

'I wore khaki for seven years': Clothing and the life-narratives of people with dementia

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This paper explores how clothes are interwoven with the life-narratives of people with dementia, and how the materiality of clothing can facilitate the retelling of broader life-histories. These issues are examined drawing on ethnographic and interview data from the ESRC funded 'Dementia and Dress' project, with some narratives 'co-constructed' between people with dementia and family carers (Williams and Keady 2005). As found with clothing narratives more generally, the accounts of people with dementia and their carers reflected tensions between continuity and change across the life-course, in bodies and appearance, identity and experiences of clothing (Twigg, 2009; Weber & Mitchell, 2004). Within these narratives, dementia could be experienced as further 'biographical disruption' (Bury 1982), challenging embodied relationships to clothing and identity. However, clothes could also facilitate continuity in embodied identity, and connections with the past. Biographical and narrative approaches are increasingly recognised in dementia studies as foregrounding personhood, and challenging the reduction of people with dementia to their condition (Goldsmith 2002; Haight, Gibson and Michael 2006). This paper suggests that clothes as material objects can facilitate such life-history work, and also considers the importance of understanding clothing histories and preferences for providing person centred care.

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