Coming of Age Again

Charles Musselwhite reflects on Malcolm Johnson’s article Coming of Age published in the inaugural Generations Review, December, 1991.

Generations Review (GR) first appeared almost 25 years ago in December 1991. Edited by Leonie Kellaher and Christina Victor, GR was, it was hoped, to become an important way of carrying the debates and questions about human ageing and later life and as such an exchange of news, views and debates. As GR comes of (an) age I revisit it’s first article, *Coming of Age* by Malcolm Johnson, who was, incidentally, recently awarded lifetime achievement award by the British Gerontology Society in 2014. The article is timely to revisit, it serves both as a benchmark of where we were then as a discipline, and indeed as a society and how we treated or understood older people and also where we were going. The article was a text of a speech given at a launch event of Age Concern’s Coming of Age Campaign back in 1990. In his beautifully written speech Malcolm is anxious, if not on occasion angry, at the lack of progress made across society as he reflects on issues researched and covered in his own career. He describes how his research career in the field began as a junior researcher alongside Peter Millar (later Professor of Geriatric Medicine at St George’s Hospital) working to Professors Margot Jeffreys at Bedford College and Norman Exton-Smith in 1966 on a project looking at the Unmet Needs of People over the age of 70. The project, he says, was largely unremarkable, they found similar results of previous studies such as Barabra Robb in her *book Sans Everything*, Perter Townsend’s excellent mapping of socio-medical issues in later life and Sheldon, Brockington and Lempert’s pathologies, that largely older people’s needs went unmet whether at home or in institutions. However, it made Malcolm, and Peter realise that what needed to change, as much or indeed above and beyond, identifying, challenging and trying to resolve unmet need, was a general attitude that older people were largely and erroneously seen as sick, dependent and impoverished; a need therefore to understand the positive side of ageing. Not everyone who ages has such a bad time of it and he especially notes the difference between the wealthy and the poor with this respect. The positive side of ageing is he says not reflected in general society and in his speech draws on poetry, arts and literature to highlight just how this attitude manifests itself throughout culture: He describes the grotesque mourning of the loss of carefree independence and youthful beauty in Betjeman’s *Late Flowering Lust,* “I cling to you inflamed with fear, as you now cling to me, I feel how frail you are my dear and wonder what will be!” From Victorian times he cites Longfellow, “O give me back the days when loose and free to my blind passion were the curb and rein…In an old man though can’st not wake desire?” More recently he described how Philip Larkin gloomily portrays old age in *The Old Fools*, “What do you think has happened, the old fools, To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose it’s more grown up when your mouth hangs open and drools.”

Has our view of this changed? In research terms, I do believe generally that we unpick gerontology better than ever before, we do critically engage with ageing and what it means. Critical gerontology, whether you subscribe to all its’ beliefs of not, has been central to offering up a reflective mirror and reflexivity to researching human ageing. It is no longer acceptable to view older people as a homogenous dependent and needy group. We must be cleverer as researchers than this. Does it always happen? In research I would argue there are still examples of people studying ageing from outside of gerontology (and not all) that still fall into this trap. It is our duty as gerontologists to work with such researchers to change these attitudes. In society in general, how has culture changed? Do we still see ageing so negatively as Malcolm Johnson suggested in 1991? A recent article in the Journal of Advanced Nursing (Kelly et al., 2016), suggests perhaps Malcolm should have looked more closely at contemporary rock and pop lyrics, for example Bob Dylan’s *Forever Young* ‘May your hands always be busy. May your feet always be swift. May you have a strong foundation, when the winds of changes shift. May your heart always be joyful. And may your song always be sung. May you stay forever young’. Or Sophie Tucker’s *Life begins at Forty* ‘You see the sweetest things in life grow sweeter as the years roll on Like the music from a violin that has been well played upon And the sweetest smoke is from a mellow, broken and old pipe And the sweetest tasting peach is one that’s mature, round and ripe’. Despite this still around two thirds of the lyrics examined were by Kelly et al. (2016) were negative, for example Green Day’s *The Grouch*, ‘I was a young boy that had big plans. Now I’m just another shootty old man. I don’t have fun and I hate everything. The world owes me, so freak you. Glory days don’t mean shoot to me. I drank a six pack of apathy. Life’s a bitch and so am I’ or Pulp's *Help The Aged* track which asks the listener to give the aged hope and comfort "cos they're running out of time".

We are still acutely aware of the effect of poverty on an impoverished later life that Malcolm noted in 1991. Have times changed over the past 25 years? I’m not so sure; the divide between those living in the top and bottom quartiles of deprivation in the United Kingdom still differ by 15 years in terms of disability free life expectancy (see AGE UK, 2013, for example, lowest deprivation=70 years, highest deprivation=55 years). And, finally, despite these changes, the most worrying aspect is how we deal with ageing in society (including our own ageing) is still riddled with problems and issues. Look at the research findings on poor care for older people (e.g. Vizard and Burchardt, 2015) those needs are still going unmet as Malcolm pointed out in 1966 and drawing on research from the 1950s.

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