

## **Good Ageing: The Importance of Social and Cultural Narratives; And of Older People's Continuing Control over Their Personal Narratives**

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**Key Findings:** Overall, FCMAP established that older people's capacity to control their own personal narratives was central to 'good ageing' (and, generally, essential for effective social agency); it is precisely at the point when older people lose control variously of their personal narrative that 'good ageing' is diminished or ceases. FCMAP findings were regularly shared with the think-tank Demos, culminating in an intense collaborative drafting of a 200 page report *Coming of Age*, which made recommendations on five policy areas: Work and Finances, Housing and Independence, Health and Social Care, Active Ageing, and End of Life. *Coming of Age* was published as a paperback and is also available as a free online download from the Demos website: <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/comingofage>. The Executive summary includes the following points:

- At the centre of our vision is the need for long-term strategies to support people to experience good health, social inclusion and financial resilience across the life-course.
- Older people are a highly heterogeneous group, therefore we need to move away from one-size-fits-all policy approaches and services to offer older people choice and flexibility in how they live.
- We need to challenge all forms of age discrimination, including patronising stereotypes about older people's dependency and vulnerability, and to find better ways to target state support towards those who actually need it.
- Older people are feeling increasingly alienated by policy rhetoric that presents older people as a social or financial burden. We cannot meet the challenges posed by an ageing society without the support of older people themselves. Therefore, we need a shift of mind-set to recognise the extremely valuable social roles that are already fulfilled by older people, and increase opportunities for older people to use their skills to make a positive contribution to society. We discuss some of the key policy directions below.

**The FCMAP Project:** FCMAP was funded by Research Councils UK as part of the New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) Programme (administered by the ESRC) and began on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2009 and finished on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2012. The team included from Brunel University, Principal Investigator Prof. Philip Tew and co-investigators Dr Nick Hubble and Dr Jago Morrison; assisted in terms of policy issues by Louise Bazalgette and John Holden of Demos. The policy report written in collaboration with Demos, *Coming of Age*, was launched at a public day-event opening the FCMAP 'New Cultures of Ageing Conference' (Brunel University, 8-9<sup>th</sup> April 2011). An audience of over 120 people were able to respond to panel debates on 'third age subjectivity' and 'ageing policy'. The day concluded with a separate evening event featuring Will Self and Fay Weldon discussing ageing and fiction before an audience of 250, which Self described in a widely-read

review in the *Guardian*: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/may/01/looking-very-well-lewis-wolpert-review>.

*Coming of Age* was discussed at a 'Roundtable', held on 16<sup>th</sup> May 2011 at Demos's London headquarters in Tooley Street, where the research was welcomed as 'excellent' by Hugh Pullinger, Head of Pensions, Ageing Strategy and Analysis Division at the DWP. Three key stakeholders then responded to the report under Chatham House rules, all engaging with the implications of the research and all praising the innovative nature of the research. As one said, 'It's a really fantastic, very detailed report. I thought there were several particularly useful aspects of this research. I found the use of narratives as a research method particularly helpful, in providing a rich, bottom-up take on issues that are often dealt with in a very top-down way.' Subsequent policy dissemination of the report findings include reviews, summaries and links in such influential locations as *Social Policy Digest*, the DEFRA Sustainable Development in Government website, the Centre for Policy on Ageing website, the Local Government Chronicle, and other bodies, including in Ireland. On 15th November 2011, the Liberal Democrat Health Committee, chaired by Paul Burstow, Minister for Care Services, on policy proposals for 'Healthier old age' considered the FCMAP findings. Since then the research has been further discussed and cited in various *fora* concerned with policy.

The project's innovative interdisciplinary approach—co-opting and utilising the narrative turn in social sciences—sought to minimize any influence from the research team on the participants as far as possible. Rather than direct interviews with volunteers (potentially reflecting an unequal set of relationships) FCMAP drew on the Mass Observation (MO) tradition of independent and anonymous diary response in order to reveal patterns of underlying social opinions. FCMAP commissioned the winter 2009 MO directive on ageing and cultural representation of the respondent's age group. The resultant material (193 responses) was compared with earlier responses to MO directives on ageing that were sent out in 1992 and 2006, providing longitudinal comparisons of respondent attitudes. In a parallel strand of the project, eight reading groups, comprising 90 volunteers in total, were established across London in association with University of the Third Age (U3A) district associations. Group members read a range of post-war British fiction concerned with ageing-related themes such as David Lodge's *Deaf Sentence* (2008) and kept diaries recording their responses to each novel after it was read and again after subsequent the group discussion of the narrative book and themes arising. These diaries and associated data have been archived at ESDS Qualidata for future researchers. A series of FCMAP public events, 'Ageing Re-imagined', in which authors discussed the representation of ageing in their work —Jim Crace and David Lodge (3<sup>rd</sup> February 2010 at Brunel University), Caryl Phillips (19<sup>th</sup> March 2010 in Central London), Trezza Azzopardi (10<sup>th</sup> June 2010 at Brunel University)—attracted 4-500 participants.

Extensive narrative analysis of the directive replies and reading diaries revealed widespread agreement on the shortage of older characters in fictional narratives—written or filmed—while certain stereotypes of passive dependency and an inability to manage were readily identified. However, more significantly, the research revealed how the dominant socio-narrative associations of the word 'old' interact with older respondents' narrative understanding of their own lives. The contrast discernible between MO and U3A attitudes towards self-defining as 'old'—the intense antipathy of the latter to which is conditioned by the fact that the 'third age' is defined against a perceived 'fourth age' of 'decay, decrepitude and death'—demonstrated in rich detail how difficult, but nonetheless essential, it is for older subjects to prevent dominant narratives shaping their own sense of identity. In particular, the reading diaries show how literary fiction, which tends to foreground the cultural conventions that underpin thought and actions, assists critically-reflective readers to question such conventions when they encounter

them in society; while the MO directive responses testify to the capacity of sustained narrative life-writing to provide practitioners with a space to particularise their own experience against the generalising and stereotyping force of dominant cultural values. Overall, the research establishes the central importance to older people of continued control over their personal narratives in maintaining social agency. Engagement with such narratives was seen as beneficial by participants, giving voice to them in significant fashion. These findings are written up in Hubble and Tew's *Ageing, Narrative and Identity: New Qualitative Social Research*, forthcoming in 2013 from Palgrave Macmillan. A further monograph, Morrison's *Ageing and Contemporary Fiction*, drawing on the findings of the research to reconceptualise the growing field of literary gerontology, is contracted for publication with Routledge in the USA.

**Policy Implications:** Contemporary identity politics and its offshoots risk incorporating essentialist schematic ways of thinking. The primary feature of FCMAP was about giving voice to the individual and fostering a group sense of exchange, partly because our theoretical model suggests that cultural and social narrative exchange is a mechanism by which people frame and develop their ideas, but that these cannot effectively be imposed, rather they emerge from a complex sense of the experiential, the practical and the efficacious. Idealized forms of knowledge and cultural intervention will often have unintended consequences, and it is far better to listen in an open fashion, not try to prefigure the data or discussion beyond a focus on old age, and allow people to develop their genuine ideas.

In specific policy terms, as summarised in *Coming of Age*, the research revealed clearly that ageing cannot be treated as a single, solvable social problem. The experience of ageing varies vastly between individuals and groups. It is not only influenced by immediate concerns such as health and financial security, but by experience and outlook developed over the whole of the life-course. Many participants in the research resented the prevalence of ageist policy narratives that emphasise the costs posed by an ageing population but do not adequately recognise the wide variety of contributions that older people make, from taxation through to voluntary work and caring. In particular, the research questioned a number of assumptions such as that older people are disproportionately concerned with crime and disproportionately prone to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Such staple media representations, which frequently inflect on public and policy debate, were demonstrated to reside in the circulation of a set of culturally dominant narratives and shown to return to levels in line with the rest of the population in cases where older people were able to separate their personal narratives from those surrounding them.

Specific policy recommendations included the following:

**Flexible jobs for older workers:** To realise its ambitions of retaining an older workforce, the Government should work with employers to explore opportunities for developing more flexible career pathways for older workers that offer a greater choice of job roles, use older people's skill sets, support a phased approach to retirement, and combat institutional ageism.

**Reducing complexity in the state pensions system and tackling pensioner poverty:** To reduce complexity in the pensions system and provide a firm basis for people to save towards their retirement we support the Coalition Government's proposals to introduce a single-tier pension. In addition to this, we suggest that the Government should investigate giving people the option to capitalise and invest a portion of their *future* state pension entitlement in a personal pension scheme of their choosing earlier in their lives. This could have a dramatic effect on the rates of private pension take-up.

**Better targeting of winter fuel payments:** Most people in their early 60s do not feel old or 'vulnerable' therefore the current system of winter fuel payments does not reflect modern experiences of ageing. We believe that the Government should investigate better targeting of winter fuel payments, potentially raising eligibility to the age of 75 in line with disability-free life expectancy. To address inequalities, people receiving income-related or health-related benefits could automatically receive winter fuel payments once they reach state pension age.

**A diversity of service provision to support 'active ageing':** Older people are a highly heterogeneous group, therefore a diversity of service provision is needed to provide attractive opportunities for people with differing interests. Some people will wish to participate in designated activities for older people, while others will want to make use of universal services. Ensuring that core services such as libraries and leisure centres are available and accessible to older people is therefore an essential part of supporting active ageing.

**An intergenerational approach to local service delivery:** Segregating service delivery according to set age groups can further exclude those who may already be socially isolated. To give people of different generations the opportunity to share their skills and to give and receive informal support, local authorities and other local service providers should challenge assumptions that activities and services should be age-specific and investigate how they can deliver services more flexibly and inclusively.