



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin



The Faculty of Arts,
Humanities and Social Sciences
Inaugural Lectures

Professor Virpi Timonen

Professor of
Social Research and Theory

**On growing old
in the 21st century**

7 OCTOBER 2026



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Welcome

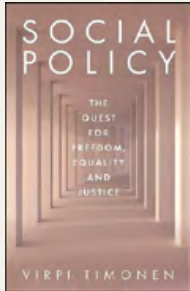
It is the tradition in Trinity College Dublin that newly appointed Professors are invited to give an inaugural lecture.

The lecture provides an opportunity to showcase their achievements in research, innovation, engagement and teaching activities before members of the University community, invited stakeholders and the general public. An inaugural lecture is a significant event in an academic staff member's career.

The Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences is proud to present the inaugural lecture of Professor Virpi Timonen.



About Professor Virpi Timonen



Virpi Timonen completed her DPhil in Politics at the University of Oxford (Magdalen College) in 2001. Her research spans social policies in ageing societies, sociology of intergenerational relations, and qualitative methodology. Her investigations of intergenerational relations and grandparenting have shown how older adults contribute to family and societal solidarity but also disrupt established roles. Professor Timonen has theorised how successful and active ageing are socially constructed through policymaking; her theory of *Model Ageing* takes a critical stance on paradigms that currently dominate policymaking for older adults. Her highly cited work on qualitative research methods has made grounded theory more accessible for researchers across disciplines and substantive fields. Her 2025 book *Social Policy: The Quest for Freedom, Equality and Justice* (Cambridge: Polity, open access) sets out the ideational constituents of present and future welfare societies.



Professor Timonen's current research, funded by an Advanced Grant from the European Research Council (ERC), is generating new insights into material and environmental legacy-making among co-existing generations. *Small Worlds: Theorising Material and Environmental Legacies* (Cambridge University Press, 2026, open access) presents her original concept of legacy-making: future-oriented ideation and actions concerning the material and environmental effects humans leave behind. Recent and forthcoming work interrogates environmental relationalities – how humans understand 'the environment' – and interconnections between how humans think about, and how they act in relation to, their material possessions and environmental effects in the era of climate turbulence.



Professor Virpi Timonen
Professor of
Social Research and Theory
BA, MPhil, DPhil

Abstract

On growing old in the 21st century

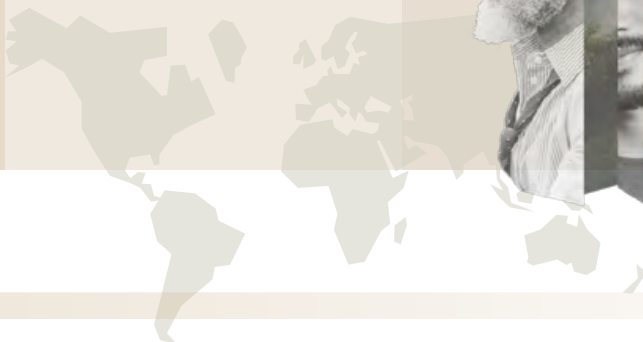
This lecture examines the demographic, social, and institutional transformations underlying population ageing in high-income societies, and considers the implications for how growing old is understood and governed. Each successive generation has, with few exceptions, lived longer than the last, and a substantial proportion of the youngest cohorts' members can expect to live into their second century, an unprecedented prospect. Drawing on Professor Timonen's research on ageing families, care, and social policies, the lecture develops three interconnected arguments. First, social institutions have not adapted adequately to the reality of extended lifespans. Normative assumptions about education, employment, retirement, and the sequencing of the life course remain oriented to shorter lives, generating avoidable strain, particularly for mothers and grandmothers navigating reproduction, career-building, and caregiving within the same compressed decades.

Second, ageing is deeply relational: resilience and wellbeing in later life are not merely personal achievements but products of social relationships. Care is an inherently relational and essential human activity, yet the need for care remains an inadequately collectivised social risk, disproportionately absorbed by (older) women and low-paid workers. Third, longer lives prompt us to reassess individual and collective relationships to time, generativity, and intergenerational responsibility – and to consider extending that responsibility beyond the human lifespan to ecological and future-oriented horizons. The lecture makes the case against individualised prescriptions for “successful ageing” and calls for a reorientation of institutions, policy, and social imagination towards the collective, relational, intergenerational, and more-than-human dimensions of long lives.



The School of Social Work and Social Policy

The School brings together scholars from the related social science disciplines of social work and social policy, united by a shared interest in the nature, evolution, and delivery of welfare services broadly defined. Its ethos emphasises multi-disciplinary scholarship, research-led teaching, and the integration of teaching, research, and policy influence, alongside a commitment to public service, pastoral care, and international engagement.

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Legacies ERC project logo



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