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Old age and the making of everyday life

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In my PhD research, I study how elderly people deal with the ageing process in relation to everyday life. The participants in my study are between eighty and ninety years old and living in their ordinary homes in an urban environment in the southwest of Sweden.

My research started as an interest in ageing, health and the ageing body. But in making my interviews and observations, the participants clearly did not think of ageing, nor health in relation to the body as much as I had expected. Certainly, they mentioned aching knees, stiff backs and failing eyesight, but moreover they talked about things; objects that were part of everyday life. They strived for and wanted to live life as usual, following their everyday routines that included everyday objects.

The staircase

The staircase offers a clear example of an object that could become problematic and therefore made aware and visible. A married couple is looking for a new flat. They explain to me that they are perfectly comfortable in their present home, but they live on the first floor, meaning they have a short staircase from the front door to their flat. “We are not getting any younger”, the wife tells me, “and we must think ahead, perhaps we won’t be able to use the stairs any longer, and we need to find a flat with a lift.” The stairs are used by them every day, but they are transforming into a possible problem. Not only the stairs; their whole home is becoming a potential problem. In some sense, their home is no longer a natural or evident part of their identity, of who they are – it has become a “visible” object (e.g. Karlsson 2008:214).

Another example of the problematic stairs is the house of a woman who I call Elsa. For her the stairs are a real problem. She avoids them as much as she can, since using the staircase makes her tired and her knee hurts. Therefore, her house is divided in two parts; she lives only on one floor. The house is built as a split level house, meaning that the second floor are the living area, and downstairs are the entrance, two small extra bedrooms and the laundry room. When I visit her, she calls out from the balcony and instructs me to go around the house, through the garden and use the back door. That means that I enter her house through the living

room. In Sweden, I would say that this way is reserved to close family members, perhaps neighbours but certainly not for strangers. The importance of the hallway is revealed to me; it is a necessary passage into a home, bridging the outside and the inside, the public and the private (e.g. Twigg 2000). Also, a Swedish custom is to take off your shoes when visiting someone (unless you belong to the upper class or you are of advanced age). But where do you put your muddy shoes when entering a living room with thick carpets in light colors? Elsa has figured it out by putting a small rug by the back door and a chair to put jackets and coats on.

It follows that the traditional organization of domestic space and functions is changed, because of the stairs. The function of each room has transformed. The living room has extended its functions because of Elsa's need to adapt to a new situation. The staircase has turned out to be a difficulty, or even a risk. One could say that it is her body, or rather a part of her body – her knee – that is making it difficult, but when she speaks of it, it is the stairs that are the problem.

The newspaper

I will now turn to the objects that are part of everyday life, invisible and unnoticed, but perhaps creating different meaning because of the ageing process. Simone de Beauvoir writes that “some given object, possession or activity acquires the power of revealing the whole world to us” (Beauvoir 1996:468). That is to say, some things can build a universe on their own. They make everyday happen. And my example is the newspaper. What can a newspaper do? It can of course give us useful information about the world we live in. It can give access to the world through its reports of events. But it can also structure time and place. It can make time happen.

The newspaper is present in several everyday situations when the participants describe their lives. For example, old age can make your sleeping patterns change, and you have to adapt to waking up at four in the morning. Then the newspaper is there for you, helping you to spend your time but you are still able to stay in bed. Perhaps the day symbolically starts with the newspaper, and a late delivery of the paper can cause a feeling of disturbance. In Elsa's account of an ordinary day, the newspaper has an evident part in creating her everyday routines. She explains that she subscribes to two daily newspapers. She is reading the local

newspaper at breakfast and a national paper at lunch. Reading them in this specific order, in relation to specific meals, helps her to structure everyday life.

Routines create meaning in their repetitive form. They combine the present with the past, but they are also a preparation for the future, since the repetitions generate continuity (e.g. Ehn och Löfgren 2007:77-119). But for the participants, routines do more than structure time - they control time, meaning that routines make you stay in the present. They create a feeling of life going on as usual, at least for today as well. Routines can also be described as a performance, producing a sense of continuity in your identity during different ages (e.g. Myerhoff 1978). So if you have been reading the newspaper for the last fifty or sixty years, it is a routine that is part of whom you are – involving the feeling of paper against your fingertips, smelling the newly printing and hearing the rustling sound of turning pages.

Returning to Elsa; after becoming a widow seven years ago, she eats her meals alone, but she says that the newspaper keeps her company. Between the meals, she finds the crosswords in the papers a pleasant occupation. Pierre Bourdieu describes reading the newspaper as an abstract experience of social relations (Bourdieu 1984:21). I would like to add that reading the newspaper is also a social *activity*. Taking part of the information in the paper gives an opportunity to ”keep up”, you are not losing the hang of things, despite old age. That is, it gives the opportunity to contradict the cultural concept of older persons as ignorant, confused and old-fashioned (as opposite to modern). Reading the newspaper also means keeping yourself busy. Being active is an important key on how to understand old age, since an active life is generally, in the western world, regarded as the best way to stay healthy, concerning all ages and involving every aspect of life (Blaakilde 2007). Since old age usually is considered as a phase in life where abilities and activities are diminished, activity becomes more or less a “mantra” to hinder or delay the ageing process. In that perspective it is also relevant to regard the crosswords in the papers as an activity, benefiting your mental health. It “keeps your brain going” as one of the participants expressed. The newspaper makes everyday happen and at the same time ensuring normative behavior.

New objects

There are also the objects that are added to life in old age – we quickly think of objects for help and support, and perhaps medicines. That is grounded in a general image of old age as similar to disabilities, illness and diseases (see for example Cruikshank 2003, Katz 2009). But

throughout life we internalize new objects, so this is not specific for old age. New things transform from visible to invisible, gradually becoming part of everyday routines. The difference is that in old age, many new objects emphasize the ageing process and the image of old age as something “other” than middle age. The stick, the walker or the blood-pressure meter all associate to illness and diminished abilities. To internalize them into everyday life can lead to taking on an identity as “old person” that feels foreign. A female participant suffering from a heart disease has regularly been hospitalized when she is feeling particularly ill. Normally she is placed at the heart clinic ward, but the last time she was hospitalized at a geriatric ward. “I can’t understand why”, she says to me. She also tells me that the doctors sent a blood-pressure meter to take home with her. It still lies in an unopened packing at her bedside table, and the batteries to make it function are lend out to a neighbour. By initiative from her children, she has recently received a mobile phone, not so much to keep in touch with friends and family as a security device if something should happen. These new things, the blood-pressure meter and the mobile phone, are given to her because of the cultural concepts or expectations surrounding her age and because of how the biological ageing process affects her heart, a part of her body. But she finds it difficult to integrate these objects into her life, since she is not defining herself as old.

Conclusion

Of course, we age throughout life, from the moment we are born, but in old age the ageing process is usually something that has become noticeable and affects everyday situations. But as the empiric examples reveal, ageing is not all about a changing body. It is as much about the objects that surround us. The anthropologist Daniel Miller says:

“[...] objects are important not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but often precisely because we do not “see” them. The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behavior, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so.” (Miller 2005:5).

In this paper, I have discussed three categories of objects that emerge in relation to old age:

1. Objects, like the staircase, that become problematic somehow; they are experienced as real or potential problems in relation to the ageing body. They become visible.
2. Objects that continue to be integrated parts of everyday life, “hidden” and invisible, but perhaps creating different meaning because of the ageing process.
3. New objects that are added to everyday life because of old age and/or the ageing body. They are transformed, or are supposed to transform, from visible to invisible.

There are also a fourth category; objects that disappear from everyday life because of the ageing process. They can be problematic objects where you are forced to let go and adapt to a life without them - with regret or a sense of relief - or the objects that simply fade out of use, forgotten.

All of these objects are visible or invisible depending on the situation. But it is their relation to the participants that make them so. Or rather the participant's bodies, their ageing bodies. The phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1997) claims that the mind and the body are intertwined in what he calls *the lived body* (the German expression is *Leib*). The mind is therefore not only in our heads but in every part of the body. The mind is embodied, and the body is “enminded” (Ingold 2000:170). But as human beings, we are also intertwined with the world. So when the ageing process changes our bodies, it changes our relation to the world. We see the world from a different perspective. So when objects become visible or invisible, or they ensure normative behavior, it is in their relation to the lived body that they have the capacity to do so.

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