Fiction and the Cultural Mediation of Ageing: The Importance of Reshaping the Narrative of Ageing

Grant holders: Prof Philip Tew (PI), Dr Nick Hubble, Dr Jago Morrison – all Brunel Centre for Contemporary Writing (BCCW), Division of English, Brunel University

Key findings

• The importance of people’s narrative understanding of ageing in determining their experience of ageing.

• The relationship between post-war representations of ageing (including fiction) and how ageing is understood, individually and socially.

• The emergence of new forms of third age (people in their 60s and 70s no longer consider themselves old) and fourth age (people in their later 70s, 80s and 90s are still living full varied lives despite infirmities) subjectivity.

• The importance of extending the concept of ‘active ageing’ beyond physical fitness and wellbeing criteria to include narrative understanding.

• The need for new narratives of the life course, which enable older people to emerge from the ingrained stereotypes of ageing as social beings in their own right.
The Fiction and the Cultural Mediation of Ageing Project (FCMAP) team from the BCCW at Brunel University worked collaboratively with other researchers at the think-tank Demos, the Mass Observation Archive at Sussex University, and in London district associations of the University of Third Age (U3A). Between May 2009 and January 2012, research was undertaken concerning (1) the responses to a specially-commissioned directive issued to the Mass Observation panel of volunteer writers in the late autumn of 2009 in comparison to responses to two earlier directives on ageing from the previous twenty years; and (2) reading diaries kept by members of specially-convened U3A book groups in London, set up as part of a collaborative learning project with Brunel, who read a range of British novels published from 1944 to the present, which were intended as a stimulus for reflection on ageing. Additionally, readings and Q&A sessions were held for project participants and the general public featuring authors from the reading list such as Trezza Azzopardi, Jim Crace, David Lodge, Caryl Phillips and Fay Weldon.

Fiction and the Cultural Mediation of Ageing: An Overview of the Project

Introduction: Since 1945, the field of fiction has been notable for the scale of its resistance to reductive, one-dimensional narratives and images of ageing which have dominated other forms of mass media. Older writers, older readers and the subject of ageing continue to retain important and privileged positions within the fiction industry. Building on the cultural turn in social gerontology, FCMAP was designed to research systematically how older people engage with representations of ageing, including how they incorporate such representations into their own narrative understanding of ageing. By focusing on the role this interaction plays in the shaping of self-image and social attitudes, the project team intended to produce an integrated analysis that would feed into both direct public policy recommendations and the academic literature concerning the topic.

The initial research questions were:

1. What is the relationship between changing social attitudes towards ageing in post-war Britain and the circulation of cultural representations of ageing?

2. How do cultural representations reflect and shape social and personal attitudes towards ageing amongst older people?

3. How do authors, including key older practitioners, approach ageing as a theme in their work and as part of the life experiences that inform their practice? How do they understand the role of their fiction in terms of broader cultural debates in this area?

4. What role does elective reading and critical reflection play in engendering engagement with broader social debates on ageing and well-being? In the context of this research what implications does this have for social agency?
Methodological Considerations: The FCMAP team decided that to try and answer the research questions by presenting them directly to participants would be ineffective, as they felt it was essential to the integrity of the project not to frame any particular focal points of interest on the part of the researchers that would lead the respondents to particular kinds of responses, contaminating or even invalidating the data produced; a strategy that in the team’s opinion far too many researchers in humanities and social sciences risk. Therefore they adopted a commitment to minimizing as much as humanly possible any particular influence brought to bear upon the respondents by avoiding directed instructions and questions other than asking participants to reflect as widely as possible on the subject. Naturally in everyday life influences do abound, in fact in the considered opinion of the FCMAP team they largely do so through the circulation of a mass of intersecting (sometimes contradictory) social narratives, so a method was required of drawing upon this larger process with minimum shaping or influencing of the views and opinions expressed by respondents. It needed to be situated not in simply a sense of language and essentialist notions of identity, but an embodied social narration of the self where, as Marco Caracciolo indicates, the fact is that ‘our fleshy, living body is as much a product of our cultures as a constraint on them,’ an ongoing interplay. As such in developing and framing the project, the FCMAP team decided to apply a range of insights of a mix of narrative theorists methodologically, but also utilize the well-established mode of narrative response inherent in the Mass Observation (MO) approach of using personal diaries to reflect narratively on a range of issues. Narrative theory draws upon insights and ideas from many fields, including cognitive and social psychology (and cognitive science more broadly), literary studies, narratology, philosophy including ethics, (socio) linguistics, and sociology.

The project was organised around three strands.

Strand 1 revolved around the MO project, which has been run from the University of Sussex (which also holds the original MO archives from the 1930s and 1940s) since 1981, when volunteer writers were recruited from all over Britain through the press, television and radio. It is the one of the longest-running longitudinal life-writing projects anywhere in the world. About three times a year, volunteers receive a ‘directive’ – a set of open questions which invite them to write freely and discursively about their views and experiences (these are often commissioned by sociologists and other academic researchers). In total, over 2,800 people have contributed to the Project, and the current active mailing list is about 600 strong. 51% of respondents to the spring 2007 directive were over 60 and many of these have been writing for years. FCMAP commissioned the winter 2009 Directive concerning narratives of ageing and representations of the respondent’s age group devised by FCMAP team member, Dr. Nick Hubble, a leading authority on MO. In keeping with successful MO practice, the directive was framed broadly to elicit a wide variety of reflections on changing representations of ageing and their relationship to self-understanding. Respondents were encouraged to explore the influence of particular representations on their own and others’ images and expectations of ageing, making social and generational comparisons. The resultant material (193 responses) was comparable with the responses to an earlier MO directive on ageing, which was sent out in both 1992 and 2006.

In Strand 2, eight reading groups were established in collaboration with U3A districts in Banstead, Camden Town, Highgate/North London 1, Highgate/North London 2, Kingston, South East London, Tower Hamlets and Waterloo. The existing U3A network provided active readers experienced in self-organised informal learning and the older age range who were used to reflecting upon texts and issues. During the course of a year, each group read nine novels published from 1945 to the present (a period corresponding very largely with the adult life experiences of the participants), featuring radically different depictions of ageing and offering a range of stimuli and points of historical and cultural reference. The volunteers kept diaries throughout in which they recorded their initial responses to the books read in each case before critically reflecting on the subsequent group discussion.

As part of Strand 3, the FCMAP team conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with contemporary authors which considered ageing as both a fictional thematic, and as part of their professional and life experiences. Authors were also invited to discuss their representational strategies with readers and researchers at public events arranged by the project team. An audience of over two hundred and twenty came to Brunel on 3 February 2010 to see Jim Crace and David Lodge in discussion; about one hundred and fifty came to hear Caryl Phillips in Central London on 19 March 2010; over seventy attended a daytime talk by Trezza Azzopardi at Brunel on 10 June 2010; and finally about two hundred and fifty listened to Fay Weldon discuss ageing with Will Self at Brunel on 8 April 2011. This latter event was discussed by Self in his review of Lewis Wolpert’s You’re Looking Very Well: The Surprising Nature of Getting Old for the Guardian (www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/may/01/looking-very-well-lewis-wolpert-review).

Collaboration with Demos: From the first stages of planning FCMAP, it was decided that public and social policy would be a priority. Hence the team met with researchers from the think-tank Demos before the project began to work out a schedule of collaboration that was designed to result in a comprehensive policy report. FCMAP data and interim reports on findings
written by the Brunel academics were regularly shared with the think-tank Demos, culminating in the intense collaborative drafting over the autumn of 2010 of a 200 page report *Coming of Age*, which was launched the following April at the FCMAP ‘New Cultures of Ageing’ Conference held at Brunel University. *Coming of Age* was subsequently discussed at a special ‘Roundtable’, held on 16th 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.’ *Coming of Age* is available as a paperback and as a free online download from the Demos website: www.demos.co.uk/publications/comingofage.

**Ageing, Narrative and Identity:** Aside from *Coming of Age*, the main publication resulting from FCMAP to date has been Nick Hubble and Philip Tew’s *Ageing, Narrative and Identity: New Qualitative Social Research*, which was published in September 2013 by Palgrave Macmillan.  

This book draws all the strands of the FCMAP research analysis together and sums up the importance of social narrative exchange for enabling individual voices to be heard and critically understood. In emphasising the importance of realigning the relationship of the third and fourth age, the reaction of the U3A reading groups to David Lodge’s *Deaf Sentence* – a novel which features such a relationship between its newly-retired protagonist and his eighty something father – is considered as a case study. Further to this, a case is made is made for including this novel on school and university syllabi as one particular vehicle for communicating the meaning of ageing and later life to younger generations. More generally, the aspiration for *Ageing, Narrative and Identity* is that the research and concepts outlined within it will contribute to a serious debate among academics, policy makers and the general public concerning the need to radically alter the dominant perceptions of older people that currently circulate in British culture and society.

### Key Findings

**Ageing Policy:** In conjunction with the researchers from Demos, FCMAP recommended an approach to ageing policy encapsulated by 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.

In specific policy terms, as detailed in *Coming of Age*, the research revealed clearly that ageing cannot be treated as a single, solvable social problem. For instance one man in his 70s from the South East London volunteer reading group rejected attempts to categorise people by their age group altogether, insisting, ‘I am an individual and I wish to be treated as an individual. I suspect all older people feel the same.’ 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 respondents resented the prevalence of ageist policy narratives that emphasise the costs posed by an ageing population and which 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.

In response to the findings FCMAP proposed in detail a range of changes in national emphasis regarding specific policy areas.

**Later Life Working**

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. However, working in later life should be a matter of choice, not compulsion, and the default retirement age should be abolished. To facilitate such later life working, the demands of the job should be subject to reasonable adjustment (including working remotely from home) appropriate to the individual's capabilities.

**Pensions and finances**

To reduce complexity in the pensions system and provide a firm basis for people to save towards their retirement our research suggested strong support for the Coalition Government’s proposals to introduce a single-tier pension. Reduce complexity in the state pensions system and tackling pensioner poverty

Attitudes about personal finances varied considerably. Some considered the state pension and benefit provision inadequate. Poorly informed employment choices may have negative financial consequences for retirement. Changed personal circumstances such as divorce or illness can diminish one's financial position.

**Universal benefits**

Contrary to the dominant approach in ageing policy, older people do not necessarily believe universality to be the best system for delivering benefits. The assumption that ‘older people’ are more vulnerable to cold weather was felt to be patronising by most people in their 60s. They felt the current system of winter fuel payments does not reflect modern experiences of ageing, which would suggest policy should target such payments, perhaps raising eligibility to between 70 – 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.

**Housing and independence**

Since respondents almost universally expressed great fear at the prospect of moving into residential care, develop policies and support systems that allow older to remain independent and stay in their own homes for as long as possible. Offer domiciliary care rather than early and often unnecessary admission into residential care if they were unable to live on their own. Encourage older subjects to remain in contact with people of all age groups, sustaining interdependent social networks. Most objected to the unfairness of the current means-tested system which can lead to situations in which the prudent lose their assets in paying for care, while those who did not save for their retirement may not need to contribute.

**Health and social care**

In policy terms highlight discriminatory treatment of older people in both the NHS and private provision. Government and Health Authorities should raise awareness of doctors who dismiss health problems experienced by older people, regarding them part of the ageing process, rather than as a treatable condition. Engage with preventative approaches to mental health support, including providing older people with opportunities to remain active and socially engaged.

**Dementia**

Since most respondents expressed fear of developing dementia in old age, make research into treatments a priority, and raise awareness of discrimination against sufferers.

**Carers**

Since so many caring for their parents are themselves growing older, they may be in need of care themselves. It was felt that carers currently receive inadequate support and are in need of regular periods of respite.
Active ageing

Given most saw retirement as a time to remain active and socially engaged, foster and provide support for voluntary structures such as the U3A. Provide increased opportunities for leisure, self-development and physical activity. The axing of support for over-55 swimmers was lamented. Provide opportunities for learning and cultural engagement, with adult learning opportunities, sustaining local library and museum services, including mobile libraries. Respondents thought volunteering was an important means for older people to continue to contribute to society, while public spaces and facilities such as leisure centres provided valuable opportunities for intergenerational contact. They believed transport concessions such as the free bus or transport passes were vital to help older people to remain mobile, and, economically and socially active.

A diversity of service provision to support ‘active ageing’

Since older subjects are highly heterogeneous group, offer a diversity of service provision since some people would not wish to participate in designated activities for older people. Ensure that core services such as libraries and leisure centres remain available and accessible to older people, as an essential part of supporting active ageing. Segregating service delivery according to age groups can further exclude those already socially isolated.

End of life

Ensure the adequacy of care in the final phase of life, avoiding indignities suffered when dying. Some respondents felt strongly thought that euthanasia should be accepted, enabling more control over the manner of death.

Other Findings: In terms of other, more general findings, 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. One woman in her 70s from Highgate reading group said: ‘it is others who are old not ourselves… though I must be very different in nearly every way I, in fact, still feel ‘me’, ie not old but timeless and ageless.’ A woman in her 60s from the Banstead group observed that ‘part of the ageing process is that we don’t see it in ourselves’. For some, ageing is something that is always on the horizon, rather than imminent.’ As another respondent said, ‘I think of the elderly as someone 20 years older than me.’

Extensive and intensive narrative analysis of data from all three strands of the project revealed widespread agreement on the shortage of positive older characters in fictional narratives–written or filmed–while certain stereotypes of passive dependency and an inability to manage were readily identified. Even 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 seem as beneficial by participants, as giving them voice in significant fashion.

The Need for Public Debate: One other achievement of FCMAP was to demonstrate the need for public debate which registers the complexity of diverse factors impacting on the experience of ageing – such as gender, social class, ethnicity and geographical region – without allowing these to obscure the universal changes which are characterising social life in Britain in the early Twenty-First century. In particular, FCMAP highlighted how this debate is often best initiated, as it has been for several centuries, by our writer as typified by the following exchange between David Lodge and Jim Crace:

**Lodge:** I think the chronological category of being old has changed. I mean my wife was told by our GP the other day that a woman in Edgbaston which is a rather posh residential suburb of Birmingham –

**Crace:** Where David lives!

**Lodge:** The average life expectancy is eighty-seven now. Now that wouldn’t be the same in Balsall Heath or somewhere like that –

**Crace:** Where I live! No you’re right.

**Lodge:** But if you are reasonably prosperous and you looked after your health then to be sixty or seventy, that’s not old anymore. I mean so if you’ve got talent and you’ve got ambition you can still you know you can still do things. So all we’ve done is push the whole syndrome of being old now you know right into the eighties and nineties.
Crace: But you say ‘all we’ve done’? That’s a big thing because what it means is that we now have real retirements. I mean my dad said to me, and he died when he was sixty-seven, so two years after retirement, and he was ill in those years so he had no time. But I remember him when he passed sixties saying to my mum and my mum repeated it quite a lot subsequently and it struck me as being true at the time, he said when you pass, when you’re sixty every extra day you have is a kind of bonus is what he said. And actually now, that would be a ludicrous thing to say! It should be eighty, every, but at that time people were dying when they were sixty. It’s interesting that maybe this is kind of a template for being a successful older person. If you regard it as a bonus, then it’s actually quite a good way of approaching old age.

The Postwar Experience of Ageing Calls For a Fundamental Rethink of Societal Values: The most important of FCMAP’s findings is the need for researchers, policymakers and media workers to pay attention to what older people say when given the opportunity to freely express themselves. In particular, FCMAP analysis of the MO longitudinal data on ageing reveals how the experience of ageing has changed. A number of respondents to this directive acknowledge that they were the products of a particular era. As one man notes, ‘In many ways this has been a privileged generation. We enjoyed the benefit of thirty years of full employment after the Second World War. However, another man, a retired plumber from Birmingham demonstrates how, despite this ‘privilege’, expectations change:

My life has been as good as I could expect, a continuous run of employment, unlike the twenties and thirties when older members of my family were out of work, also having a house which we have paid for.

Two things I would have done differently, opted for non-manual work, and chosen one with a pension at the end.

The point is that enjoying retirement requires sufficient financial means and a movement beyond the norms of the original postwar Welfare State because, over the last two to three decades, social needs had changed, as the same man notes:

Thinking about ageing has changed, people have a more active social life these days to a more advanced age than twenty, or so years ago. Both sexes of 65+ rambling six miles or more, climbing styles, tea dances, bridge classes etc. Years ago one thought about retiring as doing a bit of gardening and taking to an armchair.

The postwar experience of mass, healthy, paid, retirement has challenged the classificatory and regulatory frameworks which enabled it to come into existence. By the turn of the millennium, people were not by and large choosing to wind down on retirement, instead carrying on with what they had been doing, only without the tyranny of wage labour, and taking on new challenges; in many cases, finding this to be the most enjoyable, fulfilling and rewarding time of their life. In short, the lived experience of retirement demands that ageing be rethought. As the following mass observer eloquently argues:

Age has become an oppressive device, used arbitrarily by the state and employers to slot people into fixed roles at fixed times in their lives and to eject them. If society does not distribute education, work and leisure more equally over the lifespan, immense social distortion and personal unhappiness will result and huge potential be lost. Between them, the old and the young could create the first post-industrial society. By abolishing age as a governing criterion, an ageless and more human society can be created.
Acknowledgements:

Thanks to Natalia Clarke and subsequently Denise Odell, the FCMAP administrators; to Louise Bazalgette and John Holden at Demos; to Fiona Courage, Jessica Scantlebury, Dorothy Sheridan and all those working with MO; to Jennifer Anning and Keith Richards of the U3A; to Trezza Azzopardi, Jim Crace, David Lodge, Caryl Phillips, Will Self and Fay Weldon for their participation in FCMAP. In particular, we would like to acknowledge the support of all the MO and U3A participants in FCMAP without whom there would have been no project.

Professor Philip Tew, Professor of English and PI (FCMAP)
Brunel Centre for Contemporary Writing (BCCW),
Division of English, Brunel University, Uxbridge, Middlesex, U8 3PH
philip.tew@brunel.ac.uk

Dr Jago Morrison, CI, FCMAP Project
Brunel Centre for Contemporary Writing (BCCW), Division of English, Brunel University, Uxbridge, Middlesex, U8 3PH
Jago.Morrison@brunel.ac.uk

Dr Nick Hubble, CI, FCMAP Project
Brunel Centre for Contemporary Writing (BCCW), Division of English, Brunel University, Uxbridge, Middlesex, U8 3PH
Nick.Hubble@brunel.ac.uk

Published by the NDA Research Programme
Department of Sociological Studies
University of Sheffield
Elmfield
Northumberland Road
Sheffield
S10 2TU
www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk
Email: nda@sheffield.ac.uk