

Speech at the launch of '*Unmasking Age: the significance of age for social research*' at the Annual Conference of the British Society of Gerontology, Plymouth, 6 July 2011.

Bill Bytheway, 8 July 2011

Thank you for being here. This is the right setting for the launch of this book, since the British Society of Gerontology figures in it, not least because I was at the meeting when the first committee was appointed, 40 years ago in 1971.

Since that date, I have learned a lot about ageing from participating in the annual conference, not only from the papers that have been presented, but also from the more informal side of the event. Over the years I have valued meeting up with old friends. When only twelve months have passed it is possible to overlook any possible impact that age may have had on our appearance. Nevertheless, twelve months is long enough for things to happen which are age-related, and so it is often the case that someone comes to the conference having just experienced, or indeed whilst experiencing, a major life change. Any explicit comment we may have made about our age has tended to be self-deprecatory, something which Andrew Achenbaum argued this morning was fundamental to ageism. What I have learnt from these annual reunions is something of the complex experience of growing older in the context of well-connected social networks.

At the beginning of the book I include a comprehensive list of acknowledgements, so all I would like to say here are a few words about two in particular. First, I have dedicated the book to the memory of Mike Hepworth. He was a great gerontologist and a good friend. Along with Mike Featherstone he introduced and developed the concept of the mask of ageing, and this features prominently in this book. I am much indebted to him. Secondly, Julia Johnson and I collaborated in organising the 1988 BSG conference and, since that time, we have collaborated on a more domestic and everyday front. We have worked together on much research and this book might have been co-authored with her but, at the time that I was agreeing a contract with Emily Watt, Julia was heavily involved, along with Randall Smith, in writing *Residential Care Transformed: Revisiting 'The Last Refuge'*. It is a brilliant book, now well reviewed, and one that I would urge all gerontologists to read and study.

Turning back to this book, *Unmasking Age: the significance of age for social research*, there are just a couple of things I would like to say. First Policy Press may want you all to buy it, but I primarily want you to read it. And I'd be very interested to hear your comments and reactions. Secondly, it is focused on the concept of age and I see this as being at the heart of gerontology. It is often claimed that gerontology is 'a multidisciplinary field'. I am inclined to disagree with this and to argue that it is, or at least should be, a discipline in its own right but, regardless of how it is classed, I think it needs more rigour, more discipline if you like, and this

should come not just by bemoaning the state of gerontological theory but rather by debating and clarifying its conceptual base.

This is what I have attempted in this book and perhaps the primary distinction I draw is that between the chronologisation of life, beginning with the birth certificate, and the appearance of the body in all the complex ways in which we present ourselves in public. These provide two very different contexts within which we can study age, but they come together in the simple question 'how old is this person in front of me?' How do we answer this question without resorting to number? What is it about our appearance which assists us, indeed tempts us, into guessing this person's chronological age? I explore these questions from many angles and through many examples in this book.

Finally I wish to thank Policy Press. They are a great publishing firm who have generously provided me with much support and sound advice. The process is like a relay race with the baton being handed from one to another. This book started with Emily Watt commissioning it and it has now reached the point where Kathryn King is overseeing the marketing operation. I am very grateful to all those who have played a part in the process. I hope the book is a success and a valued contribution to the development of gerontology in the UK and elsewhere.