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Introductory Remarks

In one of the most widely used definitions of qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 3) describe this practice as consisting of “a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible”. However, as much as qualitative research “locates the observer in the world”, it also locates the observed in research. This intrinsic complexity of qualitative research becomes even more prominent in research inquiring into such highly social and cultural phenomena as age and ageing.

Qualitative research on age and ageing offers a unique possibility to delve into the ways in which daily practices and meanings ascribed to age and ageing are enacted, are changed and/or maintained. Yet, such research is conditioned upon the meeting between strange and familiar modes of living, thinking, knowing and feeling as exhibited by all parties involved in the research process. This urges us to think about the ways and consequences of constructing knowledge about age and ageing in different settings and the extent to which we can cross various boundaries and borders to challenge stereotypical views, to create space for neglected voices and perspectives and to appreciate people of various ages on their own terms.

This small-scale collection of three articles is an invitation to a critical reflection regarding the ways in which older persons are visible and invisible in research, how older persons appropriate various research activities and which topics emerge as important in navigating current socio-cultural contexts of ageing. In this, these articles encourage deep engagement with the complex relationship existing between research practices and ageing and later life. Issues, such as the processes of knowledge production; context and its meaning in research on age and ageing; the making of research subjects in research on age and ageing; and, the role of media and media practices in research on age and ageing constitute the underlying rationale for the three studies presented here.

In their article, Schiau, Ivan and Bîră touch upon a critical area of doing qualitative research with older persons. The authors bring forward the perspective of participatory action research (PAR) and its relevance for research involving older individuals, specifically in studies exploring social media use and engagement among that groups. Importantly, Schiau et al. create a space for older persons who participated in PAR projects to feedback and share their impressions and forms of engagement in such a research project. This accomplished *with* and

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through the use of social media (Facebook) that the project focuses on and utilizes as one of key interactive tools facilitating creation of a project community.

Online presence and communication are also a focus of a qualitative exploration conducted by Marinescu and Rodat, who look at the ways in which accustomed users of online health information perceive the role, credibility and status of health-related content that can be found online. The study gives voice to city-dwelling older persons living in Romania and Germany who discuss many ways of engaging with online health-related information and who juxtapose online and offline sources (e.g. consultations with physicians) when searching for relevant knowledge. By identifying several similarities between older adults coming from two different European countries, Marinescu and Rodat emphasize also the role of socio-cultural context in the ways of utilizing online media, especially in the context of health-related information and face-to-face contacts with medical staff.

The relationships between older persons and their general practitioners are the starting point for Daba-Buzoianu, Cirită-Buzoianu and Amalancei's report on a small-scale interview-based research conducted in one of Romanian cities. The study elegantly gives voice to older persons who provide rich account of their interactions with physicians and qualities of the relationships they have with them. As a result, the article tells a well-developed story of how it is for older persons to communicate with physicians, what meanings older persons attach to visits at the physician's office and which interactional features, they consider particularly helpful and pleasant.

In sum, while these three Romania-based studies make an important contribution to ageing knowledge in the country, they also provide insightful *food for thought* for international audience interested in the potential and values of qualitative approaches to ageing and old age. Consistent with the call for this special issue, all three studies exemplify the vital engagement in qualitative research *with* older persons. While Schiau et al. do that directly by employing participatory action research; the two remaining studies achieve that indirectly with their generous and encouraging approaches aiming at opening spaces for older persons to freely present their stories and their points of view.

In none of the studies, older persons are presented as victims, less capable or less knowledgeable members of societies. Instead, all three studies begin from a recognition of older persons in their own rights and on their own terms. Thus, all three studies offer a notable example of qualitative research *for* older persons in their way of breaking with stereotypical images of old age. This is particularly relevant in the context of 'digital divide' discourses that often portray older persons as lagging, lacking skills and understanding of new communication technologies. In their studies, Schiau et al. and Marinescu & Rodat with their qualitative approaches do not ask the question of 'if', they instead ask the question of 'how' to demonstrate the place of digital worlds in the ageing process and old age.

The knowledge *about* old age as created in those three studies is thus far from being patronizing and distant, instead knowledge constructed here is about actual people, their actual lives and experiences. Taken into the account the prevalence of ageism in societal and academic discourses (e.g. Bytheway, 2005; Katz, 2009; Gullele, 2004), these three qualitative studies demonstrate how research free from ageism may look like.

References

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