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Introduction: The Future as a Topic in Ageing Research

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The Future as a Topic in Ageing Research

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> I hope I die before I get old.
>
> *My Generation,* The Who
>
> I hardly ever think about getting old and how long my life will be because it depresses me. Not to mention the fact that I see it as a waste of time. Why think about when I'm going to die while I'm still in my prime of living? I should be thinking about today and not tomorrow.
>
> Research participant, quoted in Altpeter and Marshall 2003: 748

Older people are sometimes assumed not to be future-oriented, while younger people often assume that to talk about the future in the presence of an older person is either insensitive or irrelevant. Evidence from research suggests that such assumptions are far off the mark; nevertheless they affect how the future is spoken of or engaged with by researchers. The four papers included in this volume address these contradictions, focusing appropriately – given the 'The Representation of Older People in Ageing Research' series in which they are included – on methodological issues arising from asking people to imagine the future and their own ageing.

The chapters in this book were originally presented as papers at the 'Imagining Futures' seminar, organised by The Centre for Ageing and Biographical Studies (CABS) and the Centre for Policy on Ageing (CPA). All the authors had been asked to consider the following questions:

- What research methods can be used to help people think about the future?
- How has the future been conceptualised and articulated in research targeted at older people?
- Is it possible to move people beyond stereotyped and negative expectations of their own ageing and of later life?
- Do particular types of research methods affect how people tend to envisage the future and their own older age?
- What are the ethical issues in asking people to think about their own ageing?

The four contributors were invited to lead the discussion either because the topic had been a focus of their research and writing, or because they had identified the future as an emergent topic within their recent or current research. In what follows we provide a brief overview of the future in ageing research, what might influence researchers and researched when approaching the topic, and why the future should matter to researchers, before providing summaries of the four chapters.

We might expect that people who are 'middle-aged' and 'older' would have less difficulty imagining what life will be like when they are old than people who are currently 'young', since their own old age is less distant. Certainly we know that younger people often have particularly negative and homogenised visions of old age (Kimuna *et al.* 2005; Mosher-Ashley and Ball 1999; Phoenix and

Sparkes 2006, 2007; Scott, Minichiello, and Browning 1998) and we might expect this to mean that younger people would have greater difficulty in imagining being old themselves. However, it is also well documented that even people who would usually by categorised as 'old' or 'older' on the basis of their chronological age often speak as if they are not themselves old (Bultena and Powers 1978) as, for example, when a 90 year-old describes a 70 year-old as an 'old dear' (Jones 2006). It looks as if the difficulty of imagining yourself as old extends across the life course.

Perceptions of what the future might be or how it might be experienced are closely linked to ideas about ageing which, as many gerontologists and other scholars have argued is predominantly ageist (Butler 1969; Bytheway 1995, 2005, 2011; Bytheway and Johnson 1990; Copper 1997; Macdonald and Rich 1984). By this they generally mean that people who are categorised as 'old' or 'older' are systematically undervalued and discriminated against. If people generally fear and devalue old age, it is perhaps not surprising if they don't want to put themselves in the category 'old person', even in their imagination. Researchers too may find it hard to shake off presumptions and latent stereotypes, which they may have internalised. Such distancing is bolstered by the association and reality of growing old with bodily change and decline and a loss, for example, of sexual attractiveness, especially for women (Sontag 1978). Since we live in a culture which places a high value on youthful types of health and sexual activity, it is understandable if people fear association with what is understood to be the opposite (Heilbrun 1997).

Gerontologists have examined the ways in people distance their current selves from the state of being old. For example, Featherstone and Hepworth (1989, 1991) identify a common trope of the 'mask of ageing': someone in middle age or later life looking at themselves in the mirror and feeling as if the mask of an old person had appeared on top of their true face. This suggests that their true self is not their older self, further supporting the idea that people might find it hard to imagine their own ageing because of their fear of being old. Bytheway elaborates this in a chapter, 'Growing old in an ageing body' where he argues that to see age as a mask is to see being old as 'an affliction as if from an acute attack of an external virus, one that masks … the human body' (Bytheway 2011: 94). He then goes on to discuss ways in which people attempt to mask and resist what they perceive to be the effects of age, citing Twigg's research into clothing as a form of 'age-resistance' (Bytheway 2011: 98).

Resisting the undeniable changes which growing older brings has led to a vast industry producing anti-ageing products and research pursuing biological attempts to arrest the process of ageing. The activity of the bio-gerontologists who assume that there is some kind of scientific fix which can be applied to ageing, have been criticised by Vincent who argues that this is part of a cultural position rather than a scientific argument as it 'devalues old age as a final coda to life' (Vincent 2006: 693). With death being demographically almost exclusive to late life in Western societies, the link between old age and death (Victor 2010: 66) inevitably haunts any consideration of the future where older people are involved. Finitude is dealt with in different ways, as the two quotations at the beginning of this introduction illustrate, and rarely recognised or welcomed. However, as Bytheway suggests, 'Death is seen in gerontology – if at all – as the end of the ageing person's life rather than as a feature in the lives of those who continue to survive' (Bytheway 2011:195). The result is that the taken-for-grantedness of death's association with old age, combined with aversion to thoughts of finitude has resulted in the neglect of the future as a suitable topic for investigations into late life.

If imagining or accepting one's own old age can be so difficult, should we even bother to attempt it? Why does it matter that people should be able to imagine it?

While people find it hard to accept that they will ever really be old, it is also clear that many younger people worry in a general way about growing older (Neikrug 2003) and some also expect old age to be miserable (Lacey, Smith and Ubel, 2006). Lacey *et al.* (2006) argue that this expectation can lead to poor decision making in the present because a future aged self is not valued: if you can't really imagine that you will ever be old, there is not point taking actions now that will protect your future old self. This is argued to be one contributory factor in some behaviours which have negative effects in the long term, such as smoking or not taking the need to think about a pension seriously. If people do not expect to live long, and are not invested in making their future life happy, there is less reason to defer current gratifications (Goltz 2008).

Lacey *et al.* (2006) and Neikrug (2003) also argue that younger people's failure to imagine that they will ever be old reinforces ageism, inter-generational conflict and misunderstanding. If you do not really believe that you will ever be old yourself, it is harder to treat the older people you meet as if they are real and complex individuals like yourself. On the other hand, evidence from the British Social Attitudes Survey suggests that though the very old are generally viewed positively, this is not the case for attitudes towards younger people. If older people themselves hold negative views about younger people this will be discouraging to hopes for the persistence of any kind of inter-generational solidarity or empathetic understanding between the generations (NatCen Social Research 2010). More encouragingly, Jones' research with bisexual-identified adults suggests that creative research methods can be helpful in enabling people to imagine their own future (Jones 2011, 2012).

At a collective and societal level, people's failure to imagine their own ageing might be argued to contribute to some of the problems that arise for some older people, such as the lack of high-quality, affordable care for frail older people. Many surveys have found that people underestimate the cost of care in later life. For example, a Department of Health survey in 2009 found that 51% of people estimated the cost of residential care in old age at less than £10,000 per year – the average is actually £30,000 per year (Bowcott 2009). It seems possible that some of this systematic underestimation arises from people's unwillingness to think about their own old age in realistic and concrete ways.

The four chapters which make up this collection each take up a different aspect of researching the future, with contributions which engage with the dilemmas outlined here drawing on their own theorising and research.

Barbara Adam takes a philosophical approach when she suggests that people discuss the future in four ways: future as 'fate, fortune, fiction and fact'. By 'future as fate' she means the belief that the future has been pre-determined by gods or ancestors. Adam characterises this approach as one that was prevalent in pre-modern societies but that it has been replaced by the idea of the future which can be owned, shaped and managed: that is future as fortune.

Future as fiction emerges from conditions of change and instability, when the future is difficult to predict and continuities based in the past and the present are elusive. Adam develops the idea of future as fact to account for the way future planning is already shaped by the future taking and

making of our predecessors, 'Our present was their uncertain future…'. Her ideas of the future are, she argues, 'multi-layered' and present challenges for social scientists and for their subjects as they live out lives determined by repetition, finitude and change. In relation to older people this means entering 'emotional, moral and spiritual territories' fraught with difficulties for the researcher.

Cassandra Phoenix, in her chapter, tackles approaches to helping people to think about the future by means of narrative gerontology, or life story interview. Her aim was to encourage people to talk about their ideas of their own long term futures; however, this turned out not to be as straightforward as she had expected. Both young and older adults appeared initially not to be able to present accounts drawn from their imaginations as to what their futures might be like. Adopting a range of methods, including visiting locations, using objects as prompts and 'auto-photography' she was able to move beyond present situations and identities into considering participants' futures with them.

Her research into bodybuilding, with younger and older people, led into contrasting the conceptualisations of the future which both groups held and to use the more positive stories told by older bodybuilders with groups of younger people. These 'counter-narratives' (Andrews and Bamberg 2004), conflicting with prevailing negative stereotypes of physical ageing, had the effect, she argues, of opening up reflections amongst the younger people in ways that led them to review and reconsider their own and others' assumptions. Future as fate, fortune, fiction and fact is apparent in the way Phoenix developed her research and in its outcomes, as younger and older people engage with physical change in their own and others' bodies and as each generation anticipates what lies ahead. She argues the need for 'a range of qualitative methods' as well as interaction between generations, using stories told by both younger and older people.

Linda Pickard's research into the future draws on quantitative approaches using large-scale data sets. With funding through the New Dynamics of Ageing Programme she has been drawing on data from the General Household Survey to consider future provision of family care for older people in England, up to 2041. She has looked at both receipt and provision of care by younger adults to older family members who have a disability. She outlines her methods, identifying the role of projections based on assumptions as to trends, both demographic and in relation to care relationships. Using these projections and modelling future supplies of informal care she concludes that a 'care gap' is the likely outcome, a product of the 'ageing of the baby boomers'.

She draws two contrasting scenarios of the future from her findings, suggesting that neither will be attractive to current and future cohorts of older people. She also concludes, however, that research based on current assumptions as to the nature of care in the future may not be reliable, given possible policy shifts as well as changes to what is meant by a key concept, 'informal care'. Pickard's chapter reminds us of the practical difficulties of researching the future and of the need to be aware of ways in which the facts of a society's future may be embedded in the lives of current generations of older people and their families.

Finally, in her chapter, Joanna Bornat describes how, in a qualitative longitudinal research project, 'The Oldest Generation' part of the Timescapes programme, she and Bill Bytheway explored the future with members of the oldest generation, over the age of 75, through interviews, diaries and photographs. She shows how the future was immanent in many of the accounts presented, mostly unspoken but present in accounts of planning against adversity, minimising risk and maintaining

control. She suggests that as researchers they were affected by public construction of risk for older people, awareness of finitude and ways in which forward thinking is measured. Part way through the project they chose to deliberately invite participants to talk about their own futures. She draws on ensuing interview data to show how the future became explicitly and also implicitly present in the exchange, in multiple forms, concluding that researchers could benefit from reflecting on their own and older people's futures, recognising inhibitions and avoidance. At the same time, she argues that close reading of qualitative data, with a future orientation, can yield evidence of imagination and approaches to futurity which may be helpful to families, carers, wider society and older people themselves.

Taken together, these chapters demonstrate that the future is an important topic in gerontological research. Imagining the future is an everyday activity that is undertaken both by people who are approaching the likely end of their life course and by people who are not yet at that point. The ways in which the future can be imagined are shaped by sociological, philosophical and personal factors. It is entirely appropriate for researchers to investigate the meanings and consequences of particular imaginings. Doing so tells us important things about the social construction of age, ageing and the life course.

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