

INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND THE (GOOD) OLD LIFE: PHENOMENOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENTS WITH
ANTHROPOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY AND ART.

PANEL ABSTRACT (Discussants Doug Hollan, Bernhard Leistle)

What can we learn about intersubjectivity and aging as universal human conditions through ethnographic, philosophical and artistic projects that take seriously the diversity of ways in which old age is lived and experienced? What roles do kin, friend and care relations play in achieving good old lives, when people are aging under challenging and uncertain life conditions? And how may a philosophical attention to intersubjectivity and old age give ethnographic and artistic studies more phenomenological depth and theoretical insight?

These are key questions that frame an on-going comparative research project from which the panel papers have emerged. While there is already burgeoning research on the good life in old age framed as successful and healthy aging, as well as critical gerontological and anthropological work on inequality and the social construction of old age, the papers in this panel depart, theoretically, from a rather different direction. Phenomenology provides a conceptual framework for exploring old age from an interdisciplinary and comparative perspective in a wide range of local settings characterized by large diversities in available cultural, social and material resources. This panel also exhibits the interdisciplinary nature of this project, which puts anthropology, philosophy, and art in dialogue.

The ethnographic presentations explore the intersubjective ambiguities of care surrounding aging in multiple settings: among demented and institutionalized elderly in Denmark, Banyole elderly in Uganda who are highly dependent on the care of kin, and Kirgisz elderly left behind by their migrating children. The art presentation explores how to express old age and its intimate other imagistically within the wordless and non-linear space of a drawing, asking if drawings of inconclusive figures might be able to feature simultaneously strength and vulnerability, isolation and community, self and other? Finally, the philosophical paper presents a phenomenological perspective that privileges the 'inter' in intersubjectivity in a theoretical exploration of care relationships in old age. By bringing the voices of ethnographic interlocutors in conversation with art and philosophy, the panel is intended to explore the good old life in the presence of intimate others as 'not yet settled,' and as an ongoing striving in the face of - and beyond - death.

Individual abstracts

The Alien Other. Intimacy, Time and Responsivity at a Danish dementia ward

Lone Grøn

How should we think of intimate others in dementia – a condition, which brings with it considerable ruptures in experiences of belonging? Are intimate others kin - whether alive or deceased - and loyal friends who linger on? Or staff who provide a material, emotional and social scaffold for upholding 'a dignified life' with dementia? Or toy animals and highly troubling fellow residents? While these are all strong candidates for the intimate other in dementia, they fail to capture what is most salient in my ongoing fieldwork at a Danish dementia ward: the profound alienness of the intimate other and the momentary temporal structure of intimacy.

Taking my point of departure in Bernhard Waldenfels' responsive phenomenology, I argue that in dementia the responsive form of inter-subjectivity is foregrounded. Specifically, I argue that intersubjective exchanges at the ward have to move beyond the responsive content, which often structure how we communicate with others outside the ward. One can learn, as one does in the company of the residents, to master a mode of being with, which relies on the responsive form – and which opens up for moments of intimacy between alien selves and others. There are both first and second person singular and plural dimensions to such encounters: 'I respond' therefore I am, 'I respond to you', therefore you are, 'we respond to each other', therefore we are – and these moments of intimate alterity or alien intimacy are central to what constitutes 'the good old life' with dementia.

Inconclusive figures and intimate others in old age

Maria Speyer

In this paper, I reflect on my attempt to respond to vastly different ethnographic experiences of the troubling intimate other in old age, and to join them in one artistic and wordless expression. The aim of my project is to create an installation of large-scale, figural charcoal drawings on paper, and for these drawings to add to academic research a space of experience that will serve as an invitation to engage.

My hope is that this space – by which I mean the space of the paper, the exhibition space, the space in time that it takes to look at the drawings – will be a space that allows for involvement with the ambiguous and troubling aspects of intimate others in old age, by virtue of its wordlessness, its non-linear nature, and the inconclusiveness of the figures I draw.

In my paper I will ask:

How do I draw and express old age and its intimate other within this wordless and non-linear space?

Might drawings of inconclusive figures be able to examine the experience of old age and its intimate others by addressing at the same time strength and vulnerability, isolation and community, self and other?

I will also talk about how the drawings are enriched by academic research, and address the nature and process of response in my project. My paper will be accompanied by images throughout.

Virtues and vexations: intimate others caring for elders in eastern Uganda

Susan Reynolds Whyte

In Uganda, responsibility for the care of frail elderly people falls to intimate others, mostly relatives, sometimes also neighbours. Families are large so there are, in principle, many caregivers for an aging person. But tensions arise around the questions of which others should care and what intimacy is at play. Care is a composite, whose provision must be distributed among several givers, but how? Some family members have more resources than others, and some simply care more about, and therefore care more for, an aging relative. In addition, there are important gendered components of care that add to the unevenness and tensions around it. The elderly themselves often have their own preferences, though at some point they may become too weak to insist upon them.

To care for an old person, and to demonstrate clearly that you are doing so, is virtuous. Conversely, gossip, open criticism and insinuations about the shortcomings of others flourish—whether the implication is plain neglect or some suspected hidden malice. Since the ability and willingness to care are unevenly distributed

within a family, and since the ideals of marriage and kinship so often do not correspond to the reality, there is fertile ground for bitterness and resentment. In any case, virtue and vexation seem inexorably intertwined in matters of care for aging relatives, sometimes within the same person, and almost always within the constellation of possible caregivers.

On the anarchy of intimacy: For an ontological anthropology of intimate others in long-term care

Rasmus Dyring

Long-term care is undertaken by a range of caregivers (relatives, neighbors, volunteers, professionals) who could be called intimate others. However, there seems to be a plurality of intimacies in play in these relationships. This prompts the basic question: what is intimate about intimate others? If intimacy, as the etymology of the word suggests, is about traversing with others an intus—an inside, an interval—then it would be fruitful to shift the level of analysis from the “-personal” (from individual needs, social roles, character formation, obligations and rights, autonomy and choice) to the level of the “inter-”, i.e. that which takes place in the interval between those related. Recently, anthropologists have approached the ontological conditions of relationality by way of such categories as “virtual affinity,” “mutuality of being” and “webs of semiosis.” Contrary to the structuralist propensity of these approaches, this theoretical paper insists that ontological anthropology must be phenomenological, and hence that the exploration of relationality must proceed from the lived experience of being-with (intimate) others. Drawing on examples from the ethnographic literature, the paper argues that intimacy takes place in the form of certain saliently experienced but highly anarchic demands. For this reason, the relationality of intimacy cannot be exhausted by establishing the priority of “relation” over “relata” (e.g. social fact over individual, discursive subject position over subject). Instead, relations and relata alike—communities of singularities—become what they are only in response to such demands.

Virtuous aging in uncanny spaces: Being old and Kyrgyz in the absence of the young

Maria Louw

In Kyrgyzstan, a good life as an elder has traditionally been defined in relation to the extended family: As they grow older, people learn to perform ‘elderliness’, most notably through high moral integrity and authority. Younger family members, in turn, are expected to help and provide for the elderly and treat them with care and respect. These notions about elderliness have been increasingly challenged, as more elderly people find themselves left behind by their families, among other reasons because of the recent large-scale migration of the working age population.

Taking a point of departure in a concept of virtue as relationally constituted, and approaching absence as a space for hope and haunting, the paper focuses on people who grow older in the absence of their family and discusses how they experience and redefine elderliness and its moral virtues. Absent relatives are experientially present, notably, in the ways the homes of the elderly are transformed into uncanny spaces: In layers of dust that are not wiped away; in the sound of silence; in unpaid bills that make the house freezingly cold, and in places where they are afraid to fall as there is no one to help them up again. In these uncanny spaces, I will argue, the ghosts of the past, the ancestor spirits, may settle and, in their own uncanny ways, become central for the ways the elderly understand and perform virtue.

TROUBLING INTIMATE OTHERS AND THE GOOD (old) LIFE

PANEL ABSTRACT (Discussant Joel Robbins)

In this panel we explore how relationships with intimate others might change with old age and what roles family, friendship and care relations play in old peoples' search for good lives for themselves and their significant others. Who are the intimate others in old age – kin, friend, stranger, hired help, pets, toy animals or the state or NGO other? These questions as well as a deepening conversation between philosophy and anthropology are the points of departure for this double panel.

What emerges from the papers are troubling intimate others and searches for the good. Firstly, the papers highlight the considerable ambiguity of intimate relations whether kin or not. Secondly, the papers trouble common sense notions of intimacy and explore how intimacy emerges along diverse registers of closeness and distance: geographical, emotional, temporal, biological or other kinds. Thirdly, the papers trouble notions of self and other – how do we distinguish self and other in situations where it is hard to know where one person ends and another begins.

Finally, the papers address the trouble of searching for the good in situations of suffering – both for our interlocutors and as researchers. Recently Joel Robbins and Sherry Ortner have suggested distinctions between 'suffering slot' anthropology, dark anthropology and anthropologies of the good thus highlighting the question of whether anthropology ought to concentrate mainly on the dark disparities and injustices that people suffer - or the ways in which they seek out, experiment with or cultivate the good. In this panel, we seek to overcome the possible dichotomization that can arise from these demarcations by asking what the good life in old age might amount to, when people age in situations of radical uncertainty or insecurity of diverse kinds. This seems especially pertinent in a field where notions of successful, healthy and active aging have had considerable impact on care policies, discourses and imaginaries. We thus explore what the good old life might amount to among Ik elders in Uganda, institutionalized elderly in Denmark, black grandmothers in Los Angeles, German nursing home residents who carry with them memories of the Second World War, and among exile Tibetan elderly left behind by their migrating children. By bringing the voices of our interlocutors in conversation with philosophy we hope to present the good old life in the presence of intimate others as 'not yet settled', as an ongoing striving in the face of - and beyond - death.

Individual abstracts

Fencing off and keeping close. Ambiguous intimacies and space in elderly Ik Lives

Lotte Meinert

Based on current fieldwork among elderly Ik in Uganda I explore troubles with intimate others: Elderly interlocutors' practical problems with intimate others and with sustaining themselves; and conceptual trouble of delineating self and other in this context. Taking the intersubjectivity of bodies and spaces as a starting point for a phenomenological exploration, I consider the elderly's efforts of creating separate spaces and selves of their own.

Often those who are considered intimate others by elderly Ik are close kin, neighbors and friends who are proximate in space. Paradoxically this space is created with lots of physical barriers – not only external stockades around the village for protection – but also internal fences which separate intimate spheres

between kin, houses, kitchens and granaries. Keeping intimate others at some distance, but still close is particularly essential, but also troublesome for the elderly as they grow increasingly dependent on others. In this intersubjective sphere the elderly share and keep wisdom, blessings, cash, alcohol, and tobacco, in exchange for intimate others' food, water, firewood and care. The sharing and keeping speaks to larger questions of relationality as a basic human condition. I discuss this relational condition with the feminist phenomenologist Lisa Guenther's work and highlight the deeply ambiguous features of practical relationality and elderly people's work of cultivating 'intimate others' - keeping close, but still at some distance - as a way to sustain themselves.

Welfare others – dependencies in patient care paths after hospital

Helle Wentzer

'Welfare others' is not an expression of irony. We tend to think of intimate others as family and friends but in a contemporary Danish context significant intimate others are often from the welfare state. An ethnographic exploration of elderly patient care paths in Denmark after discharge from hospital confirms the role of the 'welfare other' in securing the citizens a safe homecoming. Elderly with multimorbidity and chronic diseases often discover uncertainties in what will happen next, who will care for them, and what the future will bring. A sudden fall might bring turmoil into the daily life of the elderly that transcends the physical and social borders of the individual person. Suddenly the elderly is dependent on 'the other' as welfare state, as health care system, and as health care professionals. Family and friends stand at the outskirts, waiting and looking by, perhaps granting a visit within visiting hours, bringing some personal stuff, and watering the flowers at the elderly's home. The uncertainties of the elderly become theirs as well: what are their tasks, and roles to play as 'intimate others'?

The interlocutors point to welfare others who have played a significant role in restoring their life, not as it was before, but configured into the new life conditions. The philosophers Levinas and Løgstrup, both present the relational other as the foundation of ethics. The paper reflects their phenomenological analysis of the face and the interdependence of the other in an analysis of the elderly's experiences of their care paths and the welfare other's role herein.

Aging as a relational act: Inter-bodies, alterities, and the ethics of care

Cheryl Mattingly

Focusing on the ethical relationality of care has the potential to significantly contribute to considerations of the aging body. It can even, in a very basic way, raise the question: Who is the aging self? In the case I present, Nicholas, a severely cognitively and physically impaired boy who is almost blind, cannot talk, and is nearly paralyzed, is being collectively raised by his great-grandmother, his grandmother and his great-aunt. Old age, in this household, is something shared among the three women rather than an attribute attached to a particular body or individual. While the women certainly experience their bodies as in one sense their own, they also share an inter body-self because of their shared project of care. By contrast, Nicholas, the centripetal force that has propelled this intensively intertwined mothering, is decidedly different. His body and its vulnerabilities are not shared. To be connected to him demands cultivating unusual avenues of relationality. Touch assumes vital importance. Rubbing noses, for example, is a shared pleasure between Nicholas and his grandmother; relationality emerges across deep bodily divides. Feminists have long argued for an ethics that emphasizes relationality and care of others. Drawing upon feminist phenomenologists, I consider aging in this household as an ethical project that both complicates an ethical emphasis on self-cultivation and calls for an ethics of alterity.

From money to poop

Harmandeep Gill

When the first Tibetans escaped into exile in 1959, they hoped to return to Tibet within a few years. However, today they find themselves growing old in exile. Elderly Tibetans lead lives often characterized by uncertainty, partly due to their status as 'refugees' but particularly due to the large on-migration in recent years of exile-Tibetan youth to Western nations. This has left many elderly alone in the last phase of their lives. In many cases, children or family members living abroad often provide care for aging parents/relatives through financial support. While the elderly's livelihood is often provided for through financial support by family, the most intimate support and care such as maintenance of the body is in many cases provided by hired caretakers or other non-kin. Many elderly engage in different types of relations with non-kin. This can be the hired Tibetan/Indian caretakers, people from the same birthplace in Tibet, the next-door neighbour, an anthropologist like me, NGO workers, staff at an old age home, Tibetan-Buddhist deities etc.

Dying in the absence of family or children is also regarded as a 'bad' form of death, which can result in a bad rebirth as well. In my paper, I will explore how the current situation affects the elderly Tibetans' expectations of care and intimate others. Who becomes the intimate other when family is absent? What does it mean to be intimate with someone? Last but not least, what becomes of the 'good' death in the absence of family?

Ghosts from the past – German elders and the presence of World War 2

Thomas Schwartz Wentzer

In a nursery home for men, driven by a public charity related to the Catholic Church in Germany, biographies crossed in a way that exhibits the intricacies of German history. The material of this paper goes back to an eight-months-stay at a particular nursery home in the city of Aachen thirty years ago. In those years, victims of the Nazi-regime were living side by side with their perpetrators, having to deal with the daily prospect of eating together, celebrating Christmas or Cologne carnival, going to service on Sunday etc. These settings did not only encompass the actual victims or Nazi-representatives, but their relatives and family care-givers too, as well as the professionals (the nurses, the priest, the civil service people etc.). How does one conceptualize these intergenerational experiences in and with history? – Drawing on a phenomenological or hermeneutical account, the paper will try to elaborate the idea of lived history as responsiveness-in-proxy; somebody responds to the requests of history on behalf of somebody else.