Student research report
Strategies for Survival: Old(er) Women's Management of Resources

ISOBEL MUNRO

Background

It is now well established that demographically we are an ageing society and that individual life spans have increased. In their *Demographic Trends 1998*, Statistics New Zealand showed that the proportion of the population aged over 65 was projected to rise from 12% in 1996 to 25% in 2051. The present age of retirement from the paid workforce is 65 and the continuing increase in longevity leaves many more years for older people to manage their resources. The present projected life span for New Zealand women is 82.2 years, for men 78.1 years. The gender gap is 4.1 years and this is compounded by the common situation of men marrying women younger than themselves who are then left as widows. Women tend to outlive men and frequently live alone in old age, whether widowed, separated divorced or unmarried. The most rapidly increasing group of elders is in fact those over the age of 85, the majority of whom will be women (Davey & Gee, 2002).

An ageing population poses problems for the state in facilitating the adequate and equitable provision of superannuation income, housing and health care. While advances in medicine and technology and changes in lifestyle promise to compress the period of morbidity at the end of life, there is still a perception that the frailty and poor health of the aged will be a burden on society. This has led to the promotion of the 'Successful Ageing' paradigm which has replaced the older theory of disengagement and decline (Cumming & Henry, 1961). Linked with positive and productive ageing is 'ageing in place' which has been embraced by both state and local bodies and endorsed by community agencies (Dalziel, 2000, 2001; Dwyer, Gray, & Renwick, 2000; Gee & Glasgow, 2000; McGegor & Gray, 2001; Ministry, 2004, 2008). This has been closely associated with independence (Keeling, 1999). The intention is that people remain in their own homes as long as possible with community support where necessary. There is some evidence that suggests that this is also the situation preferred by many women themselves (Hambleton, 2008; Munro, 2002); however, it is questionable whether this is an option for all old women. It is important to establish how this may be achieved, what decisions are made and who makes them in relation to an individual's resources. If ageing in place is not possible or undesired by an individual, what alternative living arrangements, other than residential care, can they access?

In my previous research on the quality of life for older women which involved 175 participants (Munro, 2002), I found that, despite their diversity, there were clear differences between the experiences of those aged over and under 75. The current PhD project will use oral histories to explore the experiences of women over 75 who live in the community or who have only recently entered residential care. I will endeavour to obtain a diverse range of participants in respect of marital status, income, family proximity and support. What strategies do the women employ to ensure their survival in old age and how are these implemented and experienced in

their everyday lives? How do they manage their resources? These resources encompass material assets, housing, health and social support from community and family. They are underpinned by the state of the economy, intergenerational relationships and ethical issues. This requires interdisciplinary research in the fields of economics, health and housing, in community involvement, family dynamics and theoretical gerontology.

A feminist perspective

In the early seventies Simone de Beauvoir signalled the gendered dual standards of perceptions in ageing and the negative connotations of the older female body (de Beauvoir, 1978 (1970)), but second wave feminists in the main ignored the issues of ageing until Barbara Macdonald, Cynthia Rich and Baba Copper drew on their own experiences to show how feminists themselves had contributed to the invisibility of older women (Copper, 1988; Macdonald & Rich, 1983; Rich, 1988). In the UK in the 1990s, Sara Arber and Jay Ginn produced extensive research demonstrating the substantial differences between the ageing experiences of men and women based on women's limited access to material wealth and income. "A person's role in production and reproduction during working life has a profound influence on the material and health resources they have at their disposal" (Arber & Ginn, 1991). In New Zealand Ruth Bonita and Peggy Koopman-Boyden were exploring ageing and particularly the ageing of women (Bonita, 1993, 1996 ; Koopman-Boyden, 1988, 1993; Koopman-Boyden & Brown, 1991). Later Colette Browne asserted that the study of older women requires a feminist gerontology based on a lifespan perspective (Browne, 1998). Ruth Ray's article in *The Gerontologist* and Nancy Hooyman's review of three significant books on women (Hooyman, 1999; Ray, 1996) prompted responses. A review of narrative gerontology (Ray, 2007) cites gerontologists Cole and Sierpina as defining humanistic gerontology as the search for meaning in old age and identifies narrative studies and feminist perspectives as the leading edges of ageing studies. In the narration of life-histories old people may enable gerontologists to better understand the meaning of old age, while as informants they may come to a richer understanding of themselves.

Since completing a master's thesis (Munro, 2002) I have read a posthumously published paper of Barbara Macdonald's, statistically updated by Cynthia Rich, in which Macdonald not only restates her concerns for older women experiencing society's ageist attitudes, but criticises academics for coming with their own agendas to exploit old women for oral histories (Macdonald & Rich, 2003). I reflected on the ethics of my own research task which involves recording oral histories of old women. I am constantly questioning the use of old and older of aged and elder or senior citizen. My intention is to rehabilitate the use of 'old woman', to give it the respect it deserves, a project of which Barbara would have approved. I am an old woman interviewing other old women so there is some point of equity in agency for both myself and the participants.

The pejorative connotations of 'old' are hard to avoid in a society that places such a premium on youth that both men and women, but especially women, go to great lengths to achieve at least, its appearance. Cosmetic surgery, paints, salves and potions along with gymnasia provide rich profits for those catering for society's fear of ageing. I have found that most of my interviewees are comfortable with acknowledging the physical signs of ageing and treat it with humour. The resistance to 'old' relates more to perceptions of personal identity; that the 'me' is somehow lost or downgraded when linked to old and its envisaging of degeneration and decay, that being old makes one a lesser person of no account and powerless, which is certainly not the way my participants have presented themselves.

The project has a double purpose: first and foremost it is to obtain women's life histories for the Alexander Turnbull Oral Archive, which will be of value to social historians and linguists;

secondly it will provide data for analysis which may show the relationship of life courses to the means by which old women cope with old age, with a focus on the well-being of women and social change. Feminist research is ethical research not only with, but for women (Klein, 1983). Oral history has been embraced by feminists as a means of integrating women into historical scholarship and highlighting gender as a category of analysis (Sangster, 1994). My work will be informed by the concerns and provisos expressed by other oral historians (Gluck & Patai, 1991; Hall, 204, 2007; Oakley, 2000; Sprague, 1999). These address the ethical issues around confidentiality, the emotional risks to both researcher and researched and the possibility of exploiting participants by not acknowledging their intellectual and emotional input.

Methodology: Influences

My research acknowledges a feminist approach (Reinharz, 1992) and is informed by readings from Maynard, Stanley and Wise, and Cook and Fonow on the social construction of gender and knowledge (Cook & Fonow, 1990; Maynard, 1994; Stanley & Wise, 2000). My epistemological position rejects absolute positivist objectivity about what is real. Human beings interpret the world from within their own experience. Pragmatism stresses the dynamic relationship between theory and practice, highlights the study of everyday experience and has an appreciation of context and environment. It pursues plurality and community rejecting a neutral 'god's eye' point of view (Sullivan, 2007). From a post-modern perspective language both reflects and assigns the cultural performance of age (Woodward, 2006). There are intersections of race, social class, assigned gender, education, and of age and cohort (Davis, 2008; Zack, 2007) in the experiences of old women. My situated standpoint as 'old woman' and my location as white middle class and tertiary educated may colour my interpretation of the participants' words. I cannot presume that my concept of reality parallels or matches that of women from diverse backgrounds, as it may predispose me to note some features rather than others.

Method

What matters is not the method itself but how it is used, its suitability to the topic and the scale of the project and that it is ethically based. This raises the issue of power relationships between researcher and researched (Letherby, 2003). Although feminists are opposed to hierarchical relationships it is usually the researcher who is responsible for the final interpretation of data although this outcome may be mediated by self-reflection and co-authorship with participants.

My analysis will use flexible constructivist grounded theory "which places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data" (Charmaz, 2006). Whether new theory, confirmation of old hypotheses or a narrative will emerge from my project is unknown. The validity of this research will be decided on the concept of trustworthiness, whether or not it has been designed, structured and carried out with due regard to ethical issues (Kvale, 2002).

Progress to date

My progress has been slow as I am a part-time student returning to study after a nine-year break and finding new technology somewhat intimidating. I have learned to use Endnote and am tackling Nvivo. After completing my full proposal and obtaining ethics approval I commenced life history interviews and almost immediately had technical problems. This was occasioned initially by my ruining my professional analogue recording equipment, plugging in the wrong AC adaptor while working too late at night listening to my first recording. While I was able to obtain a replacement for this a further problem was the transference of tape to CD

or DVD. Many participants no longer used tapes which were easily copied. Some preferred CD format, others preferred to have DVD which could be played on a computer belonging to a family member. I found that the length of files better suited each format. The transference of tapes to digital was a process requiring real time and the purchase of equipment to do this. I investigated the cost of having this done professionally. It was beyond my means.

A partial solution was to bite the bullet and transfer to digital recording. The Sony Walkman WM-D6C was replaced with a Fostex FR-2LE requiring new time-consuming learning experiences. The two earlier taped recordings are now archived at the Turnbull Library and I am about to transfer two further digital recordings after providing copies for interviewees to check.

This archiving of material fulfils one of the aims of the project, but still leaves the analysis of the material to address my generic questions. As an oral historian I do not intend to fully transcribe these narratives for coding, but produce abstracts. Some transcription will be required to present significant passages of the women's words. While the life histories have been completed to their satisfaction, I have arranged with the participants to return to ask specific questions if I cannot find the answers in the recorded material. The method of data collection which I have chosen provides loosely structured material because it is the women's stories as they have told them with the natural digressions of narration. Analysis will require very active listening, but I will have very rich data to work with.

ISOBEL MUNRO is a PhD candidate in Gender and Women's Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. Isobel is a mature student who originally qualified as a teacher and subsequently as a counsellor. Her master's thesis in 2002 explored the quality of life for older women.

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