

Putting ageing at the top of the political agenda



Alan Walker has been researching the quality of life of older people for three decades. Now the man who headed the ESRC's Growing Older Programme is responsible for an even more ambitious programme, a new five-year interdisciplinary study on The New Dynamics of Ageing. Seldom has such research been so relevant **Malcolm Dean** spoke to him.

Alan Walker is a hard man to catch up with but he is well worth the effort. Few academics have been tracking the quality of life of older people for so long. He began in the early 1970s. Older people have never been as high on the political agenda with the debate about retirement ages already in full swing, the Pensions Commission due to report at the end of November, and a new law on age discrimination coming into force next year. It is no wonder his diary is so full.

His own studies on Ageing in Europe require travel, his 20-year long social policy professorship at Sheffield University includes supervising ten PhD students among other duties, and he is a member of the new independent advisory group that David Blunkett, the former Work and Pensions Secretary, set up to advise on pension reform. He has even been into Downing Street to make a presentation on current research findings.

But overshadowing all these posts in his portfolio is his new job as director of one of the boldest current research ventures in Britain: a new five-year interdisciplinary research programme on *The New*

Dynamics of Ageing. He is familiar with dealing with daunting challenges having been the director of the ESRC's Growing Older (GO) Programme, the largest social science programme on ageing ever mounted in the UK. Approved in 1998, the £3.5 million GO Programme involved some 94 researchers working on 24 projects which finally concluded in December, 2003.

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Its coverage was both wide and deep. It ranged from measuring the quality of life of older people to producing new insights into exclusion, loneliness and wellbeing. There were an impressive number of 'firsts' – the first representative study of QoL (quality of

life) as well as a new theoretically-based measuring tool; the first national study of loneliness for 50 years; the first representative study of the impact of exclusion on older people in deprived areas; the most comprehensive research so far on black and ethnic ageing; one of the few studies of older men; a novel study on healthy ageing; and a rare look at people working beyond retirement age to name but a few.

But instead of one research council he now has to ride four – not just the ESRC but the MRC (Medical Research Council), EPSRC (Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council) and BBSRC (Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council). Instead of a £3.5 million budget it will be £12.5 million, possibly rising to £15 million. Instead of five years, it could last eight. Instead of dealing with just social scientists, the new Programme will also involve basic scientists, biologists, geneticists, medical scientists, engineers, technologists and clinicians as well. Walker has long admired the early initiatives of the US in promoting collaboration between disciplines. As long ago as 1974, the US

Congress authorised – and funded – the National Institute of Aging to provide collaboration in ageing research.

It was only four years ago that Britain's four research councils set up the National Collaboration on Ageing Research (NCAR) to promote interdisciplinary collaboration. Last year they went one step further in approving the jointly funded New Dynamics of Ageing Programme. The director's post, which was open to all, was won by Alan Walker, placing a further feather in the ESRC's cap. There will be four waves of projects – all of them multi-disciplinary. There were 292 expressions of interest in the first wave, now whittled down to ten.

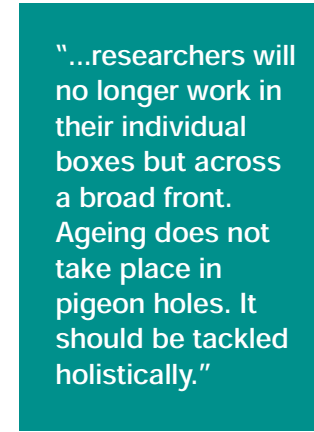
Alan Walker was an apt choice. He does not just want to understand the quality of life of older people but improve it too. To achieve this goal collaboration with other scientists is crucial. As Walker notes, we begin to age from the day we are born. What happens in the early and middle years play an important role later in life. He noted that as well as extending life expectancy by 25 years in the last century, we have also delayed the onset of morbidity. But he went on: "In terms of postponing disability, we have only begun scratching the surface."

This is one of the exciting fronts the new Programme could open up, he says: "It means researchers will no longer work in their individual boxes but across a broad front. Ageing does not take place in pigeon holes. It should be tackled holistically." He is used to meeting and debating with scientists from other disciplines including a morning with Tom Kirkwood, the biologist and Reith lecturer on ageing, on Melvyn Bragg's BBC Radio Four discussion slot *In Our Time*. He confessed: "I have huge respect for Tom as a scientist. There is a huge potential for longer and better quality lives. It is up to social scientists to shed more light on the consequences of these changes."

Like the GO Programme, the aim of the new venture will be to provide a sound evidence base for policy, practice and product development. It will not just identify the new dynamics but also seek ways current influences (biological, clinical, technological, social and behavioural) shaping present lives can be



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managed to produce the maximum benefits for older people.

At the launch conference of the GO Programme in March, 2001, Walker sounded a much needed optimistic note over lengthening life expectancy. It provided a refreshing counterpoint to a media that was concentrating on the negative consequences – shrinking workers to pensioner ratios and the rise in dependency. He set out to change a debate that was frequently filled “by a demography of despair, which portrays population ageing not as a triumph for civilisation, but something closer to apocalypse.” The ambition that was there in 2001 still burns as bright in 2005. If we have not yet created a society celebrating age, it is not as despairing as it once was.

One group of projects in the new Programme will look at ‘ageing well across the lifecourse’. This research will include active ageing, independence, later life transmissions, and the oldest old. The second theme will explore the financial and physical environments of ageing and include a look at global dimensions.

Active ageing emerged as a concept from social gerontologists, to which Walker pays tribute. It is now to be found in many policy documents of UK, EU and US policymakers – an example of how research can influence policy. Employment is only one part of such studies, but the Programme will be looking at how work contributes to wellbeing. One of Walker’s earliest studies was examining the disproportionate effects on older workers of the decline in Sheffield’s steel industry. He went on to conduct the first study of employer attitudes to older people.

For much of his working life, Walker’s studies have been set against a background of proportionately ever declining numbers of older people in the workforce. By the 1990s only one in three men was in work in the year leading up to their state retirement age. The economic cost of so many 50 to 65-year-olds not in work estimated to be as high as £30 billion. The benefits of maintaining an active life were explored by the GO Programme, but will be widened by the new one. Among the more fundamental questions it will explore is the degree to which genetic and behavioural factors interact and influence

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lifecourses. It coincides with better news on the work front. The proportion of people in work between 50 and their state pension age (60 for women, 65 for men) has risen from 64 per cent in the mid 1990s to 70 per cent in the latest labour market statistics. There are now one million people working beyond state pension (nine per cent of the age group) although many not so much from choice as driven by financial need.

The second theme – which includes financial circumstances – will coincide with the biggest debate about pensions for three decades. In an interim report last October, the Pensions Commission set out the stark facts: as many as 12 million workers are not saving enough for retirement. Inadequate though many existing pensions are, the next generation currently will end up 30 per cent poorer unless they are ready to pay more tax, save more, and work longer. The GO Programme set out the desolate conditions many existing pensioners suffer. The new exercise is bound to follow suit.

Walker has been one of the most prominent advocates of pursuing research that can help policymakers and practitioners. But he is well aware that that policy making is not the linear process that some researchers dream of – that evidence leads to debate which leads to decisions. He wrote succinctly in *Understanding Quality of Life in Old Age*, in the Growing Older book series, of the unrealistic expectations that both researchers and policymakers hold for each other: “On the one hand research cannot always be delivered to meet unpredictable timetables of policy making or to answer specific questions in a direct way and, on the other, policy is rarely the single event that rational scientists imagine it to be. More commonly it is a

myriad of apparently disjointed actions that sometimes coalesce and are labelled in retrospect as decisions. Policy making is rarely a sequential process with clearly defined stages.”

Instead, like the GO Programme, the aim will be to permeate the context in which policymakers operate. Stand by for a similar operation with this new venture under which there will be special seminars with key policymakers, constructive links with the wider policy community including NGOs, as well as intelligent dissemination of project findings as they come through. It worked for GO. Its message of new opportunities in later life was high up in Labour’s mini-manifesto on older people and still permeates Department for Work and Pensions policies and publications.

The New Dynamics of Ageing Programme could not be better timed. It is no longer just 11 million pensioners plus three million early retirees demanding to be heard. There is another generation – 15 million mainly post-war baby boomers, spanning 20 years and aged between 45 and 65 – marching toward retirement with a high set of demands and who will not be fobbed off. Researchers could not be operating on a more responsive political platform ■

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ESRC RESEARCH

New Dynamics of Ageing Research Programme

This major new multidisciplinary research programme is jointly funded by the ESRC, EPSRC, BBSRC and MRC. The Programme will integrate research into the changing meanings and experiences of ageing and the key factors shaping them, and develop practical policy guidance and novel solutions to science and technology challenges.

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Britain wakes up and smells the coffee

Just five years ago Britain’s coffee houses were in a sorry state of decline. Today, and confounding many pundits’ expectations, coffee houses are springing up across the UK’s cities, towns and villages in the form of latte-serving cafés and coffee shop chains. But, is this ‘cappuccino community’ here to stay? And does Britain’s new café society pose a threat to the traditional British pub?

Researchers from Glasgow University have spent three years exploring Britain’s burgeoning café sector. “Britain’s coffee house phenomenon is under-researched,” researcher Dr Eric Laurier points out, “and what we wanted to do was take the time to examine, patiently and attentively, what is actually happening in these cafés.” To this end, researchers used a variety of methods ranging from video recording to serving coffee themselves to investigate the relationship between cafés and everyday life.

Britain’s café sector is currently expanding and the time we spend in cafés is also increasing. But does this threaten British pubs? “One of our most striking observations,” Dr Laurier explains, “is the remarkable variety of activities – from child-rearing to insurance-selling – which cafés host. Clearly it is hard to imagine many of these activities being welcomed and nurtured in the traditional British pub. However, many pubs have responded to ‘cappuccino culture’ by changing to become more like cafés themselves during the day. And, as the success of cafés is due, in part at least, to additional spending power and increased willingness to dine out, it seems unlikely that pub trade will suffer due to the growing popularity of cafés.”

Cafés are, nevertheless, an important social phenomenon. Researchers found them to be places of hospitality, welcome and meeting for a very wide variety of people. Indeed, some cafés now attract particular groups of people, so that some cafés are recognisably arty, child-friendly, studenty or touristy, or even cosmopolitan. And, in today’s potentially anonymous cities, the value of the ‘welcome’ afforded to both tourists and regular customers by both the staff and those already seated in the café should not be underestimated.

But how secure is Britain’s café culture? Britain was, after all, an early centre of European café society. Yet, over the centuries, café culture in Britain has ebbed and flowed while remaining far more constant among European countries such as France, Italy and Spain. As a result, coffee house chains such as Starbucks found it difficult initially to attract funding for the UK as investors feared interest in exotic coffees to be a passing fad. But, confidence in the longer term security of Britain’s coffee house may now be justified, say researchers. Reasons range from women’s greater disposable income to an increasing number of returning holidaymakers who wish to replicate their experiences of drinking coffee abroad. Most importantly, perhaps, Britain’s bizarre attachment to instant coffee appears to be waning. Some 60 years after US troops introduced their host country to the delights of instant brew, the UK population is rediscovering the attractions of ‘the real thing’.

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REX FEATURES

Households loathe to throw it all away



JONNY RAVEN

Far from being a ‘throwaway society’, most of us go to considerable lengths to pass on unwanted household items to others, according to a study by researchers at Sheffield and Nottingham Universities. And when it comes to making our mark in society, it is not just what we acquire but what we decide to get rid of that is important to us.

Researchers examined how households in the Midlands and North-East got rid of ordinary, everyday consumer items over the course of a year. The study excluded things that can be placed in kerbside recycling bins and focused on other household items, including electrical products, clothing, furniture, furnishings, toys, books, CDs and videos.

“People and households use numerous methods of ridding themselves of objects, including giving things away, selling or even quietly forgetting them,” explains researcher Professor Nicky Gregson. “Of course, this is not to say that these things are not wasted by those who might receive them. But what matters more is that households clearly don’t waste without care. What we found was that households go to considerable lengths to save things from wasting and to pass them on to other people, both known and unknown,” he concludes.

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