




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

Christina Buse  
Julia Twigg  
University of Kent





“We also need to remember that people weren’t born elderly with dementia, so they’ve gone through their youth and teenage years and twenties / thirties / forties etc... having a particular style of their own....which may vary over the years- so therefore it’s really important that what people choose to wear today is a choice for them from a wardrobe they’ve chosen.”

[Sonia, Care home manager]

# Narratives, ageing and dementia

- Challenging static views of ageing and dementia-continuity and change (Hockey and James 1993; Kitwood 1997)
- Curating life-stories: 'with, about, for' (Crichton and Koch 2007)
- 'Small stories' – repeated fragments (Hyden and Oruluv 2009; Phoenix and Sparkes 2009)
- What stories 'do'-social interactions (Surr 2006)

# Clothing and life-narratives



- Material objects as memory prompts (Schweitzer, Bruce, & Gibson 2008)
- Clothes as powerful memory objects (Ash 1996)
- Significance of clothing for embodied memories and narratives (Twigg 2013; Woodward 2007)
- ‘Dress stories’ as a method of inquiry (Weber and Mitchell 2004)
- ‘The textile self’- clothing as the ‘fabric of life’ (Goett 2008)

# Methodology

- Ethnographic and qualitative methods:
  - Visual and sensory approaches- 'wardrobe interviews', photographs, clothing and textiles
  - Observations
  - Interviews- people with dementia, carers, care-workers
- 30 case studies- care homes and domestic settings -ongoing



# Maggie: Clothing, change and 'turning points' (McAdams 1993)



“I wore khaki and I was in the army for seven years so I’m quite used to wearing bright colours now, you know.”

“...when I was about sixteen / seventeen it was difficult to get jobs and things [...] I worked in a hardware department for a while but my mother’s getting a very strict... I couldn’t go here and I couldn’t go there and... [...] no freedom. So she and I had a flaming row- we’re two redheads- and I went out the next day and joined the army and I was in it for what? Seven years. [...] And I was over-it gave me a chance to see France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Germany [...] So joining the army to see different countries...” [Maggie, age 87]

# Maintaining biographical continuity (Williams 2000)

## Ellie:

“I was saying to Chrissy that sometimes if I’ve given you a long sleeved jumper you might put your t-shirt on top of it instead of underneath. Or forget... Sometimes... Some mornings... some mornings you forget to put your jumper on and you... you tuck your nighty into your trousers.”

## Maggie:

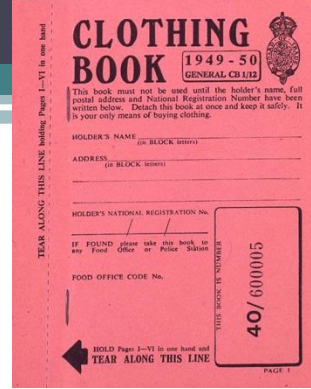
“Mmmm. Oh well. That’s all part of life.”



# Re-editing biographies (Golander and Raz 1996)

“She wasn’t washing herself or anything so now I come over once a week, help her have a bath, wash her hair and get out clean clothes for her [...] this morning she didn’t want a bath [...] She gets very stubborn [...] even to the point where I can’t get her to change her underwear at all, you know, unless I give her a bath. It’s very difficult. **I think it goes back to like being in the army and rationing and stuff, like the less clothes she wears the less she has to wash.**”

[Ellie, family carer age 26]

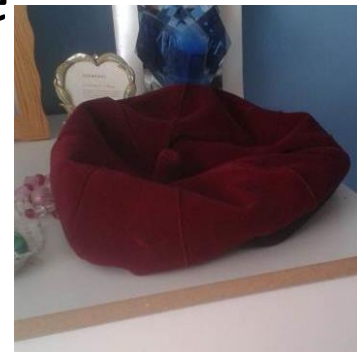


# Absent clothes and memories

“...where her dementia has progressed, to begin with when she was first diagnosed she had lost a couple of years, now she’s lost the last fifty.”

“... if we hadn’t have cleared out all of her wardrobe she would still be wearing clothes now from when she was like fifty years old if she still had them whether they fitted or not, whether they have holes in them. She wouldn’t see it so she would still be wearing old tatty clothes.”

[Ellie, family carer age 26]



# Dot: Clothing and family relationships



- Father worked in Selfridges, Nan- laundress

*“My Gran was a laundress. She always used to, you know... unless she could wash and iron it she wouldn’t... she wouldn’t buy it but she was a laundress by trade.”*

*“She was lovely. She was knee high to a grasshopper and she was chubby and round and she was ever so cuddly. She used to iron all the... wash and iron all the dress shirts for the people who played in the dance band in the park.”*

[Dot, age 87]

# Rebellion and transitions (Hockey et al 2013)

**Chrissy:** *And when did you [start] wearing heels?*



**Dot:** *When I left home. I don't think my father approved of them really. When you get to a certain age you're defiant as the day is long.*

**Chrissy:** *Yeah. You want to be rebellious, don't you, and do your own thing?*

**Dot:** *Oh yes. I didn't like somebody telling you all the time what to wear and what not to wear.*

# Continuity vs. change



- Changing fashions, changing body and shoes
- Continuity; *"As long as it's clean and neat and tidy I'm quite happy."*
- Change and the 'unbounded body' (Lawton 1998)  
*"She was always very smartly dressed; always [...] Completely the opposite to how she is now...in other words."*  
*"...Didn't turn a hair. [...] I mean she would normally have been mortified [...] because she's always been, you know, a very, very, very ultraclean person."* [Angie, Dot's daughter]



# Curating narratives- stories about...



*‘She’s a very lady like lady, and that is the way she dresses...’ [Sue, key worker, age 59]*

*“... obviously then when I came to do her care plan and we were talking about the nature of the work that she’s done – office work – there’s a certain... and of course if you go back to the time when she was in an office, the sort of clothes that would be expected of someone in an office and her age- she’s a very smart lady.”*



# Discussion: implications for person centred care

- Clothing biographies and sustaining personhood
- Understanding choices and preferences now
- Diversity- generation, personal history, masculinities / feminities
- Limitations; available biographical knowledge, progression of dementia- stories 'about'
- Tension: maintaining continuity vs. change

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Contact for further information: [jo-anne.bichard@rca.ac.uk](mailto:jo-anne.bichard@rca.ac.uk)

University of  
**Kent**

