"Theorising the ageing self as data using autoethnography"

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Slide 2 "Welcome and thank you"

It is our pleasure to give a presentation here at the Digital Americas 2021 Conference. We would like to extend our thanks to the Conference organisers, to our colleagues Roberta Maierhofer and Barbara Ratzenböck for arranging and inviting us to participate in the Aging in Data Panel, and to our colleague Loredana Ivan who is also presenting as part of this panel.

My name is Dr Hannah Grist, and I am co-director of the Centre for Women, Ageing and Media (WAM) at the University of Gloucestershire, and Lecturer in Academic Practice at the University of Bristol.

I am Professor Ros Jennings, and alongside Hannah I am co-director of the Centre for Women, Ageing and Media, and I am Professor and Ageing, Culture and Media at the University of Gloucestershire.

Our presentation today explores questions of ageing and research methods and asks how autoethnography can allow the ageing self to be used as data. Whilst we have been working with autoethnography for some time, this paper is a first step in setting out our thinking about the ways in which the method may produce new types of data with which to explore age and ageing.

Slide 3 - Methodological Approaches to Ageing

As we have argued elsewhere (Jennings 2012, WAM Manifesto), academic studies and cultural policy work on ageing are dominated by knowledge created in the areas of healthcare, gerontology, economics, social care, and sociology. As Miranda Leontowitsch (2012) asserts, "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," (Leontowitsch 2012, p.1). Demographic, economic, and biomedical approaches often link ageing with physical decline and neoliberal ageist ideologies equate successful ageing with economic productivity, sustained physical health and independence, and (especially for women) the maintenance of youthful attractiveness. Moreover:

> […] contemporary twenty-first century notions of age and generation embed identities within restrictive linear and normative chronologies (Baars 2012; Halberstam 2005; Jennings and Krainitzki 2015). These chronologies work to reinforce and reiterate ageist narratives that position ageing as bleak decline (Woodward 1999; Gullette 2004). (Jennings, 2017, p.180).

These approaches, combined with restrictive linear conceptions of time, thus have the effect of reducing the multiple and varied experiences of older people to a number (an age bracket, projected population statistics, or the value of a pension contribution, for example). They work to categorise older people as a homogenous group and look at ageing as a medical or economic problem to be cured.

In the introduction to her edited collection *Researching Ageing: Methodological Challenges and their Empirical Background,* Maria Luszczynska (2020) charts what she calls the "rebellion against the scientific method" in the study of age and ageing. She argues that:

> the horizons of researchers' interests are no longer defined by total systems of premises, axioms, laws, scientific theories, various conflicting '-isms' […]; such horizons are now being expanded by networks of practice, relationships, multiplicity, diversity, transgressiveness, […], selectivity and depth of study (2020, online).

Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs (2015) argue that the cultural turn in ageing research has facilitated:

> the positioning of older people not as happy or unhappy, healthy, or unhealthy, fit or frail individuals but as agentic, contradictory and potentially desiring subjects who are both implicated in, as well as being contributors to contemporary culture and the individualised, consumerist 'project of the self' (p.30).

Thus, important interventions by scholars in the fields of ageing studies, cultural gerontology and associated disciplines have begun to erode the reliance on quantitative methods and open up new ways of thinking about and 'with age' (Jennings and Gardner, 2012). As Gilleard and Higgs suggest of the cultural turn in gerontology, "In place of the traditional dualism of chronology and corporeality, later life is now being examined through alternative lenses, through consumption and lifestyle, technologies of the self, and the life politics of identity," (2015, p.34).

Researchers across disciplines (including healthcare [c.f Pollock and Godfrey, online] and economics) have increasingly adopted qualitative approaches to explore questions of age and ageing. Methods such as interviews and focus groups, ethnographic observation (for example within care settings), netnographic and online methods, and textual analyses of popular cultural accounts, produce data rich in thick description (Geertz 1973) and shed new light on experiences of ageing. Despite the increasing proliferation of studies which adopt qualitative perspectives, however, Miranda Leontowitsch (2012) reminds us that the project remains unfinished, and "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," (p.2).

Slide 4 – WAM Manifesto

In 2012 the Centre for Women, Ageing and Media launched the WAM Manifesto. The WAM Manifesto represents our objective as a research community to "move beyond simple cultural criticism" of popular cultural texts to engage in activist, collaborative research with real world implications. In it, we assert that:

1. Older women need to be at the centre of debates to discuss their own identities, their own lives and the policies governing them.

2. Ageing studies need to produce research that explores intergenerationality as a means for old and young to work together in their diversities to produce real world outcomes and incremental change.

We argue that autoethnography constitutes an important methodological approach which can affect real world change. Autoethnographic approaches offer older people (not just women) an authentic opportunity to lead or participate in research about their own experiences, producing rich and nuanced data which challenges stereotypical and ageist understandings of ageing and what it means to be 'old'. By reflecting on our own experiences of ageing both personally and intergenerationally in relation to the sociocultural contexts and timespaces (May and Thrift 2001) we inhabit, we argue that autoethnography "may reduce ageism, which is perpetuated by research methods themselves," (Flick, 2018, online).

Autoethnographers "privilege individual experiences and corporate realities in order to theorise about what we can learn relationally, personally, and culturally, through personal narratives," (Boylorn and Orbe, 2014 p.16). Thus, rather than research 'on' ageing people or 'into' the phenomenon of ageing, autoethnographers use their personal experiences as primary data (Chang, 2008, pp.48-49). As a result, the self and memory become intelligible as forms of data. The stories we tell define who we are and constitute a way of presenting ourselves as social beings. These narratives of self are socially and culturally interconnected and offer exciting opportunities for innovative intergenerational research collaborations. Co-created, collective, or community autoethnographies produce rich and detailed texts which examine 'the personal experience of researchers-in-collaboration' and explore broader social phenomena (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2000, online). We argue that adopting intergenerational autoethnographic approaches can resist attempts to "compartmentalise identities along the life course" and can produce data sets which "acknowledge the multiple overlaps and contradictions in the ways that age is embodied and experienced by people in their everyday lives," (Jennings, 2017, p.181).

Slide 5 - What is autoethnography?

At its core, autoethnography is an approach to writing and research that 'foregrounds the researcher's personal experience (auto) as it is embedded within, and informed by, cultural identities and contexts (ethno) and as it is expressed through writing, performance, or other creative means (graphy)' (Manning and Adams 2015, pp.188-189).

Slide 6 – Approaches to Autoethnography

Autoethnography has been adopted by scholars working in different epistemological and disciplinary traditions, and there has been much debate in the literature around questions of objectivity/subjectivity in relation to the method and the types of data it produces. On one side, scholars like Anderson (2006) and Atkinson (2006) favour the "objectivity position [which] promotes the 'scientific,' systematic approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation, that can be validated by more than researchers themselves," (Chang, 2008, p.45).

Scholars like Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, on the other side, produce evocative, affective, autoethnography which embraces notions of researcher and reader subjectivity. Both approaches have their merits but produce different data sets and theoretical implications as a result. As Denshire and Lee (2013) hold, the "different approaches in autoethnography can be characterized in terms of different relationships between the personal and the wider social and cultural world the writing seeks to enquire into," (p.222).

Slide 7 – Autoethnography as Data

What we are seeking to do going forward is to produce ways to theorise the autoethnographic forms of data (questionable data? seems unreliable?) a way of presenting more fully, older people as individuals but also as social and cultural beings. We envisage that this will challenge dominant research views in several ways. From our experience of producing collaborative autoethnographies the usual word length of articles for academic articles is not sufficient (in our article for the journal, *Lifewriting*, we were fortunate to be granted 14,000 words, but this was exceptional). Perhaps more significant is that there is a lingering resistance in academic research to accepting emotions and re-storied narratives as data. They remain in many researchers minds both questionable and unreliable. We argue that the ageing self can be seen as data, and using autoethnography can contribute to academic narratives about both ageing and what 'counts' as data. We hold that autoethnographic data, which represents multiple selves over time and space, offers a rich understanding of human perspectives in ageing.

Conclusion: Age, Autoethnography and Data

As old age and older people endure processes of Othering in complex ways (van Dyk 2016) we seek research methods which resist ageism and are inclusive of the diversity of experiences of age and ageing. We argue that autoethnography is an important method in this regard as it is "predicated on the ability to invite readers into the lived experience of a presumed 'Other' and to experience it viscerally," (Boylorn and Orbe, 2014, p.15). We have found, through our own use of the method, and that of other scholars, that autoethnographic texts produce data that can sensitise readers to the affect/s of age/ing and reveal some of the ways we feel time and feel ageing, in ways that other qualitative methods are less able to capture. Indeed, in our own research into ageing and care (both paid and unpaid, residential and end of life) collaborative intergenerational autoethnography has provided valuable insights into what it means to age or 'be old', what it means to care and be cared for, and how popular cultural representations shape and impact upon these understandings.

Autoethnography is an approach which has people at the centre, and one which humanises "research by focusing on life as 'lived through in its complexities" (Adams, Ellis, Holman Jones 2017). As such, there is great relevance of autoethnographic methods for ageing studies research. This is highlighted by Dwayne Custer (2014) when he argues that:

> Autoethnography can radically alter an individual's perception of the past, inform their present, and reshape their future if they are aware and open to the

transformative effects. Much of the process of autoethnography revolves around the idea of time and space. Time, as a linear procession of past, present, and future increments of experience, undergoes a metamorphosis. It becomes a dance without boundaries (p.2.)

As explored earlier in this presentation, ageing studies researchers have decentred traditional thinking about ageing and time as a liner, chronological process. Like Custer, we argue that autoethnography can be used in activist ways, it can challenge and transform our ways of understanding ourselves and the cultures we inhabit. Autoethnography can open up new ways of thinking and provide overlooked insights into age and ageinge contributing to the richness and authenticity of academic and everyday understandings of age/ing as, and in, data. – **13 mins 30 sec**

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