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Youthfulness and agelessness: a comment

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In recent years, we gerontologists have been forced to re-examine the conceptual base of our work – both in the wake of developments in postmodernist thought, and following the emergence of ageism as a media issue. Two particular problems have been addressed: one is how we recognise and define age in the context of the partly-disaggregated individual human being: body, mind, self, identity, etc. The second is how we relate to popular sentiments, judgements and objectives regarding age: thinking positively, being prejudiced, remaining active, being a burden, etc. On both fronts there has been a shift away from emphasising the significance of age, and one often reads such arguments as: people do not change, they remain the same; but they can continue to develop; but there is a massive diversity; so we must not generalise about age or prejudge older people; and so on. It is not difficult to associate these trends with powerful ideological movements. There is a third issue that lies just beneath the surface: how we gerontologists theorise our own personal experience of ageing.

Andrews (1999) and Gibson (2000) are iconoclasts, challenging some of these current tendencies, seeing in current gerontology evidence of the popular fear that we too might be ageing. In particular, they both attack my argument that a non-ageist gerontology should abandon a presumption that old age exists (Bytheway 1995). More importantly perhaps, they put forward a number of contentious arguments which are central to the development of gerontology as a discipline. These are that:

- old age is no different from other stages of life;
- old people are old – we and they should accept that they are;
- the dichotomy between self and body is false and should be abandoned;
- the claim to agelessness is a form of ageism;
- as gerontologists, we must fight for a study of ageing which has old people and old age at its centre; and we should rehabilitate stigmatised words such as 'elderly'.

In this comment I address each of these arguments in turn.

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Old age is just a stage

Andrews draws a parallel between the stages of life and the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly:

> A caterpillar becomes a butterfly, but we do not challenge the existence of the category of caterpillar or butterfly simply because of the gradual nature of the transformation. (1999: 303)

I am no zoologist but to me the story of the butterfly is full of cultural resonance. I have a distant recollection of being told the story as a child: once upon a time, the butterfly was a caterpillar. It lived life as a caterpillar. Then it started to become a butterfly. And look at it now – still a butterfly and isn't it beautiful! Beautiful indeed, and I would not challenge the basis of Andrews' argument that there are three stages in the creature's life: caterpillar, transformation, butterfly. She then argues however that, because the middle stage is transformational, it is not possible to identify either a point in time when the creature ceases to be a caterpillar or a point when it begins to be a butterfly. What she is implying in this parallel, is that old age is preceded by a stage of transformation. Rather than detail this transformation, she calls upon another insect-related metaphor: 'change and continuity weave an intricate web' (1999: 309) and later, more prosaically, upon continuity theory:

> Continuity theory points to old age as a time of ongoing personhood, neither the retardation or complete cessation of development, nor a radical transformation of self from 'us' to 'them'. Old age is a continuation of the life which has been lived up until that point. (1999: 311)

What point is not detailed, but I find it difficult to grasp how, in the context of an intricate web of change and continuity, this 'time of ongoing personhood' might be preceded by a stage of 'transformation'.

In trying to think through the reality of 'old age', I have occasionally considered, not the caterpillar/butterfly parallel, but rather that between age and height. Some people are indisputably tall: as we look up at them, it would be odd to question that they were tall. Now I could have ended the previous sentence: 'that they were really tall!' and that ambiguous clause, of course, points to the problem: some people are really tall in the sense of 'very tall', but others are not and then we might ask, with a different intonation 'are they really tall?'

So, in this sense, I agree that there are some people who are 'indisputably old' (Bytheway 1995: 125): anyone over the age of – what shall we say? 105? is indisputably old. Moreover, this

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argument also implies that they have been indisputably old for a very long time. But the fact remains that there are very many more people who are *disputably* old. Demographically, what we are looking at is the tail of a statistical distribution, a tail not unlike that of the normal distribution, and the question of where you draw the line is essentially 'arbitrary'. So there remains a problem in knowing what 'old age' is and, for gerontologists, a problem in knowing how to make good use of the concept. No matter how scientific we try to be, the criteria we might settle upon will essentially be 'arbitrary' with some people deemed 'just old' and others 'just not quite'. It is on this basis that I dispute that old age exists as a stage in life.

Old people are old

The concept of 'old age' is cultural rather than personal. In the ways in which we talk about ourselves, old age is often presented as a place we find ourselves in, a stage on the journey of life. Not unlike 'Europe', we are rarely taxed by the question of where its boundaries are. 'Being old', in contrast, is much more personal. As such, it is something that is not normally revealed in academic discourse (and so, in the world of our own literature, we gerontologists can indeed appear ageless). There is, however, a growing interest in, and commitment to, reflexivity in research and writing, and much of the most powerful literature about age is presented in the form of personal testimony (for example, Sarton 1993, Newton 1980, Elder 1977, Friedan 1993). In this vein, Andrews begins her article with a brief anecdote about being asked what she was working on, and Gibson similarly begins with his reactions to being misrepresented in a local newspaper. Through such experiences we are forced to think about the meanings that are *popularly* associated with age words. Gibson goes on to reveal his age and to reflect upon what he would say if asked about his experience of age. In a similar way, I felt obliged to declare my age and briefly adopted an autobiographical approach in writing the introduction to my book.

In this context, the question of who 'we' are and who 'they' are becomes critical in how we write about 'old people'. Thus, in developing an anti-ageist argument, Andrews asserts that 'We must be able to call our old people old' (1999: 311). She does not reveal her own age, and it is significant that she does not assert that 'We must be able to call ourselves old when we are old'. In contrast, Gibson accepts that he is old:

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I am now in my mid-eighties and … I admit to feeling 'old' in heart and spirit and why should I not? (2000: 774)

Later, he issues a statement in which both gerontologists (implicitly) and old people (explicitly) are cast in the third person. Incidentally, he himself appears in this statement as a detached (as if ageless) commentator:

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 … (2000: 778)

Now, in a sense, the tautological argument that 'old people are old' is just part of the previous argument about the existence of old age: old people are people in the stage known as old age. But there is a significant difference: according to this model, gerontologists normally encounter old people, not at the outset of old age, but at some point within it. The question of how they came to be old, is barely relevant. Should we be asked by a gerontologist about 'being old', about the expectations and experience of old age, there will be a moment when we may consider what is implied in the query: 'you are old, I am not, tell me what it's like'. Insofar as there may be an indisputable age difference, the gerontologist conspicuously younger than the subject then, as the latter, we may accept this line of questioning: 'OK, I am old, you are young, I'll tell you what it's like'. It is in this way that Gibson sees ageism being overcome: 'old people' being persuaded to accept that they are old. Our response, however, could have been 'OK, I am growing older, you are growing older, let's talk about what it's like' and, likewise, Gibson could have written:

I suggest that academics and professionals, and society in general, need to be re-educated about what is necessary to overcome ageist ideas, to get younger people to accept that they are growing older.

Self and body

Gibson offers a powerful challenge to Cartesian dualism:

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. … If we are old, we are old through and through and we must accept this. (2000, 778)

So, the key question is: am I old? Gibson, earlier in his article, uses Casals' powerful description to construct his answer: 'old, but not in

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the ordinary sense'. If we examine the quoted extract however, it is clear that Casals' rather different answer is 'not young, and not old in the ordinary sense'. According to Casals, 'the man who works and is never bored is never old'. So, it is clear that, although Gibson (unlike Casals) does not deny being 'old', he is not *wholly* accepting that he is old. Like Casals (and the subjects of the surveys of Thompson *et al.* 1990 and Ward 1954), he too prefers to avoid any association with old in the ordinary sense, *i.e.* with the dominant stereotypes. Casals enables him to do this, not by separating self and body, but by rejecting the 'ordinary sense' of being old.

Andrews argues that the Cartesian split is divisive in two ways: it separates people who are 'really old' from those who only 'look old' and it divides the inner and outer selves (1999: 305). She too sees the power of the negative stereotype as the explanation of why so many older people deny their age. She argues that this pretence ultimately disempowers older people. In short the separation of self from body enables the self to view the body as representing an image of age that the self would like to reject. This, however, is not dissimilar to Gibson's rejection of 'the ordinary sense'.

This is not the occasion to engage in a detailed discussion of this complex array of conceptual divisions. What is important is that both Andrews and Gibson insist upon a simple and unproblematic link between individual and age: we each are a whole and we each are of an age. And yet it is absurd to deny that our chronological age is in some way identical to the age we 'look', the age we appear to be, and equally absurd to insist that this indisputable age should be part of our identity: Joe Bloggs, 53, is free to conform to the image of a 33-year-old, and we are free to think he looks 73. It is in this complex patterning of body and image that gerontological research should flourish.

Agelessness is ageist

Andrews' central claim (1999: 301) is that the theory that we are ageless is a form of ageism: it denies older people the very thing they, and only they, have: age. Moreover, she suggests that the concept of agelessness is popular amongst gerontologists because we would like to think of ourselves as ageless: for us (perhaps knowing age as we do), it is an attractive, seductive, idea.

There have been times when I have suspected quite the opposite: that as gerontologists we are vulnerable to seeing ourselves and those we study entirely in terms of age: as *ageing* rather than *living* individuals:

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ageful rather than ageless. Once persuaded that ageing is worthy of serious study, we are tempted to interpret *all* change and *all* differences as age related, if not age driven. So, for example, the relations between generations become interpreted in terms of age differences; biographies and careers are analysed in terms of age; public images are scrutinised for signs of age; and so on. Gerontologists are well aware of the age of their subjects and, in general, endeavour to view this positively, as something that sharply contrasts with the negative character of many popular images. In this context then, to be reminded that most individuals might live with a fixed sense of self is perhaps no bad thing: who I am now is who I always have been and always will be.

Andrews' critique of Kaufman turns on the key claim that old people perceive meaning in being themselves in old age (Kaufman 1986: 6). Whereas Kaufman argues that 'being themselves' here represents continuity *regardless* of one's passage through the stages of life, Andrews interprets the same claim as 'evidence against agelessness' (1999: 312). Kaufman's study is based on a sample of 'old people' and she accepts that popular conceptions of the stages of life exist (1986:6). She makes a clear distinction, however, one that Andrews would challenge, between the ageing body and the self (1986:13). What Kaufman argues is that her subjects are aware of popular conceptions, of how these conceptions relate to appearance, and of the appearance of their own bodies. In this context, they choose to reassert and find meaning in the idea of a continuing 'un-ageing' self (1986:153).

Turning to the seductiveness of agelessness for gerontologists, Andrews argues that Cartesian dualism 'has come under severe attack in many areas of study – but not that of old age' (1999:305). In particular she associates the theory of the mask of ageing with this failure. Much has been written about this theory and there is no doubt that it has become extremely popular in gerontology (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989). First, it is important to recognise that, once again, it is primarily about how one sees and interprets one's own body. Being conscious of popular conceptions of the stages of life and the images that represent them, it is hardly surprising if the sight of my body in the mirror should cause me to reassert that within that body there is a 'me' that has always been there. This is not so much a denial of age as a reassertion of identity. And if implicit in this is a distaste for the sight of my body, then this is as much a reflection upon the popular interpretation of the standard images as it is upon any possible 'self-loathing' (Bytheway and Johnson 1998*a*).

That said, I would agree with Andrews that we should be intensely sceptical about the popular agenda within gerontology. This is why I

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did discuss the argument that gerontology might be 'essentially ageist' (Bytheway 1995: 97–9).

The study of later life and the meaning of words

In choosing to title the concluding chapter of my book *No more 'elderly', no more old age*, I was of course conscious that this was a direct challenge to some sections of gerontological literature: a challenge rather than aspirations to 'eliminating the category' (Andrews) or 'thought-control' (Gibson).

I had two empirical observations in mind: the first is that I had noticed prior to writing my book (and since then, this has been repeatedly confirmed in editing this journal) that some gerontologists appear to have abandoned the word 'elderly' – they produce full accounts of their research which never include the word – whereas others use it repeatedly and superfluously. For example, some, having defined their sample as being aged 75 or over, continue to refer to 'our elderly respondents', others, in discussing intergenerational relations will constantly refer to 'elderly parents' rather than 'the older generation'. Why do these researchers feel compelled to keep using the word? The second observation is that certain words in literature on disability have been abandoned: cripple and moron, for example. I see the same future being possible for the word 'elderly'. I take Gibson's point that words can be rehabilitated, but why should we rehabilitate 'elderly'? Why do we need it? What purpose does it serve?

The matter of old age is of a different order. Whereas 'elderly' barely has a history of any significance, that of old age is long and extensive, going back to Cicero (and no doubt beyond). It is absurd to suggest that it has no meaning and that it can be eliminated. My argument was, and remains, that the future for gerontological theory is not bright if we do not question the existence of something called old age. It is hard to imagine, for example, how psychology might have developed and continued to develop had it not questioned the existence and nature of 'the mind' or 'personality'. It is because of this sceptical tradition in psychology that both Andrews and Gibson are able to draw upon its insights in challenging the simplistic Cartesian dualism that they claim is characteristic of gerontology.

It is important that we gerontologists note that Cicero (and all those who have contributed to our understanding of what old age is) were, like us, ageing human beings. As such they must each have inherited some kind of understanding of the pattern of life from cradle to grave,

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an understanding which, in later life, some will have discussed at length (Bytheway 1995: 18). So, arguably, they were subject to the same uncertainties and fears about their own personal futures as do we gerontologists now entering the 21st century.

In evoking the idea of 'rehabilitating' words, Gibson implies that words have an existence that is unchallengable. In a sense, of course, he is right. The word 'elderly' cannot be excised from dictionaries and textbooks. Historians, however, should be encouraged to search out its origins and account for its sudden rise in popularity (Bytheway and Johnson 1998*b*). What I am suggesting is that, in the context of current writing, anti-ageist gerontology should be promoting a relativist vocabulary rather than an absolutist one: older people not elderly people, and later life and older age rather than old age. In doing this, we should be making it clear that this is not cosmetic. We are not proposing 'older people' as a euphemism for 'elderly people' or 'the aged'. Rather we want to be able to draw upon a more inclusive vocabulary, one which does not divide life up into bite-size stages and the population into box-like categories.

So, in conclusion, I am happy to reassert my argument that gerontology should give 'elderly' and 'old age' a rest. Rather than expend effort on rehabilitating these concepts, and rather than constructing a framework for gerontology which has 'elderly people' and 'old age' at its centre, I would prefer to work towards a better understanding of how we age, how we make sense of our experience of ageing, and how we relate to, and work with, people who may be older (and who may be younger) than ourselves.

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