

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.

