RE-IMAGINING OLD AGE

Wellbeing, care and participation

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Chapter 1

The personal and public challenges of old age

Introduction

There is a paradox at the centre of population aging and increased longevity in Western societies. More of us are living longer and into older ages as a result of improved health and living conditions. Yet we live in a time where youthful appearance and keeping young and active have become a personal obligation fuelled by a powerful 'anti-aging industry', cultural and media stereotypes and through government responses to aging societies. Our capacity to deny aging and our fears about our own aging may be greater than ever. How do these factors shape our understandings and experiences of both living longer and living well in old age? This book is about a project which set out to understand what wellbeing means as we grow older by talking to people who are already old and facing up to the personal challenges of what that means. We wanted to understand how wellbeing can be sustained and promoted so that people may be more likely to experience their old age positively and less likely to fear or resist growing old. As well as researching this subject we also wanted to apply our research findings – we wanted to make a difference. So we also worked with social care practitioners and older people to translate research findings into learning resources. Our starting point, as two academics and one practitioner, was a shared commitment to the value of working with older people in both research and practice. The value of lived experience is a theme that runs through this book and is visited many times. If we are to make sense of aging, our own and others, the reflections of those who are 'living old age' will be crucial. But responsibilities for securing a good old age are not limited to those who are already old. The responses of younger people, and in particular younger professionals who work with old people, make a huge difference. So a distinctive characteristic of the work we recount here is our attempts to use research findings in a transformative way with those whose work impacts directly on old people.

This project was grounded in more than a commitment to learning from the lived experiences of the older people who worked with us as researchers and those who talked to us about their lives in research interviews or focus groups. We wanted to understand how personal experiences connect to the wider political, cultural and economic contexts in which we age to explicitly influence social care practices and policy that impact on older people's capacity to experience wellbeing. Beginning as a community-university participatory research partnership, the project developed ways of bringing lived experience of growing older into dialogue with those who work in health and care services. In part, this book tells the story of both the research project and the subsequent translational project. We also set out the research findings and draw on personal reflections of the researchers to offer a detailed insight into wellbeing in old age and how this needs to be understood if we are to create the circumstances that will promote this. And we go beyond this by arguing that our methodology and conceptual framework offer distinctive contributions to challenging the negative perceptions of old age that have come to dominate the current political, cultural and economic landscape. We also argue that our way of working has the potential to transform the practice of those working with older people and to generate wellbeing in its own right. The relationships created through our work together offer an example of the way those who are becoming old and those who are already old can re-imagine what old age can be.

The project we describe in this book took place in a particular city in England in the early twenty-first century. The specific context impacted how we worked and what we learnt from this. We would urge others in different cultural, geographical and political environments to consider how they might undertake similar collaborations with old people and those who work with them. Populations across the globe are aging. This is happening at different paces and is being influenced by specific factors (such as migration) as well as common shifts – most notably the decrease in fertility rates. The latter has impacted the proportion of old people in the world's population to a greater extent than the decrease in mortality rates, although the relationship between the two varies across nation states and over time. Whilst it is hard to anticipate precise demographic changes, the United Nations has estimated that for the world as a whole the population aged 60+ will increase from 11.0% in 2010 to 18.0% in 2035, whilst within that age group the proportion of the oldest old, those aged 80+, will increase from 13.9% to 15.8%. In Western Europe, by 2035 the proportions will be 33.4% 60+, of whom 25.1% will be 80+. In the USA these proportions will be 25.8% and 23.9%. Whilst Africa will still have a predominantly young population (7.3% 60+, of whom 9.9% will be 80+)

the trend is still towards increased proportions of old people. And whilst its population is not aging at the same rate as some other countries, Japan is anticipated to continue to be the 'oldest' country on many measures with 39.5% of the population 60+ in 2035 of whom 34.3% will be over 80 (figures cited in Zimmer and McDaniel, 2016). These changes have considerable implications both for governmental policies and intergenerational relations. We reflect on what we have learnt from our research in this context in chapter 9.

But before we describe the research and what it led to, we start here by enlarging on the way in which old age prompts the paradoxical responses we opened with. We set the context for our work by considering what we know about the experiences of growing older in Western societies. We are not attempting to offer an extensive review of the large body of work within critical gerontology which addresses this question. Rather we highlight and discuss key social, political and economic contexts which shape experiences of aging. These include the experiences of advantage or disadvantage that accumulate over the life course and the intersections of age with other factors, such as gender, class, and ethnicity. We go on to explore how academics and writers are reflecting on their personal experiences of aging in order to both make sense of what growing older means at a personal level and to challenge dominant assumptions about old age. We then consider the connections between the personal and political by considering key policy responses to aging and how these have developed post the financial crises of the late 2000s. The emergence of what Walker (2013) describes as "*the new ageism*" implies a more urgent need to critically re-think how aging and old age are constructed if we are to understand the challenges and the potential at both an individual and societal level.

Aging in an ageist world

Ageism has been written about for over forty years since the influential work by gerontologist Robert Butler (1975) first conceptualised this as systematic discrimination that operates in a similar way to sexism and racism. Yet four decades of academic interest and some degree of popular understanding of its existence have not shifted the deeply embedded nature of ageism within Western cultures. And as we discuss later, there is evidence that the current context of austerity in the wake of financial crisis, has added a new dimension to this. Ageism remains the last bastion of acceptable discrimination, often mobilised through the guise of 'humour'. It is so woven into the fabric of everyday life that it is rarely visible or remarked upon. Like sexism, racism, and disablism it is em-

bedded in language, in cultural representations and within institutional practices and structures, but does not attract anything like the opprobrium associated with racist, sexist or disablist responses at personal or institutional levels.

Carney and Gray describe ageism as the *"institutionalised and endemic use of social norms and conventions which systematically disadvantage people on the basis of chronological age"* (2015, p.124). This, in turn, leads to 'gerontophobia' – a fear of growing old and /or fear of older people. The 'othering' of older people that results is curious in that it is the 'othering' of our future selves if we live to see old age. Scholars of prejudice and stereotyping have attributed this to a fear of mortality and death anxiety (Nelson, 2004), but other structural explanations have been offered that relate to the enormous social, economic and demographic changes that have taken place over the last few centuries. Julia Twigg (2004) for example, points out that with the rise of modern science and the dominance of bio-medicine the significance of aging has focused on the body to the extent that we can only understand aging as a process of physical decline. Earlier understandings, such as polysemic ones linked to cosmology, which attributed meaning to life stages and where the nearness to death was valued for the potential for spiritual development, have been lost.

Within the bio-medical framework, the 'problems' of old age have become firmly linked to the aged body, but cultural gerontologists like Twigg note that the development of consumer culture has also contributed to an intensified focus on the body. Twigg's insightful analysis shows how consumer culture with its constant promotion of youth and youthfulness has powerful implications on how aging is experienced. The body, she argues, becomes *"a project to be worked upon, fashioned and controlled, a site of self-identity and reflexivity, as well as of consumption"* (2004, p.61). There is now a burgeoning industry, from cosmetics to surgery to lifestyle media, that is entirely focused on the denial of aging and the eradication of the physical signs of old age. Stephen Katz highlights the paradox that to grow older successfully now involves denying and resisting aging through *"bodywork techniques and the fantastical allure of cosmetic, lifestyle, exercise, pharmaceutical and 'life-extension' products aimed at enhancing agelessness"* (2010, p.359).

Much of this pressure to resist old age is targeted at mid-life women to engage in the 'battle against aging' so that losing that 'battle' and 'looking old' equates with failure and becomes something shameful. Feminist and cultural gerontologists have reclaimed the body to theorize the embodiment of aging, which until relatively recently had not been a major focus

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