

The British Academy on Ageing

In February–April 2014, the British Academy held its first series of ‘British Academy Debates’, on the subject of Ageing. The three Debates were held in London, Sheffield and Edinburgh. To watch video recordings of the Debates, or to download the *Ageing* booklet that summarises the arguments that were presented, go to www.britishacademy.ac.uk/ageing

The following article reproduces the first part of the British Academy’s booklet on *Ageing*.

Ageing: where are we now?

‘Older people’ have always been part of society. Evidence shows that ‘growing old’ is not a new phenomenon, as we are often led to believe. Even in ancient and medieval times the proportion of people over the age of 60 is estimated to have been 6 to 8 per cent. However, life expectancy has been steadily increasing since the 1840s and with it the number of older people within the overall population. In the 1930s people over the age of 65 made up around 7 per cent of the UK population, the current proportion is around 17 per cent (2011), and this is expected to increase to around 20 per cent by 2025 (Figure 1). The fastest growing section of this ageing population is, however, that of the so-called ‘oldest old’, aged 85 and over. There are currently around ten thousand centenarians in the UK and this figure is predicted to grow five-fold over the next twenty years. Half of all babies born in the UK in 2014 can expect to live to the age of one hundred.

Are we ready for an older population?

The Filkin Report (2013)¹ pointed out that UK society is not ready for these drastic changes. They will invariably lead to some restructuring of society, but also have

1. Filkin Report, *Ready for Ageing?* (The Stationery Office, London, 2013) www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201213/ldselect/ldpublic/140/140.pdf

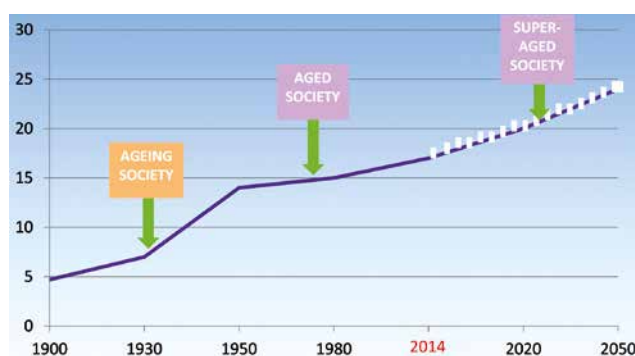


Figure 1
From an ageing to a super-aged society: the percentage of the population aged 65+. Image: Alan Walker, New Dynamics of Ageing programme.

enormous positive potential. The discrimination against and marginalisation of older people in society often prevents us from promoting creative ways of addressing the issues associated with these population changes. Collectively, we can often fail to see older people as individuals, like ourselves, with equally important, equally valid views to express. There is a ‘structural lag’ in relation to ageing and old age: public attitudes, media representations, public policy approaches and practices lag behind the social and demographic reality and experiences of older people by around twenty years. Even many older people themselves have internalised the stereotypes of their own marginalisation, believing that they are less deserving of health care and welfare support than younger people.

While age is a common way of categorising others around us, it has become so pervasive that it often seems to describe the essence of a person: ‘young’, ‘old’, ‘middle-aged’ have all become stereotypes with their own connotations which are used in everyday language. This categorisation is misleading because it presents ageing as static when in fact it is an ever-changing process. In contrast to other types of discrimination such as gender and race, discrimination against older people in society affects all citizens since all of us grow older every day and will one day *be* ‘old’!

2. www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk



Professor Pat Thane FBA, speaking at the second Debate – ‘Too old and ugly to be useful? Challenging negative representations of older people’ – held in Sheffield on 25 March 2014. Professor Thane sought to dispel the common characterisation that in earlier times ‘older people were normally cared for in the bosom of their families, and so didn’t need publicly funded care – whereas in modern, busy, mobile, individualistic, selfish societies, older people are neglected and consigned to care homes and welfare services.’

Pathways to a more positive vision

As a starting point it is essential to recognise the factors that prevent us from developing a positive vision for ageing in general, or from thinking about our own future ageing. We might ask ourselves: What is fun about it, or what are the benefits of being older? How do we envision our own lives, and those of our children, when it will be commonplace to live to the age of 100? Will we still be considered ‘old’ at the age of 70? Should we begin a second career at 60? How do we finance our retirement? What about our housing and homes?

Research currently being carried out in the humanities and social sciences (including the major New Dynamics of Ageing programme)² can help us think beyond the prevailing, often negative stereotypes associated with ageing. It provides a valuable starting point for shifting attitudes and starting to build a more positive vision. It provides a strong evidence base for a more accurate representation of age and ageing, which can support the efforts of older people themselves as they seek new and better ways of living and contributing to society. Drawing together evidence from across different disciplines, this new research shows firstly that the ageing process is individually hugely variable and malleable, and secondly that in order to make the most of our later years it is never too early to start thinking about it.

The second series of British Academy Debates – on Immigration – is being held in September–November 2014, at venues in Birmingham, Liverpool and London. Further information can be found at www.britishacademy.ac.uk/immigration



Sally Magnusson chairs the third and final Debate, held in Edinburgh on 29 April 2014.

More on ageing

In response to the British Academy Debates on Ageing, on 21 May 2014 Professor Chris Phillipson posted a ‘Policy Perspective’ piece on ‘Re-thinking ageing populations’. The ‘Policy Perspectives’ page of the British Academy’s website provides a unique forum for Fellows of the British Academy and others involved in the Academy’s public policy projects to give their views on topical debates. To read Chris Phillipson’s piece, go to www.britishacademy.ac.uk/policyperspectives



Together with Hal Kendig, Chris Phillipson also contributed a chapter on ‘Building Age-Friendly Communities: New Approaches to Challenging Health and Social Inequalities’ to the British Academy report “If you could do one thing...”: *Nine local actions to reduce health inequalities*, which was published in January 2014.