

ENTERTEXT

'There is no doubt that I'm OLD': Everyday Narratives of Ageing

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Abstract

The 3-year Fiction and the Cultural Mediation of Ageing Project (FCMAP), led by a research team in the Brunel Centre for Contemporary Writing (BCCW), and conducted as part of the New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) programme, began on 1st May 2009 and finished at the end of August 2012. This paper briefly outlines the research and some of its findings in order to illustrate some of the advantages of its particular narrative approach to ageing and issues that concern social gerontologists among others including policymakers, stakeholders and older subjects themselves. First, it discusses the responses of members of the University of the Third Age (U3A) to reading novels with depictions of older subjects such as David Lodge's *Deaf Sentence* and Jim Crace's *Arcadia*. Second, it discusses responses to the Mass Observation (MO) directive of 2009, 'Books and You', which was commissioned by the FCMAP team and situates these responses within the wider context of replies to other MO directives on ageing. Finally, the paper concludes by discussing the changing nature of third and fourth age subjectivity and the importance of narrative understanding to the experience of ageing.

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Philip Tew and Nick Hubble

The 3-year Fiction and the Cultural Mediation of Ageing Project (FCMAP), led by a research team in the Brunel Centre for Contemporary Writing (BCCW), and conducted as part of the New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) programme, began on 1st May 2009 and finished at the end of August 2012.¹ This paper briefly outlines the research and some of its findings in order to illustrate some of the advantages of its particular narrative approach to ageing and issues that concern social gerontologists among others including policymakers, stakeholders and older subjects themselves.

The initial FCMAP research questions were concerned with investigating (a) the relationship between cultural representations of, and social attitudes to, ageing and (b) the potential of elective reading and critical reflection on selected narratives by older subjects for engendering new ways of thinking about ageing. In meeting this second objective, it was necessary to develop an approach which limited the influence of the research team on the participants as much as possible in order to foster autonomous thinking processes on the part of the respondents. Therefore, since the FCMAP team had reservations concerning direct interviews with volunteers, at least in the first phase of the project, as these would not only incorporate and represent an unequal set of relationships, their vocabulary and emphases might well convey a set of desired coordinates or implicit preferences. Instead, following Holstein and Winkler’s advice ‘to worry less about large-scale generalisations and more about getting the story right’² FCMAP assembled an innovative methodological bricolage of the personal narratives, critical reflections on group encounters and responses to fiction and other media by our volunteer

participants in order to reveal experiences of, and opinions concerning ageing, that normally remain hidden to public view.

In particular, FCMAP drew on the tradition of Mass Observation (MO), the social research organisation dedicated to compiling an ‘anthropology of ourselves’ which was founded in 1937 by Tom Harrisson, Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge and ran in its first phase until 1949.³ Their projects included a study of the industrial working class in Bolton (‘Worktown’) and the establishment of a National Panel of volunteers, who answered monthly questionnaires about various aspects of their everyday lives and were, from the outbreak of the War, asked to keep day-to-day personal diaries; the most famous of these was that of Nella Last, memorably portrayed by Victoria Wood in the 2006 TV drama *Housewife 49*.⁴ MO was unique in terms of its participative research techniques, capacity to simultaneously reveal and interrogate narratives of everyday life, modes of data collection and pioneering analysis of public opinion.⁵ In 1939 they wrote:

Opinion is made in two ways. It is made by each single person looking at the facts, as far as they are available, and then framing his own judgment on them. It is also made by the reaction of each single person to the opinions of other people.⁶

Their analysis involved sifting and accounting for the influence of imposed cultural views upon personal perspectives thereby allowing them to reveal private opinion at odds with publicly-accepted norms as, for example, in their prediction of the 1945 Labour election victory eighteen months in advance.⁷ Diaries of course have the potential to unlock something of such private views, even more essential in a ‘politically correct’ age where people may be wary of offering candid public utterances. FCMAP set up two major studies to give voice directly to older subjects by using MO diary-keeping techniques: one involving the present-day MO and the other ninety volunteers from the older age ranges organised into reading and discussion groups.

The current MO project was started in 1981 and is therefore one of the longest-running longitudinal life-writing projects anywhere in the world. Three times a year, MO participants receive a seasonal “directive,” which is a set of open questions that invite them to write freely and discursively about their views and experiences. For this particular study, a directive, ‘Books and You’, was issued in Winter 2009 concerning, amongst other things, participants’ responses to representations of their own age-group in political and media discourse. The directive was issued to approximately 600 people and 193 written responses were returned. In conjunction with earlier directives concerning ageing in Winter 1992 and Autumn 2006, it was possible to collate longitudinal case studies and qualitative data regarding how ageing is understood in society, how this differs between generations and how social expectations regarding ageing relate to self-understanding.

For the second strand of the study, eight reading groups were set up involving 80 volunteers, aged from their early 60s to their 90s, in the following district associations of the University of the Third Age (U3A): Banstead, Camden Town, Highgate/North London 1, Highgate/North London 2, Kingston, South East London, Tower Hamlets and Waterloo. Over the period of a year (2009-10), all groups read nine nominated novels published from 1944 to the present, a period that corresponded largely with the adult life experiences of the participants, and the groups met once a month to discuss each book and the various ageing-related issues arising. The novels were (in order of reading) David Lodge’s *Deaf Sentence* (2008), Jim Crace’s *Arcadia* (1992), Caryl Phillips’s *A Distant Shore* (2003), Hanif Kureishi’s *The Body* (2002), Trezza Azzopardi’s *Remember Me* (2004), Angela Carter’s *Wise Children* (1991), Barbara Pym’s *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), Norah Hoult’s *There Were No Windows* (1944) and Fay Weldon’s *Chalcot Crescent* (2009). Groups were allowed to substitute one book from this list with another from a ‘B’ list. These novels were chosen to provide a range of contrasting vantage points on later life, and also for the thought-provoking ways in which their presentation might engage and mobilize the readers’ attitudes and assumptions. Respondents encountered a series of often contrasting and

complex fictional narratives that were focused on the experience of ageing that offered a truly multiple range of perspectives, but they still incorporated many existing social values.⁸

Clearly most non-academic people leading what they regard as their 'ordinary' lives do not obtain their view of older subjects through matters such as demographics, statistics, academic research, or even in most cases any lived experience of the elderly. They are used to producing opinions and the process of narrative exchange, that is the summation of ideas through anecdotes and short personal stories or commentary. One reading group member [WCM 008] ruminates that 'Certainly the perception of ageing has changed remarkably in the time [last fifty to sixty years] – 70 is the new 50, though not perhaps to those under 30.' Another participant in the same group [WMC 0011] reflected a change in that:

The present young and middle aged seem to share interests inside as well as outside the home to a greater extent and definite roles are now rarely restricted to one sex. Also as jobs are unlikely to be for life and career changes common and accepted, the perception of age related ideas and behaviour might become more flexible for both men and women of that generation.

Nevertheless, as the same participant reflects, the first book encountered by all groups, David Lodge's *Deaf Sentence*, the story of a sixty-something retired academic and his eighty-something father, conveys much of the negativity of longevity, 'He notes personal and domestic neglect, isolation, and general shrinking of interest in the outside world and apprehension and dislike of change.' And society would appear to still associate growing old primarily with such aspects as isolation and frailty. However, many respondents clearly believed that this kind of attitudinal tendency might in part predetermine such outcomes or the general conformity to these images. As one reading group participant reflected:

Elderly people usually have less energy and ambition than younger people so tend to socialise less and care less if society leaves them alone. (I suspect that sometimes people, esp. Men, who don't want to socialize – and these tend to be retired – are happy to live in such a mess that visiting their home is an embarrassing experience and a stressful one, for others).

This response was fairly characteristic of those reacting to *Deaf Sentence*, where the division between the third-age son and the fourth-age father offered a ready-made template to members of the U3A reading groups in discussing societal concerns with respect to age, which meant although they might otherwise reject these as stereotypical, instead they ascribed them to the older figure with whom they did not personally identify. Our critical interest therefore became focused not just on why the problematizing, prejudicial social viewpoint continued to predominate seemingly amongst what might be regarded as the defining characteristics used to position elderly subjects and to construct or negotiate their subjectivity and agency in negative terms, but also on why these attitudes remain even among themselves while talking about other individuals or other age groups. Consider the example of isolation that features in many of the selected texts, a condition which respondent HIL007 regards as an urban phenomenon: 'I think the elderly who live in towns are far lonelier and more nervous of the young than those who live in the tight knit community of a village.' Interestingly despite the social trope and narrative of isolation reflected in these texts, the overwhelming evidence from participants in their reflections suggests that with regard to mutual group and self-perceptions, they felt neither isolated nor infirm in any fundamentally debilitating and self-defining fashion (which is not to say that they didn't have a variety of health problems, but that these were conditions with which they considered they demonstrably lived with in a successful fashion, thus overcoming any limitations). The experience and commentary of our respondents demonstrates that many regard themselves as being capable of being as sociable, physically and/or intellectually active and robust as the rest

of the populatio. For them such alien stereotypes would seem to fundamentally misrepresent the realities of their lives.

However it remains a fact that both isolation and frailty can be conditions of some of the older population, and in a curious fashion such conditions seem then almost metonymically to evoke a presupposition of the overriding images of older subjects that informs the social, aesthetic and ideological narratives of our culture. The process of arriving at such apparent norms is intriguing. People never simply live out old age in cultural isolation. They live it through culturally and historically specific frameworks that are mostly a synthesis of public and private understandings exchanged as narratives about others, which both draw upon and sustain cultural representations of ageing and the older subject as an archetype that are difficult to dislodge. HIL007 draws upon the example of the ageing and retired journalists that meet toward the end of Jim Crace's *Arcadia* and which include its narrator, the biographer of Victor, the central, even more aged, protagonist: 'The episodes with the buffers were quite interesting – they had been side-lined because of their age.' Hence at a certain level it is not so much ageing that is necessarily problematic, but perceptions thereof and the inscription of such attitudes in judgments and behaviour, even among older subjects whose lives seem to them to defy such accounts. Very succinctly one reading group member [OUL 003] commented 'The social expectations of ageing are sometimes more damaging than actual ageing.' Responses to older people appear coded and are implicit in a range of social narratives and hence they continue to permeate responses by both the older subject and their account of the view of others, but not to be personally relevant to such active people. To most respondents ageing seems something outside and not relevant to themselves and their immediate circle; however, as exemplified below, through a series of external narrative frames or inflections the established prejudices still seem to impact upon these respondents despite their resistance, partly because of their acts of projection onto older subjects.

One example of the complex of narrative concepts involved can be illustrated using reader group responses reflecting on both Crace's narrative and their own experiences and views, in terms of ageing and isolation (the latter a central motif of the text). Assessing this set of relations has implications for anyone assessing how generally held views on a context such as ageing and older subjects might be seen to be potentially grounded on a more fluid basis than is suggested by such archetypes. The novel revolves around the later life and reminiscences offered for a biography of the eighty-year-old plutocrat, Victor, who appears largely divorced from the world. Respondent WMC004 comments 'He has a hibernating temperament, behind his shield of wealth and advancing deafness he does not like to deal with people.' SEL002 had reservations about any empathy or understanding, stating 'I did not respond as an old person to any of Victor's age-related problems. This man was old, sure enough, but so cushioned by his millions and minions that it did not matter.' Another member of the same group, SEL004, reflected on the way in which the group discussion had concluded the novel was 'certainly not about old age, except tangentially, before nonetheless commenting that 'I marked references to old age – there are some twenty – and some of them did resonate with me. Many of them are comparisons of Victor and myself which tend to make me feel complacent: Victor is much wealthier than I am but his life seems much more arid and friendless than mine.' Respondent CBL003 summarizes the character's position thus: 'Victor is basically a lonely, solitary old man who doesn't really understand human relationships.' As CBL003 says of another respondent, 'CBL006 considered the book boring and had no relevance to *normal* older people' [emphasis added]. Another participant in this group, CBL004, adds:

There is a sense of people in their 60s being old and past it – “grey and powerful as pigeons” Was this the public perception in 1992 when the book was written? Certainly it is not so now when 60 is the new 50 and the government expects us to work to 70 before we get our state retirement pension.

OUL005 stresses certain attitudinal elements rather than regarding ageing as a fixed negative condition: 'Reading Crace has made me think old age isn't a problem, it's old people.' For OUL003 the novel is prejudiced since it foregrounds 'the physical disabilities of the older characters [which] pepper the text . . .' which OUL003 proceeds to enumerate at length, adding as regards the group discussion of the text: 'It was noted that Victor could not recall the faces of his mother or aunt. He more or less invented his own story. We are all prone to selective memory and build our own narratives.' OUL0010 says of a younger middle-aged employee whose view of Victor draws upon a general view of the latter's age: 'A suggestion that Rook's view of Victor is somewhat like David Lodge's view of his father, with "old" used as image, "elderly" equated with "frail". Is the writer making a political statement?' OUL001's comments concerning of the group discussion stress that real experiences run counter to the negative coordinates of the lives of Crace's characters: 'There was some discussion about the opinion that older people can be creative and innovative. There are many examples of older writers having time to produce books and it was felt that women in particular are freed by age to be creative and productive.' OUL002 says of these discussions 'It is interesting that the pains of ageing preoccupy us far less than the positives [. . .].' Few of the respondents identified with Victor's isolation directly as an experience that defined their own lives. NOL006 remarked of its attitudes 'The author himself was in his early forties i.e. middle-aged at the time! Maybe attitudes have changed since and the views it portrays are somewhat dated?'

So how might one summarize the respondents' views more generally in sociological terms? Well certainly all of these respondents cited intuit, imply or make evident that isolation is less common or typical a condition than such narratives as Crace's (and Lodge's) might suggest. A further implication is that when experiences such as social isolation do occur among the elderly, they may sometimes be a result of practices that emerge from certain takings of position as framed rhetorically in narrative terms. As Dan P. McAdams

stresses in *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (1993):

In the modern world in which we all live, identity is a life story. A life story is a personal myth that an individual begins working on in late adolescence and young adulthood in order to provide his or her life with unity or purpose and in order to articulate a meaningful niche in the psychosocial world.⁹

Importantly such narratives which certainly change over time—one simply has to think of feminism and its influence over the role of women and condition of their lives, for instance—actively shape both the self-image of those ageing and that of them held by both themselves to a degree and, more comprehensively, by younger generations. While people understand this on one level, they often consciously reject it, showing resistance to the implicit narrative of ageing and isolation, refusing the descriptions of such a life's frailties. For example, some readers rejected novels such as Jim Crace's *Arcadia*, which didn't offer a positive older character such as the central figure in Lodge's novel: 'I'm afraid I don't believe a word of it. Nothing seems real to me. Obviously not all novels are realistic and they can quite legitimately exist in imagined worlds' (SEL006). Despite this feeling echoed by several respondents, where a number of them found Crace's characterization to be limited, more a series of archetypes (WMC009 commenting 'I felt that characters lacked depth;' KSL003 seeing a 'lack of full characterisation;' although NOL009 says 'Victor's character a caricature but also rings true'), what is very suggestive about the process of reading, engagement and reflection undertaken is that virtually all of the respondents (including these sceptics) engaged with the narrative as a structure very much in terms of lives depicted that could and ought to be judged as if they were real. The social and personal contexts were interrelated and assessed both in terms of personality and wider society, combining individual and sociological dimensions. As KSL003 concluded 'Age itself is no longer respected in western societies as the fount of wisdom and experience. It was only

presented as inefficiency and inadequacy, surplus to the requirements of modern society.’ KSL007 responded to the Crace text with negativity about its view of ageing ‘I was resentful about the stereotyping of the characters as it produced very negative feelings in the reader. There was no attempt to balance the stereotyping with positive qualities of ageing. Therefore in younger readers it was likely to reinforce prejudices about the old.’ It was also clear that the social interaction undertaken in the reading groups mirrored a range of other such U3A activities experienced by many of the participants, who regarded these as important if not essential in remaining active and socially engaged.

The majority of the responses to the MO ‘Books and You’ directive contrasts interestingly with many of the attitudes of the U3A readers. The overwhelming majority of respondents were avid readers. Many have had some interaction with book groups or other literary activities although there are mixed attitudes to such activities. One can conclude that it is reading itself (and writing of course) which is important to a particular MO version of ‘active ageing’ and not necessarily the socially-interactive discussion of books. Discussion of how the respondents’ own age group was represented produced a range of different understandings of representations. In terms of fiction, whether written or screen, there was agreement about a shortage of older characters in general, while certain stereotypes of passive dependency and an inability to manage were readily identified, as by this 80-year-old woman:

Not many characters are in their 80s! Those that are usually suffer from Alzheimers and are a great burden to their children! Eg. in the TV series ‘Outnumbered’ the grandfather is portrayed as beginning to ‘fail’ and they are considering putting him in a ‘home’. The general attitude is that pensioners are inactive whereas up here in the Lake District pensioners are climbing mountains, entering fell races, Scottish dancing etc. There is a feeling among pensioners that the NHS ‘gives up’ on people over 70.¹⁰

While a number of people made this kind of comment, the following 70-year-old woman went on to explain how such stereotypes were beginning to affect her relationship with her family:

Discussion with family is interesting as our children are now starting to treat us as though we are not quite capable of looking after ourselves and a lot of my friends say the same. I know they are showing concern but they too have been brainwashed by the popular stereotypes.¹¹

Compared to the U3A volunteers (obviously there is some overlap of membership but not significantly), MO respondents are apparently – and perhaps unsurprisingly – less prone to identify themselves as third age against an older, less-able fourth age. Although U3A co-founder Peter Laslett originally defined the fourth age as ‘decay, decrepitude and death’, this view would be unlikely to be accepted today. For example, for the Mass Observation Autumn 2006 directive on ‘Age’, an eighty-five year old woman wrote, ‘There is no doubt that I’m OLD’.¹² For the ‘Books and You’ Directive, the same woman, now eighty-eight, wrote:

... capturing this age group of mine is elusive and because I sink from descriptions of our senility I don’t naturally want to read about us. BUT I’m reading *The Children’s Book* (A.S. Byatt) and came across a first reference to an old woman and what a depressing person she presents! ‘The figure of an old woman – a very old woman – every detail of her fallen flesh remorselessly and lovingly recorded – flat, flaccid breasts, withered thighs, hanging bag of a belly’ ... It’s not stereotyping to say that old people are old, or young people are young! To try to avoid the description of an old person is to deny the truth: that we all grow old.

This viewpoint, that describing an old person as old is not stereotyping, is a fourth-age attitude and contrasts with the opinions from our London

reading groups where the third-age readers are still very much concerned with labelling precisely such descriptions of ageing as stereotypical or prejudicial. This is not so much a difference of outlook but a product of the MO emphasis on self-reflexive writing over time. Those who are used to writing narratives of their life at regular intervals over a long period of time have a different understanding of the relationship of their lives to the wider cultural narratives surrounding them. This awareness can be seen more clearly from detailed case studies of mass observers over time such as the following example of a woman who responded to both the Winter 1992 ('Growing Older') and Autumn 2006 directives on ageing as well as the Winter 2009 FCMAP-commissioned directive. Her 1992 response begins as follows:

As I write, I am two months short of my 66th birthday and in May I must retire from my full-time job because of my age. This annoys me very much, especially as 1993 is supposed to be 'The European Year of the Elderly'. I enjoy working, feel capable of continuing in my job for at least another couple of years and dread the unstructured days which threaten to lie ahead.

Sometimes when I look at myself in the mirror I am frankly appalled at the sight I see with its flabby neck, grey hair and undeniably elderly expression: this in spite of people telling me I look younger than my age – and meaning it. I sometimes jokingly refer to myself as old, and must indeed seem so to my grandchildren; but I have decided to my own satisfaction that old age starts, undeniably, at 75. I think there is truth in the expression 'You're as old as you feel' and physically I barely feel old at all, with very few aches or pains and a capacity to work hard and to go on long walks. But some of my friends, even ones a few years younger, are much less active than I because of their various ailments, most commonly arthritis, or their creeping lethargy.¹³

This shows many similarities with the third age accounts gathered in the reading groups in that the writer defines her sense of self against the

condition of being 'old'. However, she does not simply reject 'old age' but projects it further forward into a time not yet reached, and not onto others. It is possible to conjecture that the experience of writing for MO over the years has taught her not to be premature about closing off the future but to leave a neutral openness for her writing of herself. In hindsight, this openness was a wise choice as can be seen from her response to a similar enquiry 14 years later in 2006:

As I shall be 80 years old in less than 3 months' time, that leaves no doubt about my position in the scale of age. I have very firm ideas about the categories and the need for people to be aware into which one they fit. For example, it incenses me when both men and women (but men more often) advertise themselves as "young 60", or even "young 70": it's a mixture of pathetic and ridiculous. I think middle age begins at 45, and old age these days at 70, because life expectation has increased to make a 90th birthday seem quite commonplace. It's a most extraordinary contrast with what I remember from my youth of old ladies who acted and dressed as though they really were ancient and decrepit things, to be treated with the greatest respect and rather terrifying to the young.

Not only does the writer now consider herself old but she has also backdated from 75 to 70 her concept of when old age begins; indicating an increased sense that the state of being old is not one of inevitable decline towards death but rather a substantial phase – 20 years in her estimation – of life that is there to be lived. Interestingly, her development of the brief neutral openness in her 1992 responses maps on to what becomes an increasingly gendered understanding. For example, in 1992 her opinion was that:

I am not very sure whether ageing affects men and women differently, but I tend to think it's not their sex but their circumstances and attitudes which determine the way in which or speed at which they age. In the past, though rather less so today, most of the world's leading public

figures have been old men, and of course one always used to be told (and to believe) that wisdom increased with age.

Whereas by 2006, she has changed her mind quite decidedly on this issue:

I think men and women tend to age differently, and men often become more entrenched in their thought patterns and habits, while women remain more flexible and open to new ideas.

Similarly to the way in which diaries and letters historically provided women with a safe narrative space for contesting a patriarchal culture, it can be seen how the semi-public but still anonymous condition of MO narratives allows the contestation of the dominant to emerge and become expanded so that it is not just a question of the opposition of women to men but of a more productive differentiation between a flexibility that she identifies herself with and a rigidity that she identifies herself against. Once this opposition has been identified, it operates as a key for decoding the relationship of personal narrative to wider cultural narrative that underpins this mass-observer's understanding of her ageing. For example, the following passage from 2006 seems to be a straightforward description of the disadvantages of ageing:

After the age of 75 I don't think there are any advantages at all in getting older, and plenty of losses which increase year by year. At 78 I found I was so stiff I couldn't get off my bicycle and had to give it away, which was a defining moment. It's not only aches and pains and stiffnesses, heart problems, deafness and so on; it's the awareness that in many ways old people are a bore. Our mindsets and thought patterns are so different and so increasingly incompatible with the young who are often too impatient to explain computers, ipods, mobile phones and all the possibilities of the internet. I'm typing this on my computer, but I long for my typewriter and some carbon paper! I don't want to buy my clothes, food and holidays online; I would rather visit shops and travel agents.

However, it is possible to break down the paragraph into several different sub-sections so that it becomes apparent that only the first two sentences are actually describing the personal experience of physical changes related to ageing. The third sentence then relates these changes to the wider cultural narrative of the way that the old, identified precisely by physical impairment, are stereotypically considered to be 'boring'. One can see that while the mass observer has a very matter-of-fact attitude to the gradual physical changes she is experiencing, what really concerns her is the prospect of these changes signifying the negative values which she perceives as being attached to ageing in the dominant cultural narratives. This, in turn, leads to the final two sentences of the paragraph in which, while still expressing her own flexibility (she is careful to note that she is writing on her computer), she situates her own yearnings for a pre-computer age as a guilty confirmation of the dominant discourse that by being old she is somehow backward with respect to the contemporary zeitgeist. In effect, by trying to be objective about her position in the world, she allows the dominant narratives to exercise control over her own narrative of ageing in a manner that is strikingly visible. However, a few paragraphs further on in the same piece of writing, when reflecting more personally on the circumstances of her life, a very different picture emerges:

I think my situation now is ideal. It took shape 20 years ago when my daughter and her then partner wanted to buy a house but had a shortage of money. So they asked me to sell my flat and join with them, but in a self-contained basement. After 10 years they parted, so the house was sold and profits divided. My daughter found a house which she and I could afford, and 10 years later it is proving the perfect way for me to spend my last years. As long as I remain active and independent I am no liability, but actually an asset in terms of sharing the expenses that go with owning a house. If I

become infirm, my two rooms are on one level and very convenient. And I'm never lonely, as so many old people are.

It can be seen that when not feeling obliged to relate her personal narrative to the wider cultural narrative, a more positive picture of old age emerges in which it can be seen as a stage of life rather than a period of decline. Furthermore, it should be noted that this picture emerges because the longitudinal narrative focus of MO allows its participants a space in which to contest dominant narratives. This becomes further apparent from the observer's response to the 2009 directive in which she rejects the invitation to generalise in favour of staying true to her narrative understanding of her own particular situation:

In all manner of ways the world seems to have changed with astonishing speed in the last 20 years, and that applies to books and their contents as much as anything else. I find it rather hard to understand the meaning behind the question 'Have representations of your own age group in books seemed true to you?' My age group is as diverse as any other; I don't suppose many old people read sociological books about our age group and there are not many characters aged over 80 in films or TV dramas. It seems to me that these days people over 60 are divided between those who try to pretend they are still young and can't face up to advancing age, and those of us who accept it, however reluctantly, and keep the core of their personality little changed. That's how I see it; I always refer to myself as a pensioner since that is what I am; nor am I one who is 'young at heart'. But I am not an old fogey, either.

Through continually narrating her own experience in negotiation with public narratives of ageing, this woman has discovered a way of positioning herself as old while resisting cultural stereotypes.

Furthermore, the MO material allows us to see how a similar process functions in the following generation of observers approaching old age. For example, a female who was 63 at the time of the 2006 directive and who most definitely does not consider herself old in any respect, with a living mother of 102, indicates how the 'third age' subjectivity of the 1980s and 1990s is being supplanted by the recognition that people undergo a period of being unequivocally old which amounts to a comprehensive refutation of Lazlett's notion of a fourth age of 'decay, decrepitude and death'. One can see in her account, how the concern has shifted from defining her retired existence directly against the 'old old' of the fourth age, as some responders to *Deaf Sentence* did, to defining a more nuanced difference in terms of attitudes to the 'system', 'social services' etc.

I believe that the generation coming into the pensioner group now (the post-war generation) will be more prepared to speak up and demand what they want. Those now in the older age-ranges have often been too submissive and quiet ...¹⁴

This indicates the continued emergence of an understanding which sees a process of continuation, rather than any sharp differentiation, in the transition from the newly retired years of the 60s and 70s into the old age of the 80s and 90s. Difference between these generations is no longer seen as essential but as a product of historically-contextualised behaviour. Behaviour, of course, is implicitly bound up with the way that people are seen to behave, and so permits exhortation as the same woman demonstrates in her response to the 2009 directive:

Series such as *New Tricks* (retired policemen come back to solve old cases to show up the youngsters who failed to do so) and *A Touch of Frost* where the unbelievably old, always-successful detective is of the old school and unable to work a computer
But is this really how pensioners want to be portrayed – as people

unable to move with the times, and content to be seen as this? It bothers me if they do.

To conclude, many respondents in the reading groups and MO clearly understand that age prejudice is still a self-legitimizing social prejudice, especially one might add given that much of contemporary culture obsesses largely with youth and beauty. Many participants reflected explicitly on that socialized process or set of responses, when ageing subjects are considered less attractive, a process that serves to confirm long-established narratives concerning ageing, and was seen especially in the case of women (although that may have been due to the majority of respondents being female) as resulting in an undermining of one's social value. What the FCMAP research provisionally demonstrates is some key ways in which the cultural conventions underpinning thoughts and actions can be identified and challenged. First, because fiction, and literary fiction in particular as evidenced by Crace's self-conscious use of archetypes, foregrounds such conventions, it thereby invites active readers to question them. Older readers may well be critical in this process, not just because of their longevity, but as McAdams says, 'Some of us, in the last years of our lives, will suspend the making of myth and begin to take stock of what we have made'.¹⁵ Since tropes of ageing are largely founded on narratives and symbols concerned with the self, group discussion of fiction offers a capacity to allow another imaginary space of otherness (an empathic demand being part of its structure as well as self-identification) that initiates new ideas and responses, precisely because literature highlights and challenges reductive, one-dimensional narratives and images of ageing. Thus, such a combination of active readership and deliberative democracy is capable of collectively conveying a heterogeneous view that draws on individual experiences, physical and mental adjustments, and the processes of memory that continue to shape identity. The on-going analysis of the project diaries may well be expected to reveal more of these heterogeneous possibilities and the potential alternative forms of agency they offer older people. Second, the on-going narrative practice at the heart of MO offers its respondents a space to particularise their own experience against

the generalising and stereotyping force of dominant cultural values. This is especially true regarding the processes of becoming old, where continued control of one's personal narrative is shown as an essential component of maintaining social agency. Overall, therefore, our research suggests that the experience of ageing and, in particular, of becoming old, is increasingly going to be played out variously at this level of narrative understanding, and that this will permit an easier transition into old age, which will no longer be marked as something essentially other.

Endnotes

- ¹ A summary of the FCMAP Project and its findings can be found in *NDA Findings 28*: http://www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk/assets/files/NDA%20Findings_28.pdf
- ² Martha B. Holstein and Meredith Winkler, 'Critical Gerontology: Reflections for the 21st Century' in Miriam Bernard and Thomas Scharf, eds. *Critical Perspectives on Ageing Societies* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2007), 13-26, 22.
- ³ Crain, Caleb. 'Surveillance Society: the Mass Observation Movement and the Meaning of Everyday Life', *New Yorker*, 11 September 2006: http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/09/11/060911crat_atlarge
- ⁴ See Nella Last, *Nella Last's War* (London: Sphere, 1983); *Housewife 49*, ITV productions, 2006.
- ⁵ See Nick Hubble, *Mass Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory*, second edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- ⁶ Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge. *Britain by Mass-Observation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939), 32.
- ⁷ See Harrisson, 'Who'll Win?' *Political Quarterly*, XV, 1, January 1944.
- ⁸ The project data has been analysed and published in the following two books: Louise Bazalgette, John Holden, Philip Tew, Nick Hubble and Jago Morrison, *Coming of Age* (London: Demos, 2011): http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Coming_of_Age_-_web.pdf?1302099024; and Nick Hubble and Philip Tew, *Ageing, Narrative and Identity: New Qualitative Social Research* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- ⁹ Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: Guildford Press, 1993), 5
- ¹⁰ W2244, female, retired teacher.
- ¹¹ P1009, female, CAB worker.
- ¹² F1560, female, retired youth and community worker.
- ¹³ D996, female, CAB worker.
- ¹⁴ B1475, female, auditor.
- ¹⁵ McAdams, 14.