Ethnography is a powerful research technique. Put in the most succinct of terms, it requires spending extensive amounts of time with people who are—in the course of their normal lives—doing and experiencing the things that one wishes to better understand as a social scientist. This chapter explores ethnographic approaches to the study of ageing through time, across a variety of cultural settings and across disciplines. It contextualizes ethnographic principles as based on participant observation and originating in anthropology, but as premised on a particular research perspective: namely, empathy with the ‘other’. The chapter also considers what strengths and challenges ethnographic methods bring to research on socio-cultural ageing processes and the experiences of older people themselves.

Ethnography and participant observation

Ethnography is an immersive methodology that requires time and patience. It also requires, crucially, openness to ways of being in and perceiving the world that are unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable for the researcher. The insights that such immersion can generate are virtually unattainable to the same extent via any other research method. The ethnographic method was first developed in the early 1900s by anthropologists working in places that were both culturally and geographically distant. Also called participant observation, this is a technique used by researchers who want to better understand social and cultural worlds by approaching them from within, seeking through ‘being there’ to gain insight into the worldview of research subjects themselves. Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the founding figures of British social anthropology, is commonly cited as the inventor of participant observation. Forced by the onset of the First World War to remain in his Trobriand Islands fieldsite for over 2 years, Malinowski’s resulting account of Trobriander culture and social organization (1922) remains a core text in contemporary anthropology still today. It highlights many key tenets of ethnographic practice. These include the importance of building understanding by participating in and sharing daily experiences over an extended period of time with the host culture. Acquiring fluency in local languages and in local forms of meaning are also central aspects of ethnographic research. So too is the ability and willingness to build a strong rapport with both the host community and individual research participants.
The ethnographic method and older age

Older age per se was not usually an explicit concern of early anthropologists. However, given the holistic approach advocated within anthropology more generally, all aspects of life were of interest to ethnographers in their endeavours to build an in-depth account of a particular cultural system. Thus, despite the lack of a specified body of work on ageing in classical anthropology, themes highly relevant to the study of older age are discussed in many anthropological texts. These include topics such as intergenerational relations, shifting social status due to older age, age grades and gendered differences across the life course. Additionally, while remaining largely unacknowledged, many anthropologists across a wide range of fieldwork settings have relied in part on the accounts of older people as sources of cultural expertise and knowledge. The perspectives and experiences of people in the latter stages of life have thus greatly contributed to the ethnographic record, helping to form much of the classical anthropological canon, even if the resulting data was not explicitly recognized as shaped by or analyzed within such generational terms (Vesperi 1985: 20).

Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, this pattern began to change. Ageing and older age became for the first time an explicit topic of anthropological research. This shift was aligned with both the development of feminist approaches in anthropology and the then-nascent sub-field of medical anthropology. The former area of study highlighted the distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ and debates over nature/nurture, and fostered a politicized commitment to tackling social inequalities. A growing scholarly attention to such issues also raised awareness of related concerns around ageing. This was in regards to the highly stigmatized position of older people in Western societies (and elsewhere) as well as the deeply gendered parameters of older age. In a parallel and overlapping fashion, the emergent field of medical anthropology began demonstrating the marked interrelatedness of supposedly discrete categories of the social and the biological, as well as the ways in which health, illness, wellbeing, and healing are culturally embedded systems. Together, feminist theory and the development of medical anthropology helped foster an intellectual environment within which older age itself demanded ethnographic attention. Key pieces in this period include Margaret Clark and Barbara Anderson’s Culture and Aging (1967), Jennie Keith’s Old People New Lives (1977), Barbara Myerhoff’s Number Our Days (1979), and Maria Vesperi’s City of Green Benches (1985).

Dilemmas

Despite more than 3 decades having passed since the research on which they are based was conducted, these ethnographies still provide both important insights into the experiences of older age and instructive lessons in the use of ethnographic methods to study older age. For instance, Keith’s Old People New Lives (1977) is based in a purpose-built residence for retired French construction workers and their wives just to the east of Paris in Bagnolet, France. Her research questions centre on the processes of community formation in this residence at that point in time. She writes eloquently about predicaments presented by her arrival as a 26-year-old American doctoral student wishing to live in and study a residence for retired people. Early on in her research, Keith ‘wrestled with the problem of explaining what I was doing there’ to the residents, wanting to avoid deception at all costs but also having a limited number of suitable social roles available to her to adopt in the residence due to her very young age (1977: 27–8). Ultimately, she described herself to the residents as someone wanting to understand what older people thought of this kind of living arrangement. This was welcomed by the residents, and her research proceeded.
Keith also writes about a dilemma faced by all ethnographers: how to meet people, become immersed in the social life of the fieldwork setting and begin building relationships (1977: 28–33). In her case, it was the centrality of the dining room for lunchtime meals at the residence that initially facilitated her integration. Each ethnographic setting has its own parameters that are locally appropriate for achieving these goals of participant observation. The adaptability of the researcher in perceiving them and integrating into them is often what the success (or otherwise) of the research rests on.

Visibility

A third ethnographic lesson Keith’s research calls attention to is the issue of visibility (1977: 27). Ethnographers are thrust into a highly visible position when they enter the field. This is because they are matter out of place. They often stand out and become themselves a source of social curiosity and inquisition. This, for most novice ethnographers, is an unfamiliar and unsettling experience. Negotiating visibility and treating it with care are essential ethnographic skills, but often not easy ones to contend with. Visibility can serve as a highly valuable way of making contacts and explaining one’s presence in the field. But it can also unwittingly position the researcher in particular social networks that in turn make it difficult to access others, especially if there are strong factions in the fieldsite. Furthermore, while visibility is a common experience among most ethnographers, for ethnographers of older age it can serve as a sharp reminder of just how persistently age-segregated social life can be. In Britain, for example, older and younger people tend to interact regularly only within care- or family-based relationships. There is very little scope in the social imagination for, say, friendship relations whose ages span several decades (Degnen 2012: 140). Thus, a younger researcher among an older research population is rendered visible by virtue of difference in age as well as in difference of life experience. In this case, visibility is simultaneously an aspect of the ethnographic encounter and serves meaningfully as a tool for data collection and analytic reflection on how social difference is constructed, reproduced and experienced in that particular cultural setting.

Alterity

Myerhoff’s work, begun in 1972, is based in a day centre for older Eastern European Jewish people living in Los Angeles. She, too, is interested in how this group of older people created a sense of community in the face of wider social indifference, ‘a counterworld, inventing their own version of what made “the good life’” (1979: 20). Myerhoff focuses on the use of narrative as well as ritual for how meaning and identity are forged by the group. Three years later in 1975, Vesperi started her own ethnographic research in St Petersburg, Florida. Vesperi’s research is concerned with the negative cultural construction of older age, working in a context where city-leaders were trying to reinvent the city’s image and effectively seeking to erase from view the low-income older people who no longer matched this vision. Together, Myerhoff and Vesperi’s monographs bring directly into focus a fourth crucial aspect of ethnography and ageing: alterity. As the centre of anthropological inquiry, ethnographic participant observation has its roots in exploring and accounting for profound cultural difference. This is a task that requires empathy, a willingness to confront one’s own assumptions about the order of the world and to adapt to other ways of perceiving the world. Like Keith, both Myerhoff and Vesperi write about their attempts to enter into the lifeworlds of the older people they work with, but also about their awareness that this is not an entirely foreign world as it might have been in more traditional fieldwork settings. That is to say, ethnographers working in a different cultural setting...
can and do eventually leave the field to return home, whether that be across an ocean or down the road.

An irony at the heart of ethnographic approaches to older age however is that this is a future many researchers will one day live for themselves. Ageing is a shared destination of most people, despite social norms promoting highly stigmatized visions of older people who are portrayed and treated as the Other. Ethnographic accounts of older age help us understand that while ‘our subjects are not ourselves, they are indeed our “selves” as we will become’ (Vesperi 1985: 20). Myerhoff, for her part, writes that ‘identifying with the “Other” […] is an act of imagination, a means for discovering what one is not and will never be. Identifying with what one is now and will be someday is quite a different process’ (1979: 18). Ethnography is attuned to the complexity and messiness of everyday life. Consequently it is well suited to demonstrating detrimental social patterns. This includes, for example, ‘how the most negative aspects of aging have been codified into a normative model for all older people’ (Vesperi 1985: 65) and how older people are often otherized. Ethnographic approaches to ageing, by seeking to put the perspectives and experiences of older people themselves at the centre of inquiry, are a powerful tool for revealing and challenging these processes of otherization and alterity.

A developing field

These early ethnographic contributions by Myerhoff, Keith and Vesperi provide useful reflections by each author on their own work, and in turn help reveal crucial points about ethnographic endeavours on ageing more broadly. Since their ground-breaking efforts, an impressive array of ethnographers has begun exploring ageing. Unsurprisingly many of these researchers have been anthropologists, based in both Western and non-Western settings. This body of work is theoretically, empirically, culturally and geographically wide-ranging. Key authors in the field include Haim Hazan, working on issues of transformed temporality and selfhood in a variety of field sites including an inner-city London day care centre for older Jewish people and a University of the Third Age group in England (1980, 1984, 1996); Sharon Kaufman’s work in the United States on identity, continuity and the self (1986); Andrew Dawson on ageing and post-industrial transformation in the north of England (1990, 2002); Judith Okely’s research in Normandy, France, on classed difference in clubs for older people (1990); Keith et al.’s cross-cultural comparison of ageing in Botswana, Ireland, the United States, and Hong Kong (1994); Susan Pickard in South Wales, UK, on continuity and change over the life course (1995); Dorothy and David Counts’s work with retired North Americans pursuing a nomadic lifestyle as part of the RVing community (1996); Sarah Lamb’s research in West Bengal, India, exploring interconnected Bengali notions of ageing, personhood, social relations, the body and gender (1997, 2000); Charlotte Ikels work in Hong Kong and China on issues around dementia as well as differences between rural and urban settings in terms of intergenerational relations and filial piety (1980, 2002); Susan Rasmussen in Niger with Tuareg people, exploring notions of ageing, the life course and personal destiny (1997); Lawrence Cohen in north India on senility, old age and discourses of modernity (1998); Lisa Cliggett’s ethnographic account that considers the gendered dimensions of what being ‘old’ means for older Gwemba Tonga people in Zambia (2005); Caroline Oliver’s monograph examining the experience and concept of ‘positive ageing’ among older British migrants to Spain, with a particular focus on the identity paradoxes they are confronted by, and therefore the ways in which the life course mediates migrant experiences (2007); and Cathrine Degnen’s research in the north of England in a former coal mining area on the ways in which temporality, narrativity and social memory intersect to shape people’s experiences of ageing in a place that has undergone profound socio-economic transformation (2012).
In addition to the community-based studies above, a significant number of authors have used participant observation in nursing homes (such as Johnson 1971, Gubrium 1975, Shield 1988, Hockey 1990, Savishinsky 1991, Diamond 1992, Henderson and Vesperi 1995, Reed-Danahay 2001), and have trained their ethnographic sights on dementia (including Herskovits 1995, Leibing and Cohen 2006, Chatterji 2008, Taylor 2008). From such modest beginnings, it is thus clear that the ethnographic body of work on ageing now demonstrates an impressive breadth of intellectual inquiry and empirical knowledge, encompassing a wide spectrum of cross-cultural contexts and theoretical perspectives. Furthermore, while anthropology has led the way in regards to establishing ethnographic approaches to ageing, ethnography is itself a method and a perspective on the move. The ethnographic method is one that now greatly extends beyond its original disciplinary base. Researchers in other disciplines have adopted aspects of ethnographic methods in their own work as ageing studies scholars. Notable examples include human geographer Graham Rowles (1983) on the role of place attachment in the maintenance of a sense of identity and belonging in older age; sociologist Pia Kontos’s research on dementia and embodiment (2004); human geographers Peter Hopkins and Rachel Pain on home and experience (2007); and social psychologist Steven Sabat (2001) on personhood and dementia.

Challenges

With its valorization of life as lived and of immersive principles that prioritize first hand experiences, ethnographic research methods are flexible, responsive, and adaptive. This permits the researcher to follow the data across multiple sites of meaning making and through complex social terrains. In turn, as ethnography immerses the researcher directly in the lives and social worlds of fellow human beings, there are a number of ethical issues that ethnographers must be mindful of. This is the case not just in preparation for research and when conducting fieldwork but also when writing, sometimes many years after leaving the field. Primary among these are the responsibilities of researchers towards their research participants to prioritize participants’ wellbeing, to negotiate freely-given informed consent, to guard against harmful consequences of the research, and to protect confidentiality and the anonymity of the research participants (ASA 2011).

Debates about the consequent strengths and weaknesses of such an approach have been well rehearsed elsewhere (see for example Atkinson and Hammersley 2007). These include the subjective and interpretivist qualities of ethnographic research and a tendency to rely on smaller numbers of research participants rather than large data sets. Both can open the method to accusations of non-representativeness. Indeed, it is not a method that suits every research question. It is however without equal as a technique for those seeking to better understand patterns of social and cultural systems of meaning and practice from an emic perspective. However, using ethnographic methods to study older age does present certain dynamics that are distinct to it alone and worth considering in more detail here.

These include, for example, the common expectation that ethnography will occur over a long period of time, often many decades in duration, and across repeat visits. However, for researchers using participant observation to study ageing, this temporal dimension is not always possible to the same extent. This is especially the case when working with individuals who are the ‘oldest old’. Researchers might instead find themselves working sequentially over a period of time with multiple older cohorts. This has the disadvantage of requiring that entirely new research relations be repeatedly established with new individuals, rather than being able to build long-term relations with the same individuals. But, on the other hand, it also means that generational differences may become more apparent to the researcher over time as they move.
from working with one ageing cohort to the next. Alternatively, if the ethnographer’s work on ageing is based within a community study, they may find themselves working 10 or 15 years later after an initial period of research in the same community but with the now aged children of the first cohort of research participants. Individuals who were initially middle-aged during the first period of research would now themselves be entering a new life stage of older age. Such a fieldwork scenario in turn opens up exciting possibilities for tracing the ageing process through socio-historical and personal time.

Another dynamic that is particular to ethnographers of older age is the temporal chasm in life experience between (typically but not always) younger researchers and older research participants. As mentioned above, in an age-segregated society this can present its own challenges, particularly in terms of how the researcher comes to be integrated in the fieldsite given the limited roles usually socially permitted between generations. But this is also a research dynamic that is witnessing modest change due to two factors. The first is the increasingly participatory and co-produced research models of some ethnographers whereby older people are not simply research subjects but also research collaborators. Approaches like this that include older people as co-researchers are part of a move towards greater transparency and accountability in social science. They recognize and seek to redress power dynamics of research by reconfiguring the hierarchical relationship between researcher and researched into a more egalitarian and dialectical model. Collaborative research also promotes space for the experience, knowledge and life priorities of the people being studied to come more clearly to light and inform the research process, unsettling more traditional hierarchies of expertise and knowledge creation.

A second factor is the gradual ageing of an entire cohort of cultural gerontologists, who are now differently able to reflect on the ageing process. Given the subjective and reflexive nature of ethnographic work, the positionality of the individual researcher matters. This includes of course researchers’ own personal relationship with ageing. The accounts of researchers writing in the 2008 *The Journal of Aging Studies* special edition, volume 22(2), offer an instructive example of this. Entitled ‘Coming of Age: Critical Gerontologists Reflect on Their Own Aging, Age Research and the Making of Critical Gerontology’, these authors address precisely this point. While the contributors are not all ethnographers, they write movingly about how research personas and perspectives shift as one ages. This correspondingly inflects both research questions asked and conclusions reached.

Conclusion

Ethnographic approaches to the study of ageing permit unique opportunities to better understand life as lived by older people themselves. Due to the vagaries, contradictions, and messiness of everyday life, ethnographic methods are also time consuming and challenging. Ethnography is demanding, requiring substantial patience, empathy, openness of mind, and a willingness to critique one’s own assumptions. Ageing, once on the fringes of ethnographic inquiry, with older people as an unacknowledged yet deeply significant source of data, has begun to receive the sustained and systematic attention it deserves. The ethnographic literature on ageing now spans a substantial range of both cultural settings and theoretical perspectives. This has added substantially to the contribution ageing studies scholars are making to the state of knowledge about the life course.

Using ethnographic methods to study ageing presents some challenges particular to it. These include issues of access to the field, visibility, and alterity, and fewer opportunities to conduct longitudinal research with the same cohort. It can also include a temporal chasm between researcher and researched, a factor that is especially prominent in highly age-segregated societies.
Such issues in turn raise the question for ageing studies of how social and cultural theory might be developed in new directions if experiences of ageing (both of research participants and researchers) were used to inform theoretical perspectives on social life more widely. Ethnographic methods can help drive such an agenda forward as they offer a critical perspective on social realities and how these come to be. They present a counterfoil to partial visions of older age that frame ageing and older people simply as Other. This is because an ethnographic approach seeks to understand life and meaning from within, refocusing attention onto older people as people first and foremost, attuned to all the complexity, diversity, and vitality that this represents.

References


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