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The critical use of narrative and literature in gerontology

By HANNAH ZEILIG*

Abstract

It is now widely accepted that “age” and “ageing” are cultural concepts that are open to question. The thinking encouraged by critical gerontology has been crucially important in provoking questions about the complexities of later life, age and ageing. Similarly, the interrogation of stories of age and ageing via narrative approaches and as found in literature are increasingly recognised as an important source of knowledge for mining the intricacies of later life. There are close links between the interests of critical gerontologists and those who engage in narrative and literary gerontology. However, the potential that critical gerontology has for illuminating and probing these stories of age has often been neglected. The central argument of this article is that narrative and literary approaches to age and ageing when allied to perspectives from critical gerontology can furnish scholars with important perspectives for interpreting and re-configuring “age”. The focus is upon how a genuinely dialogic relationship between critical gerontology and narrative and literary gerontology can be forged. In this way, the full potential of these stories of ageing; their epistemological status for enriching theoretical work on ageing, might be better exploited.

* *Hannah Zeilig*, King’s College London, London, UK

Keywords: critical thinking, gerontology, critical gerontology, narrative gerontology, literary gerontology, stories, hermeneutics, heuristics.

Introduction: Thinking Critically

Critical thought implies the examination of “taken for granted” assumptions. It involves an active and persistent questioning in contrast to a passive acceptance of information. Such questioning often unsettles normative assumptions and unmasks ideologies that underlie our societies and ways of living. One of the impulses of critical gerontology is to go beyond accepted explanations of age and ageing to plumb the underlying processes that shape these explanations and thereby to elucidate social, cultural and individual experiences of ageing. Critical gerontology therefore provokes a reconsideration of conventional ways of thinking about age and even the discipline of gerontology itself. Its advocates are equally interested in the particular and in the general, querying prevailing norms that define ageing as well as probing how age is experienced by an individual within a specific historical moment. In this way, the thinking encouraged by critical gerontology “... enlarges our perceptions and so calls attention to what more positivist approaches cannot or do not notice” (Holstein & Minkler 2003: 788). It represents the attempt to move from the ceaseless accumulation of knowledge towards understanding the “hows” and “whys” of ageing (Alley et al. 2010: 583) and therefore to contribute to theory building.

Stories of ageing, as these are elucidated by the use of narrative in gerontology and by those who have recourse to literary representations of “age” and “ageing” have become increasingly recognised as lending important insights to gerontological knowledge. These approaches demand critical interpretations about the ways we have of “knowing” and are less concerned with seeking definitive explanations or certitudes. They constitute a fundamental part of the endeavour to open up new debates and redefine the meaning of ageing, the desire to embrace rather than elide the complexities of later life.

There are evident overlaps in the interests of critical gerontology with both narrative and literary gerontology. Narrative, literary and critical gerontology all share an ability to confront (rather than shirk) the

ambiguities and complexities of age, ageing and later life and an interest in quizzing the cultural norms of ageing via non-scientific forms of knowing. Indeed to discuss them as separate entities within gerontological knowledge is to imply that there are dichotomies between these areas of study that do not exist. However, despite their commonalities, there remains (for the most part) a lack of dialogue between these areas. This has sometimes resulted in a dearth of critical thinking by those who investigate narratives or literature to clarify, scrutinise or even reappraise concepts of “age” and “ageing”.

This article then, represents an attempt to examine some of the ways in which narrative and literary gerontology could be enhanced by reference to critical gerontology. These are both out-workings of humanistic gerontology¹ and have emerged in parallel with critical perspectives. It is thus these areas that I discuss here, critically. My purpose is not, however, to provide an exhaustive analysis of either narrative or literary gerontology. Nor do I aim to offer a comprehensive overview of the genesis of critical gerontology. Rather, my objectives are twofold. On the one hand, to examine through carefully selected examples, the intersections between critical gerontology and narrative and literary approaches to age and secondly, to outline the ways in which some of the questions provoked by critical gerontology could further extend the discourses of narrative and literary gerontology. The article concludes with suggestions concerning the uses that perspectives from critical gerontology could have for these discourses and some of the questions it might help scholars of ageing ask about stories of “age”.

Structuring and Constructing the Stories of Age: Considering Narrative Gerontology

The word “narrative” derives from the Latin verb *narrare*: to recount. A narrative is thus most interested in the *telling* of a story (which may be fictional or non-fictional) and the architecture of that story, rather than the story itself. Consequently narratives are identified as, for instance, “written

¹ For a full description of the use of humanities in gerontology and “humanistic” gerontology see Cole et al. (1992, 2000, 2010).

narratives" or "oral narratives" which distinguish between the modes of storytelling. There has been a growing interest in narrative approaches within gerontology, a conceptual trend that is linked to critical gerontology (Biggs 2004: 50). Although whether, as Katz claims (2003: 19) it can be identified as a separate path within critical gerontology, or as a "recognized discipline" in its own right (Phoenix et al. 2010: 1) is perhaps debatable.

Despite this growing interest in narrative gerontology, there is no easy definition of the area. Randall (2007) summarises the inherent difficulties of arriving at a fixed description:

As for narrative gerontology, there are as many ways of defining the phrase as there are gerontologists who identify with it, and as many ways into its subject, which ... is part psychology, part philosophy, part literary criticism, and part several other things too.

(Randall 2007: 373)

It is perhaps unsurprising then, that narrative gerontology comes in various guises. This is because, as Randall points out, "narrative" has been characterised differently and used to different purposes within gerontology. As Biggs notes: "Narrativity has been examined as a research method, a description of ageing ... and as a form of therapy" (2004: 50). It is neither solely a hermeneutic concept nor a heuristic technique or methodology and pinning it down is perhaps unimportant.

The popularity of narrative for gerontology may be because the concept opens up a critical space between what is and what is possible. After all, scrutinising the way a story is constructed also allows us to imagine how it could have been otherwise. In addition, a narrative whether it is linear or not, has a temporal element; a relationship to time that is attractive for scholars of ageing. (To this end, "narrative" in gerontology has recently been described as a "widespread traveling concept" that helps to define ageing as a development through time, [Swinnen 2011]). Finally, a narrative allows for the perspective of the listener – for how the story is heard. I am interested in the flexibility of narrative for gerontology and the possibility that it is a paradigm, or explanatory model which may be extended by critical gerontology.

Some of the ways in which “narrative” in gerontology has been used are discussed below.² These include as a tool for teaching students, as a heuristic for critiquing social policy and as a conceptual mode for considering biographical life stories. These particular areas have been highlighted as representative of the scope of narrative gerontology; they are inevitably limited as an all-inclusive review is outside the compass of this article.

Narrative approaches have been drawn on to facilitate the teaching of gerontology, narrative is seen as having “pedagogical potential” (Randall & Kenyon: 2004). Here narrative is the “root metaphor” for a consideration of ageing in terms of (mostly) biographical stories. Thus in one example, segments of stories about ageing were used to “... animate principles about aging that we want the students to consider” (Shenk et al. 2008: 242). It is posited that:

Narrative gerontology allows us to illustrate how theories of aging are socially constructed, moving learners beyond a single approach to the stories and meanings of aging.

(Shenk et al. 2008: 241)

The narratives used by these teachers included the story of an African American woman born in the 1920s. In this way, undergraduate students were encouraged to consider changing expectations of the life-course and were presented with an antidote to simplistic and

² A number of exponents have been included here. These were selected as they seemed to represent the most pertinent recent examples within their fields. Thus, the work of Shenk et al. (2008) echoes Randall (2007) who is one of the most frequently cited practitioners of this approach. Biggs (2001, 2004) and Biggs et al. (2003) is one of the foremost UK scholars to analyse narratives of social policy. Similarly, the scholarship of Katz (1996, 2003, 2005) Katz and McHugh (2010) has been central as it critiques social narratives of ageing. An extensive literature search found that the work of US scholars Kenyon et al. (2001), Randall and McKim (2004), McKim and Randall (2007) was frequently cited. Moreover, both Randall and Kenyon are highlighted by Moody (2008) as major contributors to narrative gerontology. This is not, however, to indicate that these are the only relevant examples of narrative gerontology.

conventional ways of thinking about old age (Shenk et al. 2008: 243). A second exercise, also developed to illustrate the life-course perspective and how history and cohort placement contribute to who we become in later life (Shenk et al. 2008: 243) was based on a narrative description concerning the ways in which war-time experiences shaped an older man's early and later life.

It is argued that through these exercises, students hear "the human voice" of ageing and are able to relate this to themselves:

Not only do the students learn the basic concept of life expectancy ... but they also actively experience the way it affects the lives of older adults as well as themselves.

(Shenk et al. 2008: 243)

In addition, students are "challenged":

... to explore norms and social roles from their own present-day perspective as well as a historical perspective, examining these issues within the broader context of changing demographics of the population.

(Shenk et al. 2008: 243)

Here, narrative gerontology is a framework or structure for teaching, it is a technique. The composition of autobiographical stories is considered. Students are taught to identify key fragments of a story from a personal account and "... to look beyond the literal or surface meaning to find story structures" (Shenk et al. 2008: 245). It is thus a means of connecting students with the lived stories of older people, the storied nature of our lives, the ways in which we structure our life stories and with metaphysical concepts of "self".

Narrative gerontology as a tool for teaching relies on the recognition that life can be thought of as an actively constructed text that must be part fiction. Just as the stories in novels are made up so we "make ourselves up" when we relate the substance of our lives. Therefore, the act of reading lives is similar to the act of reading novels or "fictions". Both endeavours rely upon our interpretative abilities and are full of subjectivity. This recalls the innovations of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1992) who was amongst the first to stress the importance of the stories older

people told her not despite but *because* of their potentially fictive content. Myerhoff (1992: 231) examined the stories told by older generations about themselves in the following terms: "They 'make' themselves, ... it is an artificial and exhilarating undertaking, this self-construction" (1992: 231).

When these aspects of narrative gerontology as pedagogical instrument are appreciated, there is a clear congruence with the emphases of critical gerontology. For instance: the interest in how "age" is performed by the storyteller, the relationship of an individual's story to the wider stories of society and history (the master narratives that we are inscribed in) and therefore "age" as a dynamic rather than static or fixed concept.

Narrative approaches have also been employed by analysts of social policy and ageing. The meta-narratives that structure ageing have been questioned by, in one example, examining the ways in which cultural narratives have affected the residents of retirement communities (RCs; Biggs et al. 2000). There is an attempt in Biggs' study to link the stories that are told about RCs by both those who choose to live within them and by those agencies that own them: "What ... is the relationship between the RC as it appears in the representations of claims-makers and in the experience and imagination of ... older people?" (Biggs et al. 2000: 651). The possibility that the success of RCs lies in their ability to create: "... a secure and convincing narrative for identity in later life" (2000: 653) is explored. The narratives told at a personal level by older people within one particular RC are analysed by Biggs (and divided into three levels of narrative meaning, 2000: 654) as a means of understanding the wider cultural narrative that guides the RC in question. It is concluded that:

As RCs develop in the UK, it is clear from this study that they are not a simple matter of collective accommodation and individualised consumer choice. To succeed, as a community, and it is from this that many of its positive effects appear to arise, it must also provide a convincing narrative within which tenants can live their lives.

(Biggs et al. 2000: 670)

Taking up this theme, Katz and McHugh (2010)³ inspect the social norms that shape RCs. This study examines the unique ways in which Sun City RCs "... link the experience of ageing with cultural narratives of mobility and sociability" (2010: 275). The background to Katz and McHugh's study are the "... dilemmas of post-traditional aging and the contradictions of its narratives ..." (2010: 271) thus the various narratives that dominate "post-traditional ageing" (which is, as Katz and McHugh point out, often promoted through "positive aging" cultures that elongate middle age) are made explicit and examined as they oppose and illuminate one another. The ways in which over-arching cultural narratives can affect an individual's ageing are succinctly summarised:

The creation and celebration of global, post-traditional aging identities also come with a moral edict to live in ways that maximise individual responsibility in the service of meeting new over-arching political goals of minimising risk and dependency.

(Katz & McHugh 2010: 274)

Hence ageing as it is a political event is also highlighted, larger questions about utopian ageing are tackled (2010: 287) as are the inherent contradictions embodied by RCs:

... between exclusivity and diversity, the tension between the acceptance of and resistance to aging, the mediation between local place and global nonplace, and the intersection between the nomadic forces of our time and the individual journeys and biographies through which they flow.

(Katz & McHugh 2010: 288)

Thus narrative approaches have been used to make explicit and critique elements of social policy and the culture that surrounds ageing that are often taken for granted. The conflicting stories that we are told about

³The essay itself is a germane example of the effective interweaving of many perspectives (the narrative, the humanistic and spatial gerontology). In this it demonstrates, in virtuoso, an effective interdisciplinarity that prompts critical reflection on ageing.

ageing are laid bare and ageing is exposed as it is a political as well as a personal event.

In this vein, Biggs (2001) employs a narrative approach to interrogate political attempts to fix definitions of later life⁴: "... which may or may not benefit older people themselves" (2001: 303). Here, the narratives dominating UK social policy are cross-examined. Biggs convincingly dissects the process whereby later life is redefined by its association with work and the ways in which retirement that is not resourced by elders on an individual and private basis is discouraged (2001: 312). In this way, the limitations of the superficially appealing and much flaunted concepts of "successful ageing" and "active ageing" are revealed as miasmas, promoted by government to further their own agenda. As is neatly observed:

... At first sight, "new ageing" policies appear to be highly facilitative. ... It creates a narrative that is facilitative for older people with the ability to finance a "midlife style" and want, or have the physical or mental capacity, to participate in existing social institutions. It encourages inclusion of a type that privileges work and activities that take a work-like form. As a place in which to stand and build an ageing identity, this story of late-life development is, however lacking. It lacks critical edge and at root, it has little place for dissident or alternative pathways for self and social development other than through work.

(Biggs 2001: 314)

These are ideas, as discussed, that are also considered by Katz and McHugh (2010) who eloquently note:

Integral to the cultural narratives of positive ageing ... is its governance through the coercive individualism of global processes that erode the subsidies and services of welfare states and national economies.

(Katz & McHugh 2010: 274)

⁴ This echoes the work of Katz (1996) who was among the first to expose the social construction of "age". Indeed, the scholarship of Biggs and Katz is mutually reflective and informative when considering the "meta" narratives that shape ageing.

In this guise then, narrative gerontology is a methodology as well as an effective heuristic. It is a means of querying the content of the tales being told to us about later life *and* a technique for interpreting the disconnect between the surface appearance of these tales and the underlying trajectory they insidiously follow. It is therefore inherently critical and challenging, a call for change. And the need to radically re-think the ways in which age and ageing have been culturally configured is a central impulse in critical gerontology, which aims to unsettle our habitual and comfortable frameworks and needle us towards personal and cultural transformation.

The possibility that narrative methods might promote social change is cogently argued by Ray (2007). She contends that the intertwined nature of individual with collective narratives, the possibility that marginalised groups (such as older women) are fore-grounded and a sense of social responsibility can all be encompassed within narrative gerontology. She therefore includes the individual level, a perspective missing from Biggs' and Katz' accounts. Ray points to a reflexive form of scholarship in ageing, one that is personally engaged rather than academically distant and descriptive. She asserts:

... as social change agents, narrative gerontologists must not only change the way people *think* about ageing, but also how they *feel* about ageing. This requires that we must first change our own thoughts and feelings about ageing.

(Ray 2007: 70, emphasis in original)

Whilst this is a consciously ambitious agenda, it encapsulates the ambitious and radical nature that is also characteristic of critical gerontology. However, it should be noted that this form of narrative gerontology does not, of course, provide a foolproof methodology for capturing and then explaining stories of age. Its difficulties are mentioned in passing by Phoenix et al. (2010) as the dangers of creating "yet another general unifying view" into which we neatly slot the stories that are told us.

If Ray (2007) stresses the transformative possibilities of narrative gerontology other scholars have sought to draw on narrative techniques to examine the activity of "storying" our lives. To this end it has been defined as "... the study of stories of ageing as told by those who

experience life and growing older.” (Birren 2001: x). The thrust of this approach is to construe the stories told by older people as narratives and to use these as “data” for uncovering the dynamics of lives as these are affected by ageing. This approach then, is a means of capturing the individual processes of meaning making in later life, a way of delving into the interior (and private) aspects of “age”. Many such discussions of narrative gerontology draw overtly on the similarities between reading “lives” and reading “novels”, the “novel-like” quality of our lives. Thus Randall and Kenyon (2004) observe:

The feel of time in the midst of our life . . . is akin to what we feel when reading a novel, poised between the beginning from whence we have come and the end to which we are heading.

(Randall & Kenyon 2004: 335)

There is an insistence on the insights that can emerge when lives are examined as we would examine literary texts:

To look at lives as literary texts is more than playing with an appealing metaphor. It constitutes a valid perspective on the nature of human nature, the intricacies of internal change, and the complex contexts in which, over the lifespan, such change occurs.

(Randall & McKim 2004: 252)

To claim that examining lives “is more” than “an appealing metaphor” is perhaps to underestimate the power of metaphors for guiding study. Narrative gerontology, as it is articulated by these scholars, makes much of its roots in literary theory (although literary scholars might question this):

Yet insofar as a life is itself a type of text . . . analogous at least to an anthology and at most to a novel . . . then we might benefit by looking more closely at literary theory. . . . Drawing on such thinking, . . . let us consider how, in life as in literature, story time may vary with respect to feel, flow and focus.

(Randall & Kenyon 2004: 335)

There is a consequent danger of these analyses spiralling ever inwards as they grapple with questions of “self as author”/“self as reader”, rather

than critically adjusting their insights and extrapolating from these to provide insights on ageing; as the authors themselves note:

Given postmodern critiques of the very idea of “the author”, *self-as-author* is ... a problematic notion. ... There will, of course, be as many strategies for reading the self as there are for reading works of literature.

(Randall & Kenyon 2004: 338, emphasis in original)

The tendency of this approach (which has been further expanded with reference to the “poetics of ageing”⁵) is to imply that all stories can and should be distilled into coherent narratives and therefore to over emphasise the role of narrative in an individual’s life. In so far as this is the case, teleological leanings are discernable:

Narrative too, one could argue, is not only essential to life, or to making meaning *in* life, but *is* life. ... as I have tried to argue here, it is *in* stories and *through* stories that we live our lives at every level. Without narrative, ... those lives would be devoid of structure and direction, purpose and coherence, momentum and meaning.

(Randall 2007: 385–386, emphasis in original)

This is a problematic claim. The extent to which narrative is “essential to life” or indeed to making meaning in life is debatable, as is the assertion that without narrative lives are devoid of momentum and meaning.

Some of the difficulties of using a narrative approach for elucidating life stories are evident in the work of Grimm and Boothe (2007). These researchers used an elaborate methodology to examine biographical narratives of happiness and disaster. One of the problems of this study (although not presented as such) is that:

⁵ The main proponents of this approach, Randall and McKim (2004); McKim and Randall (2007) borrow Aristotle’s concept of poetics (which they argue is no longer limited to literature) to refer to the active, creative way in which we make sense of ageing.

Narratives are governed by rules. The everyday storyteller has to set out the scene of the events, a stage and a starting-out constellation These conditions and circumstances create dramatic tension and suspense and thus open up the specific purpose-oriented movement of the narrative.

(Grimm & Boothe 2007: 142)

The extent to which the “everyday” storyteller seeks to create tension and suspense is surely controversial. And further, if narratives are indeed governed by rules, then the methods for unravelling these narratives (as indicated by Grimm and Boothe’s methodology⁶) are also rule bound. In contrast, the way we live and the stories that emerge cannot be captured by a set of rules. The inchoate and fragmented ways in which we really experience our lives (as partly articulated by writers such as Beckett, Pinter, Joyce) rarely work towards any single “end point” or moment of revelation. Our lives and their stories do not have the forward thrust of narratives, they are fractal. The relativity and uncertainty of the stories we tell must also be acknowledged; stories that cannot easily be subjected to methodological analysis.

Nonetheless, considering narratives of age (whether as teaching tools, to critique social policy and cultural norms or to explore biographical stories) represents one of the most interesting ways of provoking critical thought about ageing. Narrative gerontology has the ability to engage our critical and imaginative faculties in the consideration of stories as they are diachronic. These stories can be linked to wider global processes, thus avoiding parochialism. It has a capacity to admit to the indeterminacy and infinity of meaning (the co-authoring of our lives by wider cultural stories as well as by family and friends) that is potentially of great value to scholars interested in “post-traditional” ageing in an era of “post-postmodernism”. In this way, and reflecting the concerns of critical gerontologists, there is an ability to analyse the macro/structural levels of ageing without losing sight of the micro-levels.

Above all, critical gerontology looks at what is missing, it stands in opposition to what is known or thought to be known about ageing. Thus,

⁶The recourse to complex schema for analysing stories is also exemplified by the typology constructed by Phoenix et al. (2010).

social structures are critically deconstructed. They are important not simply in and of themselves but also because they affect how older people view themselves (Holstein & Minkler 2007). They are internalised. Understanding the internal worlds of people as they age and as these relate to the material, lived conditions of older people is an area of intense interest for critical gerontologists. In this sense, critical gerontology strives to connect the applied or practical nature of gerontology (Morrow-Howell et al. 2001) with the structural forces that shape ageing and the urge to comprehend the subjectivities of ageing. The use of narrative in gerontology is one of the most fruitful ways of uniting these concerns.

I now turn to some of the ways in which stories of ageing and age have been examined in literature, the differences between “story” as it is conceived of by narrative gerontologists and those engaged in literary gerontology and the possibilities that critical gerontology has for studies of ageing in literature.

Fictional Stories: Considering Literature and Gerontology

As noted by Cole et al. (2010: 16) literary scholars were amongst the first academic humanists to explore ageing (after historians). This has merged into the sub-discipline “literary gerontology” that has been pithily described as the interpretation of ageing and creativity through close readings of literary texts (Kontos 2003). Unlike narrative gerontology, literary gerontology does not represent a methodology (although content analysis has been favoured by some) and neither is it a conceptual framework. It does not appear in quite the profusion of guises that characterise narrative gerontology, although it does encompass a variety of genres (from the memoir to poetry, novels and plays). Literature has been used to diverse ends within gerontology and by those who are not gerontologists but who have an interest in “age”.

Kathleen Woodward and Schwartz (1986; Woodward 1991, 1993) demonstrated the possibility that literature and literary criticism could illuminate ageing and paved the way for the investigation of literary perspectives on ageing. Woodward’s work uniquely meshes psycho-analytic theory with literary works to investigate age, and is discussed below. Other scholars have considered late style and creativity in old age

(Cohen-Shalev 2002; McMullan 2007; Wyatt-Brown & Rossen 1993; Wyatt-Brown 2010) and the images of older people in literature (Fallis 1989; Hepworth 1996; Mangum 1999). Literature has been used as data for reconceptualising ageing – for example, assumptions concerning “age appropriate behaviour” have been considered as these are transgressed by Falstaff in *Henry V* (Donow 1992); and the concept of “life review” has been applied to novels by Philip Roth and Jane Gardam (Wyatt-Brown 2010). Stories from literature have also been used as teaching tools, including as a means of redressing ageist attitudes (Waxman 2005, 2010).⁷

Clearly, the notion of story is at the heart of both narrative and literary gerontology. It is perhaps curious that whereas narrative gerontology considers the concept of a story carefully, those engaged with literary texts generally take it for granted that there is a shared understanding about the components of a fictional story. As outlined, some narrative approaches stress the similarity between lives and literary texts, yet there are important distinctions to be made between “life” stories and those found in literature. One of the most glaring differences is the overt plea that fiction makes to a reader’s imagination. The story of a life as told by the person who has lived it, although composed using the imagination and in some ways “fictional”, necessarily bears some relationship to reality as experienced by the storyteller. However, the stories contained within literature make no such claims. Fictions call upon us to participate in the act of creation and the call to a reader’s (or an audience’s) imagination is

⁷ As in my discussion of narrative gerontology, I have referred to what I hope are some of the clearest examples of different expressions of literary gerontology. For the most part these are those US scholars whose work has been in the *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging* (Cole et al. 1992, 2000) and latterly the *Guide to Humanistic Studies in Aging* (Cole et al. 2010). The British scholar Mike Hepworth (1996, 2000) was an important influence on early attempts to think about literature and ageing as was the work of Kathleen Woodward. Recently, the insights from British literature scholars who include ageing, such as McMullan (2007) and King (2009) are contributing new perspectives to critical thinking about ageing and literature. To this end, McMullan has been instrumental to setting up the network “A new old age: critical dialogue between the arts and humanities, and critical/social gerontology”. This network will build strategically on expertise in arts and social/critical gerontology.

an essential part of the author's purpose in telling her story. In her book "Mystery and Manners" Flannery O'Connor (1961) makes a point about short stories that relates to the distinct nature of fictional stories in general:

A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate.

(O'Connor 1961: 87)

In contrast, the stories that people tell us could be (and often are) told another way. (Hence the interest in narrative gerontology in how a story is structured and constructed). However, as Flannery O'Connor indicates, a fictional story embodies its meaning. This meaning is fleshed out by the reader's imagination whereas personal life-stories do not appeal to our minds and imaginative abilities in the same way.

This pull that literature has on our imaginations should make literary gerontology an especially insightful means of considering ageing. However, often those interested in ageing have naively excavated literature for insight into both the subjectivities and universalities of ageing. Literature has been used both heuristically and hermeneutically for ageing but its epistemological status has rarely been questioned. Just as gerontological theorising was once described as dominated by "stories about theories" (Marshall 1999); so there has always been a danger within literary gerontology of getting lost amidst stories about stories of ageing. The tendency to find "catch all" solutions within the humanities is evidenced in the work of some of those who first looked to literature to expand gerontological knowledge (as critiqued by Zeilig 1997, 2004). Like bibliomancy (the quasi-mystical medieval practice of finding general truths in books), many of these approaches seemed to draw universal truths from texts only marginally interested in age or ageing. This tended to result in a narrowing rather than a broadening of focus for both the humanities and ageing because the extent to which imaginative writing mediates and constructs reality was overlooked.

So, for example, Kastenbaum's interpretation (1995) of Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* demonstrates some of the more obvious dangers when extrapolating from a novel to provide gerontological insights without proper regard for its whole context. The fundamental problem with using

The Picture of Dorian Gray is that Wilde's primary interest in the novel is in youth as a symbol of superficiality and decadence. This is connected to his fascination with aestheticism; and is not important in relation to age. Dorian's portrait reflects his moral corruption rather than how he would look if he were ageing. In addition, Kastenbaum tends to take the fictional character of Dorian out of context and treat him as though he actually existed, resulting in the misleading statement that "Dorian's decontextualisation of youth leads to self-deception ..." (Kastenbaum 1995: 190). Dorian Gray was Wilde's creation; he could not actively "decontextualise youth". Thus Kastenbaum has started to endow the character Dorian Gray with a life of his own. This confusion between an author and the characters she/he has created further exemplifies some of the problems encountered by early attempts to use literature to enlighten gerontology.

There have, of course, been notable exceptions to the tendencies towards grandiose claims and generalisations that characterised some of those who first examined literature for gerontological insights. Mangum's work on representations of ageing in 19th century British children's literature (1999) prompts a reassessment of tales that are firmly engrained in the collective psyche. So, for instance, the ageing Queen and Duchess are considered in *Alice in Wonderland* as they refuse to play games by the rules and are "... irascible and dangerous abusers of the authority that comes from both the State and their age" (Mangum 1999: 71). The reader is invited to reconsider this familiar tale from the perspective of age. The text is carefully related to its context. This context includes the concerns of the author: "The representation of aging in *Alice* echoes Carroll's larger preoccupations with the unmanageable, growing, aging female body" (1999: 72).

Other discourses that were latent in Victorian England are also used by Mangum to contextualise her analysis (in particular the essay "The Art of Growing Older", 1866 in which an ageing woman is labelled a "queen"). In this way, the images of the Queen and the Duchess are convincingly demonstrated to be recognisable "types" within Victorian culture. Mangum carefully sites her analysis within the wider culture and social mores of Victorian England:

The term “old age” signalled only a general and shifting category in England until the passage of the 1908 pension bill forced members of Parliament to attach old age to a specific chronological age.

(Mangum 1999: 61–62)

Her study therefore reveals the uncertainty of the term “old age”, its historical evolution as related to chronology and how these factors are tied to cultural representations of older women in Victorian British children’s literature.

Similarly, Hepworth (1996) examines the *William* stories, which were written for children, as these provide images of older people. Hepworth’s work (like Mangum’s) carefully locates the *William* stories by Richmal Crompton within their fictional and cultural contexts. Hepworth however concentrates upon a single concept “infantilisation” as it is associated with later life. Through reference to the characterisation of older people in Crompton’s stories, Hepworth explores the possibility for a “positive infantilisation” and finally asserts that “... in these stories the older characters are liberated ... from the negative stereotyping and thus depersonalisation of the adult world” (1996: 437).

Images of older people in a specific form of fiction are therefore examined through the lenses of age and “used” within a wider proposition: concerning the normally derogatory notion that older people are trapped in a state of childishness. In this way, Hepworth demonstrates the potential that fictional stories can have to question and unsettle jaded assumptions about older people. Mangum and Hepworth both appreciate the nuances in fictional representations of “age” and the way these are inherently linked to historical context and the author’s concerns. Both scholars avoid the facile categorisation of older people as a blurry homogeneous group. In this, their work displays a criticality that invites us to question superficial and established notions of what old age is or how it is represented.

The works of Woodward and Schwartz (1986) as well as Woodward (1991, 1993) use literature and psychoanalytic theory reciprocally and critically to get beneath the experiences of ageing. Woodward’s discussion of *The Years* (1991: 73–90) not only provides insights into later life, but simultaneously into Woolf’s novel. *The Years* is read alongside the work

of Freud, Lacan, Pontalis and René Girard as a means of considering narcissism and ageing and the “differentiated and moving views” (1991: 75) that the novel presents of the coming of old age. Woodward focuses on the character of Eleanor in the novel (who is depicted as she moves through her 50s and into her 70s during the course of the story) and in particular on several “paradigmatic moments” (1991: 76) in the final scenes of *The Years*. Woodward draws our attention to the concluding chapter of the novel (which features a party and the coming together of four generations of the Pargiter family, who are at the heart of *The Years*) and a moment in which Eleanor drops off to sleep. The reaction of Eleanor’s middle-aged nephew (North) as he gazes upon his aunt is scrutinised with reference to both Freud’s work on narcissism and Lacan’s analysis of aggressivity:

If a sleeping child calls forth a tender gaze, *The Years* asks us to consider that the sight of an old person in sleep elicits dread. The fear of one’s own mortality in turn calls forth aggression, as we see in North’s description of Eleanor’s body as she sinks into sleep.

(Woodward 1991: 77–78)

This work opens up fascinating perspectives on ageing and its possible elucidation with reference to psychoanalytic theory and fiction; discourses that are brought into direct and critical dialogue. Thus the fictional character of Eleanor is discussed as she represents an alternative sort of dreamer from that envisioned in Pontalis’s essay “Dream as an Object”:

In the character of Eleanor we find a figure of maturity who stands in marked contrast to Pontalis’s final view of the dreamer who attaches herself in a childishly regressive way to the dream as an object.

(Woodward 1991: 80)

And as she represents an alternative vision of old age:

For Eleanor, old age is precisely *not* a period in her life she longs to escape . . . Woolf’s figuring of Eleanor’s experience proves wrong the cultural myth of old age as inevitable decline.

(Woodward 1991: 83, emphasis in original)

Woodward's work (including a more recent essay "Performing Age, Performing Gender" 2006) demonstrates an ability to probe the representations of age deeply, drawing upon a multiplicity of cultural reference points to uncover the ways in which age identities are formed. Her work lays bare the ways in which we are all engaged in "storying" age at cultural and individual levels and helps us to query ideologies of age. In this, it is an example of gerontology at its most effective and critical.

Woodward's scholarship has amply influenced other scholars. McMullan (in *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*, 2007) examines late life creativity and engages closely and critically with Woodward's analyses in her essay "Late Theory, Late Style: Loss in Freud and Barthes" (1993). McMullan is a Professor of Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama and he happens upon the ideas of literary gerontologists as these are relevant to his interest in the common conflation of late style with old age.⁸ In his concern to expose late style as a construct rather than the reality of creativity in old age, McMullan necessarily (albeit slightly reluctantly) engages with scholars of ageing. An uneasy relationship with "humanistic gerontology" and "literary gerontology" is betrayed in the Introduction to *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*, here McMullan notes: "... it is not my intention in this book directly to work within the field of humanistic gerontology" (2007: 9) and he is at pains to emphasise that his study has only an "oblique" relationship to "the field of literary gerontology" (2007: 11). However, he simultaneously acknowledges the influence of Woodward's analyses:

Nevertheless, it seems to me that Kathleen Woodward is right when she claims that the repression of ageing is an intrinsic component of contemporary western culture, and I would argue that the concept of late style is designed less to celebrate than to *deny* the difference represented by old age and to substitute for it a myth of synchrony ...

(McMullan 2007: 9, emphasis in original)

⁸ It should be noted that the complex relationship between age and stage of life have been carefully considered by gerontologists in other contexts. For instance, Gilleard and Higgs (2008) explore the contingent nature of age/cohort effects in an article on internet use in later life.

and later (chapter 5) credits the potential that humanistic approaches to gerontology have for “the study of late style” (2007: 267). It seems then, that McMullan is not quite sure how his study relates to the concerns of scholars of age and ageing, as he attempts to clarify in the Introduction: “This is not, . . . , a book written about or against old age” (2007: 10).

Nevertheless, the intricate pulling together of many texts (including work by Adorno, Kenneth Clark, Jung, Robert Butler and Eric Erikson among many others) to illustrate his points and the careful and critical contextualisation of each text or work referenced, exemplifies how literature and concepts from gerontology might best be integrated. McMullan confronts the fluidity of the category “age” as this is relevant to Jacobean England:

Old age was a flexible conjunction of calendar age and infirmity, and it is important to remember this flexibility in establishing an understanding of ageing in the 17th century.

(McMullan 2007: 287)

His study grapples with the profound difficulties of “age” when applied to creativity in later life:

It seems to me, . . . , essential to distinguish between “old-age style” and “late style” because the importance accorded to late work is not always the product of a privileging of old age per se.

(McMullan 2007: 10)

and therefore demonstrates the way in which “old age” escapes from its comfortable chronological delimitations when considering late style: “A late stylist, it seems, must be *considered* old, *treated as* an old man, even if he is not . . . actually *old*” (2007: 284, emphasis in original). The uncertainty of age in both life and art is therefore exposed. The extent to which age is culturally determined and utilised as a construct by critics seeking a way of categorising an artist’s oeuvre is carefully detailed (see for instance “Old-Age Style without Old Age” 271–284). McMullan’s

study shows that despite the difficulties of juxtaposing disciplines, the potential of such combinations for enhancing our study of ageing is clear.

King (like McMullan a Professor of English Literature) cogently takes up the argument that seeing literature as a direct mirror of the experience of old age is problematic:

The “reflection” model in imaginative literature fails to take full account of the way in which these discourses shape both the experience of ageing and how it is perceived and represented by others.

(King 2009: 298)

King challenges this limited approach, proposing instead: “I believe that it is necessary to consider the ways in which fiction interacts discursively with non-fictional work on ageing” (2009: 297). To develop her argument, King looks at the representation of memory loss and its impact on identity and self-image in the female protagonist of *There Were No Windows* by Norah Hoult, first published in 1944. The novel is related to medical and sociological discourses on women and ageing during the same period, which includes several papers published in the *Lancet* in the 1940s as well as Simone de Beauvoir’s famous 1949 work on older women as “other” in “Le Deuxième Sexe” [The Second Sex].⁹ *There Were No Windows* is carefully and critically contextualised as it presents the character of an older woman (Claire) struggling with the onset of dementia:

It is useful to consider what professional discourses were available to a doctor during the 1940s by which to describe a woman in Claire’s condition Since the psychiatry of old age was still in its infancy during the 1940s, the absence of a gendered discourse of ageing is unsurprising.

(King 2009: 302–303)

Thus as King concludes:

⁹ De Beauvoir, S. (1988). *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley. London: Pan. (As referenced by King 2009).

... *There Were No Windows* highlights the inadequacy of discourses of gendered ageing in Hoult's own time, and invites the reader to reflect on those of their own.

(King 2009: 306)

King's work therefore demonstrates the function of fiction as one in a number of cultural discourses on ageing, which can be related to its own period and then extrapolated from to help contemporary readers consider the construction of the older woman: "Hoult's novel suggests that the most well-meaning of us may hide behind discourses that make older people and particularly older women Other" (2009: 306). In this way, fiction can be "used" to help us question and resist normative discourses of gendered ageing. This is an inherently critical exercise that chimes with the concerns of critical gerontology, which has sought to understand the feminisation of later life (Bernard & Scharf 2001; Calasanti 1999; Holstein & Minkler 2007; Ray 2007; Woodward 2006) and to dissect the ways in which age and gender interact.¹⁰ Although it is noteworthy that King does not refer to the work of these scholars.

Insights from literature are truly insightful then, where the author and her/his work are contextualised properly, when their depiction and representations of age are interrogated rather than accepted and when they are understood as one in a number of cultural discourses. Understanding the historicity of old age and therefore recognising that it is not a simple point of definition should be central to any mutual reading of literature and gerontology. Equally, the ability to separate "age" from cultural constructs such as "late-style" and allied to this, not using it as a facile explanation for any given story is essential.

However, it is perhaps by admitting age as a category, by recognising that age cannot simply be added into analyses of fictional stories (or indeed the stories that older people tell us) that will elicit the most pertinent insights from literary and narrative gerontology.

¹⁰ The work of the women, ageing and media (WAM) group is also pertinent here. Although they do not refer overtly to critical gerontology the work emanating from this group is designed to provoke, it radiates cultural awareness and critical sensibility in its reconsideration of discourses of ageing as these affect older women; cf: "<http://www.wam-research.org.uk/watch-online/>".

To this end, the role of critical gerontology as a way of considering both narrative and literary gerontology has great potential.

Concluding Questions and Comments – Critical Stories

An awareness that “age” and “ageing” encompass more than straightforward physical decline and decrepitude, that alone these categories explain nothing about an individual and that we need to change our minds about what “age” can be, is at the heart of critical gerontology. If “age”, “ageing” and even “age-related” illness can not be accepted unquestioningly then it follows that a consideration of structural inequalities, power relations, concepts of successful ageing (quizzed by Torres 2001, 2006 among others), thoughts about our ageing bodies are all open to examination. These insights, the urgency of questioning the stories of age – be they wholly or partly fictional, is at the core of how critical gerontology can contribute to narrative and literary gerontology. The discourses of critical gerontology can be used to help us reconfigure what culturally has been casually accepted.

When these perspectives are applied to stories of age, innumerable interesting questions start to form about the intricate interplay between the personal, emotional and the social, political, cultural constructions of age/ageing/older people. These questions include querying the age ideologies that underpin a story, interrogating how age, gender and ethnicity interact to shape the stories that we are told, examining how the story under consideration relates to other stories and discourses on age, considering how far “age” is a relative concept that is unrelated to the years that a person or character has lived, asking how the stories that we are told age us and considering how the stories that we are told about age can be challenged and changed.

These are general queries, but there may be some specific ways in which critical gerontology can provide clarification for the discourses discussed here. Narrative gerontology, as a tool for teaching could be sharpened by explicit reference to questions about the interplay of individual agency with social structure, the way these shape experiences of ageing. Further, students might be alerted to the problematic nature of “age”, which is not a simple explanatory concept. The use of narrative to critique social policy

is invaluable but might benefit from micro-level insights, the inclusion of voices from those who are “on the ground”. This in turn may prompt more scholarship that is personally engaged (as advocated by Ray 2007). The study of personal life narratives may benefit from critical questions about how lives are experienced, the incomplete way in which they are often lived.

Where extrapolations from literature fail to be critical they also fail to tell gerontologists anything about ageing. Fictional stories can be invaluable for considering the various manifestations of age and ageing. However, these stories are most insightful when they are thoroughly contextualised, when the frame of reference is accounted for and when fiction as one in a range of cultural discourses is appreciated. Incorporating the critical gerontological imagination as an approach to works of literature reveals the possibility that “age” can be considered as a concept that is integral to the reading of a text and as it relates to a wider historical context and can not be fully understood within the confines of a particular story. The work of both McMullan (2007) and King (2009) happen upon the importance of considering “age” as an unreliable explanation that requires clarification, however both analyses would have been aided by an awareness of the questions that have already been asked by critical gerontologists. In particular, McMullan’s discussion of the influence of Alzheimer’s on the poet Oppen and the artist de Kooning (2007: 283–284) would have benefited from an awareness of questions recently posed about the malignant social construction of this illness (Basting 2003, 2009; Kontos 2003). King examines the way an older woman may have an identity beyond her age but does not engage with the ways that feminists working in gerontology or age studies (for example: Gullette 1988, 1993, 1997, 2003, 2004, 2007) have also explicated this “othering” of older women.

If both narrative and literary gerontology are cross-examined with reference to the insights of critical gerontologists then it is possible that an individual expression of “age” (be this a personal narrative, social narrative or an imagined account) may be properly extrapolated from as it connects with the conditions that have created this particular vision of “age”. In this way, the subjectivities of individual stories (and the interpretations of these stories) may contribute to a more generalisable, epochal sense of age/ageing. Thus age can be considered as it is a

historically specific and therefore shifting phenomenon. A truly interdisciplinary and integrative relationship between narrative and literary gerontology and critical gerontology could be created, such that there is a mutuality of reflection between these discourses, which have so much to gain from one another.

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Corresponding Author

Hannah Zeilig, Institute of Gerontology, King's College London, 4th floor, The Strand, London WC2R 2LS, UK. Email: hannah.zeilig@kcl.ac.uk

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“The baby-boom is over and the ageing shock awaits”: populist media imagery in news-press representations of population ageing

By ANNA SOFIA LUNDGREN¹ & KARIN LJUSLINDER²

Abstract

From an international perspective, media representations of population ageing have been described as apocalyptic in character. In this article, we analyse the way population ageing is represented in three Swedish newspapers: *Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Västerbottens-Kuriren*. The aim is to investigate Swedish news-press representations of population ageing and the old age identities that they offer. We conduct qualitative analyses of the articulations between the verbal content and the use of illustrations, metaphorical language, headlines and captions using the concepts offered by discourse theory. The analysis of the material shows that the studied newspapers firmly position population ageing within a wider discourse of political economy and as a threat to the concept of welfare. Growth is promoted as a self-evident means for adjusting to the expected threat. Illustrations and metaphorical language helped to constitute population ageing as a serious, dichotomised (e.g. young

¹ Anna Sofia Lundgren, Centre for Population Studies/Ageing and Living Conditions Programme (ALC), Department of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

² Karin Ljuslinder, Department of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

vs. old) and emotive (e.g. addressing anxiety and fear) problem. The analyses also show how the representations of population ageing bear some populist features, and we argue that such features support a de-politicisation of the phenomenon population ageing.

Keywords: population ageing, media, old age, populism.

Introduction: The Construction of Population Ageing as Threat

The understanding of demographic phenomena as the cause and origin of expected social and economic crises has often been criticised. One of the latest phenomena to attract interest in this sense is population ageing (Mullan 2002). McDaniel (1987: 331) talks about an “emerging problem paradigm” that seems to serve as a model of explanation for a variety of different phenomena, such as increased health care costs, sluggish economic growth and an increased tax burden on people of working age (see also Vincent 1996). There is an “eagerness to explain and to address a variety of social and economic problems (...) by reference to population aging”, writes McDaniel (1987: 335).

What is common in the body of research that has touched upon cultural aspects of population ageing is the recognition that it is often conceptualised as a societal threat. The concept of “apocalyptic demography”¹ is widely used (cf. Evans et al. 2001; Gee & Gutman 2000; Robertson 1997; Rozanova 2006; Vincent 1996) and referred to as the tendency to focus on the economic costs of the expected changes in the proportion of older and younger persons in the population. Longer life spans and lower fertility rates, together with the large generation of baby boomers that are now reaching retirement age, will constitute a situation in which fewer and fewer will have to support more and more in a way that will eventually collapse the social security systems – or so the argument goes. Gee (2002: 750) has convincingly described how apocalyptic demo-

¹Other value-laden phrases have also been used to make similar points, for example “demographic alarmism” and “voodoo demography” (Gee 2002), and “demographic demagoguery” (Cruikshank 2003).

graphy has been used to “reconstruct and redefine social problems in ways that fit a political agenda or, at least, that calibrate with current and popular ideological positions” (see also Evans et al. 2001; Vincent 1996).

Media is claimed to have a significant impact on the creation and distribution of apocalyptic demography (cf. Cruikshank 2003; Fealy & McNamara 2009), and research on how population ageing is made comprehensible has often used media examples (cf. Martin et al. 2009; McDaniel 1987; Northcott 1994). Northcott (1994: 68) recognises media’s tendency to both reproduce stereotypical understandings by repeatedly multiplying them in printed text, and, thereby, to “... fuel perceptions of an age-related economic crisis”. McDaniel (1987: 331) suggests that regardless of the likelihood of the suggested future crisis, once reproduced in the media, the problem paradigm of population ageing can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The earlier descriptions show how representations of population ageing have been recognised in an international context. However, this empirical study’s geographical focus is Sweden, in which news-press reports on population ageing became salient in the late 1990s (Abramsson 2005). These reports closely resemble the previous arguments of apocalyptic demography; they are dominated by a focus on political economy, primarily depicting population ageing as a definite, but vaguely characterised threat (Lundgren & Ljuslinder 2011). Investigating the Swedish press is of special interest because the Swedish welfare system, which is frequently referred to as “the Swedish model”, is often depicted as unusual from an international perspective, as it is general and primarily funded by income taxes (Bengtsson 2010).

Aim

In this article, we investigate Swedish news-press representations of population ageing and the old age identities that they offer. We do this by considering the content of these representations in relation to the visual imageries that are used – illustrations, figurative language and the parts of the article that are graphically distinguished. The reason for specifically studying visual imagery is because they are what first catches the audience’s attention and directs their interpretations of the often

polysemous media content (cf. Lind 1994). We work from the supposition that media is one of the most important sources of information (cf. Curran 2002; McLuhan 1967; McQuail 2005; Schudson 2003), especially regarding phenomena that the audience does not have any direct personal experience of. On the basis of previous research (cf. Lin et al. 2004; Ljuslinder 2002), we also presuppose that media content has an impact on people regarding self-identifications, approaches to other persons and on the way society's resource allocation is legitimised.

In this article, we argue that population ageing partly functions as an empty signifier in Laclau's (1996) sense of the word – a signifier that is open to different but vaguely defined inscriptions. Visual imageries and content help to constitute this signifier in ways that string together notions of population ageing, old age, welfare and Swedish national self-image.

Materials and Methods

The empirical material consists of three Swedish newspapers' reportage on the subject of population ageing; the two daily papers *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) and *Västerbottens-Kuriren* (VK), and the tabloid *Aftonbladet* (AB). Both DN and AB have national coverage and are amongst the largest newspapers in Sweden, while VK is a local newspaper and is published in Umeå in northern Sweden. The motivation behind the choice of the local VK is the high average age of the people in many of the municipalities in the county of Västerbotten. After already having been confronted with some of the experiences of population ageing primarily because of out-migration, we found it interesting to include this newspaper in the investigation. Even though there were some marginal differences between the three newspapers' reports, these differences were not decisive because our focus was not on the differences between various types of news-press. The reason for our choice of three different types of newspapers was mainly motivated by a desire for breadth.

Using the full-text online database Mediearkivet, the chosen newspapers were initially searched for articles containing the expression "population ageing" or semantic variations thereof. We chose to delimit the investigation to the time period 1988–2009, in order to cover the rise in media awareness that occurred in the late 1990s (cf. Abramsson 2005). In total, 594 articles

(DN = 398, AB = 83, VK = 113) were found. These articles included reports on population ageing from Sweden and other countries. We included these as well because they contributed to the mediated construction of population ageing. The material was first analysed quantitatively and coded for genre, main topic, definitions of population ageing, expected consequences, old age positions, positions referred to as sources and whether the article related specifically to the inland of northern Sweden. The frequencies of each category helped to highlight the cultural construction of meaning that was made within the studied representations. A full account of the quantitative analysis is found in Lundgren and Ljuslinder (2011).

For the analytic purposes of the present article, two qualitative analyses of the material were performed. First, a selection of articles containing illustrations was analysed qualitatively (DN: 250, AB: 51 and VK: 40), focusing on the visual imagery: illustrations (photos, drawings, tables, etc.) and, as press images are seldom read in isolation (Barnhurst & Nerone 2001; Hirdman 2004), their relation to any other visually emphasised components of the article (headlines, captions, etc.). For example, population ageing would be interpreted differently if it was articulated with a photograph of happy and healthy older people than it would be if it was articulated with a photograph of older persons lying in a hospital corridor. Similarly, the caption may reveal that an illustration is ironic rather than serious.

There are plenty of methods for analysing images. In order to be able to take part in the process of “taking an image apart and tracing how it works in relation to broader systems of meaning” (Rose 2001: 69), the classical method of news-press image analysis that was inspired by the semiology of Barthes (1967) was chosen. This method works well with the ontology of discourse theory. We have used Hillesund’s (1994) suggestion of analytical tools: *denotation* (descriptive level), *composition* (e.g. contrasts, angles), *connotation* (associative level) and the *function* that the illustration seemed to have in the text. Concerning the function, two aspects were detected. A *referential function* means that an image refers back to something written in the article text with the aim to depict or illustrate it. An *emotive function* means that an image does not only depict but also conveys feelings or evokes emotions in the audience.

Second, and parallel to the analysis of illustrations, the same selection was re-read to pick up on how population ageing and old age identities

were described. Research has often stated that, for example, the use of *metaphor* “allows us to understand a relatively abstract or inherently unstructured subject matter in terms of a more concrete, or at least more highly structured subject matter” (Lakoff 1993: 245). According to this view, understanding is achieved “by mapping the structure of one domain onto another” (Kövecses 2002: 147). The analysis was carried out by first searching the material for descriptions of population ageing and of older people, and specifically any use of linguistic metaphor, metonymy or recurrent words and phrases that stood out. The imagery that was found was themed into groups depending on the words and phrases that were used. Each description was then analysed with regard to the aspects of the phrases that were (potentially) transferred to the understanding of population ageing. We have worked from the supposition that the choice of words affects how the phenomenon of population ageing can be comprehended. We limited the scope of the investigation to the printed articles and did not take into consideration the intentions behind the articles or how these intentions were perceived by the audience. Whenever we speak about any potential meaning to an audience, we do so from a theoretical or analytical point of view.

Clearly, all the illustrations or graphic descriptions that occurred in the articles were not aimed at illustrating population ageing or old age identities as such. For example, when one article dealt with the political conditions in the sparsely populated inland communities in Västerbotten, and population ageing was mentioned as one among several other threats, the article was illustrated by a photograph of a spruce forest taken from the air. Such an illustration might say more about common ways of representing the sparsely populated inland of northern Sweden than it does about population ageing. We have nevertheless chosen to include all the illustrations in the analyses. The reason is that we wanted to see the total discursive terrain of illustrations that accompanied the textual representations of population ageing.

Theoretical and Methodological Points of Departure

In the analysis of the news-press articles, the concepts of the discourse-analytical approach often called “discourse theory” have been deployed

(Laclau & Mouffe 1985). Discourse theory is typically *problem-driven* and in this article it is “population ageing” as represented by the news-press that constitutes the primary “problem”.

Overall, discourse theory involves an understanding of the social as discursive and a conviction that all social phenomena (whether material or not) can be analysed using the tools offered by discourse theory. It also involves a research emphasis that displaces a focus on specific categories, for example “older people” in this case, to the underlying logics that make social categories possible (cf. Laclau 2000). More specifically, it implies a take on the material as fixations of discourse, as well as the view that such fixations are at the core of the (re)production of identities. This means that, for example, illustrations and choices of words are viewed as materialised discourse and analysed as such.

In the pursuit of analysis, some concepts have been specifically important. The concept of *discourse* is typically defined within discourse theory as the structured totality that is the effect of how a certain phenomenon is comprehended and talked about (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). We will primarily use the concept of discourse to identify specific ways of writing about, or otherwise portraying, for example, population ageing. For example, writing about it from a medical point of view or from a rural perspective represents different ways of comprehending the phenomenon. Analysing such discourses as they appear in the news-press material involves an examination of their construction. How is the sign “population ageing” connected to other signs in order to explain or describe something? The concept that is used to pinpoint such connections is *articulation*. Articulation is thus possible to understand as fundamental in the construction of meaning, and it is also central to our analytical method (cf. Howarth 2005).

Central to discourse theory is also the notion of contingency. It is assumed that identifications can never be fully realised and that there is always the possibility that there are alternatives. However naturalised, all articulations are, so to speak, possible but not necessary. This enables some degree of sensitiveness towards differences and antagonisms between fixations that try to define and temporarily fixate the meanings of any given social phenomenon.

Every discourse has a discursive centre that is ascribed a privileged position within the discourse and from which the other signs get their meaning. If such a centre is somehow emptied of meaning and made to comprise a range of different elements that it binds together, Laclau (1996: 36), following Levi-Strauss, talks about *empty signifiers*. The concept empty signifiers is often defined in terms of surfaces of inscription for various political demands. Typically, signs like “freedom” or “feminism” are described as such unifying signs that are open to different and sometimes contrary inscriptions. The process of constituting the chains of meaning that are symbolically equal to different identities under such an empty sign always makes up a space that seems to constitute the (equally empty) opposite: a constitutive outside that functions as a perceived *enemy* to the person’s own identity. For example, “patriarchy” emerges as the antagonistic enemy of feminism – an enemy that marks the limit of feminism and is simultaneously threatening and necessary: without patriarchy feminism would lose its defining limits (cf. Gunnarsson Payne 2005). We use the concept empty signifier to show how certain phenomena, for example, the notion of welfare, functioned as a unifying idea that was supposedly threatened by population ageing.

The representations studied in this article were different in character. Nonetheless, and despite their differences, many of them displayed some features that also recur in the theorisations of *populism*. A common and pejorative use of populism is when it is seen as a rhetoric style characterised by someone ascribing himself/herself power by claiming to represent “the people” against a ruling elite. Theoretically, the concept of populism has been used by Laclau (2005) and others (cf. Swyngedouw 2010; Žižek 2006) to indicate a process where articulatory practices divide society into two antagonistic camps where “the people” is one. However, rather than viewing “the people” as a given entity, the focus of the theorisations of populism is on how this entity is *constituted* by the parallel constitution of a threatening “other”. Faced with this threat, an empty signifier is formulated that succeeds in uniting “the people” despite its internal differences and particular demands. A broad and seemingly homogeneous category of “the people” is thus produced through the establishment of a chain of equivalences between a series of otherwise particular demands that are now posed in the name of the people, for

example “better social security, health services, lower taxes, peace, and so on” (Žižek 2006: 553).

When expanding on the character of empty signifiers, Laclau (1996) distinguishes between empty signifiers and what he calls *floating signifiers*. Whereas the empty character of the former functions as the driving factor behind politics, inciting different groups to struggle to define the agenda and achieve hegemony, floating signifiers merely stand for equivocal signs that are attached to different signifieds in different contexts. A floating signifier thus means different things to different people, and as such works to dislocate the stability of the sign, but it does not incite any united struggle under its flag. We will argue that the position of older people is best understood as such a floating signifier.

We will begin by analytically describing the material, and specifically its content, illustrations and metaphorical language, to briefly identify some important articulations. We then move on to tease out three discursive patterns that recurred throughout the studied articles. In an attempt to explore the effect of these patterns, we then discuss them in relation to the theoretical notion of populism, which, in our view, pinpoints some important political implications.

Description of the Material

Content

The material exhibited three main traits (for part of the analysis, see Lundgren & Ljuslinder 2011). Firstly, the writers as well as named sources were almost always positioned as *experts* – politicians, researchers and persons responsible within the health care system. This fact contributed to the constitution of population ageing as a phenomenon that was owned by some kind of expertise.

Secondly, the overall view in the studied articles was that population ageing constituted a *threat* that was similar to the one found in the discourse on apocalyptic demography. What was supposed to be threatened varied, but in the majority of articles it was vaguely defined as the “the Swedish welfare model”, “the welfare”, or even “the people’s home of Sweden”. These phrases mostly implied the general welfare provided

by the government through the transfer of taxes. Sometimes it was “the economy” or “growth” that was put forward as threatened, but these concepts were always related to welfare because growth was always presented as the self-evident tool for maintaining welfare.

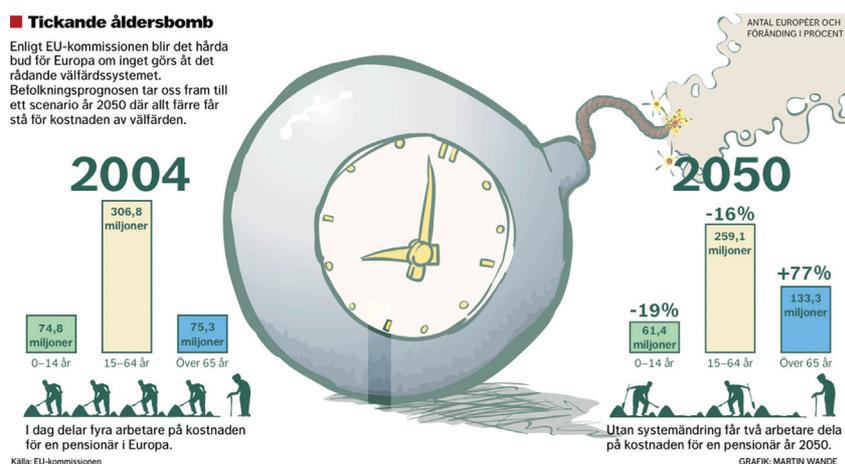
The majority of the space used in all three newspapers related to Swedish conditions with only a minor part focusing on international conditions (percent: DN: 60/37, AB: 74/25 and VK: 28/11). The major distinguishing characteristic between the newspapers was that DN described the effects of population ageing in the northern inland in only 1% of its coverage, and AB only 3%, whereas the percentage in VK was 61. What an article constituted as a threat or as being threatened in VK was sometimes situated locally in Västerbotten, and in these cases the focus was partly shifted from “welfare” to “inland”. The threat to welfare seemed to be likened to the impossibility of living and ageing in the sparsely populated areas of Västerbotten.

Thirdly, population ageing was often represented as an *unproblematised cause of different problems* and was therefore distanced, thus becoming abstract and separated from the socio-economic context that produced it. Therefore, by first referring to the naturalised threat of population ageing, the articles could then suggest certain orientations for politics where the suggested urge for the preparatory planning for population ageing could rule out other political questions. Even though it was not always explained, population ageing was ascribed explanatory value. By naturalising a demographic situation as a self-evident reason to carry through certain political ideas, references to population ageing were also used to suggest solutions to perceived social problems in a way that made political decisions look like administrative measures against the inevitable threat.

Illustrations

There were various kinds of illustrations that often supported the themes detected in the content in different ways (see Figure 1 for an example): population ageing was a serious and threatening thing that had to do with costs, care and older people. The older people were, however, never portrayed as active. Furthermore, there was a focus on experts in the illustrations just as in the texts.

Figure 1. Population ageing as a ticking time bomb (from DN, November 24, 2006)



Note: Reprinted with the permission of DN.

The most frequent kind of visual illustration consisted of small passport-like *portrait photographs* of experts of different kinds, showing no significant facial expressions. Photographs are often seen as being neutral and are often referred to as having only a referential function (Hillesund 1994). The number of photographs of experts in the studied material (very often the same persons over and over again) can, however, not be considered to be only referential. As media content consists of relatively few persons taking up the majority of the content space, these persons come forth as *media elites* who define and interpret events and situations and legitimise concepts, norms and the positions used in the representations (Edström 2006). In the articles illustrated with portrait photographs there was no obvious communication between the photo and other visual codes. However, the corresponding headlines often connoted threat by including expressions like “Global problem, but inland first out” (VK July 7, 2007b) and “Crash on its way” (DN October 5, 2005). These headlines were articulated with the solemn faces of the portrait photographs and supported the threat-connoting headlines.

A large percentage of the articles were illustrated by *graphs, maps* or *charts*. These figures often visualised, for example, statistics and estimations of the proportions of older and younger persons in the contemporary population and the population in the future. These illustrations bring a sense of *logos* and facticity into the context, inviting the audience to comprehend the credibility of the articles' messages logically. Even though the figures alone did not always represent population ageing as necessarily threatening, the articulation with the content and headline often accomplished such a reading. One article (VK July 7, 2007a) was illustrated by two bar graphs that showed the population pyramids of the inland and of the Umeå area in 2025. The graphs were articulated with the headline "Old-age bomb to detonate soon" and the caption read "... When the pyramid looks more like a nuclear bomb cloud the burden for those who work will be extremely heavy". One quote from the article was magnified. It said: "It is unsustainable. We cannot have a society consisting of pensioners only, such a society has long since ceased to function".

Apart from the portrait photographs of experts and various types of tables there were also *photographs depicting medical care situations*. A typical example depicted anonymous nurses pushing a hospital bed in a corridor. Such photographs could very well represent an ordinary workday for nurses, but when they were articulated with the headlines an atmosphere of threat was created: "More pensioners threaten welfare" (VK June 14, 2000) and "Baby-boomer generation triples our health care costs" (DN July 29, 2008). The photographs helped to define problems in the future as having to do with older people, economy and care.

Some articles were illustrated with *pictures of unnamed older people* or *close-ups of an old person's hands*, metonymically illustrating the category "older people" in general. Just like the images of care situations, but unlike the workings of graphs and charts, such illustrations can be said to have an emotive function (Hillesund 1994), thus appealing to a sense of solidarity through their articulation with headlines such as "Dare to stand up for the elderly and the geriatric care staff" (VK April 7, 2009). The ones that were addressed and prompted to act were not those who identified themselves as old (or as geriatric care staff). The old-age positions that were hereby

constituted often connoted anonymity and passivity, but also a need to act in a way that portrays a well-deservedness of older people (and care-staff).

Some of the articles representing population ageing contained illustrations that set out to *depict the Northern regions' inland of Sweden*. Such illustrations occurred only in the local VK. The region was mostly illustrated by a photograph of a solitary farm or a derelict house (VK July 11, 2007; VK March 12, 2009), and showed a striking absence of persons and human activities. The photographs can be said to have an emotive function by creating dystopian connotations to desolation and connoting "loneliness" and "desertedness". As this desolation is unwanted, it is emphasised through articulations with headlines like "impossible situation for rural municipalities" (VK March 12, 2009).

Problem-laden Metaphoric Language of Population Ageing

Population ageing seemed to give rise to the use of metaphorical language. Even though the metaphors were of very different characters, sometimes innovative, and at other times clichéd, they all made population ageing comprehensible by associating meanings from other contexts.

The process of population ageing was sometimes described as a *challenge*: "see it as a challenge and cheer if only for one day" (VK August 13, 2004). Even though they were potentially charged with positive connotations, expressions like "the demographic development is one of Sweden's biggest challenges" (VK May 8, 2008), or "difficult" (DN May 16, 2001), "major" (DN May 29, 2001), "substantial" (DN March 14, 2003) or "serious" (AB April 24, 2007) challenges were only very rarely articulated with anything that was described in terms of desire. Seemingly, the challenge metaphor was rather used to point to the fact that if this challenge was not met, it would lead to terrible consequences.

More commonly, the threat of population ageing was described in terms of a *problem* or *crisis*; "population ageing" was likened to expressions like "the crisis threat" (DN June 23, 2004), "age crisis" (VK July 13, 2007) or just "problem" (AB January 25, 2002), and the distribution of people in different ages was described as "distorted" (VK July 7, 2007), suggesting that something had happened that had dramatically dislocated a former, and better, status quo. The future was described as "dark" (DN February 21, 2002), and adjectives used in order to emphasise the nature of the

problem to come were “nasty”, “unwanted” and “galloping” (VK July 13, 2007). One writer of a debate article stated: “One prepares for an acid test” (DN March 12, 2009). A few news articles referred to a report called “The demographic desert is spreading over Sweden” (Wikner 2009).² The severity of the expected desertification was emphasised by VK’s statement that “The threat of desertification must be fought off” (VK July 30, 2009).

Within a scientific demographic discourse, population ageing is commonly understood as a parallel process that includes both a declining fertility rate and an increasing longevity rate (cf. Harper & Leeson 2008). The metaphors that were used to describe the process of population ageing, however, focused on the expected rise in the proportion of older people in the population to a much higher degree than on the expected decrease in the proportion of younger people. The most common way to describe this rise was by using the word *boom*: “retiree-boom” (DN November 18, 1991), “grey panther-boom” (DN October 10, 1999), “old age-boom” (DN March 25, 2007) “senior-boom” and “grandma-boom” (DN August 18, 1999). In Swedish, the word boom is usually explained as “a sudden, very strong upswing” (the National Encyclopedia: boom) that indicates both content (upswing) and form (sudden, very strong). Therefore, the word boom infers a change that is not necessarily valued. To stress the problematic context of the boom, it was therefore often articulated with more value-laden words and expressions: “Pessimists croak about the senior boom” (DN August 18, 1999).

Slightly more drastic was the similar use of the word *shock*, implying the sudden and dramatic impact of population ageing: “The baby-boom is over and the ageing shock awaits” (DN January 2, 1999). The word “shock” infers the notion of a shocked subject: often “society”. This seemed to be deliberate because many articles, specifically debate

²The use of the word “desert” articulates well with how old age is often conceptualised as a period of sterility. It also positions older people outside the economy in a way that has often been criticised (Narushima 2005; Warburton & McLaughlin 2005). But “desert” also has other qualities that are picked up on, for example the potential to “spread” – which is to explain metaphorically a demographic tendency or process in terms of surface.

articles, pointed out how ill-prepared society was to meet the expected population ageing.

However, there were also even stronger metaphors. Population ageing was often compared with a *bomb*: “age bomb” (VK July 13, 2007), “ageing bomb” (VK July 4, 2007a), “population bomb” (DN October 10, 1999), or an *explosion*: “age explosion” (AB August 21, 2003), “old-age explosion” (VK June 14, 2000). The bomb and explosion metaphors constitute population ageing as something that will happen suddenly and forcefully, and as something that threatens to destroy something. Even though there is a suddenness to several of these metaphors, many were formulated so that the reader would understand that these bombs and explosions were expected. The expressions “ticking bomb” and “timed demographic bombs” (DN April 26, 2004; DN November 24, 2006) install measured time as a factor. A similar reference exists in the phrase “The situation today is the calm before the storm” (DN February 7, 2004). “The storm” is a metaphor for population ageing that brings notions of uncontrollable natural forces into the representation. The “ticking” of “timed” bombs and the awareness of the storm that is to replace the calm constitute the argument that was often promoted: population ageing is happening and we must start preparing for it. The critique inserted the supposed fact that nothing was being done.

“Othering” Metaphors of Older People

Even though a large number of the total amount of articles did not mention older people explicitly as a category at all, some articles did, and there was often a clear distance built into the expressions. One common way of referring to older people was in terms of “our elderly” or “our old” (AB November 7, 1996; DN October 26, 1996; VK December 22, 1988). This kind of pronoun simultaneously indicates an *addressed* and an *addressing* community (Nilsson 2008; Rørbye 1998). Expressions like “our old” instigate a “we” that in many respects equals “society”. This “we” is supposed to attend to the needs of older people, but it is also a “we” that owns, as it were, the elderly. This construction of older people can be understood as a way to highlight a category that is otherwise often neglected in public debate, and as an active desire to discharge the category from responsibility, but, as Nilsson (2008: 106) has

put it, it simultaneously “robs the category of agency”. A similar duality is maintained in the metonymic use of hair colour. Older people were sometimes referred to as “the grey” (DN July 12, 1998) or “the silvery-haired” (DN November 11, 2005). In these cases hair colour seemed to signify a collective (“them”) in a way that embodied difference (from “us”). However, grey hair was also used in self-descriptions, as in one letter to the editor in which the writer brought up the rise in the cost of medicine and health care for older people. “The grey-hair ranks ferment” (AB June 1, 2009), says the writer, using grey hair as a metonymy for older people, the word “ranks” to suggest (military) unity among older people, and the parable “ferment” to illustrate a situation where something grows in strength and proportion.

Sometimes older people were referred to quite respectfully as “older people”, “pensioners” or “50+”. Less positive references were terms like “oldies”. Even though condescending expressions were not used very often, the material did contain ageist examples where older people were referred to using negatively charged stereotypes (Andersson 2008). One article began by stating: “Germany considers introducing voting rights for children to compensate that a majority of the electorate soon wear out the park benches and feed pigeons. That is a sharp reminder of how rapidly populations are ageing in Europe” (DN November 9, 2003). In this quote it is obvious that the description of the category of older people is consciously demeaning. It is in order to make the German consideration comprehensible that the category of older voters needs to appear in a negative light. The negatively invested description, “wear out the park benches and feed pigeons”, strengthens a view of older persons as standing outside the labour market and as being taxing to the economy.

The words *obstacle* and *hinder* also occurred with some frequency in the articles: “The rising proportion of older people seems to be the true obstacle to growth” (DN December 10, 1993). Such descriptions hint at a wider metaphorical understanding of the political economy and social life in terms of a path or a track. Consequently, older people are understood as hindering an expected progress: “In modern industrial society you do not get more adept over the years but only slower, and thus increasingly becomes an obstacle in the system” (DN January 29, 1992).

Obstacles also imply standstill and stagnation, words that are often articulated with ideas of the past, of nostalgia, retrospection – and old age (Lundgren 2010).

Discursive Patterns

Taken together, the content and visual imageries used in the news-press representations of population ageing displayed three interrelated discursive patterns.

Creation of Seriousness

The first and most prominent strategy was *the creation of seriousness*, both in the sense of severity or gravity, and in the sense of credibility. This was accomplished in a number of ways. The articulation of population ageing with graphs, maps and tables gave the representations the power of impersonality and a scientific legitimisation, which helped to strengthen the truth claims. A further contribution to this impression was the articulation of such expert knowledge in numbers and statistics combined with quite value-laden words and predictions:

If we divide the number of elderly people over the age of 65 with the number of people aged 20–64, this ratio will increase significantly until 2050, which seemingly gives grounds for the horror scenario. Isn't the demographic disaster then a fact? (AB September 24, 2007)

Even though the word “seemingly” is used, the article quoted above used a mathematical argument and a statement concerning the result of this calculation to invoke the idea of population ageing as a serious threat.³

The frequent use of photographs of politicians and other experts also contributed to the construction of population ageing as an important and severe phenomenon that justifies it being dealt with and commented on by

³ The use of dependency ratios is central to arguments referred to as apocalyptic demography. The way such ratios have created divisions between dependent and non-dependent people in the population solely on the basis of age has been critiqued (Gee 2002; Robertson 1997).

supposedly competent people. Over-explicit headlines that risked being interpreted as exaggerated were charged with *ethos* through their articulation with photographs of named experts and well-known politicians. However, a sense of seriousness and severity could also be achieved without the references to expert systems. The repeated use of the bomb metaphor implied the significance and gravity of population ageing. The efforts to metaphorically illustrate or describe population ageing in terms of a bomb, a shock or an explosion, as well as the graphic uses of statistics, also enacted pseudo-concreteness (Žižek 2006: 556) – a concrete figure chosen to represent the vague threat. Maps showing the areas in the world that were most exposed to problems associated with population ageing, and illustrative population pyramids, reduce a range of different aspects into unambiguous and pseudo-concrete visualisations, suggesting that the meanings of population ageing are possible to understand and even predict.

In some of the debate articles written by oppositional politicians, severity was constructed as an effect of the author taking the position of whistleblower. The author was telling the public about something that was hitherto unknown, while suggesting that it was known *but ignored* by the ruling political majority. This type of positioning charged population ageing with severity, and not only because the phenomenon was itself constructed as a severe threat, but also because it positioned the reader as extradited to, and deceived by potentially ignorant or even lying politicians.

Dichotomisation

The second strategy that was used was *dichotomisation*. Following a logic of equivalence, the articles formed dichotomised and often oversimplified positions that were pitted against each other. Of these, there were particularly three partly interrelated dichotomies that reappeared: the young/old, the taxpayers/dependent and the whole of Sweden/the sparsely populated Norrlandic inland. An example of an articulation of the first two dichotomies is found in the following quote:

We are living longer and do not have to work in old age. But we also give birth to fewer children. The balance between the young, economically active, and the old, supported, thus becomes increasingly skewed. (VK July 4, 2007b)

In the quote, the relation between different parts of the population is economised by articulating “young” with “economically active”, and “old” with “supported”. The dichotomies were sometimes illustrated by using staged photographs (VK July 7, 2007) or stylised graphics (DN November 24, 2006) in which older persons stood on the one side and younger persons on the other, thus creating an image where generations stood against each other. It was sometimes suggested that a “generation war” was to be expected (DN August 18, 1999; DN October 19, 2005; DN January 18, 2006). Something that contributed further to the logic of difference structuring the discourse on population ageing were the many illustrations of older people depicted metonymically by photographs that emphasised the details that separate older persons from younger ones: crookedness, white hair or old female hands. Similarly, population ageing itself was represented as part of a dichotomy that consisted of population ageing and disaster on the one hand, and welfare and growth on the other.

At first, the dichotomy “old/young” seemed all-embracing. The imagery that was used to represent older people was often imbued with exoticism and focused on the features that supposedly distinguish older people from younger: grey hair, wrinkles, the use of a cane and care dependency. However, the articles displayed two kinds of old-age positions, thereby highlighting the category as a floating signifier (Laclau 1996). On the one hand, older people were comprehended as part of the equivalential chain of identities that were threatened by population ageing. In these cases, the exotic descriptions seemed to create a sense of compassion on behalf of the audience. On the other hand, there were times when older people seemed rather to be equated with the term population ageing itself. When this happened, the category of older people was comprehended as part of the threat rather than as the potential victims of this threat. Older people could in such cases be articulated with notions of actually *being* the obstacles of population ageing, as mentioned in the previous section: “Pensioners a hinder” (DN December 10, 1993).

Use of Emotion

The third strategy included *the use of emotions*. Metaphors are said to arouse emotions that guide our understandings of the world, and writers of newspaper texts utilise the potential of metaphor, for example to

“reassure the audience, or in contrast, to increase anxiety or raise anger” (De Landtsheer 2009: 63). The explicit metaphorical references to future catastrophes in the material worked to address feelings of anxiety or even fear. The strongly alarming and disturbing metaphors of population ageing were often articulated with illustrative graphs connoting objectivity. However, the metaphorical language was also repeatedly articulated with photographs of single older persons in vulnerable positions. The reader was thereby positioned to feel sympathy for the category of older people, imbuing the discourse with the idea of a stereotyped “ideal victim” (Lindgren & Lundström 2010; Nilsson 2003) of population ageing.

Emotions were also present in many references to welfare. These references seemed to engender feelings of national pride and having something to protect, and the articulations with welfare often connoted complex symbolic notions of a cherished “Swedish welfare state” or “people’s home of Sweden” – expressions that lie at the heart of the Swedish self-image (Hultén 2006). Research has pointed out the particular impact that the media in general has had on maintaining and reproducing a sense of national community and identity (Anderson 1983; Löfgren 1993), and how such national identities are in turn charged with emotions (Nilsson 2000).⁴

Populist Formation of an Empty Threat

“Apocalyptic imaginations are decidedly populist”, writes Swyngedouw (2010: 219) in his thought-provoking analysis of climate-change discourse. Even though our material was not apocalyptic in its entirety, we argue that some important populist features were displayed in the representations, and that seemingly sober and “neutral” representations supported rather than contradicted these features.

⁴ In the Swedish case, there are some arguments that the welfare state in the shape of “the people’s home” no longer exists, just as there are efforts made to explain that “the people’s home” is still a credible description of the Swedish welfare system, even though “the market and the family nowadays are more common complements in welfare provisions” (Bergh 2010: 113).

“The people”

What is central to populist processes is the division of the population into two antagonistic camps, where one camp consists of “the people”. The unity of these respective camps is dependent on the possibility to articulate otherwise separate demands through a common equivalence. In the case presented here, it was the different and distinguished demands and fears related to population ageing that gave rise to the position of “the people”. This position was often present in the articles in terms of a “we” or an “us” that sometimes referred to and included society as a whole, sometimes “the wage-earners” and sometimes “the not yet olds”. There were differences in what population ageing was taken to imply, and it was often not defined at all, which means that it was left to the reader to interpret. However, population ageing was described as threatening welfare in all the articles.

Following the populist logic of the apocalyptic demography discourse, this “we” (“the people”, “the welfare”) is possible to view as an empty signifier that was constituted as being threatened by the likewise empty and antagonistic signifier “population ageing”. Population ageing was installed, so to speak, as an empty threat that simultaneously managed to form a link between the range of different identities and demands that constituted the “we” in the first place (Laclau 2005; Žižek 2006). Without population ageing there would be no obvious connections between the particular demands for the improvement of care services for older people, decent retirement pensions and a more generous labour immigration policy, that were now brought together, nor would there be “a people” (an “us”) to attribute views and demands to.

A Global Threat

Important to note is that although some geographic areas were described as more threatened than others, the threat of population ageing was primarily constituted as a global threat: “Collapse or not, that is the question. And the question is global” (VK July 13, 2007) or “A development that [...] will affect both Umeå and Stockholm, and the densely populated continent” (VK July 13, 2007). This meant that even though the “we” that was constituted as threatened was sometimes

a very local “we”, it was always implicitly included in a universal “we” that consisted of all people, populations or states. This constant potential of widening the “we” increased the scope of the threat, but simultaneously obscured the possibly particularistic character of these positions.

The positions that were constituted as threatened were thus seldom (if at all) described as heterogeneous political subjects with potentially antagonistic views on the matter, but were rather portrayed as universal victims of the threat of population ageing, “suffering from processes beyond their control” (Swyngedouw 2010: 221). This tendency also existed in debate articles signed by politicians. Even though they represented a particular political party, the described threat (i.e. population ageing) tended to unite the supposed victims of this threat into one homogenous category in a way that de-politicised the matter of population ageing. By naturalising the threat and homogenising the supposed victims, population ageing and any suggested measures stood out as self-evident and beyond the political realm.

An External Enemy

What is central to populism is not just the constitution of an enemy, but also the location of that enemy outside of the system. In the studied case this meant setting aside the possibility that the processes of population ageing are inherent to modern societies. For example, modern aspects such as improved and increasingly technology-intensive equipment, more expensive medical care, better living conditions, norms of “finding oneself” before starting a family, increased demands for higher education and so on, all contribute to higher average age rates and lower fertility rates. These are all things that most people find central to an individualised democratic modern lifestyle and which they do not wish to change. By ignoring how our way of living and thinking contribute to a situation of population ageing, populist discourse produces population ageing as not only a threatening enemy, but also as an external enemy that is conceptualised as inexorable.

The external enemy of population ageing was often described as an impediment. The “fantasy” of a threatening enemy thus has qualities that bear likeness with what Glynos and Howarth (2007) have called the “horrific” and “beatific” dimension of fantasy; at the same time that

the enemy is seen as foretelling disaster, it is also conceptualised as the impediment that *hinders* the vague notion of the good society being realised: if “we” only solve the problem, everything will be fine.

Postponed Catastrophe

Even though the bomb metaphor seems to bring with it an antagonistic charge and a sense of immediacy and acute menace, the reports always placed the threat of catastrophe in the future. This postponement was brought into the bomb metaphor by the fuse, which was never named in the text but was clearly visible in illustrations, suggesting that we are on the path to disaster, but not yet there (see Figure 1). Of course, this postponement of the awaited disaster also made it difficult for the reader to determine whether the news-press articles represented a reasonable interpretation of population ageing. As the apocalyptic discourse thus never proved itself to be wrong, it made it possible for the news-press to continue using the same populist rhetoric (cf. Mullan 2002; Swyngedouw 2010).

Paradoxical Liberalisation Tendencies

The suggested measures brought up in the news-press representations of population ageing show quite a large amount of liberalisation tendencies. “Increased fees required in care” (DN May 12, 2002) and proposals for “exposing welfare services to competition” (DN December 8, 1999) are obvious examples. Consequently, these representations came to support the taking up of certain well-trodden political and ideologically charged positions; it supported the political focus on an employment policy that aimed to increase labour force participation by increasing the retirement age and levels of labour immigration, and also made it more difficult to get sick leave or live on income support. Paradoxically, the liberalising solutions, which were presented as administrative measures, were proposed under the pretext of saving the general – i.e. the state offering its services to all citizens – and tax-financed welfare. Welfare surfaced as an empty signifier that was able to host otherwise antagonistic views. The visual imagery supported the suggestions made by displaying

images connoting severity and threat, thus indirectly contributing to feelings of inevitability.

Conclusions

The studied newspapers showed some minor differences in the way they represented population ageing. Such differences have been described as inherent in different newspaper types – tabloids and newspapers – and the former should not be criticised because it is unlike the latter (Connell 1998). Our main point is, however, that all the studied representations, taken together or studied separately, supported some central and partly collective features. They unambiguously displayed population ageing as a threat, they appointed politicians and academics as experts rather than “ordinary people”, “wage-earners” or “older people”, and they seldom defined the concept of population ageing explicitly. These features were built up and legitimised by a range of recurring patterns: the creation of seriousness; the use of dichotomisation; and the use of emotion.

While discourse theory has otherwise been said to be a blunt and abstract tool for analysing how language is used in interaction, it proved helpful for the aim of this article: to tease out and visualise the concrete articulations that constituted the aforementioned features and patterns. The theorisation of populism by writers influenced by discourse theory further showed valuable in providing an explanation of the potential political implications of the kinds of equivalences found in the material.

Looking at the material from a perspective of populism, there were some complexities concerning the chain of equivalence constituting the ones threatened by population ageing. It consisted of two main positions: wage-earners and older people. However, while wage-earners were exclusively positioned as threatened, the news-press did not offer any such unambiguous positions of identification for older people. Older people were rather positioned as floating signifiers – sometimes conceptualised as the ones most affected, even victimised, by the threat of population ageing, and at other times described as actually being guilty of population ageing. This floating character made it somewhat more difficult to link the positions within the chain of equivalence together, and to raise general demands in its name (cf. Griggs & Howarth 2008: 125). If the logic of populism in the

news-press representations were to be truly populist in the theoretical sense of the word – and thus able to attract broader coalitions of people outside the news-press discourse, urging them to identify as a united collective raising collective demands as to what needs to be done in order to deal with population ageing – it would need a more unequivocal scheme of the process and its involved identities: a more palatable fantasy. Such a uniting logic is inherent in many democratic struggles and is what constitutes the strength of populist reason.

However, and importantly, such a move towards an all-embracing populist logic would risk blinding us to the nuances of the political processes of population ageing (cf. Žižek 2006). Analysing the Swedish news-press, such an absence of a multifaceted representation of population ageing is a discernible fact. With the help of populist discourse, including a sometimes powerful and hard-hitting visual imagery comprising illustrations as well as choices of words, the news-press representations offer dualistic rather than a plurality of positions. However, one of our key findings is that this was not accomplished solely by the articles that were “apocalyptic” in character. Furthermore, articles that seemed quite different, and written from a seemingly “neutral” point of view, contributed to, rather than contradicted, the populist features. Taken together, the implicit choice posed to the audience (the “we”, “us” or “society”) stood between doing nothing and awaiting disaster, or following the suggested measures with the effect that *a demographic situation is made to naturalise certain political ideas, making them appear administrative, rather than political in character*. This is a choice that is not really a choice.

In this article, we have stayed within the frames of the news-press discourse, and we have argued that its visual imagery displays populist tendencies that work ideologically to de-politicise the issue of population ageing. These tendencies, although not devoid of some ambiguity, offer certain positions for the audience. They do not say, however, how the audience will react. It has been noted that people’s responses to populist and post-political tendencies displaying ineligible choices are themselves often populist – people will either protest or ignore them. One topic for further research would be to investigate how people respond to the images of population ageing that are presented by the news-press, among

others, and how such images are made comprehensible within the frames of everyday life.⁵

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Corresponding Author

Anna Sofia Lundgren, Centre for Population Studies/ Ageing and Living Conditions Programme (ALC), Department of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå University, SE 901 87 Umeå, Sweden. Email: annasofia.lundgren@kultmed.umu.se

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⁵ As a continuation of this research, we have, during 2011, interviewed politicians, health care workers and people over the age of 55 and living in the inland of Sweden about their conceptions of population ageing and how they think and plan for this future "challenge".

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How do unfamiliar environments convey meaning to older people? Urban dimensions of placelessness and attachment

By JUDITH PHILLIPS¹, NIGEL WALFORD² & ANN HOCKEY³

Abstract

The discussion within gerontology of the relationship between older people and their environment (place attachment and ageing in place in particular) has been based on an assumption of familiarity with place. Yet increasingly older people experience unfamiliar environments. This can be through increased travelling as tourists and visitors to other towns and cities, through redevelopment of town centres or through cognitive decline, where the familiar becomes unfamiliar. This article reviews the conceptual frameworks underpinning the concepts of place attachment and unfamiliarity and questions the relevance of such concepts for understanding urban lifestyles in later life. We demonstrate that even in an unfamiliar environment older people can develop a sense of place through the aesthetics and usability of the environment as well as through

¹ *Judith Phillips*, Centre for Innovative Ageing, Swansea University, Swansea, UK

² *Nigel Walford*, Centre for Earth and Environmental Sciences Research, Kingston University, Kingston, UK

³ *Ann Hockey*, Built Environment Research Group, Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford, UK

shared memories. Consequently this has relevance for how we plan our environments to make them age-friendly.

Keywords: ageing, unfamiliar environments, attachment to place, sense of place, placelessness.

Introduction

Studies of the ways in which place conditions and contributes meaning to everyday life have tended to focus on people's relationship with familiar spaces. This is particularly relevant in studies of older people's attachment to place where meaning and a sense of place have developed through a lifetime of memories and associations. Increasingly older people experience unfamiliar environments – environments they have not visited/ experienced or have knowledge of. This can be through increased travelling as tourists and visitors to other towns and cities, through redevelopment of town centres or through cognitive decline, where the familiar becomes unfamiliar. Although there are qualitative differences in the experience of unfamiliarity in relation to time and use of space, between these three contexts there are transferrable elements that are important to be considered when considering the outdoor environment. The spatiality of ageing will be influenced by unfamiliarity of place as a consequence of personal competence, lifestyle or changes in spatial structure.

“Attachment to place” within the gerontological literature is associated with long time periods of exposure to a place and has significantly contributed to how we give meaning to the spaces inhabited and used by older people. Place identity has been described as the individual's incorporation of place into the larger concept of self; a “potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas, and related feelings about specific physical settings, as well as types of settings” (Proshansky et al. 1983: 57). Space is defined here as “general” (Tuan 1974) as opposed to “specific”, objective as opposed to subjective or as Agnew (2005: 82) describes “space refers to location somewhere and place to the occupation of that location”. Consequently, place is space which has social and emotional meaning and is socially constructed. We also define “place”

in this study on a macro scale, for example, a city or town, rather than in micro terms of accommodation or home. A further concept introduced here is that of placelessness, where a place conveys no sense of identity, emotion or attachment.

Given increasing globalization and consequent mobility that exposes older people to unfamiliar environments, the concept of placelessness is increasingly relevant. This article reviews the conceptual frameworks underpinning the two broad concepts: first of place attachment that is biological, social, psychological and the concept of familiarity with place; and secondly the experience of unfamiliar place and placelessness which may be experienced for both short and long periods of time, e.g. through experiencing the re-development or regeneration of "home" community or town or city; through travel to new environments through leisure opportunities; through migration to a new country; through change in health, sensory deprivation, and experience of cognitive decline. In other words, through changes of personal competence, lifestyle or spatial structure. The article questions the relevance of such concepts for understanding urban lifestyles in later life.

We explore this issue by drawing on a study (Older People's Use of Unfamiliar Space) to demonstrate that even in an unfamiliar environment older people can develop a sense of place through the aesthetics and usability of the environment as well as through shared memories. It must be stressed that this article primarily aims to illustrate the conceptual framework rather than present empirical results. Although the empirical study was undertaken in the UK the argument can be applied in a global context. Ageing itself is a global phenomenon and spaces of ageing are becoming more fluid and global (Phillipson 2003; Rowles 1983), for example through transnational networks of support by and for older people or through global migration; unfamiliar environments can be found across the globe as cities expand, areas rejuvenated or left to decline and people become increasingly mobile. It is important therefore to look at how older people created meaning in such unfamiliar areas.

Against this background this article looks at 'place attachment in later life' and the concept of familiarity before turning its attention to the varied experiences of 'unfamiliar environments' and 'placelessness'. Empirical data is then presented to examine the question of 'How does an unfamiliar

environment convey meaning?' before concluding with a wider discussion on the spatiality of ageing.

Place Attachment in Later Life

The disciplines of environmental psychology, cultural and social geography, which have dominated the theoretical framework underpinning environmental gerontology, can help us understand how place can become both an environment for attachment and detachment.

'Attachment to place' and 'place identity' have a long history in the study of ageing research. They are grounded in two particular theoretical frameworks, both of which explore the interaction between the person and his or her environment. Two most recognised and influential scholars in environmental gerontology, Lawton and Rowles, have a long history of shaping theory, policy and practice (Lawton 1977, 1980, 1985, 2001; Rowles 1978, 1983, 2008, 2012). In Lawton's case the well recognised Person-Environment fit model has had significant influence on housing and in particular institutional design and home modification. Lawton primarily from a quantitative, psychological perspective, and Rowles (1978) from a qualitative and geographical ethnography perspective, have framed our understanding of how people become attached to their close environments. The press-competence model developed by Lawton and Nehemow (1973) states that those with low competence encountering strong environmental press are more likely to have maladaptive behaviour (and attachment) compared with those having high competence encountering weak environmental press where behaviour (and attachment) is likely to be positive (Lawton 1980). Lawton (1980) illustrated that if people cannot use or function every day in their environment (because of physical or psychological barriers for example) then they can be less attached to place. Lawton further developed his original 'environmental docility' hypothesis to include concepts of competence and adaptation into what he called the 'environmental proactivity' hypothesis (Lawton 1985, 1998) where persons could shape their own environment. Emotion and cognition and physical and mental competence have become increasingly important in Lawton's model consequently acknowledging the complexity in the person-environment interaction beyond simply 'environmental

determinism' for which he was originally criticised (Peace et al. 2006). The Person-Environment Fit concept has been developed further to accommodate changes over time in place (Scheidt & Norris-Baker 2004) and the integration of the social with the physical environment over time, as well as the development of agency, with older people shaping their own environments (Wahl & Lang 2004).

Such seminal work has been continued by Rubenstein and Parmerlee (1992), Weissman (2003), Wahl and Lang (2004), Oswald and Wahl (2005), Rowles (1978, 1983, 2008) and Peace and colleagues (2006), developing place attachment in relation to the social environment and emotional and psychological aspects of meaning in the person-environment interaction. The literature is not expansive however on unfamiliarity as a concept.

Rowles (1978, 1983) argues that older people's attachment is linked to their construction of personal identity and identifies components of attachment to place: physical insidedness – physical attachment and familiarity with a place; social insidedness – integration into the social fabric of the community and developing a sense of belonging through participation and through nurturing group identification with the neighbourhood, and autobiographical insidedness relating to the personal history of the individual in relation to place. Attachment to place can be built up over a lifetime of experiences (Rowles & Watkins 2003; Rubenstein & Parmerlee 1992) and emotional attachment to place can be both temporary and permanent.

Whether 'insidedness' is geographical or social, attachment to place and place identity can rarely be immediately created in a new environment (Tuan 1977) but is experienced through long-term involvement with a location (Morgan 2010). Our view on place may be shaped through our 'landscapes of memories' (Rowles 1983), recollections of childhood places, artefacts, material possessions and past events, and on meaning alongside personality and autobiography. For older migrants in the study by Cuba and Hummon (1993b), it was based on satisfaction with the new dwelling and on its positive contrast with the previous home; in other studies, different patterns of place attachment are associated with the meaning and feeling of place (Massey 1994; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell 1996). Children have different patterns of place attachment based on activity within a space (Hart 1979; Hay 1998; Moore 1986), or relationships with friends and

family (Cuba & Hummon 1993a). Hernández and colleagues (2007) in a study of natives and non-natives found that bonds were established to places where people had lived for considerable periods of time or where they had moved from other places, which had a similar spatial and cultural frame of reference. Belonging to a different city entailed a decrease in the levels of attachment. It is not surprising that we find comfort in familiarity, created through length of residency, social integration within the community, access to services and neighbourhood satisfaction.

Rowles (2008) also talks about “being in place”, which evolves over the lifecourse and is a product of our actions. We have processes of ‘making’ and ‘remaking place’ and in relocation we transfer our meaning of place – in space and time. Any move in later life may be traumatic for those who have never moved before; conversely, others who have moved many times may have refined place-making skills, e.g. in arranging furniture in similar spatial configurations and through psychological preparation and anticipation. Artefacts, he argues, help us create and maintain a history and shape our autobiography. The essence of “being in place” is a tapestry grounded in location and personal history.

From these studies it is evident that time and familiarity are important aspects in place attachment and place identity. All the above rely on attachments building over time suggesting an ‘intimate familiarity’ with place where functioning within the environment becomes automatic, and where people know how to interact with each other (Burholt 2006). Hay (1998), in taking a lifecourse approach, found that place attachment increased with age, with place attachments formed earlier in life being stronger than those formed later in life. Length of residency is a variable, which is a direct predictor of place attachment in numerous studies (Lewicka 2010) with few notable exceptions (Fleury-Bahi et al. 2008; Harris et al. 1996) that do not find attachment to neighbourhood due to long-term interaction with place.

How long it takes for someone to become attached to place can vary from individual to individual and will depend on how they adapt to change. Golant (2003) talks of a “trajectory of change” analysis depending, not just on the current level of competence of the older person, but the capability of the person in the past and likelihood in the future to influence change.

There may also be generational and historical effects. Certain generations will have particular memories associated with place, for example, the attractions of the tourist spa towns in England in the early 20th century or the pilgrimages to particular world destinations imbue attachment and belonging for certain generations. Different expressions of attachment with place depend on where people are in their lifecourse. Attachment may also be linked to historical events (such as the 1966 Aberfan disaster which brought a Welsh mining community together in a shared identity in the face of tragedy), which make bonding a strategy for survival. Consequently, attachment to place is not a static concept of spatial ageing, a factor often assumed in ageing in place initiatives; it is dynamic at both individual and societal levels.

Much of the work on place attachment has focused on rural communities (Keating 2008). Features of the rural community, in terms of the aesthetical qualities of the environment or the social embeddedness often conveyed in the image of the rural setting have been identified as factors linked to attachment (Burholt 2006). Such places may be easily attractable and attachable because of their natural qualities. Chapman and Peace (2008) found that women's sense of identity, particularly in rural Canada, was tied to the land and their desire to age in the natural landscape with family and friends around them: "Distinguishing place from self was difficult" (2008: 31).

However, several studies look at urban attachments (Phillipson et al. 2000) and attachments in deprived urban communities (Smith 2009; Scharf et al. 2003). Fried (2000) suggests that place attachment might be even stronger in deprived neighbourhoods. Place attachment might be greater for people who have few physical, economic and social opportunities other than place around which to focus a sense of belonging. Those with greater resources can seek social gratification elsewhere. In other words if the environment is unsuitable people with resources have agency to detach themselves and move to other environments and become attached elsewhere.

Place attachment has also received attention in policy and practice and in the UK for example, the concept has been a strong component underpinning the policy of "Ageing in Place," often defined as the ability of an older person to age in a stable environment. The focus of policy has

also been on location, design and built environmental context of ageing in place. This has been reinforced through the UK policy initiatives to future proof design through guidance such as Lifetimes Homes, Lifetime Neighborhoods (DCLG 2008)-a strategy which sets out to plan for appropriate housing and neighbourhoods designed across the lifecourse; Care and Repair schemes (to improve the housing of older people) and the move to develop age-friendly communities.

The theoretical, policy and practice developments around attachment to place demonstrate the complexity of the interaction between person and environment over time. What does this mean for place identity in later life? Peace and colleagues (2006), drawing on the work of Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996), conclude that place identity is developed through the “distinctiveness of place; ‘continuity’ – places forming a constant reminder of the self; ‘self-esteem’ – whether places allow people to feel good about themselves and ‘self efficacy’ – whether the environment is manageable to maintain daily lifestyles” (2006: 159).

A new strategy may be necessary to maintain self identity if adaptive behaviours cannot balance place identity with declining competence (Peace et al. 2006). It is at this point in what Peace and colleagues (2011) describe as “option recognition” that modification to behaviour or environment is sought. All these components again require time and a certain familiarity with the environment.

Unfamiliar Environments

In developing an understanding of what makes a place, what leads to attachment to place and place identity, it appears that time and associated familiarity are key concepts.

Unfamiliarity is under defined as a concept but has been considered in the sociological literature as synonymous with ‘strangeness’ (Schutz 1944). It signifies that which is unknown or even incomprehensible in terms of accustomed categories of one’s “thinking as usual” (Cohen 1972). The Oxford English dictionary defines unfamiliar as “not known or recognizable,” “unusual or uncharacteristic.”

Placelessness

Relph (1976) describes placelessness as “the casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardised landscapes that results from an insensitivity to the significance of place” (preface). Hummon (1992) constructs a typology where people may move from being ambivalent about a place to be considered placeless with little sense of identity, emotion and attachment to an area. Hay (1998) argues that aesthetic connections gained by tourists and travelers, are however superficial and such people exhibit “uncommitted placelessness” as described by Hummon (1992). There has been very little empirical work carried out on the concept of placelessness and the definition as constructed by Relph (1976) has been criticised for being too simplistic and ignoring temporal, social and individual circumstances that shape particular places and people’s experiences of them (Seamon & Sowers 2008). Considering these distinctions we describe placelessness as a lack of “insidedness” and meaning, anomie or simply not knowing a place. Placelessness may be as a result of exclusion or may itself lead to exclusion being made unwelcome or not having the resources to engage in the spatial environment.

Placelessness is also linked to a temporal frame and can be created where people have little time to put down roots as they pass through spaces such as hospitals, care homes, airports and shopping malls (Augé 1992; Miles 2010). Augé (1992) links such mobility to placelessness and consequently placelessness can be linked to unfamiliarity (of the physical and social environment). Unfamiliarity can lead to detachment and placelessness but we know little of the factors that contribute to this and what contributes to the meaning of space and attachment in an unfamiliar environment.

Trends of globalisation, increased travel, multiple living spaces and longevity of the population challenge these underlying concepts and frameworks. Demographics surrounding family life are changing and challenging notions of place attachment. Reconstituted families, increasing single households, caring at a distance, multiple-location living and mobility, mobile and remote technologies and changing levels of cognitive functioning are all challenging “ageing in place” as a concept as well as place attachment as a single location. Social networking has the potential to change our emotional attachment to place, as more remote connections are valued.

Boldy (2009) argues that “ageing in place” should have a wider definition as to baby boomers location is more important than house or home. Place can also be many places and not about a building or location but even a lifestyle. Different places may have significance at different stages of lifecourse and as such we should consider the effects of dementia and illness on attachment and familiarity with place (Hay 1998).

For these reasons it is timely to relook at the concept of attachment to place, particularly in relation to the underpinning notion of familiarity. Unfamiliarity with place may be an increasing phenomenon challenging our understanding of what makes an age friendly environment.

There are a number of reasons why unfamiliarity is an important concept to study within the context of ageing and the environment:

First, unfamiliarity with one’s location occurs when the built environment is new; an experience encountered by increasing numbers of older people as they travel the world as tourists or have to relocate due to necessity or choice in later life. Increasing globalization and technological advance provide more opportunities to travel than ever before. Those who have the capacity and resource to travel will experience unusual and unknown places. It has been argued that “such strangeness to remain enjoyable has to be experienced from the security of some familiar shelter, ameliorated by a touch of familiarity, or even demarcated as unreal-staying on the cruise ship” (Dann 2000: 611). Conversely, older people moving because of care needs or on health grounds – may have a small radius of movement in their new environment making their search for familiar spaces and places difficult.

For some people travelling to unfamiliar places as tourists can be exciting, attractive and alluring; for others travel to an unfamiliar location is threatening and risky; they may be emotionally ambivalent to the locality (Hummon 1992). Cohen (1972) argues that it is the extent to which unfamiliarity attracts or repels individuals depends on the intensity of the exposure to it and the degree of their preparation and experience of similar encounters. For the unprepared, being alone without language can be threatening. If prepared it can be an attractive challenge. Discussion of unfamiliarity in the travel literature has concentrated on how to manage or minimize it (Dann 2000) so as not to lead to culture shock in unfamiliar environments.

The issues for the traveller are fundamentally different from those who do not move through choice. They are likely to revolve around finding the comfortable areas to enjoy, navigating the street network to find key landmarks and sites or the places they have come to visit. There may not be a biological, social or psychological attachment to place. A degree of unfamiliarity will be acceptable as they wander around unfamiliar sites, knowing that their unfamiliarity will be temporary; their degree of confidence may depend if they are alone or with others. Given the increasing availability of mobile and innovative technologies such as Google Street View, older people are able to prepare for such forays from the comfort of their home.

Second, as urban landscapes change through regeneration or decline, the use of space changes and previously familiar places may become unfamiliar (Phillips 1999). What might have been familiar through growing up in a place with distinctive shops and landmarks may now be unfamiliar as a result of a homogenized Macdonaldization effect, characteristic now of many US and UK towns and cities. Older people may be vulnerable, insecure and powerless within such contexts.

Although older people may stay put the environment around them also changes as environmental fabric decays or in-migrants settle around them, potentially creating unfamiliar environments. What is place attachment at one point in time may become place detachment at a later point. With climate change what was an attractive area to live in can become vulnerable and threatening. What was once a lovely active holiday resort is now a disabling environment where accessibility is difficult and streets are dirty.

The issues for older people here are that familiar cues such as particular buildings, signs and memories are permanently lost through demolition and replacement. Often such changes can be accompanied by the decline of social networks, decreased confidence in walking around the area or loss of familiar cues such as signposts. How older people adapt to such changes will depend on how they have adapted in the past, whether they have moved at all during their lifecourse and what replaces the "familiar" area. Adaptation to change is a constant feature for older people who move house into unfamiliar interior space and have developed strategies and routines over their lifecourse to create meaning in each new setting

(Rowles et al. 2004). The process of “place making” and personal identity are interlinked, however temporary a place may be.

Third, with changes in cognitive functioning some older people will experience unfamiliarity in their previously recognizable household surroundings (Setterstein 1999). Although considerable work has focused on people with dementia in the institutional environment, less work has concentrated on the home, or more so, on the outdoor built environment (Mitchell & Burton 2006) where change is a constant factor whether it be at street level or large scale planning. People with dementia can get lost and become disorientated, particularly in unfamiliar environments.

We can learn from research with people with cognitive impairment in relation to unfamiliarity in the home environment. Van Hoof and Kort (2009) in reviewing the literature find the two most important aspects of the indoor environment were lighting and thermal comfort.

Looking at the outdoor environment, Duggan and colleagues (2008) explore the impact of early dementia on outdoor life found that going outdoors regularly added to peoples’ quality of life as they were able to exercise and informally meet friends and neighbours. However, the familiarity of the environment was important; changes caused confusion and, as a result, sometimes people with dementia stopped going out altogether. People with dementia tend to avoid unfamiliar environments and tend to move within gradually smaller areas as their cognitive ability decreases.

Small changes to familiar objects and outdoor cues can be significant in making the environment become unfamiliar. The study by Brorsson and colleagues (2011) found that repainted houses, road diversions or familiar objects rearranged in supermarkets made familiar and comfortable areas into unfamiliar and inaccessible public spaces. Maintaining familiarity of activity and place was important to people with AD. This can be made difficult with the use of “everyday technologies, such as self service checkouts, in crowded places with high tempo and noise, and where there were changes in the personal and recognisable landmarks of older people.” These changes reduced feelings of accessibility. Older people in the study reported that they “were no longer so fond of what they called “adventures” or of performing unfamiliar activities in unfamiliar spaces. At present they located almost all their activities in a familiar space. This

meant that the public space that the informants felt was comfortable had gradually become smaller" (Brorsson et al. 2011: 591); a finding replicated in work by Shoval and colleagues (2011).

Good design however is essential for everyone, not only people with cognitive impairments and in familiar and unfamiliar environments. How the design of streets and neighbourhoods can make a difference to older people's well-being and quality of life has been highlighted through a body of research undertaken under the Inclusive Design for Getting Outdoors (IDGO) initiative. The effects of well designed tactile paving, clear "shared space" and the importance of lifelong neighbourhood design have all been highlighted (Newton & Ormerod 2008; Sugiyama & Ward Thompson 2007; Thies et al. 2011).

The experience of older people under these three different contexts is different. For example, the traveler could adapt knowing that such unfamiliarity is temporary while for those experiencing environmental change or cognitive decline and have no agency, the unfamiliar environment can be threatening and insecure and a permanent state of unfamiliarity. There are lessons however we can transfer from one situation to the other in how older people convey meaning in later life to unfamiliar settings.

How Does an Unfamiliar Environment Convey Meaning to Older People?

To explore the question this article draws on findings from the Older People's Use of Unfamiliar Space (OPUS) study. The OPUS study was conducted in two town centres of the UK; one town in South Wales (Swansea) familiar to the 44 participants in the study and one unfamiliar town centre in Eastern England (Colchester). The overall aim of the study was to investigate how older people used and experienced urban town centres that were both familiar and unfamiliar to them. Unfamiliar was defined as environments they had not visited or experienced or had knowledge of.

Forty-four older volunteers, all over 60 (mean age 71) were interviewed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Sixty percent (26) of the sample was female with 40% (18) male. All participants were ambulatory

with no pre-existing diagnosis of cognitive impairment (average scores for male and female participants using CASI were 96.3 and 97.0, respectively). Thirty-two of the 44 considered themselves to be “always fit and healthy”. The group was drawn from primarily middle-class organizations (U3A; Network 50+), which required a high level of participation and this was reflected in that most were well educated and well travelled. Twenty-eight respondents often travelled to towns unfamiliar to them. The majority were native to South Wales and had lived in the Swansea area for considerable lengths of time.

Following a survey covering their demographic background, experiences of travel etc., 2D images and routes in familiar and unfamiliar towns were displayed in a “reality cave” and participants were asked to comment on general impressions and distinctive features, for example the use of signage, confusing and helpful cues, colours, lighting.

A smaller group (10) of Swansea participants in the research was then taken to an unfamiliar town centre. This group, who were self-selecting from the 44, followed the route “for real” with a “walk around town” accompanied by a group of older local residents (10) from Colchester who were familiar with the area and the researchers. The two groups (Swansea visitors and Colchester residents) also met as a focus group following the accompanied walk to discuss their experiences. The Swansea residents also met with spatial planners. Qualitative data were collected through participants recording their experiences in notes (as they walked) and through discussions with the group of local residents and local planners. The quotes below are from both the cave and reality.

This study aimed to explore the environmental factors within a location that enable people “unfamiliar” with it to become attached. We were interested in investigating the physical domain (rather than the social) and two key themes emerged from the data: The aesthetics and the usability of the environment, both contributing to how older people conveyed meaning in an unfamiliar environment.

The *aesthetic and emotional components of location and the appropriateness of the environment* explored through the OPUS data to illustrate the components of the environment, which could lead to feelings of detachment or placelessness. In relation to the former little research has explored

the aesthetics of the urban and built environment rather than concentration placed on the aesthetics of the natural physical world.

The *aesthetics* of the urban environment were very important in establishing people's first impressions of the town, both in the reality cave and more so in the actual environment.

Our data suggests that historic buildings and landmarks appear to be pivotal characteristics or "anchor points" (Couclelis et al. 1987) of the town landscape for making sense of a place. Spaces of greenery interspersed with the built landscape also provided aesthetic appeal:

We are now passing columns with something carved on the top and they would be worth pausing at to look at, and what looks like a very old pub on the right: cycle stands for the cyclists; more pedestrian crossings, plenty of those and plenty of bus stops; hanging baskets and a balustrade, wrought iron; above the shops some very interesting architecture; a bright yellow building which would be a definitely landmark and especially as it is on the corner of Museum Street, which suggests there is something to explore there; and attractive old buildings, the white ones with a bow window above the functional shop fronts. (Virtual cave)

The negative images or aesthetics led some people to feel "detached" from the place (not wishing to have association with it in the first instance). Arriving at the train station confronted with boarded up shops, traffic noise, untidy greenery and litter detracted from a positive appreciation of the urban landscape. Similarly, the lack of attractive buildings and historic monuments questioned why they had come to the area:

I wasn't particularly impressed by the railway when the train come into the station, looks a bit run down I think. (Real environment)
Very busy road- buses, lorries, many cars: I hope there is something more interesting to see in this town. (Real environment)

The aesthetical qualities of place were also considered important to those who were familiar with their environment. Historic buildings were recalled with a memory of the civic pride of yesteryear; individual memories of places and spaces also created meaning through shared emotions.

The second category of statement connected to the physical environment included the *accessibility and ease of mobility*. This again suggests that familiarity over time is a key issue; people felt it difficult to attach themselves

to a place within a very short period of time if the condition of the urban fabric, e.g. the state of the pavements and crossing areas, presence of street furniture, litter and rubbish was poor making accessibility difficult. More examples of usability and accessibility were mentioned in the real environment rather than the virtual cave as illustrated below:

There is poor access here and evidence of more stands they don't give the pedestrians much room here, even with the bus stops there, poor waiting areas and obstructions. (Real environment)

For a town centre the pavements are very narrow with a lot of people having to walk out onto the road to get passed; pavements a bit uneven, he's going to be run over, standing in the middle... There are very uneven pavements. (Real environment)

One of the greatest detractors from appreciating the aesthetic qualities of the built environment was the necessity to concentrate on one's mobility. Shared spaces for cars, bikes and pedestrians left many feeling nervous about being in an unknown centre with unwritten rules about priority of way. Similarly, what we have termed "sensory overload" of smells, sight, colour and noise as well as large moving crowds led to detraction from the positives of the urban landscape.

Rubbish in the road, trees in the middle of pavements. You've got to be very careful there, oh look at that, oh yes with the uneven surface around there; you can fall down there quite easily... now we've got bollards in the way. I wonder why they're there, but, keep walking, awful lot on this pavement isn't there, a lot of obstructions on that pavement but we're crossing the road. another post is on the road... cars on pavements, they should not be there. (Real environment)

Despite the barriers and complexity of the environment to our older visitors many were able to create a sense of meaning in spaces and places that were unfamiliar to them. However in contrast familiar areas (Swansea town shown in the virtual cave to Swansea participants and Colchester residents in speaking of Colchester in the focus group) evoked a sense of emotion and history. Images of the local, familiar area viewed in the reality cave led participants to convey a sense of history behind the scenes describing the former and current usage and history of a building, consequently providing greater detail of the image. In a similar way the

hidden “unseen” landscape beyond the immediate vision formed part of people’s perception of the area. Older people were taking a much wider spatial lens describing the view beyond the scene. When questioned on what landmarks people used in navigating and orientating in a familiar landscape through the series of still images they talked of the “dangers of the street behind,” the difficulty of walking down the road because of the bollards or described the ambience of the setting as “a popular leisure area.” Thus, even areas that are familiar can potentially have unseen “dangers” behind what appears on view. A well known market was vividly described by all respondents yet only the frontage of the market had been displayed in the cave; similarly as car drivers many people highlighted the dangers of a blind spot or talked about the speed limit on a particular road that could not be seen. People were also knowledgeable of the environment around-the road bridge over the river; the green spaces that were used as “playing fields”. In unfamiliar areas the scene was described in terms of the colours of the buildings, distinctive landmarks, detailed layout of the road and features and fixtures along the roadside – bollards and fencing. The narratives of unfamiliar areas lacked depth and insight into areas compared to familiar scenes.

Taken together with the above, these findings indicate that the meaning of space is important: cognitive maps are constructed through more than just physical and built environments. Emotional spaces are pertinent for older people. Places and spaces are imbued with memories, histories and identities that enable people to navigate familiar environments. Memories are used as “shortcuts” in giving directions. In looking for toilet facilities, one resident commented:

I think sometime that you don’t appreciate the knowledge that these older people have got but if you don’t make use of it now and another generation you will have lost it. Things that they can recall and if you are re-establishing an area the memories of an older person can sometimes trigger things off. (Focus group with planners)

Discussion

“Ageing in place” and “attachment to place” remain important concepts in relation to later life. The majority of older people want to remain at home,

many having lived in their home and locality for a number of years and even with the loss of social and civic participation their attachment to an environment remains strong (Bonvalet & Ogg 2007; Phillipson et al. 2000).

Places age and change as people age-what at one time is a suitable place to age may become inappropriate at a later time. How older people with their associated memories and identities attached to place make sense of new and unfamiliar environments is increasingly important to examine, particularly in light of the increase in cognitive impairment when people have little choice about being in “unfamiliar” environments.

Throughout the article we have stated that the three potential contexts in which unfamiliarity of place may occur can be experienced differently by older people. People who are cognitively impaired, have low personal competence and lose their spatial skills or through relocation or regeneration will experience the unfamiliar environment differently to those who have by choice of lifestyle travelled to unfamiliar places as tourists or visitors. All three have an impact on the spatiality of ageing. For the first and second group seeking familiarity their radius of movement may become much smaller as the familiar may shrink in spatial scale. For the traveler their lifestyle may thrive on unfamiliarity as they experience it as a temporary and a positive choice. However all three groups can make sense of their unfamiliar environment if the aesthetics and usability of the environment is conducive to conveying meaning.

A Sense of Unfamiliar Place

Is unfamiliarity a relevant concept to understand urban lifestyles in later life? People use environments and take actions, perform behaviours that give them a sense of place, even if there is no emotional attachment to place. Unfamiliarity however does not necessarily mean people do not use spaces or that places are meaningless and emotionless. Unfamiliar urban environments can have meaning (even negative). The key issue to positive aspects of attachment is whether they provide an aesthetically pleasing image and are usable; this based not just on functional ability of an older person in the environment but on their psychological attachment and assessment of the usability of that space.

In relation to the physical fabric of the outdoor environment we know that place attachment is related to features such as the presence of

aesthetically pleasant buildings, quiet areas and the presence of green areas—all positive predictors of place attachment (Bonaiuto et al. 1999).

This resonates with Lynch's (1960) work on "Images of the City" where he argues that a successful landscape should possess the two desirable urban qualities of imageability (the ability of objects to evoke strong emotions in an observer) and legibility (the organisation of elements of the city that allows them to be seen as a coherent whole). This he argues leads to distinctive areas clearly interconnected in a way that citizens can appreciate (Lynch 1960). Closeness to prominent landmarks in a city, easily defined edges of neighborhood and good quality of housing stock are also important in creating meaning (Gieryn 2000). We also know that people with cognitive impairments continue to use landmarks and signs in their way finding strategies (Brorsson et al. 2011; Sheehan et al. 2006).

Unfamiliarity is not synonymous with meaninglessness or placelessness. Exclusion (from social, spatial and material resources) can lead to detachment and placelessness as older people are unable to participate in particular places and spaces due to barriers in the environment. Unfamiliar areas can have meaning for people in later life if they are aesthetically pleasing and are usable. Practical ways to develop more enabling environments are increasingly important across the lifecourse (Iwarsson & Ståhl 2003) and are detailed in Phillips (2012). Lessons on how to create enabling environments that are aesthetically more pleasing and usable however can be learnt from disciplines outside of gerontology – particularly through occupational therapy. Time-use as a method used in leisure studies may also be a fruitful avenue to review older people's use of unfamiliar space (Chatzitheochari & Arber 2011).

Brief Encounters

The OPUS data looked at a historic town centre where tourists come with a specific purpose—their attachment is as a tourist or visitor in the town centre; most studies on place attachment have not looked at such centres but have concentrated on the neighbourhood and rural areas looking at function and context and over greater periods of time. An exception to this can be found in the works of Kyle and colleagues (2004) and Williams and Roggenbuck (1989) who looked at more recreational settings similar to that in the OPUS study where place attachment may be more punctuated

and brief. In both cases a sense of place and community differed between those with long-term familiarity (where place attachment was stronger) and those having more sporadic contact with a location.

However, we have to challenge the notion that place attachment can only be developed through familiarity and long time frames. Lewicka (2005) found that socio-demographic factors were more important in place attachment than length of residence. Place identity (as opposed to place attachment) may take longer. Hernández and colleagues (2007) found that for non-natives attachment to place was a much quicker process than place identity. In examining the literature they also conclude that length of residency in an area is “mediated by others such as the number of relationships within a community, home ownership or otherwise, the presence of incivilities on their property, and even the scope of attachment analysed” (Brown et al. 2003; Giuliani 1991: 311). The OPUS study indicates that older people can develop meaning and a sense of place within a short period of time.

Challenging the Person-Environment Framework

There is a need to revise our understanding of familiarity with place and how a person’s interaction with their environment plays out in later life to accommodate unfamiliarity. The challenge comes from the concentration in many frameworks to understand the person-environment interaction on the basis of familiarity. Unfamiliarity needs to be incorporated as a dimension in environmental press. The research also supports the notion of person-environment-activity as a further dimension.

It is here a focus on “place” can assist. Physical structures may not necessarily be a component of place; we have to understand the concept of place; what activities are important in that place and then consider what form enables those activities to occur. The OPUS study describes what makes a place and conveys meaning and attachment (or not) in a place, which is unfamiliar. Our study does not rest on the notion that as an historic town it will naturally be attractive to older visitors and convey a sense of history and meaning. This has to be created through activity, aesthetics and usability. The individual’s perception of the environment is crucial in terms of their actions within an environment.

If we look at the conceptions and behaviours, which make a place, then we understand how people become attached to place and put meaning into it. "Ageing in place" has traditionally been couched in the environmental determinism framework (if you create a particular place such as a retirement community such activities will result or certain environments will determine certain behaviours or by giving people a sense of ownership and hence security and control in their environment then they will successfully and actively age in place). We need to go further and explore what conveys meaning in an environment for older people, particularly public urban environments. Further research is needed in this area, particularly looking at the strength of attachment over time and other factors in the environment such as the spatial arrangement of social connections and networks.

What we argue is that although place identity and attachment to place are linked to familiarity and length of residence there are other environmental factors at play, such as the aesthetics of place. Older people who display a sense of place through "autobiographical insidedness" (Rowles 1983) and well connected social networks display feelings of security and belonging. However, it is crucial to look at the superficial environmental factors as many people developing cognitive impairment may lose both social connections and a sense of self. Given Lawton's "Person-Environment Fit" then the environment and its aesthetic qualities become of crucial importance.

The Meaning of Place

The meaning (as well as use) of place may change as people age. Preserving memories of places is important in relation to regeneration of towns and city areas for locals as they "age in place"; creating character and ambience can be difficult in new areas – preserving or recreating meaning can be appropriate in some areas. Older people familiar with the environment can add to the planning process through their collective memories and experiences. For spaces to become places, emotion and meaning has to be embedded in such spaces. This can be created by recording historical facts about an area or collecting stories from local residents. Experience and ambience are less well acknowledged but essential if older people are to be interested and encouraged to visit unfamiliar places as tourists. This expands the work of Rowles and

colleagues (2004) to the outdoor environment. It is apparent that the “encounter” between older people who were visiting (from Swansea) and local older people (from Colchester) in the OPUS study revealed that despite different cultural backgrounds there was a mutual appreciation of the issues brought into the focus group discussion by both groups. This suggests that listening to the views of local older residents may be helpful in making places less worrisome to older visitors. Memories are applicable in creating meaning in the wider environment, which can be used to sustain independence for those older people “ageing in place”. Attachment to place is tied into such collective memories (Burholt 2006). A biographical lifecourse record of a “walk around town” would be useful to help capture key memories and histories of the location. Memory and orientation however are complex issues – some memories will be false or distorted or negative and painful and people will have different points of reference. Older people come with a variety of experiences and knowledge of areas, which planners need to pay attention to if areas are to become attractive, safe and walkable. Such emotional responses and histories can become important cues for older people in navigating an unfamiliar environment. An unfamiliar space can have meaning through such reminiscences but these can be negative as well as positive or some aspects such as the physical can be negative while the social and psychological could be positive and may vary on subsequent visits. Developing the meaning of space and place is also a spatial skill, which older people possess, in relation to familiar areas.

Understanding the associations between ageing and the environment consequently takes us to consider concepts of unfamiliarity. However the connection between unfamiliarity and placelessness should not be assumed and as a result we need to consider refining our concept of “Person-Environment Fit” to help understand ageing in the 21st century. Unfamiliarity of place will increasingly be a concept we need to discuss in the context of older people’s lifestyles of mobility; the increasing prevalence of dementia within the population and the changing nature of the urban environment. The concept of unfamiliarity is useful to understand urban lifestyles in later life.

Mobile technology and the Internet can however make the unfamiliar more familiar from the comfort of one’s home where a tourist can plan on

how and where to travel in the unfamiliar environment. As the OPUS study showed, such features cannot as yet replicate gradient, noise, smell of particular lighting settings and a combination of all of these at once. New technology can play a part in wayfinding support (FUTURES 2007).

Conclusion

As stated at the outset, this article is a “think piece” that reviews some of the conceptual aspects of environmental gerontology concerning attachment to place and familiarity in relation to person-environment interaction and considers the implications for meaning and behaviour when places are or become unfamiliar. It challenges our mainstream understanding of the spatiality of ageing – how older people interact with places as they age – and develops further theoretical perspectives through the concept of unfamiliarity. The article uses empirical research to briefly demonstrate ways in which unfamiliar places can hold meaning through the aesthetics and usability of place. Additionally, it demonstrates that older people’s voices are central to understanding what and how a sense of meaning and attachment can develop. Research has shown that for older people who were familiar with the area, attachment was conveyed through shared memories of events and situations around particular places and buildings. Such a sense of attachment can be conveyed to the unfamiliar traveller helping them to gain an appreciation of the environment and share in such attachment. For the unfamiliar place a sense of meaning can be conveyed through the aesthetics and facilitated through the ease of accessibility. This has implications increasingly for older people with cognitive impairment particularly if we are to develop and shape outdoor environments that are inclusive. We need to look at older people in general as well as older people with dementia to understand what conveys meaning and a sense of attachment when that environment is unfamiliar. This assessment can also be helpful for older people as migrants in a foreign land, travelers across the globe and for people experiencing changes in their landscapes through regeneration. Without a consideration of how meaning is conveyed in the unfamiliar environment there is a danger that the unfamiliar can become placeless and lead to insecurity and detachment as well as link to fear and lack of confidence in travelling.

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Corresponding Author

Judith Phillips, Centre for Innovative Ageing, Swansea University, Singleton Park, Swansea, SA2 8PP, UK. Email: judith.e.phillips@swansea.ac.uk

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Later life ICT learners ageing well

By HELEN RUSSELL*

Abstract

This article is based on a qualitative study of later life computer learners and their learning experiences in Sydney, Australia. Participants who undertook lessons from peer tutors in non-formal learning environments were aged between 63 and 86. Sixteen later life learners were interviewed individually by using hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. The use of semi-structured interviews provided opportunities for participants to elaborate and reflect on their learning and lived experiences. The interviews took place over a period of seven years, from 2003 to 2010. The main aim of the study was to understand and interpret the lived experiences of information and communication technology (ICT) learning in later life. Interpretations from the study suggested that learning and using a computer contributed to a sense of well-being, furthered an understanding of the lifeworld and provided participants with a heightened sense of belonging. In this article, well-being is discussed in the context of ageing and learning in a modern developed country. The ontological and existential themes of being, becoming and belonging are explored and used as a framework to interpret the findings from the study.

Keywords: later life, learners, well-being, ontological, existential.

* *Helen Russell*, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences – Education, University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Ageing Well

People older than 70 years have lived through many historical, cultural and technological changes, possibly more than any other age group in our time. The world has changed so rapidly that older retirees may experience a very different world from that in which they grew up and grew older. Hence, for the current cohort of older adults, there has been a lifelong imperative to adapt to change in order to meaningfully participate in society. The individual lifeworld and lived experience include the ontological existentials of time, space, corporeal and relations. How we feel about ourselves and our quality of life as we age are grounded in these four ontological concepts. The ontological nature of ageing well means that humans need to position themselves to respond to the changes in their own way, to use the changes to their advantage and to choose what is relevant and meaningful to their lives.

In a study of adults aged 82–92, six dimensions of quality of life were revealed, “relationships, activities, health, philosophy of life, the person’s past and present lives, and future perspectives” (Borglin et al. 2005: 203). In a similar study with people aged between 77 and 87, it was found that “material values became less important and that social relations and spending time by oneself became more important” (Borglin et al. 2005: 203). In considering these two studies, it may appear that within older adulthood values change and that there is no single description of well-being in later life. Health-related concerns, such as the “transition from health to infirmities,” may provide a way of interpreting the changes (Borglin et al. 2005: 203). It seems reasonable to assume that as people experience age-related physical and mental decrements, their priorities and values and sense of well-being would shift to a more practical level of what they are able to do and not do.

The lived experience of transitioning from independence to dependence may also provide an affective dimension to a sense of well-being. The fear that there may be a loss of control of body and mind could undermine an older person’s sense of “all’s right with the world.” As dependencies and perceived loss of control are negotiated, older people need to feel that they have choices. Even though the number of older adults purchasing and learning to use computers is increasing in developed countries, many older adults do not purchase and learn to use a computer. However,

it is recognised by some researchers that in order to remain autonomous, older people will need to use technological applications and digital devices (Slegers et al. 2007). Those with little or no experience in using technology or a dislike of technology may feel that they are having technology thrust on them.

Within the choices of older adulthood, persons seek to recognise the self, that is, the person they believe themselves to be, and this knowledge would assist in coming to terms with a dependency or change. Remaining in control throughout life is viewed as a prime motivator in adult intentions (Wolf 1998). The importance of maintaining a sense of continuity and integrity of the self enables older people to recognise oneself as not having fundamentally changed, despite a loss of independence. People born early in the 20th century have lived through a majority of technology inventions and their lives parallel the history of technology. In developed countries, the available technologies require “constant adaptive change” (Candy 1991: 20). The current cohort of older adults is faced with learning to use a range of digital devices that may become necessary for independent living or ageing-in-place. The acceptance of new challenges “may be key to staying fully functional and maintaining a high quality of life” (Mynatt & Rogers 2001: 25).

Adapting to changes requires a sense of the future, forward thinking rather than living in the past:

Maintaining certain objectives and perspectives on the future, and the existence of efforts to achieve them, is something that we not only maintain as we get older, but also appears to be an important determinant of well-being in old age.

(Hernandez-Encuentra et al. 2009: 242)

It is believed that those who fix their view on the future are better able to “adapt to the changes that take place around them” (Blit-Cohen & Litwin 2004: 396). Adapting to changes also applies to changes in the body and mind, from health to frailness, from independence to partial dependence, from control to loss of choice and control. However, in describing the shift in what constitutes well-being in later life, older adults are demonstrating that they are able to adapt to change and to set their sights on the future in a realistic and meaningful way, and

importantly, while they are maintaining a sense of continuity and a recognition of the self, “an experience of a preserved self” (Borglin et al. 2005: 215).

Older adults are faced with significant challenges as they learn to use new technologies. The difficulties in unlearning old ways of doing things and devising new strategies to compensate for perceived deficiencies of an ageing body and mind will possibly also require “new learning of an unfamiliar mechanism” (Blit-Cohen & Litwin 2004: 386). Learning strategies used in the past may not be relevant to learning with the digital devices of the 21st century. As older adults devise new learning strategies, they are also learning to operate new technologies.

Older adults respond to disorienting dilemmas with a heightened awareness of longevity, and they seek equilibrium to resolve the tensions unique to older adult life. This can be resolved by seeking meaning through learning (Jarvis 2001).

Learning forces the self into a continual reflexive state that is “ontologically and existentially directed” (Kidd 1973: 5). This means that learners face questions relating to the self that require reflection and understanding of the self. Kidd (1973) furthers an understanding of the self and the nature of learning by proposing a triad of being–becoming–belonging that is situated in the ontological and future-directed nature of learning. As a human being, we are always becoming, not in a selfish pursuit, but striving towards individual and social goals (Kidd 1973). Becoming refers to the purposeful activities carried out to achieve personal goals, hopes and wishes to promote the improvement or maintenance of knowledge and skills, and to cope with changes (Centre for Health Promotion 2010). However, without the belonging component, being–becoming would remain individually located and self-centred, and Kidd believed belonging is what gives learning its real meaning. Frankl (1984: 133) illuminated this aspect of the being when he referred to the location of the true meaning of life as outside the being. “The true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche as tho it were a closed system”. The importance of Kidd’s belonging element to the being–becoming dualism is augmented by Frankl, who stated that “being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself” (Frankl 1984: 133).

The ontological questions raised by Kidd's being–becoming–belonging notion are, “Who am I? What do I want for myself? Where am I going? How will I get there? When will I get there? Where do I belong?”. According to Kidd (1973: 9), learning is about self-discovery, self-expression and fulfilment, and involves a search for that part of the being that is truly human. In answering the ontological questions, humans have a greater understanding of themselves, that is, their own being. In a similar notion to Allport's (1955) belief that the more we know about the self the more we know about the whole human race, Rogers (1969) asserted that the deeper the being delves into the self to find the unique, the more they find the whole human race. Kidd (1973) believed that it is not enough to have insights without meaningful relations with others and that it is the relationship (belonging) factor that makes learning meaningful.

For older adults, the “adoption of new technologies requires learning new skills, new ways of performing familiar skills, new procedural knowledge and a new lexicon” (Czaja et al. 2006: 348). The technical jargon may be of particular difficulty for older adults.

Older adult computer learners face serious learning difficulties in an unfamiliar and unique computer environment (Hrimech & Bouchard 1998; Moody 1986). In a world of many changes over a lifetime, the current cohort of older people has been challenged many times to integrate new ways of thinking and doing. The affective nature of learning, such as feelings of self-confidence and self-efficacy in taking on new challenges, may contribute to the overall sense of well-being.

There is a further affective component and that is the way those in later life experience the technology, and this can be related generally to past experiences, self-efficacy and personal achievement with technology. “The use of technology brings experience of use that has a key role in the affective and emotional dimensions beyond usability” (Hernandez-Encuentra et al. 2009: 240). This means that the technology is more than a physical object playing a functional role. The technology provides users with feelings and affects, which indicate a subjective and personal experience that transcend the way the technology is used. The emotional experience of using a device includes a range of feelings such as “sensations, perceptions, feelings, expectations, values, satisfaction, or

frustration" (Hernandez-Encuentra et al. 2009: 240). The users have a relationship with the technology grounded by the purposes for its use and the emotions they experience when using the technology. They have an affective involvement with the technology, because they have an emotional response when using a particular technology. Further, they have a deeper understanding of the technology, because they have experienced a range of affective and emotional dimensions.

The learning experience of older people and their sense of achievement may be heightened by the notion that learning to use new technologies is perceived by the learners as being difficult and cognitively demanding. Older people have less confidence in their ability to use computers than do younger people in learning to use and operate current technologies (Czaja et al. 2006: 333). This seems to suggest that when older people persist with their learning, despite experiencing barriers, they achieve a stronger sense of pride in their accomplishments and more confidence in their abilities with technologies.

Common terminology to describe ageing well is couched in positive terms and centres on the dual notions of continued meaningful participation and decreased marginalisation. Descriptions include active ageing (WHO 2002), satisfactory ageing (Kelly 1993), successful ageing (TSAO Foundation 2004) and well-being (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2001, 2003).

The World Health Organization (WHO 2002) described active ageing as the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance the quality of life as people age (WHO 2002). Kelly (1993) articulated two dimensions that are important to the notion of activity within satisfactory ageing: those of quality of relationships and regular engagement in activity. When the quality of relationships and regular engagement in activity dimensions are combined, such as when the activity is the context of the relationship, and communication and sharing with others are a central component of the activity, there is more likelihood of higher life satisfaction (Kelly 1993). This combination, of relationship and activity, is relevant to the computer learners in the current study who used computer knowledge and skills to improve and increase communication with younger members of their family.

Interdependence and intergenerational solidarity are considered important tenets in active ageing, so it is acknowledged that the two-way giving and receiving between people means that both parties are able to experience autonomy. It is in the mutual transfer of knowledge that both are able to make decisions. This relationship enables reciprocity and autonomy, as well as a sense of belonging. In an active ageing policy document (2002), the WHO defined autonomy as the perceived ability to control, cope with and make personal decisions about day-to-day life, within the context of family, friends and neighbours. This means that people are able to choose these two aspects of interdependence and autonomy in such a way that it assists them in their lifeworld. It is also important that people believe they are able and capable of making autonomous decisions. The "rapid rate of political, social and technological change necessitates the need for autonomous people" (Candy 1991: 20). As people age, their quality of life is largely determined by their ability to maintain autonomy and independence (WHO 2002). Thorson (1978) presented two criteria as developmental tasks of ageing that place them within the autonomy dimension. These are maintaining control and avoiding helplessness. The OECD (2001) identified acting autonomously as one of the three key competencies essential for the personal, social and economic development and well-being of people in modern complex societies.

The choice between interdependence and autonomy enables older adults to maintain and pursue the being-becoming-belonging of learning. They are able to answer the existential and ontological questions of the being by creating the lifeworld of their choice, according to their needs. These needs may change as they age, but underpinning this is the strong sense of "integrity and continuity", that is, the desire to continue to be the person they recognise as themselves.

There are benefits to all generations in intergenerational exchanges and relationships. Erikson et al. (1986) suggested that the inter-generational interdependence opportunities were unique to this stage of life, and that they contributed to the psychosocial developmental second last stage (passing on cultural and historical artefacts and wisdom). Thorson (1978) also included perpetuating the culture as one of the eight developmental tasks of ageing.

Continued participation as a dimension of well-being was identified in the literature by several authors. These authors referred to the essential aspects of ageing well in various ways. Thorson (1978) referred to the concept of ongoing participation as remaining integrated in society, Erikson and colleagues (1986) as vital involvement and both Kelly (1993) and the TSAO Foundation (2004) described regular engagement in activity as a dimension of well-being. Participation enhances the quality of life of people as they age (WHO 2002).

Interest in life generally as a dimension of well-being in later life is closely related to the previous section of continued participation. The notions of vital involvement (Erikson et al. 1986), remaining integrated in society (Thorson 1978) and regular engagement in activity (Kelly 1993, TSAO Foundation 2004) suggested that there was a link between continued participation and interest in life generally.

The OECD (2001 and 2003) identified three key competencies essential for the personal, social and economic development and well-being of people in modern complex societies as: interacting in socially heterogeneous groups; acting autonomously; and using tools interactively. All three key competencies contribute to the well-being of older adults in the socio-cultural context of the lifeworld, grounded by the existential concept of time. In the time dimension, older adults are acutely aware that they have a limited number of years left to live and they want to make the most of them.

Of particular relevance to the study of older adult computer learners is the notion of using tools interactively. The OECD (2003: 5) stated that:

Using tools interactively does not simply mean having the technical skills to use a tool (e.g., read a text, use computer mouse, etc), but assumes a familiarity with the tool itself and an understanding of how the tool changes the way one can interact with the world and how the tool is used to accomplish broader goals.

The OECD further stated that the key competency of using tools interactively requires “mastery of socio-cultural tools such as language, information, and knowledge” (2003: 5). Within the lifeworld of older adults being able to evaluate tools for specific purposes and being able

to “talk the talk” of digital speak are as important as having the skills of using digital tools. It is further suggested that “new technological innovations require unfamiliar technology implementation” (Mahmood et al. 2008: 109).

The terminology for ageing well suggested that with choice, independence and good health, there will be benefits to the individual. Further, that family would benefit by acknowledging and encouraging the experience and wisdom of people in later life. The descriptions also included the notion of the flow-on effect of benefit to the community, locally and globally. Benefits include less financial dependence on governments for assistance, housing and health-related costs. The community as a whole may also benefit by being inclusive of diversity and more cohesive.

The Research Design

Participants

Five male and 11 female information and communication technology (ICT) learners, with ages ranging from mid-60s to mid-80s (as at 2003), were interviewed at least twice over a period of seven years, from 2003 to 2010. An approach was made to non-profit organisations that offered lessons for older adults and learners volunteered to take part in the study. The main aim of the study was to understand and interpret the lived experiences of ICT learning in later life. Participants were learning to use technology either in small class settings with peer tutors or in their own home with an individual peer tutor. Peer tutors were voluntary and not qualified teachers. On average, each learner attended weekly lessons for a period of 12 months. The initial interviews took place during the period of learning and then participants were further interviewed when they had ceased lessons. All participants had retired from paid work and identified themselves as older adults. Quotes from the following 15 of the 16 participants are given in this article. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of participants.

Name	Gender	Age
Alex	Female	73
Andy	Male	82
Aub	Male	86
Bobby	Female	70
Clem	Female	81
Coby	Female	82
Gill	Female	77
Henk	Male	81
Hilary	Female	77
Kerry	Female	63
Merv	Male	72
Morgan	Female	82
Pat	Female	68
Quentin	Male	64
Sunny	Female	78

Methodology

A hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was chosen, because it enabled rich existential and ontological insights into the learning experience by privileging the voices of the participants. Ontological insights were interpreted from the lived experience of the participants, whereby questions of the being's relationship with the world were explored. Understandings of phenomenology and hermeneutics were influenced by the work of Heidegger (1962) and his ontological "account of the human-world relations which determine and outline the dimensions of human existence (*Dasein*)" (Ihde 1990: 23). Heidegger's link with ontology influenced an orientation to phenomenology and enabled a focus on the being's relation with the world and the nature of lived experience.

Research Questions

1. What is the nature of the learning experience?
2. What interpretations do learners place on their learning experience?
3. What are the outcomes of the learning experience?

Analysis

Three phenomenological, analytical and interpretive tools were used at various times throughout the analysis and interpretative phase. The three tools were within-case, cross-case and thematic analysis. Within-case analysis focussed on the individual participant's learning and enabled insights into the ontological experience, that is, those elements that seek to answer being questions. Narratives as told by the participants in the interviews were constantly examined, comparing them to other stories told by the respondent and also comparing them to stories told by other participants in cross-case analysis. Data from within-case and cross-case analysis were placed within a thematic framework so that the data could be examined and referenced as emerging themes. Various understandings such as *a priori* understanding (based on the literature review), emerging understanding (based on field data), and analytical understanding (based on recurring data in within-case and cross-case analysis) were used.

Results from the Study

The results from the study indicated that within the being–becoming–belonging triad, several phenomenological themes emerged. These themes will be explored as follows: the being dimension encompassed two themes, personal achievement and self-confidence. In the becoming dimension, three themes emerged, adaptive capacity, autonomy and using tools interactively. Within the belonging dimension, three themes emerged, quality of relationships, continued participation and interest in life generally.

Being

The being domain is centred on the ontological and the affective nature of learning; focusing on the question of "Who am I?". Devoid of work titles and roles and no longer defined by work/social role, older adults look to other sources to answer ontological questions. Participants in the study grounded their learning by referring to personal achievements and a sense of confidence. Learners did not need extrinsic confirmation of achievement (not that they rejected it, but they considered it "icing on the

cake," always nice to have a loved one say, "well done" or by being able to show someone you have regarded as an expert a new technique, strategy or function). Later life computer learners in the study did not need rewards or certificates; they knew when they had "done well".

Personal achievement. The way that older people experience technology is an important component of learning to use a particular digital device. This new learning experience can be related to past experiences, self-efficacy and personal achievement with technology generally.

The satisfaction that is derived from accomplishment in retirement, particularly because it is freed from the work-related paradigm of external reward, provided an opportunity to derive satisfaction on the basis of intrinsically experienced adequacy. Being able to use a computer gave Alex "a lot more depth" in her life, including having more to talk about with friends, and the ability to produce computer-based documents, such as newsletters, flyers and posters for her various social clubs.

For Quentin, the greatest sense of personal achievement came after frustrations and perseverance. His graphic account described next attests to the feelings of despair and joy in his attempts to complete a task on the computer:

I feel a great sense of satisfaction when I finally manage to do something after running into brick walls. A couple of weeks ago I made an order for an anti-virus program over the net. I was lacking confidence in doing it myself but I thought, "Well, I've got to do it", but I wasn't real sure how to do it. Anyway in the end, I went into it. Half way through it I got into a panic because it asked for my serial number and I couldn't find it. I didn't realise you could switch from one program back to another to find it. I had already given my name and address and bank card number. I panicked and then I aborted the whole thing. I switched the computer off. I tried to make a phone call to the help line but they closed at 5 pm and this was 8 pm. Right, I decided, I have to go through with this; it's not going to get the better of me. So I turned the computer back on and had another go, starting from the beginning again. I entered in all the information for a second time and followed the cues and finally came to the end and saw the word "SUCCESS", flash up. I thought, "Right, well I can do something" (Quentin)

Pat experienced a "high" in achieving a self-set task, a specific learning need she identified. It also affirmed her belief in her learning capability at a crucial time:

I had all these play files just sitting around and I said to my son-in-law, "I really need to get rid of all this, I can't just keep opening new files", so he showed me how to delete them all and I went home and I did it. And it all worked and I thought, "Oh, thank goodness, I've learnt something." (Pat)

The sense of achievement assisted learners in the positive construction of themselves as computer learners. This enabled them to be more optimistic for future learning achievements, more inclined to be curious, more confident to explore and more able to cope with difficulties.

Some participants from the study described progress in measurement terms, in tangible ways, and others referred to greater confidence as a sign of progress. Quentin's comment captures the complex nature of achievement, progress and self-confidence:

I think back and realise that I am doing things on the computer that previously I had no idea about. I am able to do many things now that I'd never even dreamed of. I even feel more confident in offering advice to friends about certain [computer] exercises. (Quentin)

In a combination of affective and cognitive domains, Quentin related personal achievement to a sense of making progress, feeling good and being confident. The increased confidence came about from seeing a product and an outcome from learning as well as a sense of personal achievement.

Self-confidence. An important aspect of a sense of well-being is the belief that participation, active involvement and acting autonomously are possible. The notion of self-confidence, of how the self is constructed and whether this is affirmed or not by others, emerged as a theme in the analysis of the study. Participants in the study referred to greater self-esteem and self-confidence as a result of learning to use a computer. When they achieved something that had been difficult to master, they experienced an invigorated sense of self-achievement, at times elation, and a belief in their continued ability to learn. Their sense of capability was reinforced and affirmed when they were asked questions by others, and they were able to participate and contribute in discussions (especially if these were mixed-age groups) and when they were asked to assist

with tutoring beginning learners. Alex described her experience in the following way:

I came back to help with beginners this year and the fact that I was able to solve a problem means I've progressed in my learning. The beginners couldn't do it, but I could. I hadn't realised that I've got more knowledge than I thought I had by listening to other people's problems and thinking, "That's not a problem for me". I know how to. (Alex)

Alex also experienced self-confidence in another way, by being able to contribute to discussions in a mixed-aged group. Alex believed that her familiarity with computers and the terminology associated with technology provided her with knowledge that crossed over age barriers. Despite being in her 70s, Alex did not feel that age was a consideration when in technology conversations with younger people.

Clem mentioned the iterative effects of greater self-confidence and the link with personal achievement. "[Learning to use the computer] gets easier the more you can do. You are more confident to try new things, to experiment" (Clem). The more Clem was able to achieve, the greater her confidence was. This led to trying new things and experimenting and, in turn, increased her confidence and sense of personal achievement.

Becoming

The nature of the changing world in which those older than 70 have lived provides the backdrop and a link with the being. Within the context of a technologically dense world, participants reconciled their lived experiences with the being. For this current cohort of older people, the being-becoming duality is of greater significance than for other age groups. Technological advances and rapid obsolescence result in totally new ways of doing things in everyday living and may present older adults with the challenge of facing learning that is significantly unfamiliar to them.

Adaptive capacity. Adaptive capacity is the ability to adapt to unfamiliar learning techniques and to technology generally. Participants in the study alluded to the strangeness of the computer learning environment, particularly how computers occupied the learning space and how they (as learners) would physically and psychologically position themselves

within the learning space. For older people, the newness of the learning environment and the unfamiliarity of the computer learning environment required an openness to change and a need to adapt. Without the capacity to adapt, they may not be able to learn. Hilary described the difficulty with learning to use a computer. "The techniques are strange. Something you wouldn't have thought of 20 years ago. It's not like anything you've learnt before" (Hilary).

A number of participants in the study were competent typists with extensive experience in using manual typewriters. They were amazed and thrilled with the various functions of the word processing programs in being able to delete, backspace, change styles and save the file. They acknowledged the keyboard differences in the computer and the typewriter, but regarded the computer more highly. Participants mentioned the light feel of the keyboard and the absence of needing to correct an error. The ability to adapt to the technology in such an enthusiastic way encouraged learners to use a wide variety of functions not available on a typewriter, such as macros, autocorrect, word wrap, fonts and colours. The learners acknowledged the necessity to adapt, if they were going to achieve success, and they created and constructed new horizons, by learning new things, exploring and being curious. They were not fixed or rigid in their learning strategies, and they adapted to suit the context.

In a world of great technological change, older adults need to adapt to a new world order and to find new expressions for their lifetime of skills and knowledge. For older people, the newness and unfamiliarity of the computer learning environment required an openness to change and to adapt. A number of participants mentioned doing things differently since learning to use a computer that demonstrated their capacity to adapt. Andy paid bills online rather than in person; Quentin had more frequent contact with friends, but wrote fewer letters; Kerry used electronic spreadsheets instead of paper-based ledgers; Morgan checked tide times online; and Clem no longer bought the daily newspaper, preferring instead to read it online. The older adult participants adapted to the technology in ways that suited their specific needs.

Autonomy. Alex, Coby and Quentin referred to their pride in the ability to create personalised greeting cards for friends and family. Bobby was able to type official-looking letters in relation to investments. Andy used

the Internet for banking and paying bills to avoid standing in queues. Quentin looked ahead to the future to a time when he will be physically incapable of doing his own shopping. When this happens, he believes he will be able to shop online without having to ask friends to help out. The knowledge of the avoidance of future dependency was important for Quentin to maintain his lifestyle and to control his lifeworld.

Andy, with failing eyesight, was able to increase the size of the fonts on the computer so that he could read newspapers, newsletters and notices. Without this facility, to increase the print size, he would be unable to continue reading. Andy's experience demonstrated that the perceived benefits to him were not only autonomy but also of maintaining interest in life in general with the ability to participate meaningfully. Andy was able to stay in touch with what was happening without having to rely on other people for news. Bobby was also able to stay in touch by reading the news in her first language without having to travel to her country of birth. This link with her past was very important to her as she had little contact with relatives and friends from her homeland.

Both Clem and Kerry talked about one of their children having a serious illness and being able to use the Internet to find out more about the illness. They were able to increase their knowledge and understanding of the illnesses by acting independently. The information they gleaned from their research was then used to assist them in coping with their child's illness and in discussions with their child. Clem and Kerry's ability to use the computer as a research tool and a source of information enabled them to be more informed and better able to participate and contribute in discussions and making decisions.

Gill was a volunteer gardener for a residential village and liked to know about the plants she helped to cultivate, particularly little-known species. "It's nice to know what these plants are. So I look them up on the Internet. Brilliant. Google. Fantastic. Always wanted to know these things" (Gill). The ability to independently search for information about a subject she loved gave her much pleasure and reinforced her love of the computer. She also believed that in the future she would be able to find out anything she wanted to know.

Aub was increasingly becoming house-bound. He had difficulty hearing and had recently relinquished his driver's licence. Aub had a volunteer

home tutor for computer lessons and was reliant on assistance with shopping and cleaning. He used the computer to write his life story and to use the Internet. His primary use of the Internet was in finding out what happened to the people he served with in the defence forces, particularly during the war:

I often use the Internet to get on to the Australian War Museum. Through that I have found a lot of my friends or relatives or people that I trained with and I can look up the Nominal Roll and it will tell you what happened to them. That fills in a certain thing and it sounds like a bad expression, but it gives me satisfaction. Not because they got shot down but at least I know what happened to them and be able to use the computer and know where they are. (Aub)

Aub was increasingly dependent on other people for his physical needs but being able to use the computer to fill in the missing pieces of his life gave him much satisfaction. He was able to make contact via email with some of the people from his past life, and he scanned a number of photos and sent them as attachments. Despite his physical dependency, Aub's sense of autonomy was still high because of his ability to use technology to stay in touch with loved ones. Without this technology, Aub's life would be very different.

Using tools interactively. In a world where digital technology has replaced manual tools and appliances for domestic use, commercial use and entertainment, the skills of being able to use digital technology is an imperative. Using tools interactively is recognised as being one of the key competencies of well-being for adults in modern complex societies. To be without the skill is to be at a disadvantage and increases the potential for being marginalised. Participants in the study were increasing their ability to use computers by attending lessons and using computers on an almost daily basis. They accepted that the world was not the same as the one they had known most of their lives and that in order to keep-up with the rest of the world they had "to go with the times".

Belonging

Within the domain of belonging, three areas were identified and influenced by literature from the Centre for Health Promotion (2010). Personal

belonging includes the person's fit with the living environment, and the connections with physical environments such as home, neighbourhood and community. Social belonging includes the sense of acceptance by intimate others, family, friends, neighbourhood and community. Community belonging represents access to resources normally available to community members, such as community activities. These three belonging dimensions (personal, social and community) were analysed and interpreted in this study as quality of relationships, continued participation and interest in life generally.

Quality of relationships. Beginning with the closest relationship, the family, older adults experienced increased communication, based on technical discussions, with intergenerational members. The current older adults provided role models for future generations of the capabilities of older adults and the potentialities of development throughout life. Future generations were learning what life could be for them as they age. For younger people, the close association with an older adult breaks down the stereotype of older adults being frail and incapable of learning, thereby weakening a myth of ageing. Not a burden but an equal; not dependent, but independent; not incompetent, but competent.

Participants from the study made many references to increased communication based on computer discussions with intergenerational members. Clem was delighted to share new-found computer skills with her grandson and was always keen to "show off" to him particularly when she achieved something new. Clem's grandson was a welcome and frequent visitor to her home. He encouraged Clem to undertake personal challenges on the computer by sharing with her the many functions and uses of the computer.

In relation to friends and neighbours, and a sense of community, participants gave varying accounts of improvements in relationships. The reliance on close assistance when needed (help-at-hand) was identified as essential when facing difficulties and frustrations in learning. Participants spoke of greater contact with close neighbours based on computer-related needs. Neighbours provided a unique opportunity to establish and affirm the sense of community and belonging. Their geographical closeness enabled them to be of assistance to struggling learners and to share achievements. For many in the study having reliable and close assistance

made a difference to their ability to overcome difficulties. By being able to consult with a neighbour, the participants did not have to wait until weekly lessons for problems to be solved. As was described by the participants, there were many times when they were “stuck” and just needed to know how to troubleshoot in the language they would understand.

Older people are able to enhance existing relationships with people from interest groups, particularly when members are geographically distant from one another. In the current study, Pat was able to email fellow lace-makers in-between their annual meeting. These exchanges were principally to swap patterns and to discuss lace-making generally, but increasingly the communication included personal comments. The members had more opportunities to get to know each other and their relationships were strengthened on a new level. In a similar way, Gill delighted in discovering the names of plants she had previously been unable to identify. Gill would then share this knowledge via email with other members of the gardening club. Alex said the shared interest in computing gave her other groups, such as during aquarobics and exercise classes, more to talk about.

Continued participation. The quality and strengthening of family, friend and neighbourhood relationships enabled continued and meaningful participation in life in general. Sunny described her inclusion in family discussions as a result of learning how to use a computer. In the recent past, at family gatherings, she was expected to sit quietly in the corner attending to her knitting. As a result of learning to use the computer, Sunny was able to ask questions, understand what others were talking about and feel that she was on the same level of knowledge as the rest of the group. Sunny’s nephew and niece offered her unsolicited assistance with any computer problems, “Can I help, aunty?”. Her contributions to computer discussions were valued, and Sunny believed she was not considered to be a little old lady asking stupid questions and not knowing what she was talking about.

The importance of meaningful participation, as experienced by the older adults in the study and affirmed by others was an essential aspect of well-being. A number of participants in the study provided details of their computer-generated contributions to social, religious, family and interest

groups and organisations. These included creating budgets using spreadsheets; designing and writing newsletters, event notices and posters using desktop publishing programs; and compiling historical and biographical documents using word processors. In all instances, it was apparent that the participant's skills and knowledge were appreciated and valued by the group and organisation members.

Interest in life generally. The participant group in the study displayed an interest and enthusiasm for life that was reflected in their learning experiences and in a cyclic way, appeared to be generative; the more they enjoyed their learning, the more they enjoyed life in general. Gill described what it was like to be a computer learner:

I've got two loves, definitely, two loves. Computers and gardening. I wondered a few weeks back which was stronger. I think gardening is stronger. But they are both pretty strong. Look, it's the most magnificent thing out. Magic. Absolute magic for me. What would I do without it? What did I do with all my time before? It's just so rewarding, fulfilling. That's how I feel. This is a labour of love. It makes me feel good. You want another life to handle it. Not here for dying. (Gill)

Sunny commented that she was "on the down run," but was going to "make the best of it with what I'm doing." Both Gill and Sunny referred to the temporal nature of life and their attitude to how they wanted to live their lives. They did not want to "fill in time" in meaningless pursuits. They were wholeheartedly committed to doing their very best in whatever they were engaged in.

Participants in the study were keen to discuss future projects and the changing nature of their goals as they became more competent in their computer use. Unanticipated opportunities opened up as the seemingly infinite nature of the computer learning environment revealed itself to them. Participants discussed the exciting possibility of future projects and fulfilling future goals and were delighted to share new-found discoveries. They were interested in the myriad of uses that people, especially those in later life, gained from the computer. Participants were amazed at the diversity of interest and how the computer could be used to extend these interests. This additional knowledge awakened within them an interest in areas not thought of before. The later life computer learners in the study reflected on how older people use the computer for many and varied

purposes and this reflection enabled them to show more interest in life in general. They began to see other possible uses for the computer and this ability to respond to the changing nature of the world enabled them to broaden their horizons and expand their lifeworld and increased their ability to adapt to ongoing changes.

Summary and Conclusion

The conceptual frameworks from the literature of ageing well provided a sound basis for the analysis of data from the research and the establishment of links and relationships between many components and dimensions of well-being as they related to the learning experience of later life computer learners. The frameworks have been useful in setting a context for the notion that ageing is a process and that there are no inevitabilities about the ageing process. Analysis suggested that older adult computer learners in the study were influencing the direction their lives would take. They were learning their lives into the future and determining the type of life they wanted for themselves while maintaining a sense of self, of integrity and continuity. Later life learners were developing in new and unforeseen ways, embracing change and growth.

Ageing was seen as developmental and evolutionary. During older adulthood, there was no evidence from the study of participants being aware of a state of oldness, at least not in a way that restricted their life, choices and the ability to act. The participants generally had positive attitudes to ageing or at least did not bring negative attitudes to learning as a result of ageing. They had a sense of agency and a belief in themselves that they could act and that these actions would be productive, positive and self-affirming. They were positioning themselves favourably to act and to be in control of their lifeworld.

The hermeneutic phenomenological methodology and analysis from the study helped uncover the deep need and yearning from within the being to relate to others, to feel a sense of belongingness and to participate and contribute with others in meaningful and valued ways. Participants in the study provided many instances of care for others and the pleasure of inclusion. They showed immense joy in being able to share the ups and downs of the learning experience. Also, in a technological

world with the potential for alienation, the older adult computer learners in the study embraced the need for change. They achieved a great deal of satisfaction from better understanding their lifeworld and playing an important part in it.

The later life computer learners in the study viewed computer learning as a path to self-actualisation and also as a way of being able to represent the self in authentic ways. Participants wanted connectedness with others and depth in their lives. They valued relationships and feeling a part of the world and sought unity with the self and others. It is human to want to have something to think about: to get dressed up to go somewhere; to do things that are meaningful and fulfilling. Humans of all ages want to have depth to their lives and to feel useful and valued.

The people in the study sought compatibility between thoughts and actions (sense of agency) and beliefs and emotions (relationships). The notion of the being as an entity that is becoming (growing and developing) and belonging (with others) was an important aspect of the study. Participants were being, becoming and belonging in the pursuit of the existential self. They pursued opportunities to be true to their sense of self and to have their intrinsic needs actualised. They looked for ways to use ICTs that were relevant in their lifeworld and that would reflect how they wanted to live their lives and the meaning in their lives. They did not slavishly follow the popular interests of others; rather, they learnt skills that would be useful and purposeful. For some participants, the real value was in learning, the stimulus of learning and the challenge of learning something new. In the existential pursuit of being–becoming–belonging, the older adults in the study challenged and competed against opposing actualities from the socio-cultural field.

Through learning, the participants in the study experienced increased self-confidence and a greater interest in life. The increased participation placed them in a position to counter the notion of developmental certainties of decline. The participants perceived the benefits of learning as being iterative and far-reaching, positioning them favourably to adapt to change.

The current group of older adults is unique and groundbreaking. Their parents and grandparents were unable to provide role models because the previous generations had never lived through so many technological changes. The current generation of older adults is minimising potential

marginalisation with a strong sense of contributing to life in ways of their choosing. This does not appear to lead to selfishness or insular behaviour. While there is an element of autonomy and independence, there is also interdependence and intergenerational importance in their lives; for maintaining quality relationships with close and extended family and local community. Counter to the notion that the learning may lead to self-absorption, there may even be a greater sense of concern for the future and for passing on the culture.

Learning to use ICT and learning generally have been found to be significant for the older adults in the study in constructing a sense of well-being. The learners in the study had the strength to act and a sense of agency in new ways; ways that were not related to their past life. These ways related to modern skills, to changes, to technology, to family, friendship and the local community. The older adults in the study were aware of the pressures of the changing world and the need to adapt. However, they did not consider age as a place to stand still. Activity and participation, choice and enjoyment were of significant importance in their learning experience outcomes. They may have thought initially only of tangible outcomes or outcomes that could be measured, but on reflection they recognised intangible but possibly more important or significant outcomes for themselves. For the participants in the study, learning and a sense of well-being were inter-related, that is, learning is about living and living is about learning.

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Corresponding Author

Helen Russell, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences – Education, University of Technology Sydney, Kuring-gai Campus, PO Box 222, Lindfield 2070, Australia. Email: Helen.Russell@uts.edu.au

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Pietro Garibaldi, Joaquim Oliveira Martins and Jan van Ours (eds.) (2010). *Ageing, Health, and Productivity: The Economics of Increased Life Expectancy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 288 pp. ISBN 978 0 19 958713 1 (hardback)

REVIEWED by KATHRIN KOMP*

Many scholars and policy makers view longevity with concern. Longer lives, they fear, might challenge economies and welfare states. Garibaldi, Oliveira Martins and Van Ours, however, think differently. In their edited volume *Ageing, Health, and Productivity*, they argue that longevity can facilitate economic growth if suitable policies are implemented. Their central argument is that increased life expectancy usually goes hand in hand with increased healthy life expectancy, with the latter development opening up possibilities for healthy and active ageing. This train of thought contributes to the ongoing debates on the effects of population ageing and on policy reforms. The same train of thought also seems timely, considering that 2012 is the European Year for Active Ageing.

The book posits that longevity as such is neither good nor bad for economic growth – it is the framework of policies and market structures that determine its impact on economic growth. To develop this argument, the book proceeds in two steps. In a first step, Dormont, Oliveira Martins, Pelgrin and Suhrke discuss the interrelation between “Health expenditures, longevity, and growth”. In a second step, Ilmakunnas, Van

* Kathrin Komp, Department of Sociology, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

Ours, Skirbekk and Weiss describe the connection between “Age and productivity”.

The section “Health expenditures, longevity and growth” underlines that longevity is often accompanied by an increasing healthy life span. This observation suggests that ageing populations can remain largely healthy populations, with largely stable health expenditures. Recent increases in health expenditure might also be attributable to technological progress, market structures and the behaviour of physicians and patients. At the same time, high health expenditures might also promote economic growth because part of this expenditure flows into research and development. Moreover, high health expenditures might lead to better health status within the population, enabling people to work until a later age and possibly also motivating them to engage in life-long learning to equip themselves for an expected longer working life. The only obstacle in the way of these economically positive developments is the current mandatory retirement age that prevents healthy people from working until a later age.

The section “Age and productivity” studies the productivity of older workers at the individual-, workgroup-, and company level. This section reports that older people maintain their level of productivity to the extent that this depends on cognitive skills, while they lose some of their productivity depending on physical strength. However, older workers themselves feel that their working capacity declines only slightly with age. Moreover, compared to younger workers, older workers are absent less often, but they have longer periods of absence. Finally, the age composition of workers within working groups influences productivity, in that age-diverse working groups are less productive than age-homogeneous ones. At the company level, however, no such effects exist.

The two main sections of the book have very different writing styles and analytical approaches. The section on health is rich in new and exciting ideas, but its main arguments are based on a thin empirical basis. The ideas sometimes follow each other in quick succession, which does not always give them all the room and attention they deserve. In this sense, I agree with Axel Börsch-Supan that many of the ideas in this section deserve fuller explanations, maybe even in separate papers (p. 116). The section on productivity, in contrast, is focused and many of its statements are grounded in analyses of datasets from Germany and Finland. Here,

a stronger theoretical discussion would have been preferable. However, an excellent presentation of the conclusions and policy implications of the analyses makes up for this shortcoming.

I should also compliment the editors of the book for coming up with a structure, where each of the two sections ends with a short chapter on policy implications as well as two short essays by external experts who discuss the sections and findings. This structure makes the relevance of the topic easier to grasp and it gives the reader the feeling of participating in a lively, ongoing scholarly discussion.

Besides its merits, however, the book also has some limitations. The main limitation becomes obvious in the second section of the book, which promises a discussion on productivity, but it in fact only deals with paid work. Gerontologists might raise their eyebrows about this narrow understanding of productivity, considering that feminist gerontology and the concept of productive ageing advocate also recognising activities such as informal caregiving and volunteering as productive. The authors probably did not pick up on those debates because they are economists, not gerontologists. This disciplinary perspective accounts for both the weakness and the strength of this book. The weakness is that many concepts central to social gerontology, such as productive ageing, gender differences and social inequalities, are not reflected in the book. The narrative would have been stronger had those concepts been considered. The strength is that this book applies a non-gerontological perspective to a gerontological topic, thereby enriching discussions on population ageing and serving as an eye-opener in many respects.

Overall, I very much enjoyed reading this book. It provides gerontologists with a new perspective on possible effects of ageing populations, which can enhance our discussions and serve as a starting point for new studies. Especially, the section on health and productivity can give us such food for thought. The book is probably most suitable for gerontologists familiar with discussions on the effects of population ageing. When it is presented together with introductory gerontological texts, this book can also be useful in teaching situations, where it might start critical and differentiated discussions. Given a proper framing, this book might, therefore, appeal to emerging as well as experienced gerontological scholars.

I J A L

International Journal of Ageing and Later Life

The International Journal of Ageing and Later Life (IJAL) serves an audience interested in social and cultural aspects of ageing and later life development. The title of the journal reflects an attempt to broaden the field of ageing studies. In addition to studies on later life, IJAL also welcomes contributions focusing on adult ageing as well as relations among generations.

Being an international journal, IJAL acknowledges the need to understand the cultural diversity and context dependency of ageing and later life. IJAL publishes country- or cultural-specific studies as long as such contributions are interesting and understandable for an international audience.

In order to stimulate exchange of ideas on ageing across many parts of the world, IJAL is available free of charge to anyone with Internet access (www.ep.liu.se/ej/ijal).