



SESSION ABSTRACT

Narrating older age: Reflections on the meaning of ageing

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Abstract: In Europe and globally populations grow increasingly older. At the same time, the duration in which people need care due to frailty or chronic illness expands. This makes ageing, care and old age important research sites for anthropologists. The anthropology of ageing is particularly interested in what life in older age actually means for people in diverse contexts and across the lifespan. This is also the main focus of this panel in which we engage with anthropological and related approaches to ageing by highlighting the perspectives and the agency of older people and the way they give meaning to experience and to relationships.

This panel thus particularly welcomes contributions that engage with ageing and narratives of personal experience. This may range from detailed life stories to short anecdotes or situated constructions of identity that emerge in conversations between interlocutors in fieldwork and are not addressed at the ethnographer per se. We want to reflect on the meaning of ageing in different social and cultural contexts. Among others, we welcome contributions that give room to the meaning of the pandemic experience for older people. After all, many older people found themselves cut-off from their usual social activities and of (physical) contact with relatives and friends. Especially for older persons in care institutions, the pandemic and ensuing governmental measures, this meant that they suddenly found themselves under rigid regimes of “care and protection”. How do older people make sense of this experience? How do they relate the present pandemic to other earlier life events and experiences? We are interested to discuss these and other questions that probe into the connection of narrative and anthropology of ageing.

Discussant: Petra Ezzeddine (Charles University, Prague)

SESSION SCHEDULE

Tuesday, September 27, 2022 | Slot 3 | Room 2

Esther Hertzog: Ageism toward older people living at home and in out-of-home frameworks during COVID-19

Lubica Voľanská & Soňa G. Lutherová: "They protect us and we stay at home." On intergenerational relations during the Covid 19 pandemics

Monika Palmberger, Barbara Götsch: Narrating the pandemic in care institutions

Discussion with Petra Ezzeddine (discussant)

Tuesday, September 27, 2022 | Slot 4 | Room 2

Albert Irambeshya: Mutual caring through associative bodies: the case of elderly's people saving groups in Rwanda

Zhenwei Wang: The elderly's access to digitalized family communications in townships in China

Luisa Bischof: The meaning of ageing in narrations of non-institutionalised relationship biographies in later life

Anna Zabicka: Coffee, sex, and booze: home and time making among older adults in a rural nursing home in Latvia

Discussion with Petra Ezzeddine (discussant)

SESSION PAPERS

Ageism toward older people living at home and in out-of-home frameworks during COVID-19

Esther Hertzog

The paper will discuss ageist perspectives of the COVID-19 period for the older population, whether living at home or in out of home frameworks, as they emerged from older people's reported experiences. Focusing on Jewish and Arab interviewees' descriptions of their experiences during COVID-19, the paper will compare the older people's experiences in the various frameworks.

Analyzing the interviews revealed that ageism connected to the imposed isolation was more accentuated in out-of home frameworks. These were sometimes described as "closed institutions" or even as "prison". Nevertheless, despite the strict restrictions imposed in these frameworks it appears that the tenants and their representatives complied with the rigid control.

The ageist attitude was also found in relating to the older people living at their homes. Ageism was revealed in particular through the children's latent control over their older parents' mobility and their decision making ability. The interviews also revealed that during this period older Arab people tended to cling to faith and religious rituals.

Latent ageism that is not openly discussed, but which is conveyed through compassionate righteous attitude, and through ignoring or silencing the older person,

also emerged from the analysis. It is connected, apparently, to the fear and anxiety in referring to the "carriers of death" on the one hand and the profound care for them on the other.

The research on which the paper is based used the qualitative-narrative method. It took place during the months of August-October 2020 and March-May 2021.

30 interviews were carried out with Jewish and Arab older people (all of them over 75), living at home or in out of home frameworks, and also with 7 officials within these frameworks.

“They protect us and we stay at home.” On intergenerational relations during the Covid 19 pandemics

Lubica Vol'anská, Soňa G. Lutherová

The position of older adults as one of the most vulnerable social groups has remained in the foreground in media and public discourse in Slovakia since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Seniors' vulnerability has been constructed not only in the context of the illness itself but also regarding the impact of the pandemic on their mental health due to social isolation (Tyrrell - Williams, 2020), an interruption in the social ties, and restrictions in daily activities. In many aspects, their public image has been presented in a unified and simplified way, with a common feature of the necessity of “taking care” of them. Thus, the narrative on vulnerability was complemented with the narrative of being a burden and has flourished as a result of an overwhelmed healthcare system that cannot provide for all (Cohn-Schwartz & Ayalon 2021) not only in Slovakia. At the same time, the narratives fuelled the intergenerational conflict on responsibility and care. The paternalistic approach was reflected in communication and narratives about intergenerational help on all level of society – from the state to the family.

This paper relies on online surveys conducted in spring 2020 and 2021, diary entries, and ethnographic interviews made throughout the years 2020 – 2021. The research findings suggest that although the narratives about intergenerational relationships and families create a unifying and simplistic image, they often differ from the actual social practice that is influenced by long-standing patterns of family structures and intergenerational relationships in Slovakia, which can be traced back to the socialist and even earlier periods.

Narrating the pandemic in care institutions

Barbara Götsch, Monika Palmberger

The older persons we spoke to in a narrative-ethnographic study in Vienna's “Houses for Living” (*Häuser zum Leben*), consistently maintained that they were not afraid of the COVID-19 pandemic. Crises, we were told, happen. They will pass. And if not, ‘we have had a good life’, residents would declare. These unanimous declarations were contrasted by different views of the residents about the measures taken. While some welcomed the measures and accepted them as inconvenient but necessary, others saw restrictions on movement and the surveillance of their activities as ‘stealing their lifetime’.

In our contribution, we reflect on the narrative constructions and presentations of self

in relation to the pandemic we witnessed in two different old people's homes in Vienna. We approached residents through two different avenues: first, through participant observation in communal activities, where we, among others, examined the way residents interacted among each other. Second, through narrative interviews on a one-to-one basis. We encountered a diversity of reflective life stories and experiences and strategies in dealing with adverse life situations such as illness. When talking about hard times, narratives of personal experience that referred to WWII emerged as prominent almost invariably, often put in relation to thoughts on the current war in Ukraine. Strikingly, older people's efforts of meaning-making and agency in times of adversity showed important connections to early life experiences and their embeddedness in social relations in the present. We consider the residents' existential observations in two care institutions in light of work in phenomenological anthropology and work on generation and social relations.

Mutual caring through associative bodies: the case of elderly's people saving groups in Rwanda

Albert Irambeshya

While the folk narrative in Rwanda has relegated and relegates elderly care to the kinship sphere in the framework of intergenerational reciprocity, mutual caring among elderly people in Rwandan society is emerging as an important source of care. In the current context of social changes, where adult children are living far from their old parents, mutual caring among elderly people fills the care gap left by children. However, this mutual caring mechanism is overlooked by researchers and there is little knowledge about the practice and approaches of this form of care. This paper fills the gap and explores the everyday mutual caring practice among elderly people as it is expressed in various forms of caring activities. Furthermore, the paper discusses how mutual care practices among elderly people relate to elderly people's care expectations. The paper argues that care is not a fixed script that is located to a specified category of people rather, it is always negotiated and keeps adjusting to the changing situation over time.

Drawing on the data from the fieldwork in the Karongi district, the paper depicts the relevance of the embodiment of the mutual support spirit by elderly people as a trigger factor for coming together and create their own agency to care for themselves. The paper contributes to the care debate in African societies where family structure is changing and shows that elderly people are not the passive receivers of care rather, they join their efforts and come to bring their contribution to their own care.

Key concepts: Elderly care, associative body, saving group, mutual care, elderly people

The elderly's access to digitalized family communications in townships in China

Zhenwei Wang

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork between 2020 and 2021 in China, this paper investigates how the elderly learn to use smartphones at the local University of the Third Age (U3A) in a township in northern Zhejiang to engage in the virtual life of the extended family.

The lives of extended families in China are greatly digitalized nowadays due to

technology development, increased spatial mobility, and busy work schedules. Members of families visit each other in-person less often, and much of their communication is moved to online spaces. Especially during COVID-19, on-site visits are discouraged by the states to prevent the spread of the virus. Many elderly people in China's townships enrolled in U3A courses to learn how to use voice control, chatting apps, and internet surfing on smartphones in order to participate in virtual communications.

This paper focuses on the narratives of the elderly about their learning motivations, learning experiences, and feelings of exclusion and inclusion in their digitalized family lives. The results indicate that older people mostly use their smart phones for social support and recreation (communication, sharing images and videos, and listening to local operas and news). Only a few of them use it for online mapping, online shopping, or online gaming. Because many elderly people are illiterate or farsighted, voice control is essential for them. Furthermore, elderly people reported feeling more connected to their friends and family members through smart phone facilitated online communication. Many of them love to listen to the voice messages sent by their adult children and grandchildren in their family chat group again and again.

The findings of this study contribute to the body of scholarship by giving elderly people in townships a voice and assisting them in constructing meanings of digital participation as part of contemporary family life.

The meaning of ageing in narrations of non-institutionalised relationship biographies in later life

Luisa Bischoff

Along with the increasing older population in so-called Western countries, the share of non-institutionalised living arrangements in older age is growing continuously. Therefore, the way in which individuals living in non-normative relationship constellations are giving meaning to getting older is becoming increasingly relevant. Focussing on never-married older individuals, the contribution poses the question of how the meaning of ageing is being negotiated at relationship transitions within their biographical narratives.

Using elements of Grounded Theory Methodology, this question is being addressed by analysing narrative practices of meaning making in in-depth interviews with never-married individuals over 50 years of age. The data were conducted as the qualitative unit of analysis of the mixed-methods project "Becoming Single in Older Age".

In the data, personal experiences of ageing are becoming relevant in different phases of the relationship biography. New relationships and separations are being made meaningful by affirming or rejecting chrono-normative expectations of the life phase they occur in. The affective dimension of the practices of meaning making becomes apparent, when different relationships and separations are being compared to each other retrospectively and a temporal "causality" emerges in the biography. The narrations do additionally point to the meaning of the combination of older age and the marital status of being never married as markers for narratively constructing one's identity. Historic time or *Zeitgeist* function as another reference to position oneself in not only in the past but also in the present social context. At the same time, the meaning of ageing becomes apparent, when imagining the future, especially regarding

the (im-)possibilities of future relationships.

The contribution illustrates how analysing narrative practices of meaning making enables us to highlight how perceptions of the past, experiences of the present and the anticipation of the future are entangled in the process of giving meaning to growing older.

Coffee, sex, and booze: home and time making among older adults in a rural nursing home in Latvia

Anna Zabicka

Almost every day at 3 p.m. Ruta, 56 years of age, and Imants, 86 years of age, would meet under the main stair in the hallway next to the nursing home's elevator to have sex. Ruta lived with other two women on the second floor and Imants with another two gentlemen on the first floor therefore to have sex in one of their rooms was not possible. They chose the timing at 3 p.m. wisely since that was usually the time when the majority of the staff except the primary caretakers would leave the main building at the nursing home and go to the office building for the afternoon coffee.

In this paper I analyze different situations, like people having sex, drinking coffee, having conversations, or drinking alcohol as practices through which people claim and make spaces and time in a rural nursing home. I argue that such ordinary temporal routines are practices that (re)create and (re)organize internal and external borders of and within the nursing home. Such practices are used to create private spheres in a seemingly public institution, in which public/private division is usually interpreted according to one's role in the nursing home, that is, an employee or a client, and blurred due to physical care work, 24/7 present staff, and limitations concerning room sizes and how many people are living together.