

# Policy Narratives of Ageing: The Right Way, the Third Way or the Wrong Way?

**Dr Jason Powell**

School of Community, Health Sciences and Social Care  
University of Salford, UK

**Margaret Edwards**

Liverpool John Moores University, UK

## Introduction

This paper analyses key policy narratives regarding old age and social policy in the United Kingdom. In recent years there has been a proliferation of new discourses which impinges upon a new understanding of old age and British policy. The notions of 'volunteering', 'mentoring' and 'grandparenting' in particular have become embedded in social policy discourses and have become increasingly associated with older people once they retire. We seek to tease out the theoretical implications this has for understanding old age and how in turn policy is being used as a mechanism for 'social inclusion' to objectify older people as transmitters of knowledge for families, younger people and society in general.

The structure of the paper attempts to introduce a 'narrative approach' to understanding the trajectory policies take in shaping ageing. In order to understand how old age has been positioned, social democratic political discourses under 'New Labour' government are examined. This supplies a particular dominant narrative on obligation, state surveillance and active citizenship. It is argued that future developments in policy analysis will have to take both tacit and explicit themes in social policy into account especially as relates activities of older people. They will also have to more closely examine the relationship between old age, citizenship and formal policy discourse.

## Political Narratives: The Problematisation of Old Age by Social Democracy

Before the emergence and consolidation of social democratic political narratives, the neo-liberal, Conservative policies of the 1990's came to focus on two main issues. On the one hand, increasing attention was paid to the role families took in the care of older people who were either mentally or physically infirm. This, it was argued had always been a role that friends and relatives had taken on and became a core feature of social policy. Wider economic priorities, to 'roll back the state' and thereby release resources for individualism and free enterprise, had thus become translated into a policy discourse about obligations and the need to enforce them (Biggs and Powell, 2001).

This is the contextual backdrop to how mentoring and volunteering came to fruition. When it suited the Conservative government to problematise old age as a burden it did so by promoting the role of the family; secondly, it also promoted 'independence' by focusing on role of older people in communities as active citizens but they must do it for free (Biggs & Powell, 1999). In some ways, social democracy represents some startling continuities of the previous Conservative government especially with its emphasis on community and independence – but we will consider its main narratives in more depth.

The ideology of social democracy has also been used interchangeably with the much publicised 'Third Way'. Giddens (1998) claims 'citizens' are faced with the task of piloting themselves and their families through a changing world in which globalisation has transformed time and space and our relations with each other have been transformed by 'risk'. For an interrogation of the array of 'social democratic' truisms that underpin discourses associated with community and citizenship is to reveal the moral lineaments. For Giddens (1998) we need a new partnership between government and civil society where government supports the renewal of community through local initiative, gives an increasing role to the third sector of 'voluntary' organisations, encourages social entrepreneurship and significantly, supports the 'democratic' family characterised by 'equality, mutual respect, autonomy, decision-making through communication and freedom of violence' where parents have 'negotiated authority' over children (1998, 93).

As far as social policy is concerned, the buzzword is no longer 'equality' but 'inclusion', community building participatory programmes rather than State provided financial benefits, positive social welfare does not encourage the 'moral hazard' of dependence, the social investment state characterised by 'positive welfare': not giving out economic maintenance but investing in human capital, positive welfare based on autonomy, active health, lifelong education, well-being and initiative (1998, 128).

Nevertheless, the 'Third Way' turn in public policy was particularly exercised by the 'risk' an ageing population has on British and western policy process in general. And, through an increased awareness of the notion of ageism, the influence of European ideas about social inclusion and North American social communitarianism, older people found themselves transformed into active citizens who should be encouraged to participate in society rather than be seen as a potential burden on it. (Biggs & Powell, 2001; Giddens, 1998).

A contemporary policy position-paper, entitled 'Building a Better Britain for Older People', indicates that:

The contribution of older people is vital, both to families, and to voluntary organisations and charities. We believe their roles as mentors- providing ongoing support and advice to families, young people and other older people- should be recognised. Older people already show a considerable commitment to volunteering. The Government is working with voluntary groups and those representing older people to see how we can increase the quality and quantity of opportunities for older people who want to volunteer (1998).

Whilst such a social democratic discourse is attractive to pressure groups, voluntary agencies; there is, just as with the policies of the neo-liberal governments, an underlying economic motive which may not be to the long term advantage to older people. Again, as initiatives and policies develop, the force driving the story of elders as active citizens was to be found in policies of a fiscal nature. A subsequent Governmental overview entitled 'Winning the

Generation Game' (2000) begins well with "One of the most important tasks for twenty-first century Britain is to unlock the talents and potential of all its citizens. Everyone has a valuable contribution to make, throughout their lives". However, the rationale behind this statement becomes clearer when policy is explained in terms of a changing demographic profile; 'With present employment rates' it is argued, 'one million more over-50s would not be working by 2020 because of growth in the older population. There will be 2million fewer working-age people under 50 and 2 million more over 50: a shift equivalent to nearly 10 percent of the total working population".

The solution, then, is to socially include older people in work or work-like activities such as mentors or volunteers in schools for example (Straw, 2000). Older workers become a reserve labour pool, filling the spaces left by falling numbers of workers. They thus contribute to the economy as producers as well as consumers and make fewer demands on pensions and other forms of support. Those older people who are not thereby socially included, can engage in the work-like activity of volunteering.

In the UK document entitled 'Supporting Families' (2000).

'Family life' we are told in a ministerial introduction, 'is the foundation on which our communities, our society and our country are built. Business people, 'people from the community, students and grandparents' are encouraged to join a schools mentoring network. In particular: "the interests of grandparents, and the contribution they make, can be marginalised by service providers who, quite naturally, concentrate on dealing with parents. We want to change all this and encourage grandparents- and other relatives- to play a positive role in their families". By which it is meant: 'home, school links or as a source of social and cultural history' and support when 'nuclear families are under stress'. Even older people who are not themselves grandparents can join projects 'in which volunteers act as 'grandparents' to contribute their experience to a local family'.

In the narratives of social democracy, older people are seen as a reservoir of 'potential' social inclusion. Older people are portrayed as holding a key role in the stability of both the public sphere, through work and volunteering, and in the private sphere, primarily through grandparental support and advice. Grandparents, in particular, are storied too as mentors and counsellors across the public and private domains.

However, whilst the grandparental title has been used as a "catch-all" within the dominant policy narrative; bringing with it associations of security, stability and an in many ways an easier form of relationship than direct parenting; it owes more to public than private space. It is impossible to interpret this construction of grandparenthood without placing it in the broader project of social inclusion, itself a response to increased social fragmentation and economic competition.

## **So miracles do happen?**

In the land of social policy, previously conceived problems of growing economic expense and social uselessness have been miraculously reversed. Older people are now positioned as the solution to problems of demographic change, rather than their cause. They are a source of guidance to ailing

families, rather than their victims. Both narratives increase the social inclusion of a potentially marginal social group: formerly known as the 'dependent elderly'. The narrative of older people as active citizens and grandparents

The stories of ageing found in social policy, which are inevitably rhetorical due to their summarising function and level of abstraction, can be compared to the experience of older adults, as reported in gerontological research (Phillipson, 1998). Particular attention will be paid to grandparenting as this forms the substantive policy bridge between adult ageing and social life.

Bengston (1985) claims grandparents have potential to influence and develop children by divulging values for them. Subsequently, grandparents serve as arbiters of knowledge and transmit knowledge that is unique to their identity and life experience and history. Similarly, Levinson (1978) claims grandparents become mentors performing functions of generic life guide for younger children.

Two reviews, explicitly commissioned to inform UK policy (Hayden, Boaz & Taylor, 1999; Boaz, Hayden & Bernard, 1999).

Boaz, Hayden and Bernard (1999) cite two research reports: firstly, Henwood and Waddington (1998) reported that 'when thinking about the future, older people looked forward to their role as grandparents secondly, Walsh (1998) reported that grandparents looked after their grandchildren and provided them with 'love, support and a listening ear', providing childcare support to their busy children and were enthusiastic about these roles.

Grandparenting included spending time with grandchildren both in active and sedentary hobbies and pursuits, with many participants commenting on the mental and physical stimulation they gained from sharing activities with the younger generation. Specific suggestions for other activities included older people playing a mentoring role to younger people, either on a one-to-one basis or through local schools (Hayden, Boaz and Taylor, 1999, 8)

Hayden, Boaz and Taylor (1999) advised for mentoring roles through relationships between older people themselves and younger people and working as volunteers in schools. A pilot study was set up in the light of the Supporting Families initiative, to examine the success of grandparenting role in schools. In one such study in Lambeth many older people and children enjoyed the process and the government looked to implement such a system to schools with teaching shortages throughout UK (The Guardian 13/3/2000). In this context not only is old age being perceived as the 'saviour' of education but that education is problematising ageing in a new light as an existential personification of 'teacher' without the professionalisation attached. Through a grounded theory approach we have found that use of a narrative approach allows both an epistemic and ontological understanding of old age in social policy. The next section illuminates how narrative approaches can be used to analyse old age and points to future social research which should adopt an holistic stance towards explaining effects of policy narratives.

## **Teasing out Social Theory: The Narrative Approach to Old Age and Social Policy**

Narrative approaches are becoming increasingly popular in the social sciences, both as a method of undertaking and interpreting social research (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) and as a technique for modifying self-identity (Giddens, 1991). Katz (1999) considers how the conceptual activities of older people who construct their own analytical models of self-identity based on "lived experiences" and narratives in their everyday environments and interaction with others. Gubrium (1992) argues that older people theorise their lives by translating encounters and vocabularies into their own personal and meaningful narratives.

When the metaphor of narrative is used to interrogate social policy, it opens a number of possibilities. First, it alerts us to the possibility that social policies not only facilitate certain courses of action by government executives, important though that is. They also provide stories within which certain categories of person or group, who are of interest to policy makers, are encouraged to live out their lives such as within education (Straw, 2000). They have a life of their own and which older people have to enter to have their voices heard. As Rouse 1994 has pointed out, such discourses determine whether a particular viewpoint can be expressed intelligibly. If statements about, for example, the role of older people within them are made; 'Which of those statements counted as 'serious', who was empowered to speak seriously, and what questions and procedures were relevant to assess the credibility of those statements' (1994, 93).

The rhetoric of social policy and the formal representations of adult aging, provide a source of raw material for the construction of identity and a series of spaces in which such identities can be legitimately performed. Part of the struggle over power and knowledge that formal policy-making represents, is the struggle to impose 'the' definition of a particular issue to the exclusion of others (Jordan, 1996). These definitions may provide sufficient flexibility for most people, most of the time to engage in social life with little difficulty, or they may not.

The methodological attractiveness of thinking in terms of narrative, that social policies tell us stories which we don't have necessarily to believe, is the opening of a critical distance between description and intention. Policy narratives describe certain, often idealised states, of affairs. Whilst depicting them as stories, rather than realities, allows the interrogation of the space between that description and experience. For example, Jack Straw (2000) in a UK government initiative entitled 'Supporting Families' talks of 'active citizenship' and a new relationship between older people and the communities in which they live. In order for younger people to be socialised as 'good citizens', Straw claims older people can be used as 'mentors' and 'volunteers' in classrooms in schools. The point behind old age is rather than being perceived as a declining discourse, the new identity space of 'mentor' offers the platform through which public policy can rhetorically flourish. However, by use of a narrative approach it allows social researchers to observe the experience and discontinuity behind description and experience of aging identity within social policy.

## **Conclusion: Living with Multiple Narratives**

Each ideological phase of social policy, be it the Reagan/Thatcherite neo-liberalism of the 1980s and early 1990s, or the Clinton/Blairite interpretation of social democracy in the late 90s and start of the US Bush administration in new millennium, leaves a legacy. Moreover, policy development is uneven and subject to local emphasis and elision. Each period generates a narrative that can legitimate the lives of older people in particular ways, and as their influence accrues, create the potential of entering into multiple narrative streams. The notion of narratives can be seen as a mechanism by which the social world is fabricated and this explains why policy narratives continually break down and fail to achieve hegemony. Thus, political ideologies of citizenship can never achieve absolute power but instead are subject to a continuous process of re-constitution via the play of both policy and personal narratives contesting each other in a permanent state of flux. Such a perspective can facilitate an understanding of how older people can re-construct policy and personal narratives to explain their own self-identity (Longino & Powell, 2002). Such a strategy involves a challenge to the homogeneity of the social category 'elderly' as an embodiment of the 'times up' medical and retirement narrative. When we are addressing the issue of older people's identity in later life we can usefully note Foucault's (1977) contention that there has been a growth in the policy and personal localities of power and knowledge that seek to inscribe physical and social bodies with discourses of 'family normality' and volunteering.

In the search for an identity in the policy domain of multiple narratives afforded to role, duty and responsibility, older people must 'achieve' it through 'ontological reflexivity' (Giddens, 1991). Accordingly, the self-identity needs to be consciously constructed and maintained, in relation to itself and others. The ageing self has a new pathway to follow, stepping outside temporal and sustained policy narratives, to include a process of self-struggle and self-discovery, it is anything but given. Nevertheless, a striking feature of recent policy history and narratives has been that not only have the formal policies been quite different in their tenor and tacit objectives, they have also addressed different areas of the lives of older people. Where there is little narrative overlap there is the possibility of policies coexisting, however opposed they may be ideologically. Different narratives may colonise different parts of policy, drawing on political inattention and convenience to maintain their influence.

If the analysis outlined above is accepted, then it is possible to see contemporary western social policy addressing diverse aspects of social life of older people in differing and contradictory ways. Contradictory narratives for older people coexist in a landscape that is at one and the same time increasingly blurred in terms of roles and relationships and split-off in terms of narrative coherence and consequences for identity.

In a future of complex and multiple policy agendas, it would appear that a narrative of third way 'social inclusion' through active ageing coexists with one emphasising obligation and surveillance to communities and the other emphasising retirement, decline and burden. Each lending narrative expression to the subject of ageing identity, however contradictory this may appear. This may, in part result from an inexact and homogenising categorisation of older people who are still contrasted to the wider population. It also owes much to a schizophrenic policy inheritance, attempting solutions to problems where old age is a secondary consideration.

## References

- Bengtson, V.L. & Achenbaum, W. (1993)** *The Changing Contract Across Generations*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Beck, U. (1998)** *Democracy Without Enemies*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Beth Johnson Foundation. (1999)** Intergenerational Programmes. Stoke: BJB.
- Better Government for Older People (2000)** Wolverhampton: BGOP.
- Biggs, S & Powell, J (2000)** 'Surveillance and Elder Abuse: The Rationalities and Technologies of Community Care' in *Journal of Contemporary Health*, 4, 1, 43-49.
- Biggs, S & Powell, J (2001)** 'A Foucauldian Analysis of Old Age and the Power of Social Welfare', *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, 12, 2, 93-112.
- Blair, T. (1996)** *New Britain: My Vision of a Young Country*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Boaz, A., Hayden, C. & Bernard, M. (1999)** Attitudes & Aspirations of Older People. *DSS Research report*, 101. London: CDS.
- Bornat, J., Dimmock, B., Jones, D. & Peace, S. (1999)** Stepfamilies and older people. *Ageing & Society*. 19.2. 239-262.
- Building a Better Britain for Older People (1998)** Dept. of Social Security. London: HMSO.
- Chamberlayne, P. & King, A. (2000).** *Cultures of Care*. London: Policy Press.
- Chambre, S.M. (1993).** 'Volunteerism by elders: Past traditions and future prospects', *The Gerontologist*, 33, 221-228.
- Cochrane, A. (1986).** 'Community Politics and Democracy', in Held, De Beauvoir, S. (1979) *Old Age*, London: Penguin.
- Duckworth, L. (2001)** Grandparents who bring up children need more help. *Independent*. 13.9.2001. p.18.
- Featherstone, M. & Hepworth, M. (1993)** Images of positive ageing. In Featherstone, M. & Wernick, A (eds) *Images of Ageing*. London: Routledge.
- Finch, J. & Mason, J. (1993)** *Negotiating Family responsibilities*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M (1977)** *Discipline and Punish*, London: Tavistock.
- Guardian-ICM Poll. (2001)** *Grandparenting and Retirement Activities*. London: ICM.

- Freidenberg, J.** ( 2000) *Growing Old in EL Barrio*. New York: NYUP.
- Giddens, A.** (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A.** (1993) *Sociology*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A.** (1998) *The Third Way*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Girard, I & Ogg, J.** (1998). *Grandparenting in France & England*. Presentation to the British Society of Gerontology. Sheffield.
- Gray, J.** (1995). *Enlightenment's Wake*. London: Routledge.
- Gubrium, J.F.** (1992). *Out of Control: Family Therapy and Domestic Disorder*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hayden, C. Boaz, A. & Taylor, F.** (1999). Attitudes and Aspirations of Older People: a qualitative study. *DSS Research report 102*. London: CDS.
- Holstein, J. & Gubrium, J.** (2000). *The Self We Live By*. Oxford: OUP.
- Growing Older.** (1981). London, HMSO.
- Community Care: An Agenda for Action* (1989). London, HMSO.
- NHS & Community Care Act* (1990). London, HMSO.
- Katz, S.** (1999). 'Busy Bodies: Activity, Aging and the Management of Everyday Life', *Journal of Aging Studies*, Vol. 14, Number 2, 135-152.
- Kenyon, G. , Ruth, J. & Mader, W.** (1999). Elements of a Narrative Gerontology. In Bengtson, V. & Schaie, K. (eds) *Handbook of Theories of Ageing*. New York, Springer.
- McAdams, D.** (1993). *The Stories We Live By*, New York: Morrow.
- Minkler, M.** (1999). 'Intergenerational households headed by grandparents: Contexts, Realities and Implications for Policy', *Journal of Aging Studies*, Vol.13, 2, 199-218.
- Moen, P. & Wethington, E.** (1992). The concept of family adaptive strategies. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 18. 233-51.
- Phillipson, C.** (1998). *Reconstructing Old Age*. London: Sage.
- Phillipson, C. Bernard, M., Phillips, J. & Ogg, J.** (2000). *The family and Community Life of Older People*. London: Routledge.
- Ryff, C. & Seltzer, M.** (1996). *The Parental Experience in Midlife*. Chicago: CUP.
- Scharf, T. & Wenger, G.** (1995) *International Perspectives on Community Care for Older People*. Aldershot: Avebury.

**Schreck, H.** (2000) *Community And Caring*. New York: UPA.

**Silverstein, M. & Bengston, V.L.** (1997). Intergenerational solidarity and the structure of adult child- parent relationships in americal families. *American Journal of Sociology*. 103.2. 429-460.

**Supporting Families** (2000) *Home Office*. London HMSO.

**Thompson, P.,** (1999). The role of grandparents when parents part or die; some reflections on the mythical decline of the extended family. *Ageing & Society*. 19.4. 471-503.

**Thomson, E. & Minkler, M.** (2001) American grandparents providing extensive childcare to their grandchildren: prevalence and profile. *The Gerontologist*. 41.2. 201-209.

**Waldrop, D., Weber, J., Herald, S., Pruett, J., Cooper, K. & Jouzapavicius, K.** (1999). Wisdom and life expeerieence: how grandfathers mentor their grandchildren. *Journal of Aging & Identity*. 4.1. 33-46.

**Walker, A & Naegele, G.** (1999). *The Politics of Old Age in Europe*. Buckingham: OUP.

**Wenger, C.** (1984) *Support Networks for Older People*. Bangor: CSPRD.

**Winning the Generation Game** (2000) Cabinet-Office.gov.uk.