ARTICLE

Foregrounding the ageing self: a duoethnographic account of growing older as a gerontologist and educator

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Abstract
Although ageing is personally relevant to many if not most gerontologists, a reflexive perspective is largely absent from gerontological scholarship. This paper employs duoethnography, a variant of autoethnography, to explore how experiences related to growing older have informed the authors' teaching and scholarship in the field of ageing. Duoethnography involves putting two autoethnographies into conversation, promoting dynamic self-understandings and generating new insights through dialogue. The co-authors first reflected on their journeys to date in the field, including on how the personification of ageing has shifted our perspective. Then we shared our narratives and made some initial revisions based on each other's feedback. Next, we collaboratively identified and discussed three broad, connective themes: the differing yet central role of gender in our narratives, teaching and generativity, and the pedagogical and personal challenges associated with ageism. Our reflections and dialogue deepened our understanding of these issues central to studying and teaching about ageing. The kind of reflective practice that we model could be a vital resource for bridging the gap between theory and practice, researcher and researched.

Keywords: autoethnography; duoethnography; reflective practice; pedagogy

Introduction

The field of gerontology is somewhat unique in that, sooner or later, it is directly relevant to all those who study and/or practise it. But gerontologists, like many people, do not always embrace their own ageing experience. Accordingly, there is a call from within the gerontological and ageing studies community for more self-reflexivity in our work (Ray, 2008; Pruchno, 2017). The present paper documents our efforts, through the method of duoethnography, to understand and learn from each other's journeys as both scholars of ageing and *ageing* scholars. We place particular emphasis on teaching and the process of discovery in the classroom as it informs our broader work.

This project began as a chance meeting and conversation following a conference symposium on an ageing-related topic. We discussed recent experiences that have led us separately to reflect on how our own ageing has changed our relationship to course material and the practice of teaching. Given our academic identities as an emancipatory gerontologist (Estes, 2019) and a lifespan-developmental psychologist influenced by critical gerontology, we share an interest in the 'ageing enterprise' (Estes, 2019) and our own roles in perpetuating it. We were also interested in exploring how dynamics related to ageism, including internalised ageism, play out in the classroom.

However, self-reflexive methods ideally entail a process of discovery not limited by initial goals or existing theoretical commitments, and collaborative approaches like duoethnography require mutual, dialogic learning. Accordingly, we will also put our multiple selves (*e.g.* gerontologist, sociologist, mature adult) and the intersectionality of these roles into conversation. This collaborative self-reflexive exercise will frame our experiences working and teaching in the field of age studies, but will also hopefully speak to the possibilities for more authentic and self-aware ageing selves in the classroom and in our scholarship.

Background and method

As already indicated, this piece came about after a discussion following a session on Ageing and the Life Course of the 2020 Eastern Sociological Society's meeting in Philadelphia, PA. Joyce was a presenter ('Critical Histories of Ageing and Later Life: Moving Beyond the Self-perpetuation of Political Economy of Ageing') and Andrew an audience member. We shared some recent experiences of feeling 'old' in the classroom and talked about how this had shifted our perspective on teaching and scholarship. It occurred to us that we had seen few formal treatments on this topic, and that others might benefit from our efforts to more consciously bring the embodied, ageing self into our teaching and scholarship. Given many successful past usages of personal narrative as a tool for critical reflection (*e.g.* Meyer and Willis, 2019), we felt comfortable with an autobiographical approach.

Although the kind of self-reflexive exercise we propose is still uncommon, there are some important exceptions, including work in the 1990s on the process of teaching about ageing and older adults (*e.g.* Blieszner, 1999; McGuire and Zwahr, 1999). More recently, Reynolds *et al.* (2021) conducted in-depth, biographical interviews with 50 retired British gerontologists, who contemplated how their scholarly work has affected their experience of ageing and *vice versa*. For many participants, their lived experience deepened their understanding but also challenged earlier assumptions. Ray and Cole edited a special issue of the *Journal of Aging Studies* (Vol. 22, Iss. 2, 2008) featuring the reflections of academic gerontologists on the intersection of their work and personal lives. The articles vary with respect to the mix of personal and academic content, the level of biographical focus on ageing (*i.e. versus* earlier experiences) and the degree of disclosure. Most relevant to the present project, Calasanti (2008) recounts classroom experiences that illuminated the complex dynamics of ageism, Cruikshank (2008) ponders the meaning of old age in relation to other social identities, and Minkler and Holstein (2008) jointly draw on their biographies in a critique of the civic engagement imperative for

older adults. Pruchno assembled a similar special issue of *The Gerontologist* (Vol. 57, Iss. 1, 2017), with contributions on health and illness, work and retirement, mortality and loss, and family and (especially) care-giving relationships. However, only eight of the 20 articles focus on the ageing self (as opposed to ageing parents/family members), including intimate meditations on ageism (Scheidt, 2017) and on finitude and the meaning of time at the end of life (Cohen, 2017).

It is noteworthy that so much of this scholarship appears in special issues, suggesting there is both recognition of the importance of a reflexive perspective and a reluctance to integrate it more thoroughly into the discipline. Contributors to both of the above volumes address the increasingly blurred boundaries between their personal and academic roles and identities, and advocate for additional reflexive scholarship to enrich the field. Given that only a few of these articles focus specifically on teaching or collaborative work (*e.g. see also* Hagestad and Settersten, 2017), we believe our contribution can help to move the conversation forward in a meaningful way. In an age-segregated society, the classroom is one of the few institutional spaces centred around intergenerational relationships, and it is thus likely the space in which many academics are initially and most poignantly made aware of their own ageing. Because such experiences can trigger ageist defences or simply be laughed off, it is important to share and reflect on them collectively so as to challenge more effectively ageism in the classroom and ourselves.

Autoethnography has been used quite frequently in educational research, though more in primary and secondary than higher education and – as we have already seen – very little with respect to the dynamics of ageing in the classroom. In the early stages of this collaborative project, we encountered duoethnography, developed by Norris and Sawyer (2016). As with autoethnography, duoethnography began as a way for researchers to examine their own practice, but in contrast to the former it is characterised by dialogue between two (or more) researchers. Duoethnograhy is 'in essence, intersecting autoethnographies' (Breault, 2016: 778). To a greater degree than autoethnography, the self is the site of research more than the topic, *per se*. Though it has become a formal methodology, it was created with the intention of offering enough room for duos to develop their own style and approach (Norris and Sawyer, 2016). However, it is not enough for each researcher's voice to be present (*i.e.* 'parallel talk'); their stories must be in conversation. As authors reconsider and reframe the past together, biographical interpretations shift. Accordingly, the process of duoethnography is 'transformative not static' (Breault, 2016: 781) and like 'going into the woods without a compass' (Breault, 2016: 778). More precisely, the objective is that two researchers enter into the collaboration 'with their own understandings of a problematic issue and then, through conversation and the sharing of their lived experiences of that issue, their understanding is transformed or new dimensions of the issues are uncovered and explored' (Breault, 2016: 782). Transparency and trust between collaborators are key to the trustworthiness of this method.

Otherwise, there are few fixed rules, but rather general guidelines or best practices. One of these is that duoethnography should not be used primarily for the purpose of theory confirmation, as it is intended to be a process of learning and revelation. At the same time, our theoretical commitments are part of who we are as academics and teachers, and cannot simply be set aside. We can only be

transparent about these commitments and open to re-evaluating them. As already indicated, we have both been influenced by critical gerontology, and are critical of the ways that neoliberal ideology and the ageing enterprise (Estes, 2019) – including academic and practitioners – define and control ageing bodies and shape the ageing experience in ways that are often taken for granted. This is already a self-critical approach, but adherents have been accused of focusing on the negative instead of promoting a positive vision for ageing (Estes, 2019). Additionally, Andrew's perspective has been heavily influenced by lifespan and lifecourse approaches, including the idea of cohort differences and the general principle that lifecourse trajectories are shaped both by earlier experiences and unexpected turning points. Joyce's perspective has been informed by conflict theory and how different social and structural forces influences the ageing process, application of the lifecourse perspective, and an abductive approach connecting experiences with ageing/older adults and her academic work.

We are also aware that we may become more strongly identified with the *status quo* – epistemological and otherwise – as we become established representatives of our fields. Accordingly, we may unwittingly teach and write in ways that serve to maintain hegemonic ideals. We also acknowledge that our commitment to confronting ageism does not preclude us from internalising and manifesting these pervasive cultural ideas. In what follows, we engage all of these pre-existing ideas and assumptions in our critically reflective process.

Our process started with the conversation in Philadelphia, followed by email correspondence and a series of Zoom meetings, as we made our way through the extant research literature in our own areas and began recording and sharing our personal reflections. We completed and exchanged full drafts of our narratives, noting any questions we had and things that stood out, including areas of overlap and divergence. Next, we each revised our own autoethnographic contributions, focusing primarily on clarifications and streamlining the narrative. Andrew also added material related to a topic he had previously reflected on a lot but for some reason neglected to include. Otherwise, we decided not to make substantive changes to our narratives because what we chose or neglected to include is itself important, reflecting our journeys as we understand and tell them. Instead, material included in one of our narratives but omitted in the other's became a potential topic for further consideration. More precisely, we used our comments and notes on each other's stories – what was similar, what was different, what was interesting – to identify topics collaboratively for further discussion, so as to bring our narratives more fully into conversation. Such conversation is at the heart of the duoethnographic method, and is intended to generate insights above and beyond what autoethnography can offer. At the same time, the conversation is shaped by – and therefore necessarily restricted to – what the duo finds interesting, noteworthy, *etc.*

We ultimately selected topics/themes that (a) were central to our narrative self-understanding, (b) seemed likely to generate mutual learning, and (c) are of broad gerontological importance. Although relevant to both our scholarship and teaching, these topics resonated particularly in the context of the classroom given the often intergenerational nature of student–professor relationships. Although there were no topics or themes rejected, *per se*, there are certainly other relevant dimensions of our identities – most notably related to race and socioeconomic

status – that are important to subject to critical reflection. We attempt to integrate a consideration of these issues throughout the duoethnography, as these themes arose in the process of our reflections and conversations. Selected topics were discussed over an approximately hour-long Zoom meeting, which was recorded and transcribed. This discussion is documented as thoroughly as possible, within space limitations, in the final section. Note that in references to ourselves and each other, we employ first names, which seems in keeping with the spirit of this endeavour. We present the analysis, including the identification of themes, as it emerged through the duoethnographic process.

Joyce's account

Who I am

Though, as a sociologist, I am resistant to labels that can reify, I also realise that understanding who I am is warranted. In our conversations, Andrew suggested we begin our individual accounts with a reflexive statement of who we are and our work in the field of ageing studies. Looking at the intersections of my identity, I would define myself first as someone born and raised in a working-class borough of New York City. Living there strongly influenced my worldview. While I now self-define as a 52-year-old woman, I never felt pressure for gender conformity in my youth or during my early socialisation. And while challenging heteronormativity in my academic discipline, I am married to my husband without children. I have often lived intergenerationally and cared for various older generations of family members. My education comprised both private, non-secular grammar school, high school, and graduate school with public education in college. I completed my MPH graduate work at an Ivy League institution. I have been teaching ageing-based work as a sociologist for 21 years – the last 12 as a social gerontologist at a state university. I was tenured and promoted to Associate Professor in 2017. My work centres around the meaning of place and place attachment for older adults, and applying social research methodologies to the study of ageing and older adults. I have worked in applied health research and as a consultant for smaller non-profit organisations and for larger ones such as statistical and international organisations.

How I became a scholar of ageing

Getting there

My earliest memories involve living a few houses away from my grandparents and with my great aunt living upstairs from me. She was part of a dance group at the centre, and all her friends came over daily after the centre closed. They always had so much fun together and let me be a part of their group. My great uncle lived in an apartment in my grandparents' house, and the other apartment was rented to my other 'great aunt', who was not related at all but invited me in each day for her homecooked meals. So, thinking about growing up, I don't remember a time when I wasn't spending each day with older persons.

Two experiences from my early childhood to adolescence stand out about my understanding of age and older adults. The first is: every Sunday, I would help my grandmother who ran a Bunco card party. Women would play a dice-based

game in tables of four, and I would bring prizes to the winners and also serve coffee and Danish. Raised among older adults, I enjoyed being with both my grandmother and all these women.

My other influential memory is of being a Girl Scout and bringing presents to older adults in a skilled-care facility on Christmas. Since this facility looked like a sterile hospital, many Scouts were too afraid to leave the hallway and go in the rooms to deliver the presents. I was given a small gift to give to a woman who was hooked up to monitors with oxygen. I gave her the present while the troop of Girl Scouts all stood back in the hall – my Scout leader with them. While the wires and tubing made me a bit scared, I also felt a connection to the person.

Reflections on gendered expectations of care-giving and ageing through a biomedical lens

My mother is a nurse and was often called to help out older neighbours who asked for her. As an only child, I routinely accompanied my mother on these visits. Several were powerful in shaping my views of ageing and later life. For example, one time my mother was called to check in on our beloved next-door neighbour, a woman in her eighties. She had missed a breakfast meeting with friends and did not answer her phone. When we entered her house, my mother called for the woman, and when she did not answer, my mother went to the bedroom. I followed along and was asked to sit in the adjacent room. From where I sat, I could see a common painting of the time. It showed a guardian angel in flowing white robes protecting two small children as they crossed over a broken bridge. I became more curious and went into the bedroom doorway. My mother met me and said, 'Francis died peacefully in her sleep last night.' I remember thinking Francis looked at ease and that I had never remembered her so quiet.

My mother also made routine visits to two other neighbourhood women. Amelia, as I had learned years later, was undergoing treatment for cancer. My mother would give her a shot once a week. I remember her as someone kind and, as I would call now, very frail. She would sometimes cry while the three of us sat and talked. Her neighbour, Clara, also would call my mother on the phone, and frantically say in German, '*Ich brauche deine Mutter. Ich brauche ihre Hilfe. Lass sie jetzt rüber kommen*' – 'I need your mother. I need her help. Have her come over now!' We would run over so my mother could help her. My mother explained to me that Clara was a proper, extremely neat person so these emergencies upset her, and she would need help to be cleaned and bathed. What struck me about these two women was not their age, though both were in their eighties; it was that they lived alone and often needed immediate care. Being alone was their 'vulnerability' – not their older age.

When volunteering in a hospital thinking I, too, wanted to be a nurse, I saw an older woman die. I was transporting someone back to their room, and a code was called for the other person in her room. It was an older woman with a DNR (do not resuscitate) order, and she was actively dying. As we moved our patient to her bed, crash carts and teams of people rushed in, but all stopped due to the DNR. As I stood and watched her die, I vividly felt the lifeforce leave her body. It was then I thought nursing is not for me; other aspects of health would be a better option. Years later, while on the committee for a student's doctoral dissertation about

nursing students who witness death and trauma without receiving emotional support, I realised I may have experienced this trauma, too.

I was (and am) a care-giver

Throughout college, I lived with my grandparents and took care of my grandfather as he was treated for laryngeal cancer. I provided direct medical care to him each day before going to school. I felt his pain when people could not understand his forced, electrolarynx-driven speech and saw how his friends stepped away. I learned the realness of relating to and talking to someone with a serious, life-threatening illness. By speaking openly about everything, I felt I got to know him really well.

My great uncle who had Parkinson's disease also lived with us. He had been in the hospital, and they wanted to discharge him to skilled care because he was unmarried and childless. We took him home, and I managed the home-health-aide schedules. I learned to appreciate the value of working as a team to care and to keep moments of levity. My uncle would see (hallucinate) bunnies owing to his disease, and he would often joke about bunnies being better than other alternatives. Later on, I would co-ordinate care for my grandmother (his sister) when she had begun to experience severe cognitive decline. I coped with the changes in her new behaviours by seeing her as two grandmothers: a matriarch and also a timid and more anxious older woman – often in fear of her aides and wanting to leave her house. This allowed me to mourn the first and know the second.

I still have a personal care-giving component of my life. In daily calls with my parents, no matter where I have been living, we catch up about any needs that come up. As a woman ages, it is often said that she is sandwiched, since she cares for parents and children at the same time. While I do not have children, after marrying, I did gain a second set of parents who are turning to me with care needs. It has not been uncommon for me to leave a conference or fly back to help out with one of two sets of parents or meet one in a hospital. On my sabbatical leave, I stayed with my in-laws to help with their daily needs because my father-in-law was ill and died at home while receiving hospice care.

Becoming an ageing scholar

Shifting to the professional

Moving back a little in time, my initial professional interest in the field of ageing began when I worked as an Assistant Project Manager on a federally funded hip-fracture project. Part of my job was doing follow-up phone calls with older adults discharged from a hospital post-hip fracture. I tracked them in all living situations and developed a real interest in understanding their lived experience – from those who had good care and recovered well to those more isolated. I didn't realise my interest in ageing was so strong until one day our Institutional Review Board administrator said to me, 'I really like your work because you love older people.' Years later I was able to pursue my interest in ageing and the lifecourse when I studied sociology. I combined a formal background in demography and my interests in ageing to look at the effects of social class upon wellbeing amongst a sample of older women.

After getting my PhD in sociology, I taught courses in sociology, gender, sexuality, social research methods and research design while infusing topics about ageing and older adults into these courses. It wasn't until my position in a university's gerontology programme that I got to delve into the field more deeply. I began formally teaching gerontology in 2009 when I was hired as an Assistant Professor, at which point my full-time journey teaching ageing began.

Growing older while teaching ageing and the lifecourse

I will now reflect upon my experience teaching over the last 12 years. I began teaching undergraduate and graduate-level gerontology courses. My focus early on in my teaching about ageing was more pedagogical: learning the content, designing courses and course shells, and creating ways to best present the materials to my students. As a non-tenured Assistant Professor (actually, non-tenure-track at first), I was teaching very large, in-person, introductory seminar courses to undergraduates, bringing students into the ageing network to do experiential learning and working on my role as the faculty-sponsor of the undergraduate-requested Gerontology Club. Mainly, I was in a 200-seat lecture hall with freshmen, generally 18–20 years of age, in graduated theatre seating, staring back at me teaching a required course about ageing and older people. As most in the field can relate, I spent a lot of time offering counter-narratives against emerging adults' views of older adults as being somewhere on the spectrum of 'cute, little, old lady' to 'wise, revered elder' to 'demented and infirmed'.

My undergraduate students often overgeneralised these ideas of ageing from their limited interactions with older adults. We worked together to debunk the 'cute' labels and idea that 'successful ageing' is only active and abled. We used the literature to draw lifecourse connections between their lives now and when they would reach 65, 75 or 85 years of age. I saw the need for self-reflexivity to understand ageing on both the part of the students and my own.

At the same time at the graduate level, my masters and graduate-certificate students were of all ages – many younger and some older than me – and many with a substantial amount of time working in the ageing network. While I taught about ageing, I did not really feel it connecting to my life or personal experiences because I was hyper-focused on improving my own teaching iteratively and making materials to address my graduate students' practitioner and academic needs.

I was first made aware of my own age, 40, when teaching during the screening of a hospice film with a panel sponsored by the Gerontology Club. This was one of the first times I felt 'aged' by someone professionally. During our panel film introductions, a hospice CEO said to me, 'you are too young to be teaching gerontology'. While I am sure he intended this as a compliment in a dominant cultural view, as a social gerontologist, I thought to myself, 'that feels ageist and he should know better, right?' Like the items in the Relating to Older People Evaluation (ROPE) measure reflecting positive ageism, 'you look good for your age' (Allen *et al.*, 2009), the compliment made me feel age-marked. Still, this only drove me to ponder more deeply how I related to the work/materials myself. As someone who believes in intersectionality, I felt taken aback by this identity politics-based view. Of course you do not need to be/identify as 'old' to study/teach ageing! I was always fascinated when colleagues in other disciplines tried to categorise my

work by my age. Because I received my PhD years later and not directly after my master's degree, my chronological age and academic rank would be muddled for some. Later this stereotype would return, when, in my fifties, colleagues (after asking my age) would cheerfully say, 'you don't look your age'.

As my gerontology programme went mostly online, and before photos and massive video use were attached to learning platforms, I interacted with students based on their writing. So, when differing views of ageing were presented, they seemed more about variations in training and experience studying ageing and less about the age groups/cohorts my students and I were in. Occasionally, I would have a student who self-identified with the 'older adult' label and would offer their advice – based on age alone, not from reading or integration of course materials. They would say, 'let me tell you all how ageing is' in a class discussion. These were excellent learning opportunities for the students (and me) where we could unpack concepts like using one's own experience to generalise for a group and how literature and research could broaden held views on ageing and later life. I learned early on in my career at an inclusivity training workshop at Temple University that you never give your own point of reference as an example without context. My point of reference as someone seen as a white, middle-class and well-educated woman is not the same reference point as people may have when they come from different socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, sexual orientation and gendered backgrounds.

As my comfort level with delivering gerontological material in the in-person and online classroom increased, I added experiential learning for students at all levels. Some of my undergraduate students have had little contact with older adults. I often asked, 'How often do you see your grandparents or people you perceive as older adults?' The vast majority did not see grandparents or others and expressed anxiety about going into a skilled-care facility that they fear would be like a horrible institutional setting with physically and cognitively impaired people. Some students feared the older adults would be racist because of things that were happening in the local community at the time. I used both journalling and pre-briefing with students and brought community partners on campus. These partners could meet the students and show them what their place was like – using photo-filled presentations. I kept the student-to-professor or graduate-assistant ratio low so the undergraduates always felt supported when in the field. They particularly liked the post-visit debriefing at one five-star skilled-care facility where we journalled on the patio while the activities director (an alumna of my gerontology programme) shared soft drinks and snacks. We partnered with Retired Senior Volunteer Programs (RSVP), Bill Thomas's alternative Green House models and a continuum of care (called 'the hotel' by undergraduates due to its luxury and concierge-at-the-front-desk feel). Knowing the older adults in these settings and guiding the students with my graduate assistants, I felt 'aged' between some students and the older adults. I was older than most of my undergraduates and, at the same time, younger than some of my graduate students. During my half-decade relationship with a community organisation, I developed a long-term friendship with a 95-year-old woman in care, Dorothy, who wrote biographies of residents and edited the facility newsletter. She was an Ombudsman and had also recently written her own autobiography. While Dorothy's experience was

not typical, it both reframed and provided a contrast to my own prior care-giving experiences.

I felt my own age and academic rank helped me be more relaxed when advising students. I wrote a lot about ways of experiencing or seeing the lifecourse in Mitra and Weil (2016) and about doing authentic research with older adults in Weil (2017). Being close to tenure and not 'worrying' about that climb, I could devote the time to my students (and my research, of course). It was around this time that, after an exam, a Millennial/post-Millennial freshman student, said to me, '*Tienes la edad de mi madre*' ('You are my mother's age'), and I thought, 'yes, that's about right' as I could be seen as a Gen-X, myself, although I often resist cohort labels. Her comments made me think about how my own intersectional identities play out in the classroom; would this student say this to a male instructor? What about my perceived identity made this an okay comparison to make – my perceived gender, socioeconomic status, my race, ethnicity, *etc*.?

Doctoral students began approaching me with gerontology-based topics, and I helped create some gerontological coursework for a newly formed Adult Acute Gerontological Nurse Practitioner Program. With my experience – some linked to chronological age and my own developmental stage – I could guide students' work while avoiding the more hackneyed 'sage on the stage' approach. With my critical stance, they sought out access to more emergent and progressive ways of thinking about ageing, older adults and the lifecourse.

The work becomes more personal

Currently, as an Associate Professor, my research and teaching have focused on something very powerful to me: the meaning of place in ageing and later life and place attachment. Because I have moved for several academic jobs, the ways place impacts the experience of ageing has become personally significant. Some age-based organisations would now consider me a member, and changes to my health have allowed me to identify with lived experience a bit more. Having more contact with the biomedical aspects of ageing in our culture has given me more empathy and perspective on the material.

With the COVID-19 pandemic and #BoomerRemover hashtags on social media, higher education, and teaching and students' own research going virtual – we are all redefining place, roles, and how society sees ageing and older persons. In this environment, I have increased concerns about age bias in academia and the unfortunate lack of value often placed on gerontology and age-studies programmes. I hope we can continue the call to use a more self-reflexive and critically-examining-the-critical-theorist approach to analyse the role of a gerontologist in the academy and dominant culture. Instead of homogenising and problematising ageing and then suggesting ways to address the problem we have created, we can show the parallel of our own experiences with the work. Our work and our teaching practices do not exist in a vacuum separate from our daily lives. There is no sterility but rather a synergy and integration of our life and work in ageing. After all, we embody the concept.

Andrew's account

Who I am

Reflexivity requires that we identify the subject positions, experiences and commitments that inform our perspective on the area of knowledge or expertise under scrutiny. Although it is not always easy to determine in advance which facets of the self are relevant, space limitations preclude a full biographical account. In addition to locating myself with respect to important social categories, I focus on those life experiences that seem most relevant to this aspect of my journey. So, I am a 54-year-old, middle-class, married gay white man, with no children but two cats. I grew up on the East Coast as the youngest – by seven and a half years – of three boys. From the age of 10, I was effectively an 'only child', and then my parents divorced when I was 15. After high school, I was eager to experience life beyond my small, rural home state, and my education and career have taken me all over the country. As a young adult, I was also very engaged in both grassroots activism (related to HIV/AIDS and queer rights) and electoral politics (including a brief stint in Washington, DC after the 1992 election). With the exception of a two-year break after college, I spent my twenties and early thirties pursuing my education at three different elite, private institutions – something I find somewhat embarrassing now – before working at two public universities. I met my partner at the age of 36 – my first long-term relationship – while working at the first of these institutions, then returned to my native New England 15 years ago to take the second. I was tenured and promoted to Associate Professor 10 years ago, but have not yet gone up for promotion to full Professor. I have done research about and taught in the areas of ageing and lifespan development for the last 20 years.

How I became a scholar of ageing

As already indicated, I am a lifespan-developmental psychologist, and I not surprisingly tend to view my own life through the lens of my (highly relevant) field. At the same time, I am aware of the potentially limiting and biasing nature of this or any particular lens. Interestingly, the concepts I initially resonated to the most have been among the least useful in making sense of this journey, and *vice versa*.

Key to the lifespan-developmental perspective is the idea that past events and experiences shape the course of subsequent development, including expected and unexpected events. Earlier in my life and career, I was – like many young people – more focused on the planned and therefore expected dimensions of the lifecourse. However, in thinking about my early career trajectory, it is the largely accidental nature of my specific choice of scholarly focus that stands out. Accidental and unexpected events are often associated with (retrospective) turning points in the lifecourse. My career path was actually shaped by a series of decisions, a cascade of both accidental events and serendipitous opportunities. First, after college I was unable to find a job in adult mental health, as I had hoped, and ended up accepting a position in the activities department of a nursing home specialising in Alzheimer's care. Although I had been close to my maternal grandfather (who died when I was 21), I hadn't previously thought much about ageing, and I knew almost nothing about nursing homes. This experience was eye-opening in many ways, and what I observed during my time there would be life changing.

For example, I was shocked to discover that most nursing homes are for-profit and to witness the implications of this for the quality of care. At the same time, I was deeply moved by my interactions with residents and their families, and humbled by what I learned about dignity and personhood. The second accident was my enrolment in a philosophy of education course on 'human presence' as part of my master's degree studies. Neither the course nor the programme focused on ageing, but it gave me the opportunity to record and reflect on my experiences at the nursing home while they were still fresh in my mind, something that likely would not have happened otherwise (since I have never kept a journal). I still share these stories and my reflections more than 25 years later – and often get emotional in doing so – in my adult development and ageing classes. And although I subsequently applied to doctoral programmes with a stated interest in young adulthood and identity development (with an LGBT focus), a seed had been planted.

Accordingly, it's probably not accurate to say I 'accidentally' ended up in a doctoral programme with a strong historical focus in lifespan-developmental psychology, despite initially be drawn for other reasons. And although my dissertation focused on singlehood among mature gay men, this did not necessarily prepare me, nor did I necessarily expect to be so competitive for, the surprising number of lifespan-developmental positions when I went on the market, first landing one of these jobs in the Upper Midwest and then three years later in New England.

One final detail also seems relevant to my semi-accidental transformation into a gerontologist and lifespan-developmental psychologist, and also speaks to the role of my sexual identity (a topic I return to below). By the time I started my second job I had grown a little weary of accusations, both explicit and implicit, that my interest in LGBT development amounted to 'studying myself'. For example, a member of my dissertation committee suggested I was trying to 'rescue' gay singles. I also found the political context within LGBT communities (the Q and other letters had not yet been added to the acronym at the time) made it increasingly challenging to do research in this area. Additionally, I was ready to put more distance between my personal and professional life. Finally, given that the field of ageing was and remains a 'growth industry', it was a decision that just made good sense. Having already had several pushes in the same direction, these rationales were somewhat *ex post facto*, but they are interesting and somewhat ironic in the context of the next stage of the journey.

Becoming an ageing scholar

Although I have never before engaged in this kind of formal introspection, I have always been somewhat age-conscious and I have thought a lot in recent years about the meaning of age in relation to my identity and relationships. I have thought even more about my generational membership, and even taught a course on the general topic. In fact, generation or cohort is one of the lifecourse concepts I have drawn on most frequently to make sense of my life. However, the events that I reflect on next have shifted my understanding of generational differences and have made me more aware even of the limitations of cohort as an organising principle. A couple of other factors seem particularly relevant to this second part of my journey. First, I have become increasingly aware of my changing relationship to time and have recently

noticed the ways in which this has impacted my teaching. Finally, reading Joyce's narrative reminded me to address how my gender and sexual identity have shaped the teaching role for me, especially as I age. Because this is something I have thought a lot about before, I added it here, though we return to these issues in the final, dialogic section.

I first became aware of myself as a member of a generation – Gen-X – in the early 1990s, when we were derided in the media as selfish, lazy 'slackers'. Despite and in defiance of these negative stereotypes, I began to strongly identify with my generational status. Millennials entered the scene in a similar way in the early 2000s, as they started bearing the brunt of generation-blaming. The repetition of this 'kids these days!' dynamic was my first indication that, as central as the concept of cohort is to lifespan psychology, its popular usages tend to generate more heat than light. I wish I could say that there wasn't part of me that enjoyed seeing another generation in this less-than-flattering spotlight, or that I didn't agree with some of the generalisations. At the beginning of the 2010s, I also found myself most intellectually inspired by the work of critical gerontologists, including those who were openly critical of the legacy of Baby Boomers and their attitudes towards and approach to ageing (*e.g.* Gilleard and Higgs, 2007). This critique seemed fair game in light of the cultural denigration of Millennials, which in my mind *had* to be coming from Boomers. I was clearly still somewhat caught up in this intergenerational 'warfare'.

But who, if anyone, benefits from such conflict? As teachers, we try to make sense of student behaviours that frustrate or baffle us, and generational difference provides a convenient explanation. At the same time, intergenerational relationships built on difference and discord do not provide the basis for a beneficial teaching and learning environment. This may seem obvious, and we do not enter the classroom (or engage in scholarship) primarily as representatives of our generation or treat our students as such. We strive to treat our students as individuals while also respecting their important social identities, which may or may not include their generational membership. But it's important to remember that popular uses and abuses of generation have always been more about age (and ageism), a fact that was abundantly clear with the 'OK, Boomer' phenomenon – an important if discouraging cultural moment and a pivotal one in this part of my story. Although grounded in legitimate complaints about the grim legacy mature Americans are leaving for younger generations, it quickly became a means of dismissing anything said by anyone perceived as old, irrespective of actual age or generation. Generation-blaming can go both ways, and it's not particularly surprising that, when younger people are lumped together and negatively stereotyped, they form their own oppositional generational identities, in this case compounding cultural ageism. Accordingly, this is a dynamic that must be addressed in the gerontology classroom. Interestingly, as much as I have reflected on 'OK, Boomer', I have been reluctant to discuss the subject in class for fear of unleashing a torrent of ageist stereotypes.

In addition to confronting ageism, the challenge for lifecourse scholars and educators is to write and teach about the role of historical time and place in lifecourse development without placing too much emphasis on generational difference or contributing to intergenerational discord. In the seminar mentioned above,

entitled Generational Identities and Relations, I learned the hard way that generational identity is not a given. We offer a small number of seminars each semester, of which students must take at least one prior to graduation. Accordingly, these seminars tend to fill quickly. Couple this with long course titles (*e.g.* the above course title was preceded by 'Seminar in Contemporary Trends') that don't always fully appear in the online enrolment system, and students don't necessarily know what they're signing up for. In other words, most of my students had no inherent interest in the topic. By the middle of the semester, several students expressed frustration with the constant focus on generational differences, which surprised me for a few reasons. I understood this lack of interest better when I realised that they were not in fact Millennials, as I had assumed (without doing the mathematics), but rather leading-edge members of the next generation (alternately referred to as Gen-Z, iGen, Gen-Tech, *etc.*). They had not established a generational identity perhaps in part because they were still young, but also because their generation had not yet been defined by generalisations and stereotypes. Moreover, generational identities should not be assumed to be consistent or equally relevant across race/ethnicity, and generational discourses tend to erase racial and cultural difference. This experience reminded me (because I had apparently forgotten my own history) that generational identification is not universal, presenting both opportunities and challenges in the classroom.

One other development has changed the way I think about generation and cohort. Early in the media-promoted generational conflict between Boomers and Millennials, my generation seemed to somehow fall between the cracks. Some mass media treatments of the different generations have left Gen-Xers out entirely. We are admittedly a much smaller generation than either of the adjacent ones, but we certainly claim a distinctive identity (whether or not professed differences are supported by empirical evidence). This relative invisibility has inflicted a bit of a psychic wound on many of my fellow cohort members, judging from recent memes on social media. But it has also provided a more neutral ground from which to observe and evaluate intergenerational conflict, helping me to better see the role of the media – driven by ratings and clicks – in perpetuating it. This and other experiences are hopefully moving me towards what Biggs *et al.* (2011) have labelled 'generational intelligence', a concept that has helped me think about what it means to be a mature gerontology scholar and teacher, and which I describe in greater detail below.

Thus far, I have focused on the shifting context of my generational identity, but the changes I describe could also be a function of broader developmental processes (and as any lifespan-developmentalist can tell you, disentangling age and cohort is a tricky business). I have told my students many times that the good news about getting older is that most people do, in fact, 'mature' – an observation informed by both empirical research and my own sense that I have 'mellowed' and become less self-involved. Another relevant change that seems directly driven by the passage of time is my experience of time itself. When as a young man I was told by my older relatives that time moves faster and faster as we age, my silent response was probably akin to 'OK, Boomer'. Like so many things in life, this fundamental truth is unfortunately something we must learn and experience for ourselves. Although I am by now very familiar

with the progressive compression of time, its implications for intergenerational or cross-age relations have only become clear to me over time, in the context of the classroom. Earlier in my life, I always found it a little embarrassing when first my teachers and professors and then my older colleagues made pop culture references that seemed hopelessly out of date. These always struck me as doomed efforts to seem hip and to connect with students on their own level. I have always been and remain a fan of pop culture, though it is very likely that I am no longer particularly 'with it'. However, it occurred to me in the course of making a failed pop-culture reference in class that my mistake was not being out of it, *per se*; rather, I had miscalculated what counts as current among people in their late teens and early twenties. Whereas for me, anything within the last five (or ten!) years seems recent, this period of time represents roughly a quarter of my students' lives. This may seem like another self-evident point that should not have required a revelatory experience, especially since we address this very topic in class. But it is precisely these self-revealing and self-reflective, 'aha' moments that mark the difference between 'informational intelligence' and the ability to act intelligently (Biggs *et al.*, 2011).

Generational intelligence, as defined by Biggs and colleagues, is the 'processes by which individuals or groups became capable of seeing from alternative age-perspectives' (Biggs *et al.*, 2011: 1109–1110) and the ability to effectively and empathetically 'engage with the age-other in a generationally inflected context' (Biggs *et al.*, 2011: 1110). Generational intelligence requires developing a critical generational consciousness, including an awareness of oneself as a member of a particular age-group among and understanding the different demands and priorities associated with different age positions. Personal experience with a variety of age positions is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition, though it undoubtedly helps. On the other hand, generational intelligence certainly requires the rejection of ageism, and that is a challenge even for mature adults, who have all internalised cultural ageism to one degree or another. This includes gerontologists. As much as I once bristled at the idea of faculty trying to relate to students as peers, I have also – ironically enough – had a difficult time embracing my identity as an older person. My growing acceptance of my own ageing and of age differences between myself and my students has, somewhat paradoxically, reduced the empathy gap between us. Whether or not this reflects generational intelligence or not, it seems at least like a step in that direction.

Specifically, I have come to more enthusiastically embrace my role as someone the same age as their parents. This has allowed me to develop a teaching persona that feels more authentic and relaxed. As one specific example, I have long used an ice breaker in my adult development class which involves reading a series of statements and asking students to stand up when something applies to them. One of the statements is 'stand up if your parents embarrass you in public on a regular basis'. Without fail, many students stand up, and I now often respond with something along the lines of, 'of course they do – that's the joy of being middle-aged!' My point is not so much about taking pleasure in creating discomfort, but rather about modelling the kind of mature self-confidence that allows one to act foolish in public. This is a principle I have begun to live out in the classroom, though without embarrassing students, for example by making and making fun of my 'dad

jokes'. Dad jokes are a cultural phenomenon that denotes an age relation more than a familial one (and they can be told by women as well as men), but I can't be certain how students relate to this version of me, particularly students for whom my racial and class statuses are more salient than my age. I do believe that occupying a more clearly defined age role in relation to my students has fostered greater empathy, nurturance and patience that hopefully help me to build a more intersectionally informed basis for connection. Along the same lines, the many ramifications of age-related differences in time perception, *e.g.* related to how students think about their health and plan for their financial futures, have provided me with greater insight into their lived experiences.

It is important to note that being a more 'age-authentic' or generationally intelligent teacher is not simply a matter of becoming more 'student-centred'. This latter concept, taken to its extreme, seems to denote a decline in standards and resignation to a student-as-customer model. The indispensable flip side of greater empathy and understanding in the classroom is the responsibility of modelling mature selfhood to students, and the need to honour one's accumulated knowledge and experience by challenging and truly guiding the next generation. To fail at this critical pedagogical task is to renounce one's own expertise, a failure that may disguise itself as egalitarianism but which almost certainly reflects cultural ageism – a devaluation of what age and experience can bring. At the same time, I am mindful that expertise is more or less likely to be respected depending on the race and gender of the expert.

I have also pondered not only how my status as a gay non-father impacts how I am perceived and how I relate to students (*e.g.* do 'dad jokes' land the same?), but also how teaching has impacted these roles and identities. This brings me to the final part of my story. Despite having thought about these issues before, I had not thought to include a discussion of this until I read Joyce's narrative. This is particularly ironic because it reflects the unintentional reproduction, on my part, of a gendered dynamic wherein care-giving and other family roles are assumed to be intertwined with women's but not men's professional selves. I inadvertently and somewhat surprisingly (to myself) omitted a key dimension of my journey. We live in a cultural setting that is not always receptive to having sexual minorities and especially gay and bisexual men (because of myths related to paedophilia) in leadership roles *vis-à-vis* younger generations. And as a non-father, teaching and mentorship are an important means through which I can meet needs related to nurturance and generativity. In recent years, I have joked with my colleagues that I learned to be more patient and nurturing primarily as a result of teaching our capstone research course, which many students find very challenging. I also don't think it's an accident that I have become particularly reflective about my teaching and intergenerationally relevant scholarship as I have reached the age of my students' parents. Although I obviously can't know for sure, I have wondered if this project would have happened had I occupied different gender, sexual and family roles. And my experiences are likely different from those who occupy different roles and identities. Accordingly, it is important for diverse voices to be included in this kind of reflexive scholarship.

Putting our accounts into conversation: convergences and new insights

After writing and exchanging our autobiographical accounts, areas of both overlap and divergence became apparent. For example, both authors talk about the limitations of generational/cohort-based identities and about ageism as a barrier to students' understanding. And we both use an intersectional approach, reflecting on how our multiple, overlapping identities have shaped and been shaped by our respective journeys. At the same time, we present our narratives somewhat differently. While Joyce devotes time to discussing the role of gender and care-giving in the context of her early experiences with ageing, Andrew focuses more on changes in perspective stemming from his own ageing process, including related to internalised ageism. We jointly identified the following three primary themes – illustrating both conjunctions and disjunctions in our stories – for further discussion: divergences and convergences in our gendered pathways, the role and experience of generativity in our teaching, and confronting ageism in the classroom and in ourselves. Each of these issues has important implications for our work and more broadly for how we train the next generation of gerontology scholars and practitioners.

As already indicated, we were both initially struck by the differential role of gender in the first part of our stories. Specifically, while Joyce recounted early experiences shaped by family care-giving, Andrew started his story in the context of early career decisions with no reference to the personal sphere. Given self-identification as a feminist and as someone with a non-traditional gender identity, Andrew was surprised by his failure to initially acknowledge and account for the gendered dimensions of his trajectory. Moreover, Andrew's entry into a paid care-giving role *was* actually gendered (further complicating the idea of 'accidental' transitions). Specifically, direct care nursing home staff are largely female, and there are subtle and not-so-subtle cultural biases about men who go into this 'feminine' profession (and a general, morally and economically problematic undervaluing of care work). So although at different times and in different ways, both Joyce's and Andrew's gendered social locations contributed to their development as gerontologists.

Thinking about the role of these early care-giving encounters in our respective journeys, they could be viewed as moments of deep empathy that ignited our concern for and interest in older adult populations. As we jointly explored this theme, it became clear to Andrew that his 'moment' working at the nursing home was actually linked to prior experiences as an HIV/AIDS activist, and specifically being part of another group (*i.e.* people with HIV, gay and bisexual men) considered somewhat 'untouchable' and disposable by the culture at large. Similarly, potential future gerontologists have likely had a wide range of experiences, even if not directly with older adults, that could spark an empathic connection to an interest in gerontology. Our own 'origin' narratives have provided a rich resource in this respect. Students have responded very positively to our stories, which provide a model for connecting to 'age-others', even when students do not explicitly relate.

The second part of our stories, about how ageing processes have shifted our relationship to our work, also have to do with how we connect to students and how this has changed over the years. The two themes that emerged here overlap, and also reflect our somewhat gender-divergent pathways. First, we are both non-parents

and we believe this has shaped the way we relate to students. There is a gendered component to this, too: women professors, particularly those who are in their fifties or older, are often viewed by students through the lens of motherhood, as Joyce has experienced (*e.g.* as evidenced by students' comments). This phenomenon raises the possibility of conflicting roles. For example, being seen as a parental figure (*e.g.* being 'nurturing' and responsive to individual wants and needs) may provide a meaningful basis for relating to students, but it also entails projected expectations of a parent–child relationship that can be incompatible with aspects of the professorial role (*e.g.* hooks, 2003). In addition to navigating these challenges, becoming comfortable in this role has been tied to acceptance and integration of ourselves as ageing adults, a topic to which we turn momentarily. And although we both derive satisfaction and meaning from our roles as aunt/uncle and active members of our respective communities, teaching has been an important venue for us for the realisation of generativity (and we acknowledge important differences between caring relationships with people of different ages). Again, we cannot pretend to know how our own roles would be different if we were parents, but it seems appropriate to reflect on how the centrality of our occupational identities in our personal development has contributed to becoming reflexive, self-conscious and self-critical about our professorial role.

The final theme is particularly relevant to both the content and process of what we do: confronting ageism. Addressing ageism in the classroom can be challenging, given the extent to which it remains one of the most accepted and taken-for-granted biases, and the fact that many students have little exposure to the idea that being old is not inherently a bad thing. Joyce starts on the level of language and terminology (*e.g.* not using 'elderly'), and she finds that current generations of students respond well to the idea that people have the right to self-determine how they are labelled. Service-learning projects that bring students into contact with older adults have also worked well. Andrew has found that sharing his own past mistakes, *e.g.* using 'elderspeak' (*i.e.* talking to older adults as if they were children) on his first day working in the nursing home, helps to defuse student defensiveness when they are made aware of past behaviours that could be construed as ageist.

Making oneself vulnerable in this way becomes more comfortable with age. This brings us to the topic of the more subtle forms of ageism and their internalisation, which can impact the acceptance of oneself as an ageing person. As with other 'isms', ageism is deeply culturally engrained and internalised to greater or lesser degrees through socialisation. Joyce's early experiences provided a strong counterforce to ageism, but making the most of the 'ageing self' has (and will continue to be) a process for both of us. One of the more interesting forms this has taken is our changing relationship to critiques of neoliberal theories of ageing that place all the burden for 'ageing well', which is typically defined in narrow and class-specific ways, on the individual (Martinson and Berridge, 2015). As the ageing process has become more personal, we have developed a greater appreciation for the complexity, from the perspective of older adults, of the concepts and theories we have criticised. For example, we better understand why concepts like 'successful ageing' are not only problematic, but also appealing to older adults. However, it can be challenging to convey this nuance to students who are new to these ideas. But

mostly, coming to terms with ourselves as ageing adults has made us more effective in the classroom. As already indicated, Andrew and Joyce are taking somewhat different paths in this respect. For Andrew, the 'peer' or 'friend' model for relating to students never felt comfortable or appropriate, but he has only gradually grown into the role of 'nurturing (yet demanding) dad-jokester'. For Joyce, an important revelation – shared in the course of our conversations – helped her to become more at home in a role that at first felt somewhat foisted upon her. This revelation can be summed up by the phrase a student once said to her: 'You're not from here'. Specifically, she has come to experience her interactions with students as akin to an anthropological encounter that offers surprising freedom to newcomers, freedom to ask 'naïve' questions, to react somewhat spontaneously, and to generally not be held to the same communication and behavioural standards as members of the 'in-group'. In short, although we have likely long been 'age-others' to students (in his early thirties, Andrew was once lumped by a student in the same age category as his graduate advisor, who was his father's age!), we have only more recently come to really appreciate and make good use of the benefits associated with this status.

Conclusion

In sharing our respective ageing journeys, we have examined our scholarship and teaching through the lens of the ageing self. The duoethnographic method has proven particularly well-suited to this task. This process of self-reflection and dialogue has not only allowed us to see our own narratives from a different perspective, but it has also pushed us to challenge our own theoretical commitments by demonstrating the limits of any given theoretical lens, and it has yielded other insights that should enrich our scholarship. We fully expect that our efforts will enhance our work moving forward, but we also hope we have modelled an approach to reflective practice that could enrich the field more broadly. And our own reflective practice will continue as we, for example, strive to more thoroughly integrate intersectional approaches. We shared examples, and could have shared many more, about how our relationship to what we study and teach has shifted, and how our understanding has deepened, as we have aged. At the same time, the knowledge gleaned from this type of practice can be a vital resource for bridging the gap between theory and practice, researcher and researched. At an even more fundamental level, the collective reflections of gerontologists could provide a rich source of qualitative data to help illustrate elusive *processes* of ageing. Although it goes without saying that ageing is a process, the methodological limitations of our field often necessitate a greater emphasis on ageing outcomes. Accordingly, the reflexive, self-aware, ageing self could be viewed as a necessary complement to more traditional forms of inquiry.

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