

Memories materialized: exploring the narratives of people with dementia through dress



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Narratives, ageing and dementia

- Challenging static views of ageing and dementia (Hockey and James 1993; Kitwood 1997)
- Dementia research – able to recall ‘details of events long past’, emotionally significant (McColgan 2004; Westius, Anderson and Kallenberg 2009)
- Performative and relational elements (Hyden and Oruluv 2009)
- Embodiment, ‘appearance biographies’ (Ward and Campbell 2014)

Clothing and life-narratives

- Clothes as powerful memory objects (Ash 1996) and biographical objects (Hoskins 1998)
- Significance of clothing for narratives (Twigg 2013; Woodward 2007)
- ‘Dress stories’ as a method of inquiry (Weber and Mitchell 2004)
- Material objects as memory prompts for people with dementia (Schweitzer, Bruce, & Gibson 2008)

The dementia and dress project

- ESRC funded study with Julia Twigg (PI)
- Ethnographic and qualitative methods
- **Sites:** 3 Kent care homes, 15 domestic settings
- **Sample:** 32 case studies of people with dementia, 28 care home workers, 29 family carers and relatives

Kept clothes

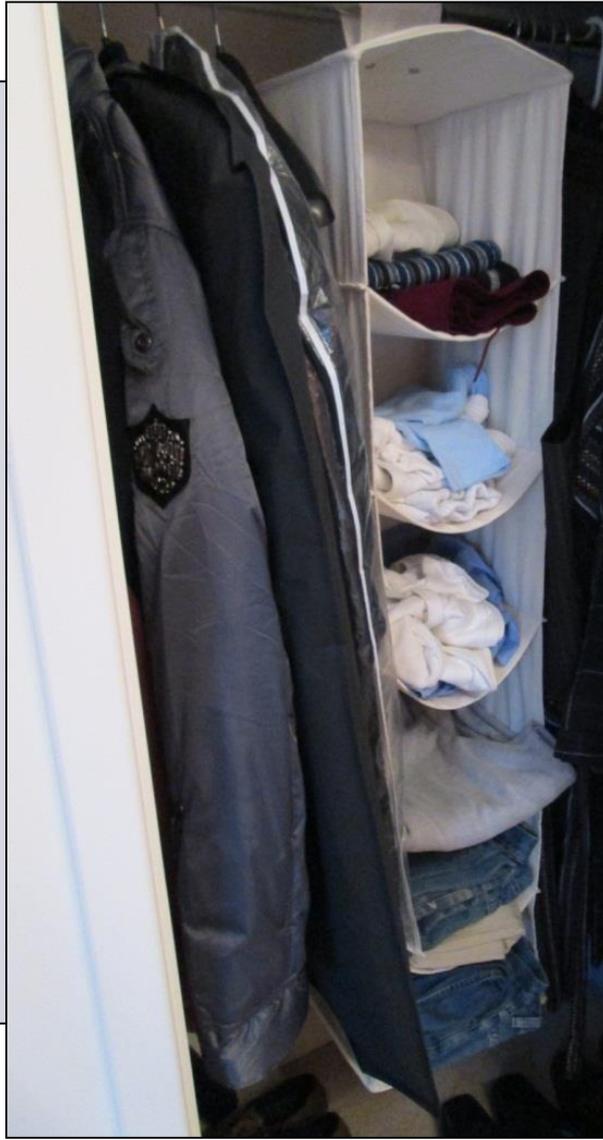
- Retained but rarely worn - histories inscribed in them, aspects of the self (Banim and Guy 2001: 206).

'In contemporary Western societies, memories are often conceived as possessions: we "keep" or "preserve" our memories almost as though they are objects in a personal museum.' Hallam and Hockey (2001: 3)

- Masculinities – work clothes
- Women – ‘special clothes’, clothes they had made themselves – retaining an identity in the object (Belk 1988: 150)

“That row there are some old working clothes which I’m forbidden to throw out! [...] Occasionally sometimes when he’s gardening he’ll put them on, makes him feel like he’s back at work.”

[Jane, carer, age 64]



Transitions to care - 'small things' (Hamlett and Hoskins 2013)



Discarded clothes

- Discarded clothes - biographical rupture (Woodward 2007: 52) or disruption (Bury 1982)
- Disjuncture between the embodied and narrative self (Banim and Guy 2001)
- Maggie's Christmas dress
- Changing bodies, transitions to care

Forgotten clothes

- Clothes not recognised, forgotten and abandoned

‘If objects are made to stand in for memory, their decay or destruction is taken to imply forgetting’ (Forty 1999: 4)

- Most recent garments most likely to be forgotten, less emotionally salient (Westius, Anderson and Kallenberg 2009)

Absent clothes

- Clothes long discarded but ‘vividly recounted’ through story telling (Woodward 2007).
- Conjured up through the ‘sensory imagination’ (Mason and Davies 2009: 601)
- Recalling aspects of the self

'I used to have a lame` jacket `n all [...] that used to sort of light up when I was in a room, they'd all stare because it sort of shone. You how it does, lame`? [...] I liked it and I like that lame`...it glittered, it stood out. Do get me? Sort of shone, like. It did! It's true.'

[Rita, care home resident, age 86]

Curating narratives (Crichton and Koch 2007)- stories about...

- Family carers telling stories with, about and for the person (Crichton and Koch 2007)
- Care-workers – translation into embodied practice, ‘re-storying’ identities (Holst, Edberg and Hallberg 1999)

‘Well mum always has tights. She never wears high heel shoes [...] she’ll always have a scarf [...] she never wears her jewellery except for Sunday.

Disjunctures and change

‘Everyone that knew my dad; “Ooh, look at Harry. Isn’t he smart.” [...] You know, because he always has been.’

‘I’ve never seen my dad scruffy. Never. Until that day I turned up in the home and he’s sitting there in screwed up clothes which really hurt me.’

(Melissa, family carer)

Conclusions

- Dress as a tool for storytelling, remembering and forgetting
- Contribution to biographical approaches to ageing/dementia
- Tensions between continuity and change
- Implications for practice

If you want to read more...

- Twigg, J. and Buse, C.E. (2013). Dress, dementia and the embodiment of identity. *Dementia*, 12(3): 326-336
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<http://clothingandage.org/>

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