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Imagining Old Age

Rebecca L. Jones

Introduction

“I hardly ever think about getting old and how long my life will be because it depresses me. Not to mention the fact that I see it as a waste of time. Why think about when I’m going to die while I’m still in my prime of living? I should be thinking about today and not tomorrow”

Research participant, quoted in (Altpeter & Marshall, 2003, p. 748)

People often seem to be reluctant to imagine that they will ever grow old themselves. Of course, at one level, we all know that, unless we die ‘young’, we will all grow ‘old’ eventually. A life course runs from birth to death and, for most people, this will include a stage of being ‘old’. But, somehow, it seems to be hard for many people to believe that they will ever really be old themselves.

We might expect that people who are ‘middle-aged’ and ‘older’ would have less difficulty imagining what life will be like when they are old than people who are currently ‘young’, since their own old age is less distant. Certainly we know that younger people often have particularly negative and homogenised visions of old age (Kimuna, Knox, & Zusman, 2005; Mosher-Ashley & Ball, 1999; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006, 2007; Scott, Minichiello, & Browning, 1998) and we might expect this to mean that younger people would have greater difficulty in imagining being old themselves. However, it is well documented that even people who would usually be categorised as ‘old’ or ‘older’ on the basis of their chronological age often speak as if they are not themselves old (Bultena & Powers, 1978) as, for example, when a 90-year-old describes a 70-year-old as an ‘old dear’ (Jones, 2006). It looks as if the difficulty of imagining yourself as old extends across the life course.

In UK English, there are significant differences between the adjectives ‘old’ and ‘older’. ‘Old’ is an absolute, whereas ‘older’ is relative to something else, often another person. The term ‘older person’ is generally considered to be more polite than the term ‘old person’, but some people argue that we should reclaim ‘old’ as part of a wider project of not denying ageing. This topic is debated by Andrews (1999, 2000), Bytheway (2000) and Gibson (2000). This chapter focuses particularly on people imagining themselves to be ‘old’ rather than merely ‘older’.

This chapter first examines some of the explanations that gerontologists and other scholars have given for why people often find it hard to imagine themselves being old. It then asks why it matters that people should be able to imagine their own old age. Finally, it considers some techniques which could be used by researchers and other people if they want to encourage people to think about their own old age.

Why might imagining old age be difficult?

Many gerontologists and other scholars have argued that modern UK society is ageist (Butler, 1969; Bytheway, 1995, 2005; Bytheway & Johnson, 1990; Copper, 1997; Macdonald & Rich, 1984). By this they generally mean that people who are categorised as 'old' or 'older' are systematically undervalued and discriminated against. If people generally fear and devalue old age, it is perhaps not surprising if they don't want to put themselves in the category 'old person', even in their imagination.

Many people associate growing old with bodily decline and a loss of sexual attractiveness, especially for women (Sontag, 1978). Since we live in a culture which places a high value on youthful types of health and sexual attractiveness, it is understandable if people don't want to be associated with the opposite (Heilbrun, 1997).

Some gerontologists have argued that many people think of old people as being so different from themselves that becoming old involves losing your true self. Featherstone and Hepworth (1989; 1991) identified a common trope of a 'mask of ageing': someone in middle age or later life looking at themselves in the mirror and feeling as if the mask of an old person had appeared on top of their true face. This suggests that their true self is not their older self, further supporting the idea that people might find it hard to imagine their own ageing because of their fear of being old.

More philosophically, Adam (in press) has argued that imagining growing older involves imagining the future and that can be difficult at both personal and wider societal levels. Of particular relevance here is her discussion of two of the ways in which people sometimes imagine the future, which she names 'future as fate' and 'future as fortune'.

By 'future as fate' she means the belief that the future has been pre-determined by gods or ancestors. Adam characterises this approach as one that was prevalent in pre-modern societies, but you can still see remnants of this idea in the way that some people talk about the future. People sometimes say things like 'well, what will be, will be' or 'it's in the lap of the gods'. While someone saying that might not actually believe that the shape of their own old age is pre-determined by God (although they might do), phrases like this suggest a feeling that there is little you can do to affect what happens. This suggests one reason why people might not want to imagine their own ageing – if there's nothing you can do about it, there's not much point thinking about it, your task is just to wait for it to unfold and perhaps to make the best of what occurs.

By 'future as fortune' Adam means the belief that people can shape their future through their present acts. They can make rational plans to optimise the future that then arises. This might suggest that people would find it easier to imagine their own ageing, if they feel that they can affect it through their own actions. However, Adam draws attention to the way that this view of the future means that it is much more uncertain than 'future as fate'. When societies are changing very fast, as in the UK in the twenty-first century, it can be much harder to be sure that your actions now will have the outcomes you want in the future. For example, in the 1990s and early 2000s

in the UK some people thought that the best way to provide income for their own later old age was to take out mortgages to buy properties that they then rented out to other people (buy-to-let). Since the property downturn around 2007, many of those people have found themselves in negative equity with houses they cannot sell. Thus, their plans for financing their retirement have not come to fruition. Experiences such as this can make the future feel very uncertain to some people. This might contribute to reluctance to imagine their personal future.

Some people might find it particularly difficult to imagine their own old age if they have little contact with older people. For example, Phoenix & Sparkes (2006) found that young people often base their ideas about their own ageing on what they see of their parents and grandparents. However, some people lack contact with their birth family because of adoption and family break-up. Other people, such as lesbian, gay and bisexual people, may not expect their older relatives' lifestyles to bear much resemblance to their own later life (Goltz, 2008). With the decline of all-age institutions such as party-political groups and churches and other faith organisations, many people are argued to be living more age-segregated lives (Uhlenberg & De Jong Gierveld, 2004). This may mean that younger people have fewer opportunities to get to know older people well, which may increase ageism and the view of older people as very different (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005). This, in turn, may make it more difficult for people to imagine that they will ever be old themselves.

Some researchers have found that it is particularly difficult to enable people to think *realistically* about their own old age. People tend to either imagine terrible pessimistic stereotypes of abusive or negligent care in residential homes, or overly optimistic visions of a life of leisure and international travel (Bulbeck, 2005; Patterson, Forbes, & Peace, 2009). While some older people undoubtedly do suffer terrible abuse and neglect, and others, particularly those with considerable wealth, do enjoy 'the golden years', most people's experiences are somewhere on the continuum between these two extremes.

Why does it matter?

If imagining your own old age can be so difficult, should we even bother to attempt it? Why does it matter that people should be able to imagine it?

While people find it hard to imagine that they will ever really be old, it is also clear that many younger people worry in a general way about growing older (Neikrug, 2003) and some expect old age to be miserable (Lacey, Smith, & Ubel, 2006). Lacey et al. argue that this expectation can lead to poor decision making in the present because a future aged self is not valued: if you can't really imagine that you will ever be old, there is not point taking actions now that will protect your future old self. This is argued to be one contributory factor in some behaviours which have negative effects in the long term, such as smoking – if people do not expect to live long, and are not invested in making their future life happy, there is less reason to defer current gratifications (Goltz, 2008).

Lacey et al.(2006) and Neikrug (2003) also argue that younger people's failure to imagine that they will ever be old themselves reinforces ageism, inter-generational conflict and misunderstanding. If you do not really believe that you will ever be old

yourself, it is harder to treat the older people you meet as if they are real and complex individuals like yourself.

At a collective and societal level, people's failure to imagine their own ageing might be argued to contribute to some of the problems that arise for some older people, such as the lack of high-quality, affordable care for frail older people. Pickard (in press) draws attention to the likely future lack of informal carers for older people, due to demographic changes. She argues that this lack has received insufficient policy attention. Many surveys have found that people underestimate the cost of care in later life. For example, a Department of Health survey in 2009 found that 51% of people estimated the cost of residential care in old age at less than £10,000 – the average is actually £30,000 (Bowcott, 2009). It seems possible that some of this systematic underestimation arises from people's unwillingness to think about their own old age in realistic and concrete ways.

What might help people to imagine their own old age?

Many people have an interest in helping people to imagine their own old age. Campaigning organisations working to improve the position of older people in society, such as Age UK, might want to do this in order to reduce ageism and the view of old people as very different from younger people. Health practitioners might want to do so in order to help people change health behaviours which have serious long term effects, such as smoking or eating too much salt. However, this final section focuses on the techniques that researchers, such as gerontologists, might find useful when investigating this topic.

If, as has been argued above, one reason that people are reluctant to imagine their own ageing is because they imagine that old age is always a time of decline and difficulty, presenting information which counters this view might be beneficial. In my own research I used just two key statistics: that only about 5% of people aged 75-85 in the UK live in care homes and only 22% of those aged 85+ (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2004/05/19405/37644>), and that pensioners are less likely to live in low income households than any other group apart from couples with no children (<http://www.poverty.org.uk/64/index.shtml>). While researchers bear a responsibility not to paint an over-rosy view of old age (for example, the statistics on income are much less good for some groups of older people, such as single women) I found that introducing just a few more positive representations of later life seemed to enable people to move on from pessimistic visions of old age (Jones, in press). Other sources of positive but realistic visions of old age include those found in the book *Growing Old Disgracefully* (The Hen Co-op, 1993).

Altpeter & Marshall (2003), Tiemann & Stone (1992) and Phoenix (in press) all recommend asking concrete questions about the future, not general ones. Phoenix suggests questions such as 'Think about yourself in 30 years time – where are you? What are you doing? What do you look like? What does a typical day involve?'. Tiemann & Stone suggest some even more specific questions such as 'what kind of clothes do you wear' and 'where is your family?' (Tiemann & Stone, 1992, p. 646). People could also be asked about hobbies and interests they might have taken up or still be pursuing, and about how they might work around any losses of physical

function they experience. Such specific questions help to move people from the vastness of trying to imagine a whole future to the much more manageable task of imagining one particular aspect of it. Likewise, encouraging research participants to talk about older people they do know, and how they want their own life to be different or similar, can be helpful.

Phoenix (in press) recommends facilitating encounters between younger and older people as part of the research process, especially when both groups share characteristics and interests. In one study, she showed younger athletes a short film of older body-builders talking about the role of body-building in their lives. She found this a much more successful way of enabling younger people to imagine themselves as older than when she attempted to get them to imagine being old without such a stimulus.

Several researchers report that creative and visual methods can be particularly helpful. Phoenix (in press) argues that both asking people to contribute images that represent their ideas about their own ageing and showing them non-stereotyped images of later life are fruitful. Masters & Holley (2006) used a 'future-self worksheet' into which undergraduates pasted or drew images to imagine their own later life in five specified domains (physical self, environment/residence, social world, financial support and psychological/spiritual self). Goltz (2008) used a range of creative methods, including drama, poetry and song-writing to enable his participants to envisage a wide range of non-traditional futures. I have found that, more simply, asking people to draw pictures that represent themselves in later life can also work well (Jones, in press).

Conclusion

While in this chapter I have argued that enabling people to imagine growing old is both necessary and possible, a note of caution should be sounded as to the agenda and motivations of those urging such imaginings and the specific focus they suggest for those imaginings. Ekerdt draws our attention to the ways in which "retirement is colonising adulthood" as a combinations of voices, including those arising from changes to pension provision, "urge adults to undertake a life-long project of retirement preparation" (Ekerdt, 2004, p. 4). He argues that focusing too much on retirement can have a variety of negative consequences, such as: making an artificial and unhelpful distinction between retired and working people; creating unrealistic expectations about life styles after retirement, especially as people age into old age; implying that the point of work is solely to enable a financially comfortable retirement; suggesting that financial circumstances are the most important factor in a happy old age. While my focus in this chapter has been on a wider issue than retirement planning, I too could perhaps be accused of over-emphasising the significance of imagining one's old age, since my professional interests as a gerontologist are served by arguing for its importance.

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