Transcript

George Leeson

Welcome to the Ageing Conversation, a series of podcasts from the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing at the University of Oxford. I am Professor George Leeson, Senior Professorial Fellow at the Institute. The Oxford Institute of Population Ageing is now celebrating nearly 30 years. It was the first Institute to move away from looking at old age per se and instead to examine the implications for societies, economies, political systems and indeed wider global community of the profound demographic shifts brought about by falling fertility and increasing longevity. We are a multidisciplinary institute and the topics presented in this podcast series reflect the breadth of expertise exploring different aspects of population ageing, past, present and future. Each of these podcasts features an interview conducted by one of our research fellows, and I'm delighted that the current series features Dr Chiara Fukaci and Dr Kate Bancroft. The opinions expressed by the interviewees do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute.

Chiara Focacci

Welcome to the podcast series of the Institute of Population Ageing at the University of Oxford. In this series we're going to look at interesting aspects of why we age the way we age, Let's dive in. Okay, welcome everyone to this episode of the Institute of Population Ageing podcast series. I'm here today with Dr. Jason Dainley, who is an associate professor of anthropology at Oxford Brookes University. Hi, Jason. It's lovely to have you here.

Jason Danely

Hi, Chiara. It's lovely to be here.

Chiara Focacci

So your work is obviously very, very interesting, and you've presented several times at our institute as well. And your ethnographic work, especially in Japan and the UK, shows that aging is not just intended as decline, but more as a human condition, revealing care, connection, and also the moral textures of everyday life. So I want to start by looking at your research, what you've done so far, and maybe ask you how did your early work in Japan shape your view of aging as both moral and aesthetic as well.

Jason Danely

That is a wonderful question. Thank you so much. I started off my first big project, I suppose, looking at aging in Japan was looking at the the ways in which older people were living and experiencing growing older in a context of a country that was

experiencing really rapid demographic change, right? And there was a lot of kind of public discussions about what that means. So Japan was aging very quickly. It was the sort of oldest country, in the world, people were living longer than they live anywhere else. And there was the sense of this horizon that was out there where this would become one quarter of the population, a third of the population, right, even more. And people were thinking about what that meant. But I was really interested in how that was experienced by older people when these discussions were going on. without a lot of their voices there. And so as an anthropologist, of course, I wanted those voices of everyday people to be part of that conversation. And when I was spending time with older people, and I was doing this in a kind of urban context in Japan, one thing that struck me and became the focus of my research were the kind of ritual and spiritual lives of these older people. So you ask about the moral and aesthetic aspects of this, right? So they were, of course, interested in their health and other kinds of social participation. But I felt like this sort of ritual aspect of their lives was kind of left out of most conversations. But it was extremely rich and it was a way in which individuals were kind of playing with different forms of temporality, right? Which is really what aging is all about, right? And why we're interested in aging in the 1st place, because it is about being a time being, right? being within time, inhabiting different kinds of rhythms, experiencing different kinds of interruptions as part of that flow. And in the ritual lives, what was central to that was looking after the ancestors and the deceased. So doing a lot of memorial rituals, often very personal and intimate kind of connections. But it was thinking about the past, people who had come before and people who had died. It was also very much about thinking about their own future as people who would become ancestors themselves very soon. So playing with ritualizing, embodying different forms of temporality in this, I felt was a way of really disrupting this idea of aging as a very static thing or as something that is inevitably about decline. So for older people, it was something that was more about different kinds of transitions to other forms of being that had other roles in the family and other ways of caring and being cared for. And that was really important for people to maintain that side of their lives amidst these kind of calls that were very alarmist and very negative, or these other calls that were all about sort of staying healthy and active and so on, but more as a form of good citizenship, of being a good older person and not being a burden on others. But in the space of these rituals, one could be cared for, have that sense of being cared for, and also perform care, right? So I think care and these kind of social relationships are really, it's impossible to think about aging without taking those into account. That really shaped the way I thought, yeah.

Chiara Focacci

And how beautiful to think of us as time beings. I always like the idea of imagining that we are different people at different times but also in different places. So how fascinating. You've also looked at how older prisoners experience ageing and I was

wondering what strikes you the most about care connection, but also justice in older prisoners. And if you can tell us a bit more about what you called urban necro socialities, maybe you can explain what they are.

Jason Danely

Sure, I'll give it a shot. So I appreciate what you said about about sort of difference. And I think it is always important to remember that when we're thinking about longevity and we're thinking about these long lives that we are now increasingly leading, right, that the longer people live, the more heterogeneous they become, the more differences there are. And I think that's really important. And we're constantly kind of going back perhaps in our lives and rethinking our pasts, as well as forming different ideas about the future. And this sense of possibility and creativity is also very important. So where does justice come into play here? So I think if sort of flourishing as an aging being, is about this kind of creativity and this kind of playing with multiple temporalities, I think my first thought with looking at people who've been, have experienced incarceration is perhaps that their life has become really disrupted, that they are unable to have the kind of possibilities that other older people have. And so a lot of these folks that I talk to that have been to prison in Japan were very socially isolated before they went into prison. that they came out and they were even more isolated, if that was possible, estranged from their families. Most of them were impoverished. They didn't have any way to kind of work. A lot of them had chronic health issues and so on. And Japan has, I think, the largest population of older people not in terms of absolute numbers, but the largest proportion of their prison population is older. So about one in five people in Japanese prisons is over 60, or even a little bit more than that. And of those, three quarters are having chronic health issues and so on. So in many ways, prison was a disruption in their lives, but it was also kind of a consequence or sort of a next step in a process that had already started with increasing marginalization in other ways. And this has become a much more prevalent issue in Japan. loneliness as households become smaller, as people have fewer children, more issues with loneliness and with social isolation and with impoverishment because of not having that kind of care and support from family. So the next step is prison. My hope in this was not just to be able to talk about justice in terms of the criminal justice system and the penal justice system, but also justice in terms of a more prevalent kind of ageism that's within Japan and other places in the world that has led older people to become more marginalized and kind of ignored, right? And so justice in a much more expansive system. But by concentrating, I think, on people who have been the most severely affected by this and who are often kind of invisibilized, then that could open up conversations about older people in general. And I think it was really interesting, there was a a guy that I was talking to who works in a place that gives shelter for people who are unhoused in Japan. And he was saying, people don't like to say that they're ageist, they don't like to say those kind of things. But if the person's committed a crime, then it's okay. And then they can say, oh, this person

doesn't deserve care, or this person should be marginalized in this way. But you can't say that just based on age. And so this is kind of how these injustices are perpetuated, right? It becomes a kind of way of keeping older people especially, you know, older and and impoverished people kind of isolated and and away. So anyway, that this is, I could talk about this for ages. But you know, the one of the the great things about this work is, as I was able to do work with and get to know a lot of these older people who've been affected by the justice system. you start to see much more of their lives, right? And much more of the potential and the capability of them to, I suppose, reestablish a kind of life after prison, build new social connections in different ways that go beyond the kind of traditional system and the family and the welfare system. But it's really about sort of reconnecting in a way to other people in the community who genuinely care about their welfare. And that's really beautiful to see too.

Chiara Focacci

Yeah, absolutely. And I'm really impressed by how results change when you look at a concept like justice from a different perspective. It's a whole other world and a whole other universe and social relations are so important. And, you know, in Italy social capital is very valuable and I do believe that, you know, people in prisons are very isolated and it's all about relearning also a lifestyle after prison, as you mentioned. And because we talked about frailty and recognition and maybe also ethical responsibility, I was wondering where do you see the anthropology of aging going in the future?

Jason Danely

Absolutely. I have not, I don't think that there's been enough focus on justice, not only in the anthropology of aging, but also in gerontology more broadly. I think there is starting to be more work that's coming out about precariousness, about homelessness, about other issues, and especially I think in the wake of COVID-19. And I still don't think we fully sort of reckoned with the kind of ways in which that highlighted and revealed the ageism and the injustice there and the inequalities around aging. But I think in the wake of that, we're starting to have more conversations about that. And that's really encouraging to me. I I would like to to go further, because you know, aging prison populations that's not only happening in Japan. That's that's happening all over the world and in in different ways. And I I think there's within that a lot of interesting experiments about how we can reintegrate people. But again, that means also thinking about aging and also thinking about disability and thinking about a lot of other kinds of identities that are intersectional together as well. For the future, there are a lot of things I'm really excited about. And I mean, not only thinking about things like justice and criminal justice there, But I think more broadly, I think that gerontology is still kind of coming to terms with, should I say, gerontology and anthropology still coming to terms perhaps with their past and with the kind of systems of power that they've been associated with in their history. And I'm right now editing a big Routledge handbook on

anthropology and development studies approaches to aging. And that's been really exciting for me because almost all of the chapters, just about all the chapters in this very massive volume, are about aging in the global South or with indigenous people, with a sort of diaspora from the global South, refugees, asylum seekers, and so on. And so it's really focusing on aging in places in the world that we haven't really done enough sort of ethnographic kind of work, I think, yet. And by shifting the focus over to these different sites and different experiences, I think it not only enriches our imagination of aging and what that looks like, but it also helps us to start to think about issues of justice and issues of repair that need to happen also within our discipline. So that I'm really excited about. And so been looking at a lot of the kind of work on decolonizing and about aside the work on abolition. And from that, also thinking about other kinds of futures, futures of aging. So I'm now writing about gerofuturism as a way of bringing together a lot of the work that, some amazing work that other people are doing. I've been reading this work by Tanisha Hill Jarrett recently, for example, who's been using Afrofuturist concepts and concepts of black liberation in her work to look to do sort of creative engagement with older people and looking at brain health. And it's amazing work. And a lot of this creative engagement, really imaginative stuff, I think it's not just about doing fun things with older people, right? It's really about imagining a much more expansive future and much more inclusive future for all of us as aging beings. And that's what really is exciting to me.

Chiara Focacci

Thank you so much, Jason, for sharing these exciting insights. And I can't believe how much there is still to discover. And I think this is really incredible. and beautiful and I wish you all the best for this exciting research. Thank you so much for being with us today.

Jason Danely

Thank you.