RESEARCHING LATER LIFE AND AGEING

EXPANDING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH HORIZONS

EDITED BY MIRANDA LEONTOWITSCH

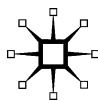Researching Later Life and Ageing

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Expanding Qualitative Research Horizons

Edited by

Miranda Leontowitsch
St George's, University of London, UK

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Acknowledgements

Contributors

Christine Bigby is Director of Postgraduate Programmes in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. She has a longstanding research interest in ageing and intellectual disability, and is the co-chair of the special interest ageing research group of the International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual Disability. She is editor of *Australian Social Work* and has published five books and numerous journal papers.

Laura Hurd Clarke is Associate Professor (Sociology) in the School of Kinesiology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. Dr Hurd Clarke has over a decade of research experience on the topic of the body and embodiment in later life, primarily in relation to ageism, appearance work, body image, health, and masculinity and femininity. In addition to a book entitled *Facing Age: Growing Older in an Anti-Aging Culture* (2010), she has published in such journals as *Ageing and Society, Canadian Journal on Aging, Journal of Aging Studies, Qualitative Health Research,* and *Sociology of Health and Illness.*

Paul Higgs is Professor of the Sociology of Ageing at University College London (UCL). He has published widely in both social gerontology and sociology. He is the co-author with Chris Gilleard of *Cultures of Ageing* (2000) and *Contexts of Ageing* (2005). In 2009 he published *Medical Sociology and Old Age* with Ian Rees Jones. He has researched topics including quality of life and consumption. Between 2009 and 2011 he coordinated an ESRC-funded seminar programme on 'New Ageing Populations' with Dr Karen Lowton (KCL) and Dr Karen Ballard (Surrey). He is currently researching the arena of intergenerational conflict. In addition Professor Higgs is joint editor of the journal *Social Theory and Health.*

Miranda Leontowitsch is a Lecturer in Qualitative Research Methods at St George's University of London, UK. Previously she worked at University College London after completing a PhD from Royal Holloway, University of London. She has researched the experiences of early retirement of senior executives, maintaining health in later life with over-the-counter and complementary medicines, and pharmacies as venues for health information. She is interested in critical and new approaches to

using qualitative methods in researching later life and ageing, with a particular focus on researching older men.

Karen Lowton joined King's College London (KCL), UK in 2001 after completing a PhD at Royal Holloway, University of London focusing on how adults with cystic fibrosis and their family members perceive and manage the disease and its treatment. Karen has since studied the expectations and experiences of young people and health care staff concerning the transition to adult cystic fibrosis services, and how families of young adults who have died from cystic fibrosis have experienced end-of-life care and bereavement. Karen's research interests continue to focus on 'new' ageing populations, i.e. those reaching mid-life with traditional diseases or conditions of childhood, exploring health and social concerns, family care, and service use.

Mary MacMaster, retired Head Teacher of a first school, is writing up research for a PhD entitled 'Growing Old for Real: Women Image and Identity' at the Department of Fine Arts and Media Research at Norwich University College of the Arts (part thesis part photographic practice, see: www.growingold.co.uk). Her interest in photography developed over several years of City and Guilds evening class study before completing an MA in Photographic Studies in 2004 at Norwich University College of the Arts.

Sue Malta is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Life and Social Sciences at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia. She is also managing editor of the online journal *International Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society* (iJETS) and recently edited the special edition on *Ageing and Technology* (Volume 8, No. 2, 2010: www.swin.edu.au/ijets). Sue's research interests include older adults, sexuality and the Internet, and slightly tangentially, social connectedness and social isolation. She is particularly interested in dispelling the idea that older adults are not sexual beings.

Barbara L. Marshall is Professor of Sociology at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada where she teaches in the areas of sexuality, gender, the body, and social theory. She has written extensively on the medicalisation of sexuality, the pharmaceutical reconfiguration of sexual lifecourses, and the emergence of sexual functionality as an indicator of successful ageing. Her current research explores the ways gender and sexuality are embedded in accounts of ageing bodies across a range of

different contexts, including sexual medicine, anti-ageing treatments, and public health promotion, and is opening up new questions about the sexualisation of the 'Third Age'.

Wendy Martin is a Lecturer in Health Studies at the School of Health Sciences and Social Care, Brunel University. Dr Wendy Martin is co-investigator on five funded research projects and Principal Investigator on the research project 'Photographing Everyday Life: Ageing, Lived Experiences, Time and Space' (ESRC First Grants scheme). She has recently completed, with Professor Christina Victor, an ESRC New Dynamics of Ageing Research Project on 'Families and Caring in South Asian Communities' and is involved with a Leverhulme-funded research project on inter- and intragenerational caring amongst minority communities within the United Kingdom.

Jane Seymour is a Sue Ryder Care Professor of Palliative and End-of-Life Studies, University of Nottingham, UK. She is Head of the Sue Ryder Care Centre for Palliative and End-of-Life Studies at the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Physiotherapy, University of Nottingham. Jane is a nurse and a social scientist, and has been involved in palliative care research and education since the early 1990s. She led (with Dr Katherine Froggatt, Lancaster University) a programme of research related to older people and end-of-life care within The Cancer Experiences Collaborative. Her research interests focus on advance care planning and other aspects of end-of-life decision-making, new models of palliative care, and public education in end-of-life care.

Christina Victor is Professor of Gerontology and Public Health in the School of Health Sciences and Director of the Health Ageing programme at the Brunel Institute for Ageing Studies (BIAS) at Brunel University. Her current research interests focus upon social relationships and later life and the experiences of ageing amongst ethnic minority elders. Christina has recently completed, with Dr Wendy Martin, an ESRC New Dynamics of Ageing Research Project on families and caring in South Asian communities and is currently working on a Leverhulme-funded project on inter- and intragenerational caring amongst minority communities.

Maria Zubair is a Research Associate at the School of Community Based Medicine at The University of Manchester. She has worked in an ESRC-funded New Dynamics of Ageing study 'Families and Caring in South Asian Communities' and is currently involved in a project investigating

the under-use of health and social services by older South Asians with dementia. She is a member of the British Society of Gerontology and the Manchester Interdisciplinary Collaboration for Research on Ageing. Her areas of interest include race and ethnicity, gender, ageing, identity, social and familial relationships and support networks, and qualitative research methodologies.

Introduction

Miranda Leontowitsch

Research on ageing has predominantly relied on quantitative methods. This has been largely due to a political economy perspective that focused on poverty and ageing as a residual category. Thus, research was geared to measuring need and assessing ways in which health and social care could meet these in an economic way. Although the political economy focus has provided valuable insights into the plight of older people (and predominantly older women), it has led to viewing older people as a homogeneous group who live in deprived circumstances. The economic focus has been met by a biomedical one, which depicts ageing as a biological and inevitable downward trajectory of physical decline. Thus older people have been regarded as passive recipients of this economic and biological plight. However, later life has undergone considerable change over the past 40 years, including changes to employment, improvements in health and longevity, as well as fundamental changes to the social and cultural fabric of contemporary society (see Chapter 1 for a detailed account of these). This is not to suggest that poverty, social exclusion, inequalities and physical ageing in later life no longer exist, but it does call for research that takes these changed circumstances into account and acknowledges that older people are a highly heterogeneous group. The following quotation by Cook is an early recognition of what needed to change:

> If we want the public and the media to abandon the oversimplifying generalities they often make about age and aging and look instead at the diversity among older people, then gerontologists must stop asking attitudinal and factual questions about the elderly as if they were a homogenous group (Cook, 1992 in Thompson, 1994, p. 14).

Although there has been a steadily growing body of work in ageing that uses qualitative methods, the need for qualitative research continues. This is due to identifying more and more aspects of later life that have not been explored because they were thought of as irrelevant to older

people. For example, in a review of studies of older people's participation in competitive sports, Dionigi (2006) points out that:

> the majority of research into this phenomenon has taken a quantitative approach or failed to consider older athletes' experiences in the context of broader sociocultural discourses. (…) The use of qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and observations, and interpretive analysis provided alternative ways of making sense of older adults and their relationships with competitive sport to what is typically found in the sport and aging literature (p. 365).

The paucity of qualitative research is also found in such areas as sexuality in later life, where the perception prevails that older people do not engage in sexual activity, or are reluctant to talk about intimate details of their lives (Gledhill & Abbey, 2008). Qualitative methods are particularly well equipped for mapping new research territories and for uncovering the more meaningful aspects of the lives of older people. With the methods available to qualitative researchers they can gain insights from the source most knowledgeable about later life, namely older people themselves. Phoenix and Smith (2011) examine how the 'master narratives' of passivity and decline are not necessarily matched by individual experiences of ageing.

> Counterstories are the stories which people tell and live that offer resistance to dominant cultural narratives. It is in their telling and living that people can become aware of new possibilities (M. Andrews, 2004). When told collectively, these 'new' stories present the possibility for both individual behavioural and social change (Phoenix & Smith, 2011, p. 630).

Thus, research on later life and ageing needs to continue its work on identifying which issues and aspects are important to older people, rather than relying on the top-down, quantifiable approaches that assume to know what constitutes later life.

The changes to later life have also been reflected in the composition of those considered to be old. For the first time those aged 65+ are no longer predominantly defined by women on a state pension or other forms of low income. As the post-World War II generation of men and women approach retirement age, the life expectancy gap between men and women narrows, and both groups enjoy increased longevity, more men live into old age. These changes are also reflected in the ethnic minority groups who have lived in the UK and many other European

countries, and have decided to make these countries their place of retirement. At the same time, advances in biomedicine and technology have increased the life expectancy of many populations who historically did not survive childhood, such as those with cystic fibrosis. Although now living well into adult life, these new ageing populations remain unlikely to survive in good health to current pensionable age, and many marginalised groups such as older people with learning disabilities enjoy increased life expectancy but face the challenges of negotiating care and income with ageing carers and uncertain financial planning. All these voices, however, have been largely absent from ageing research. Within the next 20 years the proportion of older people from across these groups will significantly increase and shape our ageing society. Their experiences, concerns and needs are vital to understanding later life, today and in future. A new challenging question is how the experiences of these different groups of older people can be researched.

A review of the literature shows that qualitative methods are increasingly used in researching issues of later life, but that few authors reflect on their use of methods or provide a critical analysis of how qualitative methods (from sampling to data collection and analysis) need to be adapted in order to research a particular group of older people. This edited collection brings together authors from Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, who provide a critical view of their own and current research practice. Moreover, they point to new research agendas, under-researched ageing populations, and old and new qualitative methods.

In Part I, Paul Higgs discusses the cultural and social processes that shaped the understanding of old age in the 20th century and how transitions in employment and social relations have substantially changed the lifecourse, thus the nature of later life and old age. This he argues, calls for research that goes beyond researching later life in terms of (biomedical) health and social policy, but also in terms of how older people experience and engage with their lives; lives that have become more complex due to changes in both the social relationships of later life and the societies in which they are experienced.

From this vantage point also, Laura Hurd Clarke draws attention to the continued disinterest and ambivalence towards the aged body in much gerontological research. Here too, the reluctance to consider the ageing body is rooted in ageist discourses and taken-for-granted assumptions about later life. With her extensive research experience she explores the challenges of asking both seemingly mundane questions about everyday activities associated with maintaining and dealing with the body, and deeply personal ones about sexuality, frailty and decline. In being reflective and

open about how such research is and can be conducted, Laura Hurd Clarke encourages us to be role models for the next generation of researchers.

New forms of later life, and the centrality of the body provide the backdrop to Karen Lowton's chapter (Chapter 3) on new ageing populations. She maps the circumstances of new ageing populations and draws on her many interviews with people with cystic fibrosis and their relatives. Although managing a life-threatening chronic condition can at times be experienced as all-consuming, in-depth interviews provide insight into people's personal achievements in terms of health and social life, as well as into sensitive issues such as managing the likelihood of dying at a relatively early age.

The topic of new ageing populations introduces the second part of the book, in which research with older people from ethnic minority groups, and people with intellectual disability is discussed. Older men, who do not necessarily constitute a new group but who have been largely absent from research, are included here too. This part of the book is not solely concerned with raising attention to these under-researched groups, Chapters 4 and 5 in particular examine the challenges researchers face in gaining access to the field, dealing with gatekeepers, and gaining participants' trust. Moreover, Chapters 3, 4 and 5 challenge different prevailing assumptions about conducting qualitative research with members of marginalised groups. Maria Zubair, Wendy Martin and Christina Victor's chapter (Chapter 4) examines issues of researcher identity and the challenges of access and recruitment when researching older Pakistani Muslims in the UK. Zubair's experience as a young Pakistani Muslim woman researching older Pakistani men and women shows how an 'insider' position when researching co-ethnics cannot be assumed. By providing detailed insight and reflection on their fieldwork, the authors argue that an 'insider' relationship needs to be continuously and actively negotiated in the field through particular presentations of the embodied ethnic 'self'. With photographs of Maria Zubair in the way she dressed when conducting fieldwork, the authors explain why it was important for her to adopt a gendered Pakistani ethnic identity.

In line with Karen Lowton's chapter on new ageing populations, Christine Bigby maps the particular challenges people with intellectual disabilities face as they grow older, but also draws attention to the unexpected improvements some people with intellectual disability can experience in later life. She warns that the strong research focus on the carers (often parents) of older people with intellectual disability has served to give ownership of issues associated with ageing to parents rather than to the individuals themselves. With her longstanding interest in ageing and

intellectual disability, Christine Bigby draws attention to locating hidden populations, getting past gatekeepers, using scaffolding techniques as a way of developing topic guides meaningful to people with an intellectual disability, as well as using participatory research with an onus on accessibility to research rather than training in research skills.

In Chapter 6, Miranda Leontowitsch examines why men have been largely absent from research, and the importance of masculinities in understanding older men's lives. She reviews the small literature on methodological issues in researching older men and then draws on her own experience of interviewing older men. She highlights the influence of gendered roles within qualitative interviewing, and how this enables her, as a younger female researcher, to gain rich data from a group of older men at the same time as protecting their sense of self.

Interviewing is by far the most popular method in qualitative research, and the same is true for qualitative studies in ageing research. Indeed Chapters 2 to 6 rely heavily on the interview method, showing how in-depth interviewing is a trusted way of learning about people's lives and experiences. However, this leaves a wealth of other qualitative methods largely ignored. The three chapters in the final part of this collection set out to illustrate how focus groups, online research and the use of photography can help illuminate the field of later life. Jane Seymour examines the advantages of using focus groups with older people in discussing end-of-life care issues. By focusing on four community studies she offers a reflective account of how issues associated with recruitment, informed consent and facilitating discussion of potentially distressing accounts in a group setting can be managed. She discusses the use of a vignette technique involving PowerPoint slides and its success. The chapter also includes excerpts from fieldnotes and quotations from focus group transcriptions that provide insight into the realities of conducting this kind of research.

In looking at new approaches to using qualitative methods, Sue Malta describes the process of conducting interviews with older people about new later life romantic relationships using instant messaging and email. She contributes to the slowly emerging literature on older peoples use of information and communication technology (ICT), and dispels the concern that older people are averse to being interviewed online. A computer screen shot, data excerpts, and detailed accounts of how the research was conducted provide ample material and thought for researchers embarking on this new method.

In the final chapter, Mary MacMaster explores ageing femininity through a combination of photographic self-portraits and staged images

of women. Prior to taking the photographs she interviewed women about images of ageing and issues of identity. The self-portraits provide a window into understanding the experiences of older women in terms of identity and presentation of self, and the staged images combine Mary MacMaster's interpretation of what she heard and saw, with added symbolism by the women photographed through the use of personal objects.

Each chapter contains an annotated reading list and notes on titles the authors found helpful in conducting their research. Together with the range of research examples and ideas for practice, it is hoped that researchers in the field of later life will find themselves equipped with information and inspiration to help with their research, and the ability to continue the important reflexive work the authors have begun here.

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Part I
Research Agendas

1
Later Life as an Arena of Change

Paul Higgs

This chapter situates contemporary later life in the social and cultural changes that have made the designation of old age problematic. In particular it argues that the social space in which older people now exist is substantially removed from the worlds of old age that existed for the majority of the 20th century in the industrialised world. The changes in employment and social relations which have transformed the most affluent countries in the world have also destandardised the lifecourse, making the distinction between adult life and old age unstable. This, in addition to growing affluence and improved health in retirement, has shifted the status of those in later life from occupying a residual category of health and social policy to a position more closely connected to mainstream cultural and societal processes. As significant in many ways as these structural changes has been the way in which cohort ageing has created a generational culture of later life namely the culture of the Third Age. This reconfiguration of old age moreover, has been facilitated by post-war babyboomers bringing their own dispositions and aspirations into retirement, and particularly by their not accepting the ascriptive status which previously circumscribed the old. Youth culture, leisure and the desire not to be defined as old has rewritten many of the scripts around old age, and thrown up new challenges for our understanding of this period of the lifecourse.

In this light, qualitative research has an important role in refocusing attention on later life as an important social and cultural space. In particular, attention to 'thicker descriptions' of the ways in which older people experience and engage with their lives provides many opportunities, not only to correct anachronistic assumptions about older people, but also to allow for more novel dimensions of this rapidly changing part of the lifecourse to be given the attention they deserve.

This chapter therefore is concerned with pinpointing the importance of studying later life through the cultural lens of qualitative research.

The changing nature of old age

It is commonplace to claim that we live in an ageing world. In Europe, Japan and North America it is very clear that larger numbers of people are living beyond the age of 65 and that, over the next few decades, this group is projected to increase both in size and as a proportion of the population. It has to be remembered, however, that this phenomenon is recent, reaching back to the second half of the 20th century at most. Before this, the numbers and proportions of older people in any given population were very much smaller, even if they exerted a disproportionate influence on the concerns of policymakers. Indeed it can be argued that the very creation of an ageing world – one where the overwhelming majority of people can expect to reach retirement age is a marker of the success of the modern world. It represents success on two counts: firstly, that there are now much lower rates of mortality in childhood and across the lifecourse (the so-called 'rectangularisation of the survival curve'); and secondly, because the institutionalisation of old age as retirement has made old age a chronologically specified point in people's lives. The ageing world is therefore a product of the modern world. The social status that might have once been accorded to the minority of older people in any community has now been transcended by status and policy issues surrounding retirement. It is in this context, of the social creation of old age through retirement, that we must situate contemporary ageing.

The standardisation of the lifecourse into socially organised periods emerged out of the transformations that accompanied industrialisation and the growth of capitalism. This was particularly noticeable in 19th century Europe and North America, where urbanisation and the industrial division of labour led to legislation regarding child labour, elementary education and more rigorous social policy. The intended and unintended effects of this was the creation of a standardised lifecourse in which childhood was more clearly separated from adulthood and seen as a period of education or preparation for the world of work. In a similar way the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a more pronounced domestic division of labour, where men were increasingly expected to be 'breadwinners', and women to be 'homemakers'. As with childhood education, this position was to be buttressed by legislation as well as by social norms. This period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries also witnessed the emergence of

the state retirement pension as a way of dealing with the effective redundancy of older workers in an environment dictated by the efficiency of labour power. As is well known the 'Iron Chancellor' Otto von Bismarck introduced the first state organised old age retirement pension in the 1870s in Germany, although it was not as popular as similarly introduced disability pensions. Other countries including New Zealand, Australia, Great Britain followed over the next few decades, so that by the 1930s most industrialised nations had a state retirement pension for men. Introduced for a variety of reasons these pensions had the impact of stabilising the position of old age within the societies in which they occurred, and over time (as the systems matured) took older people, particularly men, out of the labour market. In this way the idea of retirement as the final part of the standard lifecourse was established and became part of normative social structures.

What started out as a social policy response to the problem of the older worker has been transformed into a life stage of its own. Concern about social redundancy and poverty has been progressively shifted towards concern about the nature of this period of life. While the poverty of older people still continues to be an issue for many older people, this is often in the context of a general level of material prosperity. A marker of the shift in concerns can be seen in the way the position of the older person has been identified. The studies of Booth (1889) and Rowntree (1901) with their focus on the desperate economic circumstances of the old, can be contrasted with Talcott Parson's mid-20th century idea of the modern retiree's 'roleless role' (Parsons, 1942). Furthermore, much (particularly American) gerontological research from the 1950s started to focus on the determinants of 'successful ageing' (Palmore, 1979) rather than on its negative inevitability. Indeed the contrasting positions of 'activity theory' (Havinghurst & Albrecht, 1953) and 'disengagement theory' (Cumming & Henry, 1961) attest to the way that, within ageing research, the problem of being old was seen to be attitudinal rather than necessarily a result of poverty.

The 'selling of retirement' as a viable option for later life in the 1950s and 1960s in the United States of America (USA) was an outcome of both the emergence of Social Security pensions and private sector welfare policies (Hacker, 2002). In Britain it took longer, probably not until the 1980s, for the impact of occupational pension schemes to become realised (Hurd Clarke, 2006). However, what occurred in both countries was a transformation of the lives of large parts of the older population. Each successive cohort entered retirement with greater resources than had previous cohorts (Jones et al., 2008; Costa, 1998). Obviously there were

inequalities and variations in this development, with non-white retirees in the United States of America (USA) faring much worse than their white counterparts, and women doing less well than men in terms of pension size. However, the key point was that instead of retirement being generally a period of 'structured dependency', it became a more diffuse entity. This process was much more marked in North America where more positive images of retirement jostled with more conventional depictions of old age. The existence of organisations such as the American Association of Retired People (now known as AARP), which focused as much on consumer discounts and entitlements as it did on social policy and health care, helped create the notion that retirement could be as much about living in Florida as living in poverty. As mentioned above, the desire to identify the causes of 'successful ageing' led to a whole series of research projects, including the Kansas City studies which investigated the dynamics of the emergent retired population (Neugarten & Associates, 1964). The history of these studies and their changing conclusions is less important than their recognition that the new experiences of retirement were ones that departed from constructs of the lifecourse dominant until this point. Retirement was not simply a residual category of life, rather, it was a period that needed to be understood in terms of its own ever-changing reality.

In a contrasting way, the idea that old age could be represented as structured dependency demonstrates the changes that had occurred to old age to that point. Coined by Peter Townsend the concept of structured dependency (Townsend, 1981) had its origins in the work of the social reformers Booth and Rowntree, and flowed from Townsend's own work on the social isolation of older people, and his broader interests in poverty (Townsend, 1957). An important dimension of his approach is the notion that the dependency of older people is 'structural' rather than solely an aspect of being old. In particular it is social policy that makes older people dependent and not the afflictions of age. Again, as with writers from North America, Townsend argued that the lives of retirees could be more socially engaged if it wasn't for the constraints that low state retirement pension entitlements place on older people. Noting the fact that the basic state pension did not keep pace with the rise in average earnings Townsend argues that it is unsurprising that the retired cannot participate in society to the degree they would like to. Interestingly however, the situation for retired people in the United Kingdom (UK) has improved greatly since the 1970s, with pensioner households seeing their incomes rise faster than those of the general population (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005). This paradox is a result of the fact that the income of the UK retired population has increased by 44 per