**The Ageing of British Gerontology: learning from the past to inform the future**

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**Introduction and Context**

Ageing, it now seems, is everybody’s business. Wherever we turn these days, older people are visible in the media: on television and radio, and in advertisements which continually strive to persuade us to stave off the signs of growing older for as long as possible. Paradoxically, alongside this increasing visibility, has been an ever-present sense that population ageing – and older people themselves – is somehow to blame for many of society’s current problems with statistical and demographic information often being used uncritically to generate moral panic amongst the media, government and the general population (Lodge *et al.,* 2016).

Our two-year (2015-2017) Leverhulme Trust funded research project, ‘The Ageing of British Gerontology: learning from the past to inform the future’, is located at the intersection of this paradox. We also contend that whilst gerontologists have always been interested in the relationship of their discipline, and themselves, to prevalent cultural attitudes about ageing, much popular and societal understanding of ageing and older people often has very little basis in the accumulating body of gerontological research which has been undertaken in Britain over the past 40-50 years. Our main way into investigating gerontology’s evolution has been through the contributions and experiences of senior figures in British gerontology: experiences we contextualise and integrate with an examination of the archives of the British Society of Gerontology (BSG). The project’s research questions examine the evolution of British gerontology since the founding of the BSG in 1971 (formerly the British Society of Social and Behavioural Gerontology); explore key developments and changes in gerontological research, theory, policy and practice; investigate the ways in which gerontology has been conceptualised; and uncover the connections between the professional and personal as gerontologists age. The potential implications of the empirical findings for academic colleagues and others interesting in studying and responding to the challenges and opportunities associated with population ageing have also been considered.

The research team has been supported by a ‘virtual’ advisory group comprising experienced and career-young, British and international gerontologists (Box 1) and by the BSG and the Centre for Policy on Ageing (CPA) which houses the archive. In the second year of the project, we also worked with professional photographer, gerontologist and artist Sukey Parnell to develop a series of photographic portraits which form the heart of our Ageing of British Gerontology Exhibition launched at the 46th Annual Conference of the British Society of Gerontology hosted by Swansea University in July 2017.

**Research Methods**

Our study, which was granted ethical approval by Keele University’s Ethical Review Panel and is fully informed by the BSG’s own ethical guidelines, employed two main research methods: archival analysis and a series of qualitative semi-structured narrative interviews with established and well known gerontologists. The BSG archive materials currently exist in their ‘raw’ state and are stored in over 50 archive boxes with information about their contents. The archives provide a rich source of documentary material charting changing societal attitudes to ageing and the evolution of gerontology as a field of study. The first phase of our fieldwork comprised an initial trawl through the archive boxes to assess what was there, after which we decided to focus initially on the extensive archival material reflecting the development of BSG conferences. As well as being a consistent feature of the BSG since its inauguration, our assessment was that these materials (conference handbooks; programmes; participant lists and associated documents) would provide insights into the shifts in thinking and research about ageing over time. Analysis has been carried out using a data extraction template on which we recorded key information about each conference. This enabled us to identify themes and develop and refine them as the archival analyses proceeded. A parallel exercise, also using a specifically developed analytical template, has been conducted on issues of *Generations Review*: the BSG’s newsletter. Tessa Harding, a member of our Advisory Group, kindly volunteered to undertake this task which has provided valuable additional information.

The second phase of fieldwork involved qualitative interviews, using a biographical framework, with established gerontologists. Each interview invited participants to reflect on how they first came to ageing (research and/or practice), how their careers developed, and the kinds of contributions they have made to gerontology. Participants were also invited to reflect on the ways in which gerontology has been conceptualised and understood over their career, to identify important developments, and to highlight future directions and areas of priority as they see them. Personal reflections on their own ageing, the ways in which this has or has not intersected with their professional and academic lives, and relationships and interactions with others in the field, were also explored. Subject to consent being given, each interview was video and audio recorded in order that interview clips could be used to develop a series of short films for both our project website and the BSG website.

**Progress to Date and Next Steps**

At the time of writing (September 2017), the project is drawing to a close and formally finishes at the end of October. In terms of the archival analysis, we have over 40 sets of detailed data extraction sheets documenting each annual conference from the Society’s inauguration to the present day. Individual data extraction sheets have then been grouped into decades and a further level of analysis undertaken to extrapolate key themes which, to date, focus on:

* research themes and topics
* methodological and methods papers
* theory development
* the development of gerontology as a field of study

Supplemented with the analyses of *Generations Review* and of other key material, these will inform our findings in three main areas. First, in conjunction with the interviews, the archival analyses will contribute to understanding the ways in which gerontology has developed as a field of study since the establishment of the BSG. Second, they will support our explorations of the development of specific areas of gerontological research. Third, they feed into an historical timeline we are producing in order to chart the relationship between the evolution of gerontological research, key policy developments and practice initiatives.

We have also completed interviews with 50 gerontologists; have entered all the transcripts onto Nvivo and finalised a coding frame. This coding frame, and our initial analyses, has been triangulated with two further analytical tasks: first, we have identified topics and themes in the interviews which lend themselves to making a series of short films (15-20 minutes each). Working with a filmographer, we have selected relevant extracts to be used accordingly. At the time of writing, the films are being finalised: there will be seven in total (Box 2) plus an introductory film outlining the project and directing viewers to the range of outputs being produced. Second, we have been using the interviews to put together a series of 500-word pen portraits designed not just to identify the gerontological contributions made by each participant but to provide a flavour of who each of them are as people. These word portraits complement the images taken by our photographer Sukey Parnell: images which are a wonderful visual representation of the people we have interviewed and which have been compiled into an electronic exhibition, an accompanying newspaper-type publication and a series of postcards. Having launched the exhibition at the Swansea conference, it is also showing for a month at Keele University (from October 19th to November 17th) and is available for loan to others who may wish to host it.

Although the project formally finishes at the end of October, there is still much more to be done in terms of writing up our findings and disseminating the work. We have a book contract with Policy Press which will keep us busy until the summer of 2018, together with plans for a series of journal articles on various aspects of the project. We shall also continue to make presentations at conferences and other events and would encourage anyone who is interested in what we have done – and are doing – to make contact with us. The electronic exhibition, the newspaper and the films are all available to view on our project website at <www.keele.ac.uk/abg/>

**Reference**

Lodge, C., Carnell, E., Coleman, M. (2016) *The New Age of Ageing: How society needs to change.* Bristol, Policy Press.

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**For further information about the project:**

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**Box 1: Advisory Group members**

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| Dr Andy Achenbaum | Professor Emeritus of History and Social Work, University of Houston, USA.  |
| Ms Gilly Crosby | Director, Centre for Policy on Ageing. |
| Dr Claire Garabedian | Associate Researcher, Association for Dementia Studies, University of Worcester. |
| Ms Tessa Harding | Community activist and former policy analyst.  |
| Dr Robin Means | Emeritus Professor of Health and Social Care, Faculty of Health and Applied Sciences, University of the West of England.  |
| Dr Sheila Peace | Past-President, the BSG and Emeritus Professor of Social Gerontology, Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies, the Open University. |
| Dr Debora Price | President, the BSG and Professor of Social Gerontology/Director, Manchester Institute for Collaborative Research on Ageing (MICRA), Manchester University. |
| Dr Tom Scharf | Professor of Social Gerontology, Institute of Health and Society, Newcastle University.  |
| Dr Charles Simpson | Research Fellow, Centre for Research in Primary and Community Care (CRIPACC), University of Hertfordshire.  |
| Dr Mark Skinner | Professor of Geography and Director, Trent Centre for Ageing and Society, Trent University, Canada.  |

**Box 2: Films**

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| Film 1 | Introducing the Ageing of British Gerontology Project |
| Film 2 | Becoming a Gerontologist |
| Film 3 | To Be or Not To Be a Gerontologist |
| Film 4 | British Gerontology: Building the Foundations |
| Film 5 | Gerontology’s Collaborations and Connections  |
| Film 6 | Gerontologists on Ageing |
| Film 7 | Do Gerontologists Ever Retire? |
| Film 8 | Gerontology Futures |

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| **Can you help?** The BSG archives do not have any documentary materials relating to the conference held at the University of East Anglia in 1993.If any reader has a book of abstracts or a programme for the conference, we’d love to hear from you!  |