**Late Life Creativity: methods for understanding arts-generated social capital in the lives of older people**

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The concept of social capital relates, in essence, to people’s relationships in families, communities and other social networks. It is often described as the ‘social glue’ that holds people together through bonds of trust, mutual support, sense of belonging and shared identities. The links between social connectedness and health and well-being are well recognised, and in the context of an increasing focus on addressing the damaging impacts of loneliness in later life, it is valuable to understand how social capital may be developed and experienced. The key focus of this chapter is on examining the ways in which qualitative research methods, including creative, arts-based approaches, may be effective in both exploring and generating social capital in later life. In particular, I emphasise the crucial role of storytelling and the ways in which the reciprocity of sharing stories can in itself be seen as a distinctive aspect of arts-generated social capital.

Much of the research on social capital has focused on theoretical understandings and on how it may be measured. There is a lack of qualitative understandings of how people actually *experience* social capital. Moreover, whilst there is recognition that arts participation can generate social capital, little is known about the potentially distinctive nature of such social capital. In this chapter, I highlight some of the ways in which my Doctoral research (completed in 2011) aimed to address such gaps in our understanding through examining the meanings that older people attach to their participation in group arts activities throughout their lives. The research did not offer any prescriptive definitions of ‘art’ or ‘creativity’: thus, the design of the project aimed to yield insights into older people’s own understandings of what constitutes ‘the creative’.

The chapter begins by introducing the concept of social capital in greater detail, and discussing the rationale for the research design and methods for the PhD study, which was based in a case study town and was influenced by life course perspectives and narrative methods. The methodological approach is outlined in detail, and I then discuss some of ways in which using a social capital lens to analyse people’s experiences offered new insights into the nature of arts-generated social capital in later life.

The chapter will also highlight some of my more recent research, as well as some relevant literature, to reflect on the potential of creative, art-based research methods to explore and generate older people’s social capital. I draw upon my experience as Senior Researcher on an AHRC Connected Communities project called ‘And the Doctor Said....’ (2012-14), which used creative writing as a research method to explore people’s experiences of healthcare in North Staffordshire. I highlight ways in which people’s writings included some implicit links to the concept of social capital, and also discuss some of the evaluation comments, which suggested that social capital was being generated through the research workshops.

Finally, I refer to two participatory research projects with older people identified in the literature – one involving photography and the other involving film. Again, my aim is to highlight some of the ways in which people’s stories offer implicit insights into people’s experiences of social capital over time, and also the ways in which the use of art-based research methods may also generate social capital. I discuss some ethical considerations in relation to creative research methods, before offering concluding reflections on opportunities and challenges.

**Social Capital: Methodological Gaps?**

 Social capital is generally viewed as having originated in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and was popularised by Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone* (2000). Putnam (2000:19) describes social capital as ‘connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’.

As John Field (2008:1) notes, the essence of social capital can be summed up in the words ‘relationships matter’:

By making connections with one another, and keeping them going over time, people are able to work together to achieve things they either could not achieve by themselves, or could only achieve with great difficulty. People connect through a series of networks and they tend to share common values with other members of these networks; to the extent that these networks constitute a resource, they may be seen as forming a kind of capital.

Despite this simple definition, social capital is a complex concept; the way that it may function in people’s everyday lives is poorly understood, and there is a range of different meanings and emphases between disciplines.[[1]](#footnote-1) Moreover, little is known about the ways in which social capital that is generated by specific types of activities may be seen as distinctive. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore such complexities in any depth, the conceptual confusion means that the emphasis in social capital research tends to be on theoretical discussions about the nature of the concept, along with the analysis of large scale survey data in order to try to measure levels of social capital and to suggest changes over time and according to geographical location.

Putnam’s focus (as a political scientist) is on a perceived decline of social capital since the 1950s. He argues that this is due to a decline in membership of civic organisations, which results in disengagement from political involvement, which in turn is problematic for democracy. However, one of the key criticisms of Putnam’s work on social capital is that it is unclear as to *how* involvement in voluntary associations actually generates social capital (Mohan and Mohan, 2002). Blackshaw and Long (2005) similarly suggest that his theoretical position is limited by his lack of qualitative insights opting instead for multiple statistical indicators that secure the attention of policy makers. Fukuyama (1997) also emphasises the need for a qualitative dimension to the measurement of social capital, and notes that there is no consensual means of judging the qualitative differences of existing empirical data. Whilst it may be important to measure levels of social capital, especially from a policy perspective, there is also a case for developing a greater understanding of its practical implications for individuals and communities.

In response to some of the gaps that have been identified, Johnston and Percy-Smith (2003:331) offered a research agenda that helped to shape both my PhD research and later studies:

What is required instead is a series of intensive, community-based studies which (as far as is possible) start with a very limited number of hypotheses about the nature, characteristics and consequences of social capital which can then be tested through in-depth, predominantly qualitative, community-based research. A starting point might be an account of what constitutes ‘successful’ or ‘effective’ communities...an understanding would need to be developed of the context – social, historical and economic – of those communities and the perceptions and insights of people who live in those communities.

Having thus identified the rationale for a qualitative investigation into social capital, I will now outline the significance of the concept in relation to arts engagement in later life.

**Arts, Ageing and Social Capital**

In literature relating to ageing, issues of social capital are more commonly implicit than explicit. For example, much has been written about social relationships in later life, and about the need for support. There is wide recognition that for older people in particular, opportunities to forge social relationships may not be as widely available as they used to be, due to changes in the nature of communities (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005). However, whilst it is recognised that social capital is a resource that accumulates throughout people’s lives, life-course perspectives do not generally feature in research into social capital in later life.

Of the literature focusing explicitly on older people’s social capital there is again arguably something of a focus on their need for support (see for example Gray, 2009). There is also some recognition that older people may have accumulated valuable stocks of social capital that can be developed to the benefit of themselves and others. Heenan (2010) undertook qualitative research amongst older people living in farming communities in Northern Ireland, and found that older people were both producers and consumers of social capital. Heenan identified community engagement, trust and reciprocity as the three main components, and emphasised the need to pay more attention to reciprocity, which is an important issue in the lives of older people, and relates to notions of equality and liberty.

There is also a lack of academic literature that directly addresses the links between arts engagement and social capital. Sometimes the links are implicit when examining the range of personal and social benefits to be gained from arts participation (see for example Matarasso 1997). The *Better Together Report* (2000) was published as an outcome of the Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America, led by Putnam, which focused in developing strategies to increase community engagement and social capital. A whole chapter of the report was devoted to the arts and social capital, and it suggested that ‘The enjoyable nature of the arts makes them perhaps the most promising, if neglected, means of building social capital’(5).

However, little progress has since been made on increasing our understanding of the relationship between arts participation and social capital, and even the limited policy focus on the issue (see for example Daly, 2005), has not continued as the concept of social capital largely disappeared from political discourse during the coalition government. In a study investigating cultural value in terms of social capital, Vella-Burrows et al. (2014) suggest that whilst there is some consensus that arts and cultural organisations have a role to play in generating social capital and improving health and well being, there is generally ‘a paucity of relevant evidence’ to support their understanding (Vella-Burrows *et al*, 2014:40).

The past decade has seen a burgeoning interest in later-life creativity, from both research and practice perspectives. The Baring Foundation has been highly influential in funding arts work with older people, since launching a new funding programme in 2009 to support arts organisations working in a participative way with older people in the UK. The funding programme was initially informed by a report by David Cutler (2009), which analyses 120 case studies of arts organisations working with older people. In highlighting the value of arts participation for older people, it focuses on two inter-related dimensions of health (mental and physical) and personal and community relations. Thus, the implication again is that social capital is of great significance. Most recently, Age UK’s Index of Wellbeing in Later Life (Green *et al*, 2017) identified creative and cultural participation as the most significant indicator of well-being in later life; but also that other indicators, such as having a large social network and being involved in social activities, were strongly related to such participation. This reinforces the strong rationale for undertaking research into the nature of arts generated social capital in later life.

**About the Research: Designing a Methodology**

The methodology for my PhD study was thus shaped by the factors outlined above: the significant relationship between arts engagement and social capital in later life, and the potential for further understanding of the nature of arts-generated social capital and how it is actually *experienced.* As noted earlier, Johnston and Percy-Smith (2003:331) made a convincing case for ‘intensive, community-based studies’ to explore such questions. I thus adopted a case study methodology, which is recognised as a valuable approach when seeking to understand complex social phenomena (Yin, 2009), enabling detailed exploration of the relationship between people’s individual experiences and the context in which they are located. A small town (with a population of around 25,000) in the English Midlands was chosen, and given the pseudonym Greentown. Reasons for choosing this particular town as a case study included the fact that it has clearly defined geographical boundaries, an ageing population, a mix of affluent and deprived wards, and a range of different arts groups aimed at older people.

Having selected the context for the research, the methodological gaps in relation to arts engagement and social capital led me to see the potential of life course perspectives and in-depth qualitative interviews to generate further understandings, by encouraging people to reflect on their arts engagement throughout their lives. I considered that using narrative approaches, in which people are able to identify the issues that they felt were important and to take greater control of the interview process, might also help to facilitate such enquiry.

In a study that revolves around people’s subjective interpretations of their experiences, qualitative approaches uniquely offer people the space and time to reflect on their personal meanings (including their interpretations of ‘creativity’), to express those meanings in their own words and focus on the issues that they see as important. Moreover, the approach addresses issues raised by Wenger (2003), who warns of the dangers of becoming overly preoccupied with age when conducting research with older people and argues that it should not be assumed that everything that is under consideration can be viewed as age-related. Qualitative approaches and life course perspectives enable us to look at issues more widely, by inviting participants to identify the issues that *they* see as significant, whether they are age-related or not:

Rather, the focus is on the implications of the passing of *time* for individuals, on the implications and experience of being at a particular point in time, and the links between earlier and later points in time as well as the links between social structures and individual experiences.

(Jamieson and Victor, 2002:11)

As Jamieson and Victor also note, by understanding people’s past experiences through life course approaches, we are more able to understand their wishes, feelings and activities in their later lives.

The study’s research questions reflected a broad and wide-ranging approach, whilst nevertheless being designed to capture issues relating to the nature of people’s experiences of arts-generated social capital throughout their lives:

* What is the nature of older people’s engagement with collective arts activities during their life course?
* What are the factors (e.g. age, cohort, gender, health and social class) that may impact upon people’s engagement in such collective arts activities?
* How do people’s close personal relationships impact on their arts participation?
* What is the relationship between individual arts participation and participation in collective arts activities in later life?
* What are the links between arts participation and social capital?

By adopting life course perspectives, I aimed to take a broad approach to understanding people’s participation, focusing less on activities led by professional artists and including the types of creative activities that may be significant in terms of people’s everyday experiences throughout their lives. Such activities often tend to lack value and recognition, so to focus on them in qualitative research offers recognition of their importance.

The methodology was also significantly shaped by the influence of narrative approaches. In essence, narrative research focuses on the lives of individuals; the researcher asks one or more people to provide stories about their lives. Riessman (1993) highlights the fact that there is no overall theory of narrative; rather, there is conceptual diversity (again, often reflecting the focus of different disciplines). However, a number of common themes can be seen to run through research that pays attention to narratives in participants’ accounts:

1. “An interest in people’s lived experiences and an appreciation of the temporal nature of that experience.
2. A desire to empower research participants and allow them to contribute to determining what are the most salient themes in an area of research.
3. An interest in process and change over time.
4. An interest in the self and representations of the self.
5. An awareness that the researcher him- or herself is also a narrator.”

 (Elliott 2005:6)

Ruth Ray (2007) cites Bruner (1986) in distinguishing between paradigmatic knowing and narrative knowing. Paradigmatic knowing relies on observation, description, and reason; deriving empirical ‘truths’ – whereas narrative knowing emphasises people, feelings and relationships, with the aim of deriving personal or emotional ‘truths’. Narrative approaches have often been used in the context of life history interviews, and ‘narrative gerontology’ focuses on older people’s interpretations of lived experience. By adopting what Holstein and Gubrium (1995) refer to as an ‘active interview’ methodology, the interview is a dynamic process of reflecting on the meanings of experiences and thus generating new knowledge.

Ray (2007) suggests that narrative gerontology can lead to social change; that when narrative possibilities are limited, people’s sense of their own possibilities will be limited, but that by sharing alternative stories people may become aware of new possibilities, which can have a transforming and liberating effect. In living out the transformative narratives, people can begin to challenge social norms. At the same time, as with any qualitative research, it is always important to recognise that the participation of the interviewer in the process of reflection challenges traditional understandings of validity and reliability and means that it is vitally important for the interviewer to reflect on those ways in which they may have influenced the participant’s account.

**Doing the research**

Greentown lies in a high shallow valley, surrounded by arable fields and countryside and is around ten miles from the nearest city conurbation. Following the decline of local industries, (coal, steel and fabrics), and the resulting lack of employment opportunities, the town generally has an ageing population. Most of the arts and cultural opportunities in the town are led by volunteers. There is little in the way of purpose-built accommodation, so venues include the Town Hall, the library, community centres, churches and schools. There is a branch of the U3A in the town, established in 2005, and a variety of other arts activities and organisations, often typically attracting older participants.

Participants for the study were recruited through a range of groups, including choirs, dancing, amateur dramatics and arts and crafts groups. By involving people who were actively engaged in their community, sometimes in leadership positions, there was a focus on understanding ‘what works’: an approach that challenges the common deficit approach to research with older people. The interviews took place between March and October 2008. A total of 24 participants took part, including 8 men and 16 women, and aged between 60 and 87. The semi-structured interviews were developed around a number of open-ended themes including: the nature of people’s arts participation (past and present); the impact of key life course transitions; what role people’s arts participation plays when they deal with life’s challenges and setbacks; motivations and barriers to participation; whether creativity (however defined) changes over time, and the impact of relationships and of belonging to particular communities or neighbourhoods. Whilst the shortest interview lasted 45 minutes, they were typically much longer, up to around three hours. Interviews were audio recorded, fully transcribed and thematically analysed using NVivo software.

**Findings**

Whilst the main focus of this chapter is methodological, it is useful to highlight some of the ways in which the design of the research contributed to greater understanding of the nature of arts-based social capital, especially in later life. Through qualitative research methods, the findings offer new perspectives on arts and ageing. In particular, the influence of narrative approaches resulted in a focus on those issues that are personally significant to participants. Derek (aged 60), for example, commented that during the interview he had thought about things that he had not previously considered, such as why he had been involved in arts activities, what his music meant to him, and why he was involved in the community. Discussions of what constitutes ‘art’ and ‘creativity’ focused partly on ‘what counts’ and the activities that people included in their narratives varied greatly. They would often look to me to confirm or reject particular activities as being of interest, and the interviews sometimes seemed to leave people with an increased realisation of their own creative achievements; this is reflective again of the taken-for-granted nature of people’s arts participation as part of everyday life. There was often discussion of the ways in which particular creative skills were no longer routinely taught, and the value of sharing those skills with younger generations, whether in families or through volunteering. Creativity was also sometimes expressed in terms of identity, for example Monica (aged 71), who described the ways in which she is always drawn to artistic and creative people as a result of her upbringing.

Applying life-course perspectives also revealed the complex long-term factors that impact upon people’s arts engagement. This included the key roles played by people’s childhood experiences at home, school and church, as well as in some cases their employment experiences as adults. It was also clear that there were some important gender and class differences in the experiences of this group of older people, and these in turn were significantly influenced by historical context. In particular, the findings emphasised that working-class culture encouraged various forms of arts engagement, including music, singing, and domestic crafts. Participants’ lives were often influenced by limited educational and career opportunities and traditional gendered expectations, especially in relation to women as homemakers. This continued to strongly influence the types of arts activities that most of the women took part in (Reynolds: in press). In their later life, these factors, along with others such as time availability, health, transport and costs, could all been seen to impact upon people’s arts engagement.

The qualitative approach was also effective in highlighting the crucial importance of issues of identity in helping to understand the nature of people’s engagement in group arts activities throughout their lives. This in turn supports the usefulness of continuity theory (Havighurst, 1968; Atchley, 1989) in explaining the ways in which people’s life-course participation can be seen as logical and coherent. It becomes particularly significant for those adapting to ill-health, and it was notable that people’s arts engagement could be viewed as a positive strategy in relation to both their use of time, and their sense of identity, in the face of health problems.

Analysing people’s arts engagement from a social capital perspective highlighted the critical importance of their relationships in this context. This included both their close personal relationships and their social relationships. People’s arts engagement could be seen to have its historical roots in a range of communities, including communities of place, work-based communities, faith communities, and communities of interest. Examining the role of group arts activities in shaping people’s relationships, and some of the outcomes from them, reveals new understandings of the nature of the arts-generated social capital of older people. In particular, some arts activities (e.g. singing) involve intrinsic mutual support, and overall, a wide range of both practical and emotional support could be seen to stem from group arts activities (Reynolds 2015; Reynolds (in press)).

Some of the specific nature of that support is very much shaped by the artistic nature of the activity. This might include the sharing of expensive equipment or the cost of a magazine subscription, and sharing creative skills (both within the group sessions and sometimes at each other’s homes). In terms of emotional support, it might be the encouragement of the group when trying out a new skill, which developed people’s confidence and self-belief. For people whose narratives emphasise their identity as being someone who is busy and productive, the fact that the support takes place in a context of learning and achievement is important. Both men and women referred to the different kind of interaction and support that can be seen in all-male environments (e.g. a male voice choir) and all-female environments (e.g. a patchwork and quilting group).

There were also numerous examples of the ways in which practical and emotional support was offered to people during periods of ill health. This might include lifts to the groups for people with limited mobility or to hospitals for partners who don’t drive. Again, the nature of the activities could shape that support: for example, one participant who was recovering at home after a major operation had her ‘art homework’ dropped off by another U3A art group member, and a male voice choir member was visited in hospital by a large group of fellow choristers, who all sang around his hospital bed!

This supports Paulson’s (2011) work on dance groups for older people which she describes as ‘therapeutic communities’, based on the ways in which they offered social support and exhibited concern for members affected by illness. Moreover, my research demonstrated that arts groups (most notably choirs) can function as a community in both a literal and a metaphorical sense (Reynolds 2015). This contributes further evidence in support of previous research on dance groups (Cooper and Thomas (2002); Paulson (2010))which uses the concept of ‘communitas’ to denote the strong sense of solidarity, bonding and egalitarian community spirit in dance groups. Effectively, the collective act of dancing (or singing) becomes an enactment of community itself.

People’s arts engagement could be linked to their sense of approaching ageing in a positive way, with themes such as ‘being a lifelong learner’, ‘being sociable’, ‘being a performer’ ‘being busy and practical’ and ‘being a volunteer’ all being examples of the positive narratives that people developed around their self-identity. By analysing the ways in which people explain the meanings that they attach to their participation in group arts activities throughout their lives, and by considering the factors that impact on such engagement, I conclude that ‘resourceful ageing’ (UN 1999) is a valuable concept for gerontologists. In response to demographic changes and increased numbers of older people, it is important to explore the factors that might make the experience of ageing more positive.

Considering the resources to which people have access in later life moves beyond problematic notions of ‘successful’ and ‘active’ ageing, by recognising that older people do not operate on a level playing field, all equally able to take decisions that enable them to age ‘successfully’. Rather, they are affected by their life-course experiences and by a range of structural factors, which are influenced by a range of policy decisions. They are also affected by the environments in which they live and the opportunities for social engagement therein. It would be easy to adopt an uncritically upbeat and positive portrayal of ageing when addressing the topic of arts and creativity in relation to older people. However, examining the issue from the perspective of the resources that participants can be seen to have accumulated, allows us to take a more realistic approach that recognises the impact of inequalities and of other challenges that may be faced.

**The Potential of Creative Research Methods**

Since completing my PhD (in 2011), I have gone on to undertake research using a range of creative, arts-based methods, working in partnership with artists and creative practitioners (see for example Webster et al. 2014; Reynolds et al. 2014; Ray et al. 2017). My motivation for doing so is reflected in the words of Holstein and Minkler (2007:22), who suggest that we need to employ a wide range of research methods in order to try and gain greater understandings of ageing, and that we should not demand broadly generalisable data but be prepared to prioritise understanding over control:

Methodological bricolage means not ruling out knowledge that is gained from personal narratives, fiction, poetry, film, qualitative investigations, philosophical enquiries, participatory action research and any other method of enquiry we may discover that yields insights into fundamental questions about how, and why, we experience old age in very particular ways.

Whilst my research has not been focused exclusively on issues of ageing and social capital, it has undoubtedly highlighted the potential of creative methods in addressing these topics. In particular, creative methods further build on narrative, storytelling approaches to explore people’s experiences and the nature of human connection:

Telling and listening to stories is at the heart of social and cultural life. Much of what we understand as personhood, identity, intimacy, secrecy, experience, belief, history, and common sense turns on the exchange of stories between people.

(Narayan and George 2003:463)

Through recognising the powerful role of storytelling within societies, we begin to see the potential of a range of creative methods, including participatory visual methods, for exploring issues of social capital across the life course and within particular geographical and organisational contexts. In the following examples, I am going to discuss creative writing, photography and film making, as examples of such participatory methods. I would also draw readers’ attention to the value of drama and theatre making methodologies, as explored by my colleagues Prof. Miriam Bernard and Dr Michelle Rickett in Chapter 7.

In highlighting the potential of creative writing, I will reflect upon my own experiences working on a project called ‘And the Doctor Said...’ Examples of photography and film making are drawn from literature. In each example, including ‘And the Doctor Said...’ it is important to note that there was no explicit focus in the original research on the concept of social capital, but I would suggest that the studies nevertheless point to the potential of creative methods in exploring older people’s social capital in ways that are meaningful to participants. Furthermore, as noted previously, I will demonstrate that the methods have further potential to generate social capital in their own right.

I was a member of the research team for the ‘And the Doctor Said....’ project whilst working as a Senior Researcher at Staffordshire University: the study piloted the use of creative writing as a research method for exploring people’s lifetime experiences of health, illness and medicine in North Staffordshire. A series of workshops led by creative writers, playwrights and storytellers took place during 2013 in various community venues in and around Stoke-on-Trent. Through creative writing, participants shared, reflected on and wrote about their health experiences. Participants were not all older people, but rather encompassed a wide age range. Groups included a mixed group of teenaged Mums and older women; a group of women from Voices of Experience: a mutual support group for women who have experienced domestic abuse, and two open groups comprising adults of various ages, including older people.

This highly participatory community research project applied principles of co-production: all of the writings were shared (with the consent of individual participants) in a book of the project (Webster et al. 2014); an exhibition of writing, audio recordings, photographs, film and even pottery painted with extracts from people’s stories was developed and exhibited in local venues. Participants were invited to launch events, at which some people were willing to read their poems or extracts from their stories.

The project was a ‘Connected Communities’ project (funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council), and thus focused on achieving new insights into the nature of community over time, and on connecting academic and community expertise. It generated diverse, interesting, and poignant creative writings, some of which include an implicit focus on issues relating to social capital, such as relationships, sources of support, and resilience. Moreover, they include life course perspectives and are rooted in a particular geographical area, which we have seen is particularly pertinent in studies of social capital.

Participants completed evaluation questionnaires, which included both closed and open questions. The success of the approach in both exploring and generating social capital could be seen in some of the qualitative responses. One of the participants, for example, was encouraged to attend by the fact that “it was a workshop specifically for women, and I was part of a small group of women whom I knew to be supportive of each other.” People valued the opportunity to share their stories, and the affirmation that came from doing so in a supportive and encouraging environment. This could be transformative for some:

*The freedom – the confidence that came with others reading my work and listening positively/constructively. I found the experience affirming...it was good fun with a serious outcome. Gave me some purpose and ideas on how to begin writing. I wrote prose – a first since school days.*

*Getting to know people and getting the confidence in reading my story out.*

Moreover, some people’s motivation in telling their stories was to make an impact, both in terms of challenging other people’s perceptions and helping to influence policy and practice. Arthur W. Frank (2013) writes compellingly about the value of thinking *with* stories rather than thinking *about* them, and how this can help professionals to reflect on their practice through recognising ill people’s stories and understanding what they represent. He also highlights what may perhaps be seen as another distinctive aspect of art-generated social capital: the way in which sharing stories is underpinned by reciprocity and mutual support:

Storytelling is *for* an other just as much as it is for oneself. In the reciprocity that is storytelling, the teller offers herself as guide to the other’s self-formation. The other’s receipt of that guidance not only recognises but *values* the teller. The moral genius of storytelling is that each, teller and listener, enters the space of the story *for* the other. Telling stories in postmodern times, and perhaps in all times, attempts to change one’s own life by affecting the lives of others.

(Frank, 2013: 17-18)

Stories can also be told through sharing and discussing photographs that are meaningful to people, and again the use of photography as a participatory research method can generate changes in communities. Photovoice - a qualitative research technique involving participants in recording and reflecting on their community through photography - is increasingly popular in participatory research, but has not been extensively used in research with older people. Novek *et al*. (2012) examined the application of photovoice in researching age-friendly community characteristics in four communities in Manitoba, Canada. Participants took up to 16 photographs that they felt were significant in terms of age-friendly communities. They reflected on their approach through keeping a journal, and then participated in an individual one-hour interview with researchers. Three priority photographs were chosen and used to compile a list of key issues within each community. Focus groups were then held in each community to discuss these issues, identify priorities and action plan for community improvements. Of relevance in terms of our social capital lens, participants were encouraged to photograph not only tangible features of their physical environment, but also less tangible aspects of their communities, such as social aspects. The authors suggest that participants were successful in addressing this aim:

While the results indicate that it is easier to depict the physical environment, many participants found creative ways to capture less tangible aspects of life, illustrating themes such as the social environment, independence, community history, respect and participation. Participants brought their cameras indoors, shedding light on otherwise hidden aspects of their lives. These intimate portraits of seniors’ lives provided emotionally powerful material documenting a range of experiences including social isolation, family relationships and the day-to-day challenges of living alone.

(Novek *et al*., 2012: 459)

One of a relatively small number of examples of a participatory approach to film-making with older people is a study carried out in long-term social care with 10 people with Alzheimer-type dementia (Ludwin & Capstick ,2015; Capstick & Ludwin, 2015). Participants in this study were selected on the basis of concern about their low levels of social engagement at the outset of the study, and the study aimed to assess the impact of the film-making process on the well-being and social participation of participants. Again, the concept of social capital is implicit in the authors’ accounts of the stories that people told, particularly in terms of the communities that people have lived in and belonged to. For example, they note that:

Participants frequently drew on concepts such as neighbourliness, community values or personal determination to explain how they had met, and continue to meet, [life’s] challenges.

(Capstick & Ludwin 2015: 158)

Moreover, the process of co-producing research through the exchange of stories again suggests that social capital was generated by the actual process of the research. It required reciprocity, especially between the researchers and the participants, and this could be seen to challenge some typical assumptions about people living with dementia:

The process of fieldwork, particularly this type of ethnographic work, means that our interactions are not just about the research agenda as it is laid out, but that the process inevitably, necessarily, and ethically becomes a very porous, human interaction. Here, the encounters took on a reciprocal quality, as (often in response to questions from participants) we shared aspects of our own lives and experiences with participants... sometimes, a nurturing, caregiving dynamic arose, where people we worked with were seeking to encourage and support us in our endeavors. This counters the all-too-often held assumption that equates dementia with incapacity to relate to other people and their needs and a consequent inability to create intersubjective meanings.

(Ludwin & Capstick 2015: 33)

This quote also highlights some of the ways in which participatory approaches and creative methods may address the power imbalance between researchers and participants, particularly in comparison to traditional top-down research frameworks. However, researchers undertaking such approaches will still need to address ethical problems. In *Creative Research Methods in the Social Sciences,* Helen Kara (2015) explores ethical issues in some depth. Kara suggests that whilst people who are new to ethics may anticipate a ‘top down’ approach, involving clear rules and guidelines that are applicable to different research situations, more experience tends to bring greater recognition of the need for a more ‘bottom up’ approach. Whilst emphasising the ethical absolutes, such as not causing harm to participants, she also highlights the ‘grey areas’ and the potential for assessing each project ‘in its own, unique terms and context’ (48). This certainly resonates with my own experiences, particularly in relation to arts-based research. One of the key issues, for example, is the ways in which creative writing, films and photographs challenge traditional guidelines regarding anonymity of participants, especially when people wish to claim ownership of their stories and of their creative work.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted a number of small-scale research projects that offer, nonetheless, important and far-reaching insights into the potential of qualitative, participatory and creative research methods for understanding and generating older people’s social capital. A key focus of the chapter has been on the exchange of stories, and I have suggested that such reciprocity may be seen as a distinctive feature of arts-generated social capital. Arts-based research methods offer a valuable way of further building on the narrative approaches that often underpin qualitative interviews. Whilst there is clearly a need for further research that engages with increased numbers and diversity of participants, I would argue that art-based methods may be valuable in exploring the development of older people’s social capital over time, in ways that are shaped by older people themselves. In addition, they appear to have further potential in terms of effecting change through the research activities themselves. The nature of that change requires evaluation as an integral part of the research process. It also necessitates critical reflection on the part of researchers, especially in relation to ethical considerations. Effective co-production involves particular skills from researchers (with limited opportunities for formal training), and can be both rewarding and challenging.

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Acknowledgements

‘And the Doctor Said....’ (Medical Histories: Creating Health Narratives) was funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AH/J006017/1). Research team also comprised: Mark Webster (Principal Investigator, Staffordshire University); Prof. Alannah Tomkins (Co-Investigator, Keele University) and Dr Geoff Walton. The research team worked in partnership with writers, Deborah McAndrew, Maria Whatton, Dave Reeves and Chrissie Hall.

1. For example, sociologists tend to emphasise the individual character and benefits of a variety of social networks, whilst political scientists stress the civic community aspects of social capital (Halpern 2005:50). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)