Positioning older men’s social interactions: a visual exploration of the space between acquaintanceship and strangerhood

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In this article, we show how using a visual method enabled an exploration of the nuances of everyday encounters of older men living alone. It made visible more fleeting encounters, alerting us to the significance of such encounters. The article argues the need to pay more attention to social encounters, situated somewhere in the space between acquaintanceship and strangerhood. While not always easy to articulate verbally, characteristics of such encounters are nonetheless meaningful and supportive of masculine identities delineated by older men living alone.

key words photo-elicitation • fleeting encounters • social interactions • older men • acquaintances

Introduction

In this article we demonstrate the value of using a visual method to explore a previously unexamined aspect of older men’s lives. Drawing on empirical findings from a study of the everyday encounters of older men living alone and the nuances of these encounters in their everyday lives, we argue that we need to attend more to those fleeting encounters that may be positioned somewhere in the space between acquaintanceship and strangerhood.

Men’s social relationships have often been viewed as problematic because of having more limited intimacy and emotional content than women’s social relationships, being predominantly work based and potentially leading to a lack of meaningful relationships in later life. Cancian (1987: 74) has suggested that in relationship research in later life, ‘men’s behaviour is measured with a feminine ruler’ since most research here has explored the quantity and quality of women’s social relationships. Viewing older men’s social relationships from a mainly female perspective and comparing them with female friendships cannot adequately explore the kind of relationships that older men value and enjoy. Nonetheless, the assumption that men have inferior, not just different, relationships has gone largely unchallenged (Nardi, 1992; Adams, 1994).

Recognising that the ageing experience is gendered, raises questions about what social networks may be available to men over the lifecourse. There may be relationships that are important but not conventionally treated as significant in research, particularly
in social support network studies. One example would be acquaintances. Morgan (2009) has suggested that people we meet every day, who are not friends yet not strangers, can also become part of our regular social network. For older men who live alone, acquaintances may contribute significantly to their lives in terms of continuity and familiarity, but such relationships are largely unexplored by researchers, perhaps due to their invisibility. The study reported in this article adds to knowledge of the meaning of such apparently peripheral relationships for older men through the use of a visual method (Sorensen, 2012).

Method

As relatively little is known about older men’s views and experiences of personal, informal relationships, one research method challenge was to avoid imposing stereotypes on the men taking part in the study. The method therefore had to be collaborative, with an emphasis on researching ‘with’ rather than ‘on’ the men in a more participatory manner (Richardson, 2014).

A second challenge was to facilitate the men’s engagement in the research. Men have been found to be less willing to participate in research that involves talking about personal matters (McKee and O’Brien, 1983; Cunningham-Burley, 1984, 1986; Oliffe and Mróz, 2005). Furthermore, Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2003: 57) have suggested that, for men, ‘an interview situation is both an opportunity for signifying masculinity and a peculiar type of encounter in which masculinity is threatened’.

Third, a means was needed to facilitate a less obtrusive form of researcher access into the lived worlds of older men living alone. An observational method was ruled out as, while being observed, the men would no longer be alone. Neither could an observational study provide information about previous experiences. Any method here needed to be unobtrusive but still allow access to the social worlds of the older men.

Taking into account all of these challenges informed the decision to use a visual method. Furthermore, in previous research with grandfathers, the first author (subsequently referred to as ‘I’) had experience of the men often spontaneously introducing photographs and other objects during the interview (Sorensen and Cooper, 2010). They had often introduced these when they found it easier to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’. The viewing of photographs sometimes defused potentially awkward situations when talking about personal or emotional matters, as both the taking and viewing of photographs is common practice and hugely popular (Rose, 2010). This also influenced the decision to use a visual method.

Sixteen men aged 75 and over (mean age 82), who lived alone, collaborated in the study. They were involved in taking photographs of their daily lives and social interactions and those photographs were used in photo-elicitation interviews. They used digital cameras in order to enable control and choice to delete and re-take photographs as they felt necessary. The brief was kept very open in order to let the men decide what was important to them in their social worlds. They were told ‘Show me your daily life and world’ as an indication that I was interested in everything about their lives. As Richardson (2014) has also reported, some men found it difficult, initially, to work out exactly what I meant by that and in some instances it was necessary to give slightly more direction, for example: ‘Take photographs of anything in your daily life that you value and/or enjoy.’ The number of photographs taken by each of the men varied from just four to 30. Once the images had been printed, I interviewed...
the men, using their individual photographs as prompts (Harper, 2002), following the steps outlined by Rose (2007).

My initial invitation to ‘Tell me about this photograph’ would usually be enough and the men would converse and explain for lengthy periods. They would not only describe the images but also talk beyond them and reflect on their day-to-day lives and relationships. The photographs were not introduced by me in any particular order and not all of the photographs were necessarily discussed at great length. The photographs gave rise to different lines of enquiry than would otherwise have been the case. They allowed me entry into the worlds of the older men, gave me insight into their daily lives and threw up surprises. For example, until I saw Photograph 1 from Mr Delaney, I had been unaware that he owned and rode a motorbike and the significance to him of being a ‘biker’.

The verbal data resulting from the photo-elicitation interviews were transcribed and analysed using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). Findings linked to the men’s talk and photographs of social interactions and relationships follow.

**Photograph 1: Mr Delaney found that bikers connect with each other, creating a sense of belonging¹**
Findings

Older men in their homes

Photographs and talk about the home and neighbourhood dominated the interviews. Home was often seen as a safe base and a place for reminiscing about past lives while forming an arena for connecting with others through technology. During my visits to their homes, the arrangement of the furniture in the rooms clearly also had significance. Although many rooms in the owner-occupied bungalows enjoyed a view of the garden, the positioning of the furniture was nearly always to look out towards a road or other communal land. During my visits, the men would follow the traffic of people and comment on the various comings and goings, with “that’s the lady from down the road coming back with her shopping”, “that looks like the man who reads the meter” or “that is my neighbour’s son’s car”. Using the home as a vantage point appeared to be important. One man suddenly got up to catch the attention of the postman passing his window, just to ask if he was feeling better after a short illness. The ability to see others meant that the men felt connected; for those without a view, it was easy to feel isolated. For some men who lived in sheltered housing there was often a view onto a communal garden with benches and its importance was demonstrated by photographs taken through the window (see Photograph 2). Although the men had come to live alone through various and complex routes (combinations of separation, divorce, bereavement and never-married), most could see both positive and negative sides to living alone:

Photograph 2: The need to visually connect with others outside the home
‘They say it is not nice living on your own but sometimes when you are on your own like in here, me, I know there is no one else here and I can do just what I like, you know … you can say that there is a little bit of freedom there that I never had.’ (Mr David, aged 84)

‘You have nobody to tell you what to do, nobody to argue with but no one to talk to either.’ (Mr Young, aged 86)

There was little indication of participants actually feeling lonely despite the absence of people within their homes, as long as they felt able to connect visually with the world outside their home and to leave their home, suggesting that fleeting encounters or visual interactions had specific meaning for them.

**Older men getting out and about**

The majority of the men had taken pictures while going about their daily routines outside the home. This involved shopping, medical appointments, visiting people, bus travel for pleasure and other activities. There was an emphasis on fleeting interactions with others such as shop keepers, bus drivers, other passengers, doctors’ receptionists and people they just saw regularly but did not actively interact with. Thus, within the neighbourhood and further afield, routines allowed the men to interact with others more informally, which required little emotional investment, reciprocity or obligation (see Photograph 3). Those others may be called ‘acquaintances’: individuals we are

**Photograph 3: Routines allowed men to see the same people regularly but without obligation**
familiar with ‘whom we have met, with whom we have shared time and space and information’ (Lofland, 1973: 17).

All these men had experienced losses of peers and close personal relationships, one reason for subsequently turning to more peripheral relationships in public places, such as daily encounters with a newsagent or bus driver. Countering Carstensen’s (1992) socioemotional selectivity theory, such relationships appeared to require little emotional investment while offering the possibility of opening up new social worlds to the men. They may be considered as relationships similar to those of workplace encounters in being public rather than private (Morrill and Snow, 2005). Oldenburg (1999: 16) describes how seeing others regularly, but without obligation, often occurs in ‘third places’. Third places can be identified as public settings away from home and work. Pubs, bars and barbers, for example, are all third places that allow opportunities for sociability and can create a sense of belonging for men who do not want to see people on an obligatory basis (Oldenburg, 1999).

Compared to the effortlessness of the more fleeting and public encounters, friendships were often articulated as being harder to initiate: “I think really now my making friends is all finished … isn’t it? I do make friends, very easily but uhm … it is too much trouble to go out and find them … I never used to be like that until just lately” (Mr McBeth, aged 86).

Having the ability to get out and about and meeting people to whom they were not known also meant that they were not viewed as vulnerable widowers, for example, but just as men. This was contrary to the view of the families who knew the men’s history of loss. Thus, the men’s engagement in fleeting interactions supported and preserved their sense of masculinity.

**Older men and their families**

For relationships with a caring and supportive focus, family was mostly seen as a reliable source of support and, for some men, the only source of support. In contrast to the fleeting encounters just described, family relationships were seen to carry with them more of a sense of obligation. However, family, at times, could provide social interaction through adult children, grandchildren, siblings, nieces, nephews and in-laws, as demonstrated by Photograph 4.

The smaller number of photographs of family taken by the men suggested that family were often marginal in their daily lives and interactions. This was confirmed through data analysis, which depicted that family were not central in providing social interactions for the men. This is contrary to the dominant and somewhat dated discourse (Shanas, 1979; Townsend, 1981) giving primacy to contact with family for older men. However, this may not be surprising as women are generally characterised as the kin-keepers (Finch and Mason, 1993) and the importance of family to men is more likely to be in terms of practical support.

The men indicated that although they appreciated the concern for their welfare demonstrated by family members, they were less happy about any constant monitoring, which they often found intrusive. Such monitoring could be via the telephone, but often it involved brief visits to check on the men at times to suit the family member rather than the older man: “Oh Lord, yes, oh yes … actually she drives me barmy worrying about me. The way she came tearing round last night because the lights were out … I am sitting here nearly asleep and I suddenly see her” (Mr Young, aged 86).
The men expressed feeling put in a very difficult position for regulating their contact with family members who they were unwilling to upset, perhaps knowing that at some future point they might not be able to manage without some assistance and for many having no other sources of informal support. Although the relationships with family were evidently negotiated, such negotiations were rarely explicit. Family practices are considered to continuously develop throughout the life of the family (Chambers et al, 2009; Morgan, 2011) but in our study old age was seen as requiring rather different kinds of interactions, roles and relationships for both the older men and their families and were rarely just a continuation of previous roles. Indeed, many of the men found that maintaining these ‘supportive’ relationships entailed mostly unwanted reversals of roles.

**Expanding the space between intimates and strangers**

The kind of interactions these men described and visually represented as meaningful to them, comprised surprisingly brief encounters with others and appeared to mostly lack relational substance in terms of support or reciprocity. Some may best be described as occupying a space between acquaintanceship and strangerhood (Morgan, 2009), certainly in terms of their irregularity and, often, an obvious lack of physical interaction.

Nonetheless, most men did place importance on seeing the same people or even any people. One man, for example, gained much pleasure from seeing the same woman walking past his window to the local shop and back again, but on the other side of the road, never even noticing that he was watching her. He was not aware of who she was personally, or even where she lived, but he placed considerable importance on the visual interactions where such interactions may hardly even qualify as an acquaintanceship. However, the individuals that the men interacted with in such a

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*Photograph 4: Family get-togethers were valued for socialising but not for their monitoring opportunities*
way cannot be classed as complete strangers but perhaps ‘consequential strangers’, as well described by Fingerman (2009), in having clear consequences for the men and their sense of belonging. Although it is hard to name the interactions they described, it is important to stress that the men themselves did use various terms to distinguish them from meaningless and dissociated encounters and described the interactions in corresponding ways. Terms such as ‘friends’, ‘mates’ and ‘acquaintances’ were all used in connection with the described fleeting interactions. They never used the word ‘stranger’.

The identified visual aspect to the interactions described by the men suggests that the space between acquaintanceship and strangerhood may be a more sensory space, where interactions are visual but, possibly, where we may also use our senses of smell and hearing. We may sometimes interact in a meaningful way with others through our senses, although the interactions may not best be described as relationships. Indeed, Fingerman (2004) suggests that if the interactions are to be recognised as relationships, they have to involve some degree of mutual recognition. It is not clear if the interactions the men described involved mutual recognition. However, just through observing others, it may be possible to know them enough to establish respective social positions, which may at least indicate familiarity, even if it is not reciprocal. Of course, from this study, we do not know whether the interaction may be in some way reciprocal. When I visited the man who I saw watching the woman walking past, there was no hint of acknowledgement from either party but we cannot be sure that she did not know that he was watching.

It is therefore hard to precisely name such interactions or locate them within the social networks of individuals. Indeed, some may suggest that they have no place in a social network as there is little substantially ‘social’ about them and this might explain the lack of examination of such peripheral ties. It is clear, however, that using a lack of personal network members as an indicator for social isolation (van Tilburg, 1998) would not be useful in this study of older men’s social relationships if we cannot easily place the fleeting interactions they attend to within the social network.

Morgan (2009) suggests, instead, a spectrum of social relationships, with no hierarchy implied in terms of value, which could include the interactions described here: involving not quite acquaintances but not strangers either. That may contradict Fingerman’s definition of relationships, which does not allow such a space, since she argues that a lack of mutual recognition ‘serves as a demarcation between peripheral partners and true strangers’ (Fingerman, 2004: 187). However, we argue that these fleeting interactions cannot be ignored due to their being given obvious significance in the lives of the older men in the present study. It may be, therefore, that the boundary between acquaintances and strangers needs to be expanded to include these unexplored relationships.

It is important to emphasise that this analysis showed that all of the men were exposed to various opportunities to form other closer relationships and friendships but that they sometimes described specifically choosing not to do so. This indicated that the relationships or interactions that they chose to engage in were deliberate and meaningful for them, not just the only types of interactions available to them. In that way, they actively rejected more ‘conventional’ relationships of the kind that the literature suggests that older women might pursue. This does not portray an image of older men as desperate, grasping at any chance for a close relationship. Rather, they were circumspect and choosy as to those types of interactions that they felt were
worthwhile to pursue. Such relationship types were often continuations of the types of interactions that they had enjoyed earlier in their lives. It was, therefore, not the case that these men had no meaningful relationships, nor can their relationships be considered inferior compared with women’s relationships, but they are clearly different, in terms of mutuality and intimacy, from the reportedly more meaningful relationships that women may enjoy (Powers and Bultena, 1976) and may be much less visible.

Conclusion

This study is distinct from previous work on older men’s relationships in focusing on all meaningful interactions described and demonstrated visually by these men rather than prioritising specific relationships or interactions such as those with kin. Taking this approach provided a starting point that assumed that older men living alone are capable of, and enjoy, diverse and meaningful lives and relationships, rather than that living alone and their later life relationships should be automatically problematised.

Using a visual method enabled the men to indicate their meaningful relationships and interactions through photography, initially by themselves and non-verbally, and thence to discuss the entirety of their lives during interview. This has produced a more complete perspective on living alone as an older man by building a more complex understanding of older men’s social worlds, currently too-readily assumed as lacking authentic relationships. This approach has uncovered relationships with meaning and value to older men but rarely considered in areas of social network research in later life, narrowly conceived as social support, as they are less likely to be instrumentally supportive. However, the fleeting interactions described by these men are more likely to provide ‘stimulation and novelty’, as suggested by Fingerman (2009: 81), in their relating to acquaintances and so actively supporting identity and producing a sense of belonging.

Notes

1 The men (and others in the photographs) have given their permission to include the photographs in this article but with their self-selected pseudonyms.

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