

It keeps us young

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ABSTRACT

I wrote a newspaper article describing a branch of the University of the Third Age (U₃A). It was given the sub-title ‘It keeps us young’ by the editor without my knowledge or consent. I objected on the grounds that it gave a totally misleading impression of the nature and purpose of the U₃A, one which may lead people to suppose that members were striving to be ‘young’. This experience raised the question of the language used to describe those in the Third Age, a controversy in which a number of contemporary gerontologists are involved. It is suggested that some writers are reinforcing the concept of ‘the Ghost in the Machine’ that is commonly held by many lay people, and this leads to confusion about self-identity among those in later life. It is argued that elderly people will be able to map out strategies for successful ageing only if they come to terms with accepting themselves as being old. Longstanding ageist prejudice has tended to create a negative aura surrounding words such as ‘elderly’ and such words need to be rehabilitated.

KEY WORDS – Third age, language, ageism, dualism, self-identity.

Introduction

I recently published an article in a local newspaper, describing the University of the Third Age in Cambridge (Gibson 1998). When it appeared in print, I saw to my annoyance that the editor, without my knowledge or consent, had given it the sub-title ‘It keeps us young’. It was certainly not my intention that such a claim should be made: it is not true, nor does it express a desirable aim. I do not believe that elderly people should strive to be ‘young’ or that they should be encouraged to do so. Such an ambition would be to deny all the positive advantages that come with ageing.

Moreover, this sub-title totally misrepresents the nature and purposes of the University of the Third Age (U₃A). It conveys to the public an impression of a group of ‘oldies’ getting together and striving to be young, an endeavour which would be impossible and ridiculous

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however one interprets ‘youngness’. On the contrary, the U₃A exists for people who aim at the further development of their skills and interests in many fields in later life. Unlike *Les Universités de Troisième Age* in France, where younger people in the Second Age and connected with the university system, teach the elderly students and administer the organisation, here in Britain there is no dependency on younger people. The state of being old is not regarded as a handicap in the U₃A. Rather, it is acknowledged that advancing age brings actual benefits: not only do people in the Third Age have leisure, but they have mature experience and expertise in many fields. Having no careers to advance, they do not need to study to obtain degrees and other qualifications; their study is purely for the sake of their interest and for the actual pleasure of achievement. There is nothing specially young about their activities.

The Objects and Principles of the U₃A were formulated in 1981 when the organisation was formed, and they are set out in the Appendix to Chapter 1 of *A Fresh Map of Life* (Laslett 1996). These make it quite clear that there is no intention to make those who join it ‘young’ in any sense. In Principle 14, for example, a wide range of activities and subjects are set out:

Insistence on learning as an end in itself shall go along with an emphasis on the value of making things and on acquiring and improving skills of all kinds. The curriculum shall therefore include, if there is a demand, and if facilities can be found, such subjects as ... (Laslett 1996: 229)

and there follows a list of great variety, none of the items being specifically age-related or intended to ‘keep us young’. The members of U₃A do not set out to follow the lifestyle of younger people and no euphemisms are employed in the Objects and Principles (such as those that are sometimes advocated to spare people the supposed hurt of being called ‘elderly’). We that are old and free from ageist prejudice do not object to references to our elderly status.

Young at heart, or ageless?

It was hardly surprising then that I should object to the editor’s subtitle. I am now in my mid-eighties and, speaking for myself, I would say that I do not feel ‘young at heart’ or ‘young in spirit’ (whatever those phrases may mean). I am tempted to say that I feel ‘ageless’ (Kaufman 1986), but this is not quite correct either. Rather, I admit to feeling ‘old’ in heart and spirit, and why should I not? However, I do

empathise with Pablo Casals who, when interviewed on his 94th birthday said:

On my last birthday I was ninety-three years old. That is not young of course but age is a relative matter. If you continue to work and to absorb the beauty of the world about you, you find that age does not necessarily mean getting old. At least, not in the ordinary sense. I feel many things more intensely than before, and for me life grows more fascinating. Work helps prevent one from getting old. I, for one, cannot dream of retiring. Not now or ever. Retire, the word is alien and the idea inconceivable to me. My work is my life. I cannot think of one without the other. To 'retire' means to me to begin to die. The man who works and is never bored is never old. Work and interest in worthwhile things are the best remedy for age. Each day I am reborn. Each day I must begin again. (Kahn 1970)

In contrast to this, Alex Comfort, who has written extensively and wisely upon many aspects of ageing, made the following somewhat unfortunate statement:

Old people are in fact young people inhabiting old bodies. Old people are people who have lived a certain number of years *and that is all*. (Comfort 1977: 28, 13)

Criticising this statement, Andrews asks rhetorically:

Old people are in fact young people? Really? What happens to all the years they have lived, the things they have learned, the selves they have evolved from and the selves they are becoming? Years are not empty containers: important things happened in that time. Why must these years be trivialized? They are the stuff of which people's lives are made. (Andrews 1999: 309)

Old people are old, and when they declare 'I don't feel old, I feel young inside' what they are trying to express is that they do not identify with the false stereotype of what an 'old person' is commonly supposed to be. Ward (1984), for example, interviewed 320 men and women in the age cohorts of the 60s, 70s and 80s, and asked them how they would classify themselves with respect to their age status. While 172 referred to themselves as being 'elderly' or 'old', 148 (46 per cent) saw themselves as 'young' or 'middle-aged'. Rejection of the appellation of 'old' was also found in the well-known study of Thompson *et al.* (1990). When 43 people aged from 58 to 86, were asked the direct question 'Do you think of yourself as old?', 36 (84 per cent) replied with a categorical 'No'.

In the journal *The Psychologist*, a writer complained that the term 'elderly' had been applied to the age cohort to which he himself belonged and as it was, in his estimation, an offensive word, he objected. His response illustrates the way in which the stereotype is rejected:

Rampant ageism in *The Psychologist*! Browsing through the April edition on the train home just now I came across Carol Sellars research report 'Walking may help you to live longer'. She tells how researchers 'followed a cohort of *elderly* (61–81 years) non-smoking men' (italics mine). The day on which I am reading this? My 61st birthday. Elderly?! Me?! I simply cannot think of *anyone* who would call me that or who would dare to. (McCleod 1998)

Although his letter is phrased semi-humorously, it is evident that he really does feel offended that people might consider him to be 'elderly'. For him the word is insulting – unless, of course, applied to people much older than himself.

It is little wonder that many elderly people should try to dissociate themselves personally from the false stereotype. If we consult standard thesauruses (e.g. Urdang 1997; Collins 1996; Kirkpatrick 1998), we find that the great majority of the adjectives given in association with the word 'old' are offensive or derogatory, in contrast with those associated with 'young'. The ageist attitudes and stereotypes of society are embodied in its language and it may take many years for this to change.

Changing the vocabulary

Whether ageist, sexist or racist, certain words have insulting implications. There are two ways of dealing with such prejudice: either such a word should be tabooed and not used at all, or it should be rehabilitated and used only in its true descriptive sense, dissociated from all the negative terms that have become associated with it. For example, early in the 20th century, the word 'jew' was used as a term of abuse implying avarice and dishonesty – even amongst comparatively liberal-minded people. Now it has no such derogatory meaning, but is used merely descriptively in a religious or ethnic sense that should cause offence to no one.

The writer of the letter to *The Psychologist* would probably agree with Bytheway who, in his laudable effort to combat ageism, would literally taboo the word 'elderly'. He writes:

In particular we should abandon the word 'elderly' and begin to use a relative rather than an absolute age vocabulary. (Bytheway 1995: 125)

Once one begins to abolish certain words, however, and use a restricted vocabulary, one is on the slippery slope of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell 1949). In this novel, the governing class were implementing a process of thought-control by so impoverishing and restricting the vocabulary

that eventually it would be impossible to express, or even to entertain, concepts that were hostile to the ideology of the rulers.

No one would accuse Bytheway of any sinister intention in what he proposes, but if one considers the whole chapter (entitled *No more 'elderly', no more old age*) from which I have quoted a sentence, it is apparent that he wishes us to proceed not by the rehabilitation of existing words like 'elderly' by demonstrating that they do not mean decrepit, worn out, out-of-date, weak-minded, pitiable, etc., but simply refer to the number of years people have lived. Instead, he seeks to achieve thought control by limiting our language.

As an example of the drive to rehabilitate 'elderly' (and similar words referring to age), I would refer again to Laslett (1996). Here the word 'elderly' is used freely and correctly and is being rehabilitated by evidence demonstrating that elderly people are not the pathetic creatures they are held to be in ageist mythology. Laslett specifically opposes the elimination of the term 'old age' and, in referring to two of his former lectures, writes:

It is there insisted that the discontinuance of the use of 'Old Age' as an expression should not be absolute, nor become subject to PC. (Laslett 1996: 279)

The ghost in the machine

Perhaps the greatest merit in the article by Andrews is that it points out that the idea of people being 'old' physically but 'young' in spirit, is based on an outworn Cartesian concept of a mind/body split. This split has been famously represented by Ryle (1949) as 'the ghost in the machine'. Many elderly people, themselves strongly ageist (Duncan 1996), are aware of this distinction and so, as Ward (1984) and Thompson *et al.* (1990) found, shy away from applying the term 'old' to themselves. It is also understandable that commercial interests such as travel companies (Ylanne-McEwan 1999), who advertise their wares in magazines aimed at the elderly, should strive to foster the 'young at heart' image.

This ageist attitude however is unintentionally reinforced by those academics and professionals who insist that, although people must become 'old' in years, the youthful ghost can remain untainted, as it were, by the passage of years. Many gerontologists write as though they accepted the existence of the young ghost inhabiting an elderly machine (e.g. Comfort 1977). Others appear to think that the ghost is ageless but the machine goes on ageing (e.g. Kaufman 1986). Some, like Hepworth (1991), suggest that the ghost is 'the real self' and

remains young, while the machine – not the real self – continues to age. Biggs (1997) presents a variety of accounts which are all, basically, a version of the ageless ghost wearing the mask of the time-weary machine. He concludes with a contrast between the two:

The mask of ageing hypothesis posits a youthful self *trapped inside* an ageing mask. The persona hypothesis suggests a matured *inner* identity wearing a mask that can evoke a more youthful facade. (Biggs 1997: 566; emphasis added)

It should be noted that the images presented in conveying both these hypotheses are essentially spatial, and both evoke the idea of the ghost in the machine. I have of course over-simplified the sophisticated presentations of these various writers. Nevertheless, I must charge them with reinforcing the lay person's most unhelpful picture of what is taking place in the ageing process.

Conclusion

I suggest that older people, and society in general, need to be re-educated about what is necessary to overcome ageist ideas, to get old people to accept that they are old, and to be proud of their many years that have conferred experience, wisdom and freedom from the follies of their earlier years. Participation in the activities of organisations such as the University of the Third Age does not 'keep us young'; they assist us to make the best of our late life leisure and to develop further the skills and broader capacities that come to us with our advanced age. We cannot all enjoy the great talent of Pablo Casals but we can aim to develop talents we possess further for the rest of our lives.

Writing as an old person myself, I suggest that we can do this only if we can accept that each one of us is a unified whole and that there is no question of ageing of one part and youthfulness of another. In order to accept ourselves there should be no more 'I suppose I'd be pretty all right if it weren't for my face – it looks so old!' If we are old, we are old through and through and we must accept this. When we have learnt to accept ourselves as being old we can see the ageing process for what it is: an adventure. I was delighted to see that Betty Friedan devoted the penultimate chapter of her book to 'Age as Adventure' (Friedan 1994). Viewed as a projected journey through unknown territory with an unknown end, our personal future has quite fascinating possibilities. When we have got to know and accept our ageing selves, then we can map out the most suitable strategies for tackling this intriguing if hazardous journey.

I began this article saying that I was tempted to regard myself as being ‘ageless’, but I rejected the idea and admitted that I was ‘old’ and was happy to be such for the reasons stated so eloquently by Casals. Similarly, Andrews (1999: 316) states, quite rightly, that ‘researchers on ageing must learn to resist the temptation of agelessness’. I see the chief justification of this rejection in the fact that – willy-nilly, for better for worse – we continue to change as we age. We do not remain the same.

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