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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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