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.

Ian 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 Pension 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 2001.

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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 BHSSRC (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 doctors 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 aging 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 Beth lecturer on ageing, on Melyn 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...
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 longevities and financial options. It provided a refreshing counterpoint to a media that was concentrating on the negative consequences – shrinking worker 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 the population ageing not as a triumph for civilisation, but something closer to apocalypse.” The ambition that there was 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 Dynamics of Ageing Programme is using financial and physical resources to improve the quality of life of older people. One innovation in this area is the ‘ageing in place’ project, which provides active aging, independence, later life transmissions, and the oldest old. The second theme will explore the financial and physical resources of older people and include a look at global dimensions. Active aging emerged as a concept from social gerontologists, to which Walker pays tribute. Resources can be found in many policy documents of EU, UK and US policymakers – an example of how research can influence policy. Employment is one part of such studies. Walker comments on the difficulty of work at how work contributes to wellbeing. One of Walker’s earliest studies was examining the disproportionate effects on older workers. The benefits of maintaining active life were explored by the GO Programme. But it 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 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 an active life were explored by the GO Programme. But it 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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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 late-surfing cafes and coffee shop chains.

But, in this ‘supercity community’ born to stay? And does new Britain’s new cafe society pose a threat to the traditional British pub? Researchers from Glasgow University have spent three years exploring Britain’s burgeoning cafe sector. “Britain’s coffee house phenomenon is under researched,” researcher Dr Eric Lauter points out. “and what we wanted to do was take the time to examine, patiently and attentively, what is actually happening in these cafes.” To this end, researchers used a variety of methods ranging from video recording to serving coffee themselves to investigate the relationship between cafes and everyday life. Britain’s cafe sector is currently expanding and the time we spend in cafes is also increasing. But does this threaten Britain’s pubs? “One of our most striking observations,” Dr Laurier explains, “is the enormous variety of activities – from child-rearing to insurance selling – which cafes 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 cafes themselves during the day. And, as the success of cafes 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 cafes.”

Cafes 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 cafes now attract particular groups of people, so that some cafes are recognisably arty, child-friendly, studenty or touristic, 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 cafe should not be underestimated.

But how secure is Britain’s cafe culture? Britain was, after all, an early centre of European cafe society. Yet, over the centuries, cafe 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.

Recent change from expatriates’ greater disposable income to an increasing number of returning holidaymakers who wish to replicate their experiences of drinking coffee abroad. More importantly, perhaps, Britain’s bizarre attachment to instant coffee appears to be waning. Some 60 years after US troops introduced their home country to the delights of instant brew, the UK population is rediscovering the attractions of ‘the real thing’.

Contact: Professor Nicky Gregson
University of Sheffield
E-mail: n.gregson@shef.ac.uk
Telephone: +44 (0)114 222 0647
Website: www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/gp/
(site under construction)

HMK FEATURES

Households loathe to throw it all away

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, we are not as materialistic as 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 wanted 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 others, both known and unknown.’

Contact: Professor Nicky Gregson
University of Sheffield
E-mail: n.gregson@shef.ac.uk
Telephone: +44 (0)114 222 7943

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Joey Baker