as well as the roles and positions they can assume. Just a few examples will suffice to illustrate this point. Among the Zafimaniry in Madagascar, older adults are considered like a kind of hard wood, calm, and immobile, in contrast to middle-aged adults who go to farm every day, and young people who are considered flexible and soft (Bloch 1998). At different stages of the life course, people speak differently and have different kinds of knowledge at their disposal to perform. In another example, in England the property of a deceased spouse is so expected to be inherited by the surviving spouse that it is

not even considered inheritance, such that people do not discuss spousal inheritance when asked about property or objects they have inherited (Finch and Mason 2000).

At other times, age norms are articulated in formulaic and conventional discourses, what Bourdieu (1977) called *orthodoxy*. Social norms which are articulated as *orthodoxy* are weaker than *doxa*, which are taken for granted and not subject to debate. One example of orthodoxy comes from Madagascar where older persons monopolize and manipulate knowledge about kinship relations in order to affect decisions about new marital relations (Astuti 2000). Although their knowledge is articulated as orthodox, it is important to note that there is scope for contestation even using orthodox discourses, as people can present other opinions which are also framed as based on orthodox norms.

What is articulated as orthodoxy can also be challenged by alternative constructions, which Bourdieu called *heterodoxies*. These are positions which are not shared by all and not even intended to be legitimized as such, but nevertheless shared by several actors. They could be articulated as positions of minority groups or as emerging, not yet articulated, norms. With regard to Bourdieu's terminology, we would see some age-inscriptions as meeting the criteria of heterodoxy. However, not all emergent inscriptions need to be heterodoxies set in contrast to orthodoxies; some are just emerging without being in direct opposition to other, more dominant norms. Our term for this phenomenon is *alterodox*.

Age, age norms, and age scripts are critical to social organization, undergirding a particular social order and the domination of particular groups (Bourdieu 1977). Matilda Riley and John Riley (1986) note, "age is built into the changing organization of institutions and roles through formal or informal criteria for entry and exit, through expectations of how roles are to be performed, and through sanctions for role performance" (55). Because of the way age is constitutive of the social order, including the distribution of power, wealth and property, aging trajectories—in their institutionalization, restrictions and constraints, social meaning and social roles—are highly sensitive to social change. Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham (2007) argue that "periods of pronounced social change have often seen increased concern with age" (6). Looking at age-inscriptions therefore provides a lens for understanding broader processes of societal change.

Triggered by often very small modifications in the social order, alterodox age-inscriptions occur and sometimes rapidly become social norms, as they are shared within social networks and become more coherent and stable, a process which may result in a new dominant codification around age. This increases the process of change. Becoming a norm might mean the integration of several inscriptions. For example, for the age-inscription of caring grandfathers to become a new social norm, there might have to be new discourses of masculinity, continued valuation of fertility and the employment of parents, and societal developments which reduce state support for childcare and increase the kin-work of the aged and retired. Therefore, age-inscriptions are not only highly sensitive to modifications of the social order, but also cause and accelerate ongoing change.

## The Need for Age-Inscription

When enacted, social norms are put into use in a particular situation, to help interpret what is going on (as in Goffman's notion of "frame" [1986]) and guide subsequent action. They provide people with goals in relation to such action and help them understand their responses to such situations. However, a dominant discourse or social norm may be insufficient to justify or explain a particular response, causing another script to be mobilized (Swidler 2001). The friction between a social norm and the "balky world" (Sewell 2005, 179) in which it is mobilized is one of the causes of alterodox age-inscriptions.

Various theorists have been interested in processes of changing social orders and their relation to changing emotions (as pioneers, see Medick and Sabeau 1984). Raymond Williams used the term “structures of feelings” to refer to emergent feelings and thoughts, born of lived experience, that do not fit a received worldview or hegemony. Because of the patterned ways that experience does not match that worldview, the resulting feelings, thoughts, and actions are also patterned. These can be confused and unarticulated, manifesting themselves as “an unease, stress, a displacement, a latency: the moment of conscious comparison has not yet come, often not yet coming” (Williams 1982, 130). Jean and John Comaroff describe the same process:

It is the realm of partial recognition, of inchoate awareness, of ambiguous perception, and, sometimes, of creative tension: that liminal space of human experience in which people discern acts and facts but cannot or do not order them into narrative descriptions or even into articulate conceptions of the world; in which signs and events are observed, but in a hazy, translucent light; in which individuals or groups know that something is happening to them but find it difficult to put their fingers on quite what it is. (1991, 29)

It is this transitional, perhaps liminal, period in which people respond to existing social norms about aging with chaotic and inarticulate feelings and thoughts by changing their practices and behavior which we term *alterodox age-inscription*. It is the moment when new social relations may emerge. Although a new vision of society, personhood, and social roles are implicit in these practices, they are not necessarily a kind of resistance in the way hidden transcripts are (Scott 1985).

In the next stage of organizing the alterodox age-inscription, people may then begin to try to make such “unease” coherent and organized, finding new language to talk about their new patterns of behavior.

## The Types of Processes in the Formation and Generation of Age-Inscription

We highlight several processes by which social change occurs in relation to age-inscriptions, although we will not cover all the possibilities and variants. Here, we identify processes based on 1) substituting adjacent relations, 2) mixing of discourses in which heterodoxy becomes orthodoxy, 3) organizing unease discursively, or 4) maintaining a social norm through alterodox age-inscription.

1) *Substitution of adjacent relations*. Changes in the organization of caring for the older person can occur through the substitution of similar persons, without discourses reflecting these organizational changes in practice. Häberlein’s contribution to this special issue illustrates the ways that neighbors substitute for the daily care of migrant children in northern Togo, even as the discourse of care for older adults continues to highlight the significance of children—not neighbors. Cati Coe (2013a, 2012), in earlier work on conflicts concerning whether children were slaves, pawns, or foster children in the colonial Gold Coast, similarly argued that care norms could change through the substitutions of adjacent relations. In yet a third example when grandmothers in Ecuador take care of their grandchildren whose mothers have migrated abroad, the children tend to normalize this difference by representing their grandmothers as their mothers to their friends, schoolmates, and teachers (Rae-Espinoza 2011). The slippage between categories of persons seen as similar—whether persons of a certain age, gender, or generation—thus allows people to maintain a discourse which conforms to social norms, even as they enact an alterodox age-inscription in practice and behavior.

2) *Mix of discourses, in which sometimes heterodoxy becomes orthodoxy*. People can mix orthodox and heterodox discourses. Laura Ahearn (2001a) shows how “newer” ideals of love and personal compatibility co-exist with

“older” notions that marriage is determined by fate in Nepal. For example, a Nepalese woman mixes the two idioms of fate and choice in explaining her marriage, “We didn’t dislike each other enough to break up. This is my fate, I said, see? . . . Well, for myself it was written that I would marry; if it hadn’t been, I would have left him, see?” (Ahearn 2001a, 110). Mixing discourses leads to the emergence of new discourses and the elision of the differences between the new and the old. In these processes, formerly heterodox discourses may also become the dominant or orthodox discourse or practice. Erdmute Alber, Jeannett Martin, and Tabea Häberlein (2010; Alber 2011) showed how the trousseau was introduced among peasant Lokpa in northwest Benin about forty years ago, when some of them saw this practice among neighboring ethnic groups. As these trousseaus of modern consumer goods such as beds, “modern” pots, and other household things were highly attractive, little by little, girls started to leave their home region in order to work in the cities as domestic workers. Today, the ongoing norm of living youth is to work in urban households to acquire a trousseau, which almost all girls of the Lokpa region fulfill. The heterodoxy, namely the girls themselves acquiring the dowry through migration, has become the new orthodoxy, and a former age-inscription has become a dominant norm, namely that a girl needs to migrate to become an adult.

3) *Organization of unease discursively through comparisons and hierarchies.* When people generate new practices—like caring as a grandfather—they may begin to name, justify, and organize those practices. One strategy by which they can order their experiences is by creating hierarchies, comparisons, and dichotomies: for example, “this was the way of the past, this is now,” or “we do this, they do that” (Sewell 2005). In Thelen’s work in Romania (2015), she noted how Romanians tended to criticize Germans for putting their older relatives into institutions while the Romanians tried to keep them at home. Lawrence Cohen (1998) similarly noted Indian evaluations of the “bad family”—the modernized and Western-oriented Indian family—which did not take care of their aging parents. These hierarchies are unstable and can be easily inverted: while seemingly intransigent in criticism of an Other, they seem to be a step in the process of integrating new ideas and practices. Thus, ten years after the original research, Thelen (2015) noted that with the out-migration of Romanian women to care for Germans in their homes, Romanians began to place their older relatives in institutions and praised the Germans. Similarly, two decades after Cohen’s research, Sarah Lamb (2009) showed that Indians were far more open to non-familial care environments and had adapted institutional care homes associated with the Western family to concepts like the ashram and the joint family household. In her contribution to this special issue, Coe discusses Ghanaians’ openness to new practices of care for older adults, even though they associate these practices with the West and as antithetical to “the Ghanaian traditional family.” Thus, although these dichotomies and hierarchies of age trajectories seem rigid and can be articulated quite passionately, they can collapse or be inverted quite rapidly.

4) *Maintenance of a social norm through alterodox age-inscription.* People might maintain a social norm through new practices. Häberlein’s and Alber’s articles in this volume provide examples: Häberlein argues that the intergenerational contract is maintained through migrants sending gifts and foodstuffs to their parents in the villages in order to help those who remain to care for an older person. Alber shows that in Benin, the old and dominant norm that children should take care of their older parents can be fulfilled in a new way. Those who have lived a middle-class life style, including the expectation of living independently, do not always want to move into the households of their children when they age. Alber mentions the case of a retired man who was unable to afford finishing the construction of his house. Instead of taking him into his own household, as the dominant norm would suggest, his son helped him financially to finish building his own house. With this action, he enabled his father to continue living independently, at the same time as he fulfilled the social norm of caring for the parent.

In our view, these four types—the substitution of adjacent relations, the mixture of discourses in which heterodoxy becomes orthodoxy, the organization of unease discursively, and the maintenance of a social norm through alterodoxy—constitute the main ways by which age-inscription occurs.

## Actors and Institutions

The making of new age inscriptions can be driven by practices of older people themselves, through their agency or “the socially mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001b, 112). There are many examples in the literature. For instance, Martine Segalen (2016) has noted that grandparents in France feel compelled to invent new terms of address for themselves such as Papi and Mami, speaking to changes in the values and roles associated with grandparenthood and generating new possibilities for the performance of grandparenting. In China, older, uneducated women are often disparaged as unable to contribute to national wellbeing, unlike younger, well-educated persons “of quality,” but some older people fostering disabled children position themselves as sacrificing for the nation through their care (Raffety 2017). Similarly, Liesl Gambold’s contribution to this special issue discusses how the baby boom generation is expected and desires to age in a DIY (Do-It-Yourself) way. This, Gambold argues, gives them simultaneously the freedom to develop new paths of aging, but also the pressure of caring for themselves. Several articles illustrate a high level of older people’s agency in shaping age-inscription, but in situations constrained by larger structural forces shaped by social norms.

However, it is not always older people’s agency alone that create new age-inscriptions. They can also be socially mediated by cohort members (Riley and Riley 1986). Another possibility is that the actions of caring others are key, as Coe and Häberlein in this issue show. Therefore, age-inscription is not always a sign of an older person’s agency.

Inscriptions also come from institutions, to the extent that institutionalized norms generate unexpected and unsought-for practices. Both individuals and states construct narratives, and these exist dynamically and dialogically with each other (Borneman 1992, 285). Laws and regulations of aging through retirement policies and social security policies directly regulate the social and economic conditions through which aging is framed. We are interested in the interpretations, appropriations, or consequences of these regulations. For instance, the introduction of a pension system for all older people in South Africa has led to the emergence of an age-inscription of investing a portion of the pensions of older persons into household food security and the schooling of the children (Case and Menendez 2007). Or, in the United States, the age at which one is eligible to receive Social Security is not meant to push people into retirement. Yet, in her research on Ghanaian care workers in the United States, Coe (2017b) found that many formulated their retirement around when they would be eligible to receive Social Security, in part because they were working in physically strenuous jobs. Furthermore, the state regulation of aging can generate alterodox age-inscriptions in response. Alber (this issue) observes that for many state officials from northern Benin working in the capital in the south, starting the phase of retirement is associated with the inscription of moving back to northern Benin and thus relocating the household.

Age-inscriptions emerge from state policies, individuals, kin, and cohorts and are negotiated by older persons and others in everyday contexts and in relation to social norms. These dialogues are sometimes with other age scripts and age-related discourses from the present and the past, including, as we noted above, those of different societies or different levels of societal organization, whether kin networks, the state, or other social organizations such as religious entities. This is especially true in situations where transnational migration and media make such images and knowledge available.

The reconfiguration of aging trajectories through age-inscription is not only a response to social change but also generates social change. Changes in one person's life course affect others. For example, the active rejection of grandmotherhood by some middle-aged and older African-Americans had intergenerational ripple effects, as the care burden was shifted to great-grandmothers or the teenage mothers (Hagestad and Burton 1986). Mette Line Ringstedt (2008) argues similarly, showing that Tanzanian teenage mothers try to make their mothers the responsible caregivers.

Persons, including older persons, affect the social order in which they live, as they pursue their own projects (Ortner 2006). This is especially visible in the case of relatively wealthy older people in the Global North who are part of the "do-it-yourself generation" (Gambold, this issue), but also true in other contexts. If, for instance, older people in South Africa decide to invest parts of their pensions into the education of their grandchildren, they are also affecting the social order in which they live (Case and Menendez 2007). However, as in other matters of social life, power and wealth affect the ability to generate and share age-inscription. Thus, an examination of age-inscription is a crucial way to understand otherwise unnoticed and unremarked-upon processes of social change.

### Personal Subjectivity, the Body, and the Material World in Age-Inscription

Dominant norms are not simply expressed, but also affect personal subjectivity and embodiment as well as the physical landscape. The term *habitus*, proposed first by Marcel Mauss (2006) in 1935 and further developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977), seeks to explain the ways that dominant norms become felt and embodied by individuals. Habitus, in Mauss's conception, is comprised of the everyday routines or bodily techniques of a person such as habits of brushing one's teeth or style of walking. Inculcated through previous experiences, these habits and routines are embedded in the body, a set of tastes and dispositions perhaps not even available to a person's consciousness, although Bourdieu thinks the habitus may be available to consciousness or undergirded by ideals that are discussed more explicitly within a community (like honor). For Bourdieu (1977), the habitus is "the cultivated disposition, inscribed in the body schema and in the schemas of thought," which disposes a person to act a particular way in a situation (15). The habitus is "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions* and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes, permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems" (Bourdieu 1977, 82-83, original italics). The habitus disposes people to act in a certain way but is flexible enough to be applied, through analogy, to new situations people face (Sewell 2005). We would add to this formulation the significance of the ways that social norms are embodied in the material world and physical landscape, such as through housing, as illustrated by the articles by Häberlein, Bedorf and Pauli, and Alber. Housing, by functioning as a kin-place, enables certain kinds of personal and kin routines and habits.

The past experience which Bourdieu attributes as the source of bodily inscription is one's birth or childhood kin (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). However, we think that embodied practice can be re-inscribed through shifting norms or even more transient, liminal age-inscription at any stage in the life course. Because Bourdieu conceptualized the habitus as formed most strongly in childhood by kin, the habitus seems resistant to historical analysis, or an exploration of how it changes through time, both within the course of a person's life course and across generations. Some theorists, and Bourdieu himself, have recognized that the habitus is inscribed through various social contexts. Jay MacLeod, for instance, in his study of adolescent boys growing up in a public housing complex in the United States (1995, 137-138), re-worked the notion of

the habitus, considering it to be multiply layered, constituted not only through the boys' family life, but structured through the boys' subsequent experiences with peers and school.

Habitus emphasizes bodily and unconscious dispositions, an important point to make, but which slights the moments when such dispositions become visible and discussed. As Jean and John Comaroff (1991) have argued, the historical moments when something commonsensical becomes the subject of commentary and when topics of debate become naturalized into bodily responses and reactions are important, because they signal change.

However, we think that there can be various levels of habitual embodiment also; in other words, embodiment does not simply signal *doxa*, or what is so dominant as to be commonsensical. Instead, some bodily and material practices may be so fragile that they have not yet obtained a discourse with patterned terms and representations; this is our sense of age-inscription. Thus, we consider inscription to be more flexible than the ways that the habitus or regimes of the body are normally conceived as reflecting the ways that people inscribe themselves into dominant discourses (Bourdieu 1977, Foucault 1980). Through age-inscription, then, we seek to capture this sense of indeterminacy and possibly liminality, at the level of discourse, in the body, and in the landscape.

## Age-Inscriptions in Times of Global Aging, Migration and the Temporalization of the Life Course

Age-inscription is an indicator of pressure points for social change and of the fact that dominant trajectories of aging are not or no longer working. Although these processes are continuously occurring in everyday social life, we argue that today three social conditions are particularly generative of age-inscriptions: firstly, the longer life spans of populations around the world, including in large parts of the Global South; secondly, migration and mobility, both international and regional, which are affecting the life-worlds of both migrants and non-migrants alike; and thirdly, processes of the temporalization and institutionalization of the life course.

### *Global Aging*

The UN's latest report on *World Population Aging* (2013) reports that not only are people living longer around the world, but that there is a shift in populations as a whole, in which the share of older persons has increased as a result of reduced fertility and mortality. The global proportion of older people (aged 60 years or over) increased from 9% in 1990 to 12% in 2013, with the share of older persons aged 80 years or over within the older population at 14 percent (up from 7% in 1950). They predict the proportion of older people to continue to grow, reaching 21% of the world population by 2050. Older persons are projected to exceed the number of children for the first time in 2047, mainly due to changes in life expectancy in less developed regions. Thus, not only are individuals adjusting to the longer life spans they are experiencing, but so too are societies and states adapting to a larger number of older adults.

Because of increasingly longer life spans in Europe over the past century, Peter Laslett argued (1980), "Our situation remains irreducibly novel; it calls for invention rather than imitation" (181). As people live longer, and with less risk of death at younger ages, they experience more overlap with the lives of their children and grandchildren and more accumulated experiences in general (Alber, Geissler, and Whyte 2004, Hagestad 1986, Hareven 1982). These characteristics have consequences for the construction and perception of old age but also for intergenerational relations. Although frailty and death were once experienced as

human conditions, their possibility looming at any point in the life course, particularly for women in their childbearing years, it is now more tightly associated with aging. People may experience four generations living simultaneously (Hagestad and Burton 1986). Alterodox age-inscriptions respond to the new experiences and related challenges of these new life-course expectations.

### *Mobility, Migration and Aging*

Migration and mobility are an important aspect of the contemporary world, affecting the lifeworlds of migrants and non-migrants alike, through an expansion of “the global horizon” in which people imagine themselves emplaced (Graw and Schielke 2012). Migration and mobility affect state as well as kin forms of intergenerational support. Because of migration, the coordination and synchronization of multiple life-courses—from the tasks of parenting balanced with work and employment of the middle generation, to the aging and greater leisure of the older generation, to the vulnerability and schooling of the youngest generation—need to be reworked (Dossa and Coe 2017), because lives are highly interdependent (Hagestad 1986; Hareven 1982), and lifetimes are intertwined (Alber, Geissler, and Whyte 2004). “New models of both personhood and intergenerational care” may need to be generated (Cole and Durham 2007, 13). For example, mothers of migrant women may be kin-scripted to fill “the care slot,” provide childcare to grandchildren, and take care of the family house in the hometown (Leinaweaver 2010). New financial resources, such as remittances from migrants, may contribute to the outsourcing of the care of older adults to paid caregivers (Coe 2017a). And the loss of the migrant’s kin work may result in new fragility and uncertainty for older people, as Coe’s contribution to this special issue describes, or in neighbors’ substitution for migrant children, as Häberlein’s article argues. Finally, migration may change people’s goals in life, as the article by Bedorf and Pauli suggest, such that the house that they have built over their working years may not seem as attractive when they are ready to retire.

The articles illustrate how both migrants and non-migrants are the source of age-inscriptions in response to situations affected by migration. We do not view migrants as more agentive than non-migrants, as is so common in the migration literature. Even those who stay at home in the context of ongoing migration adjust, change, and take on new age-scripts, and have their doxa challenged (Baldassar and Merla 2014, Hirsch 2003). Thus, we argue that an examination of age-inscriptions is a key window into understanding migration and mobility. The somewhat unformulated, experimental, and tentative practices around aging which we call alterodox age-inscriptions signals the lack of stability of this stage in the life course due to migration.

### *Processes of Temporalization and Institutionalization*

Responding to the longer life span, gerontologists have introduced new periodizations of aging. They divided *the old* into the *young old* and the *old old*, or the *young old*, *middle old*, and *very old* or *oldest old*. The variations in this terminology are indicative of its lack of normativity. Likewise, in Ghana, people distinguish between older people, but here on the basis of whether they are “strong” or “weak” physically, in terms of being able to farm or walk (*wɔn honam yɛ mmɛrew*). These formulations speak to attempts by various groups to make sense of the diversity of the older population who may span thirty years in age and have a wide variety of physical and mental capabilities and social and intergenerational relations.

There are other markers of temporality, such as widowhood rites, that exist almost everywhere (Goody 1962; Lamb 2000). In Euro-American societies, celebrations of decennial birthdays (seventy, eighty, ninety, one-hundred) for older people have become quite important. They signal significant age-related

transitions which have traveled into middle-class families all over the world. However, anthropologists and sociologists have also argued that there are amorphous norms and few rituals for aging in comparison to the transitions of childhood and youth, such as baptisms, confirmations, *quinceñeras*, graduation ceremonies, or childbirth (Rosow 1974). The elaborate rituals for children and youth may be connected to the greater institutionalization of this phase in the life course, because childhood and youth are seen as the preparation phase before adulthood, whereas old age is seen as the relatively free phase after work (Kohli 2009).<sup>i</sup>

In the relatively unstructured, somewhat vague (Myerhoff 1984) and extensive social phase of aging, new cultural meanings, new lifestyles, and new forms of intergenerational or institutional care arrangements about this life stage can potentially be created. This is why age-inscriptions happen in practice. For example, many older people in the United States use the inability to drive as signaling a major aging transition and a loss of autonomy and independence, just as they, as teenagers, used the acquisition of the driver's license to signal their adulthood. Yet there is often conflict over the timing of "giving up driving," with adult children taking away the keys of their parents against their will, signaling the lack of normativity over the timing of this important ritual. In Coe's more recent work on aging in the United States, an older woman told her that she had quit driving when she was ninety-five years old, because she thought it was "the appropriate time." Yet her sense of timing did not affect her husband's sense of the appropriate markers, who continued to drive into his late nineties. Thus, while there is a generalized social norm that older adults may lose their ability to drive, she has generated her own alterodox age-inscription related to the timing of giving up driving, and her sense of timing seems to be hers alone, or at least not shared with her husband. Furthermore, there is no ritual around the loss of driving or the taking away of car keys, despite its significant social meaning.

Every aging person encounters the many physiological, emotional, and social changes of aging (Brubaker 1986) as if they were new, because they are new to the individuals going through aging processes. Cole and Durham (2007) elaborate on this point, using Karl Mannheim's notion of "fresh contact." Mannheim's ground-breaking essay was written in 1928, affected by his impression of World War I, rapidly changing societies in Europe, and extremely distinct generational experiences. His main argument is that every new generation has a completely different worldview, knowledge, and experience of historical events. He suggests that there is a special historical force to the fresh contact of groups of people who come of age at the same time. Cole and Durham (2007) expand his concept to suggest that "every individual undergoes 'fresh contact' throughout his life" (18), not just in youth, for example through a change of residence or status. Gambold's and Alber's articles clearly show how a generation comes to handle aging anew: Gambold in her examination of the aging of baby boomers, who came of age during profound political changes as well as prosperity, and Alber in her research among a new generation of middle-class people from northern Benin.

Independent of his or her cohort, each person encounters aging as new to him or her and has to cope with those changes (Cole 2013). To the extent that aging is not elaborated institutionally or socially, then they have to generate their own meanings, perhaps with the help of their social networks, in the form of age-inscriptions. This instability makes aging ripe for institutionalization (Riley and Riley 1986). The transition to modernity in Europe was accompanied by a greater attention to chronological age and a standardization of the life course, which also led to greater individualization (Kohli 2009). The structuring of the life course was a major factor in structuring industrial and modern society as a whole. We argue that the institutionalization of the life course has created and is creating new rituals and *rites de passage* for aging, such as retirement or movement to be near children or grandchildren, to live in an area with a lower cost of living, or to return to one's hometown. The articles by Alber and Gambold in this issue describe an ongoing

process of institutionalizing the life phase of aging, indexing a broader process of the temporalization and institutionalization of the life course.

Thus, we argue that three major factors result in contemporary alterodox age-inscription and thereby shape actual ways of experiencing old age: the increasing length of the life course and the aging of the population as a whole; migration and mobility which is re-arranging the roles and obligations between the generations; and the temporalization and institutionalization of the life course which is changing the somewhat less structured phase of aging. This process is resulting in the creation of new meanings and temporalities, including the adoption of institutional temporalizations.

## Overview of the Special Issue

The articles in the special issue cover a variety of cases in West Africa (Benin, Togo, and Ghana), North America (the United States and Mexico) and Europe (the United Kingdom, France, and Spain), and thus cases in the Global North as well as in the Global South. They illustrate the different effects of internal and international migration, and highlight various ways that the state is involved in setting and changing aging norms. Some of the articles are more focused on retirement (Alber, Bedorf and Pauli, and Gambold), and others on the care of older persons (Häberlein, Coe), but they also illustrate how these issues are intertwined.

Coe examines why older people in Ghana are open to a new form of care through care institutions, associated with “the West” and which the orthodoxy generated by the government and NGOs considers antithetical to Ghanaian culture and forms of kin care. Coe argues that Ghanaian older people are more open to new ideas than their middle-aged children because they see that the intergenerational contract is fragile. Furthermore, they adapt the image of care facilities to their own ideals and goals, thus localizing a foreign social norm and sustaining a heterodox discourse.

Häberlein’s article examines the question of whether aged persons in three villages in northern Togo and Benin are cared for well. She shows that the social norm of gerontocracy is upheld. Despite a continued discourse about the role adult children play in providing daily care, some older people with migrant children are instead helped by their relatives in the village, with migrants fulfilling their care responsibilities through remittances. Although housing is organized by kinship, practices of care are more heterogeneous and not simply place-based. Häberlein thus discusses an alterodox age-inscription of care by neighbors which is obscured by a social norm about the role of adult children in providing care for older adults.

Alber’s article discusses the ways that middle-class people from northern Benin living in southern Benin are adopting a discourse of “retirement.” They are using this discourse to give coherence and organization to their new life trajectory—new for multiple reasons, including their prosperity in relation to an older generation, their migration to the city, as well as their longer life span.

The article by Bedorf and Pauli explains why retirement houses built by Mexican migrants in the United States lie empty. Developing the concept of kin-place, they describe the ways that migrants consider housing and kinship to be deeply intertwined and thus devote their resources to building a house in the hometown. At the same time, however, their children and grandchildren tie them increasingly to the United States, creating a different kind of kin-place that makes it difficult to retire to Mexico. The houses are an instantiation of a social norm, but their emptiness or even decay signifies that an alterodox age-inscription, for which there is no new language and much ambivalent emotion.

Gambold discusses a less ambivalent reconstruction of the life course, in which Americans and British are retiring to another country (Mexico for the Americans, and France and Spain for the British) because of the costs of retiring in their own country, but also because of the climate and comfort of the new places. This new practice is given legitimacy by a discourse popular among this generation of baby-boomers, the post-war generation born between 1946 and 1964, of making their own choices and managing their own lives. Such self-making is supported by neoliberal governance, in which there is little state support for senior citizens, and thus they have to find options through their own social and financial resources.

These articles illustrate some of the diverse processes of age-inscription, and the conditions under which they occur. They show some of the ways that older people, their kin, and their wider communities emplot their lives in terms of location and temporality, imagining stages of the life course and the roles of others in providing care. The articles examine different motivations for age-inscription, and illustrate varying levels of repercussions of age-inscriptions on social life and social change, including gender norms, intergenerational reciprocities, and political identifications: from the more fraught and ambivalent emotions expressed by those interviewed by Bedorf and Pauli, or the hopeful and confident assertions articulated by those interviewed by Alber, to the more triumphant narratives of those in Gambold's study. In other cases, like those discussed by Häberlein and Coe, a more quiet reorganizing of practices occurs. Through ethnographically rich case studies, the articles explore the tensions and resolutions generated by age-inscriptions, the impact of age-inscriptions on the lives of older men and women, and their relations with whom their lives are intertwined.

### Conclusion: A Need for Concepts that Illuminate the Indeterminacy of Social Life

Anthropologists have moved away from grand theories and claims and towards more indeterminate, nuanced conceptualizations of process and variation. We have discarded terms like "culture," "society," and "kinship systems" (Abu-Lughod 1991) replacing them with more processual terms like kinning (Howell 2006) or repertoire (Coe 2013b). The concept of age-inscription is a similar move, allowing anthropologists to study the emergence of new practices and discourses which are shared by more than one individual but have not attained the status of a social norm. Social norms reduce the randomness and uncertainty in life and create expected and predictable roles for the aged and their relations. They allow people to prepare for life changes, so that they are anticipated and internalized, rather than becoming crises, and evaluate themselves against the expected life course. The concept of age-inscription allows us to highlight the indeterminacy and processual nature of social life and relations, which is particularly important in the study of global aging, in which so many people are encountering a longer life course for the first time in their lives within the contexts of increasing migration and greater temporalization of the life course.

### NOTES

<sup>i</sup> For example, Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg (2016) shows how Cameroonian mothers in Germany are combining German and Cameroonian rituals of childbirth and childhood, in part because of the level of regulations regarding medical care for childbirth and infants in Germany.

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