

The experience of ageing and advanced old age: a ten-year follow-up

RIITTA-LIISA HEIKKINEN*

ABSTRACT

This paper presents, analyses and interprets expressions of the experience of advanced old age based upon the concepts of the French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger. During 1990, 262 older residents of the city of Jyväskylä in central Finland were interviewed. They were born in 1910 and aged 80 years at the time. In addition to collecting epidemiological data, the narrative stories on the ageing experience of a sub-sample of 20 respondents (10 men and 10 women) were tape-recorded. A five-year follow-up was carried out with the same cohort in 1995, when 17 of the original sub-sample of 20 were still alive. Unlike five years previously, most of the narrators said they had now crossed the line into old age. At the ten-year follow-up in 2000, six women and four men were still alive to describe their experience at 90 years of age. Collective history and objective structures had provided a common foundation for my narrators' notions of the world – of right and wrong and of good and bad. Over their lifetime, this socio-cultural background had gradually changed, and they perceived the changes. Moreover, in the earlier stages of the study, they voiced criticisms of these changes. At age 90 years, however, they no longer criticised society or its people. By this time, it seems they felt they had completed the mission of living a life.

KEY WORDS – narrative, ageing, bodiliness, temporality, follow-up.

Introduction

'Isn't it just incredible how old we live to be'. This was how a lady aged 90 years began a conversation I had with her at our study centre at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland. It is possible to read several different meanings into what she said, but equally important is what she said next: 'I still don't feel that I'm old'. What does this mean? The purpose of this study is to shed light on the ageing phenomenon from the contrasting expressions of informants at 80 years of age and, from a ten-year follow-up study, at 90 years of age. The expressions uncover a story of ageing. The

* Centre for Interdisciplinary Gerontology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

narrative method was used, for it is a sensitive tool by which to explore the meaning of people's experiences of ageing.

In philosophical and methodological terms, this qualitative ten-year follow-up is grounded in the phenomenological approach. The open concept of 'human' that is adopted in this approach is based on an analysis of subjective, experienced life, of what living life or being an older person means to the individual. The notions of the 'experienced life' and the 'ageing experience' also imply inter-subjectivity and the recognition of life as an experience of community. In other words, the human being is at once seen in their historical and socio-cultural context, because their very existence in the world requires a commitment to the environment and social situation (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 1982; Cole 1992). The two key philosophers behind this line of research and its interpretations are French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) and German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1962). Phenomenological philosophy offers a radically different perspective upon the ageing individual than do the ideas and methods of the natural sciences (Husserl 1964, 1982; Heidegger 1962, 1994; Merleau-Ponty 1962). The phenomenological premises of this study imply that the individual is approached in an experiential frame (Heikkinen 2000). This approach explores experienced ageing 'for its own sake' (*cf.* Spiegelberg 1978).

Study design

A cohort study among people born in 1910 in Jyväskylä, central Finland was initiated in 1990. Interviews were conducted with, and epidemiological data collected on, 262 persons who were aged 80 years at the time. Hoping to shed light on how the respondents felt about growing old, the oral narratives of their experiences of ageing of a sub-sample of 10 men and 10 women were also tape recorded (Heikkinen 1993, 1995, 1996). The five-year follow-up was carried out in 1995 (Heikkinen 2000), when 17 of the narrators were alive and able to reflect upon the process of ageing. At the ten-year follow-up in 2000, there were still six women and four men who could talk about their experiences of ageing at 90 years of age. At each of these three waves of the study, the author personally interviewed the respondents using the narrative method, hoping in this way to be able to record the profound nature of the ageing experience in people's own voices.

History and background of the narrators

During the early 20th century, the Finnish school system was not nearly as advanced as it is today. Most children received no formal education

beyond primary school. Many of them came from large families – 10 children in the same family was not exceptional. Nor was the early adulthood of most of the narrators a bed of roses. In those days in Finland, people usually married at around 20 years of age, and it was not uncommon for marriages to last half a century, and some much longer. The following accounts and interpretations draw upon the first interviews of the narrators when aged 80 years in 1990, to illustrate the kind of life that these narrators led in early 20th century Finland.

The one thing I would have hoped, I would have liked us, my parents, to have just a little bit more money so that they could have afforded to send us to school. They couldn't afford to send us to school. It wasn't far away, we had a comprehensive school in K, but there wasn't enough money, so that was all there was to it. At that time my mother was always tied down with the children; I mean between myself and the next child there was only 16 months, can you imagine?¹

[Every] 16 months, that's the rate at which my mother gave birth, so what else could she do. And in those days an ordinary carpenter couldn't really afford ... with a family like that they obviously couldn't afford to send us to school. My oldest sister was very clever, talented ... and one comprehensive school teacher, an elderly spinster who was quite well off herself, she lent my sister the money so that she could go to teacher-training college in Jyväskylä. Someone had spotted her talent and said you must get training. In those days there was no social welfare, there was no help from the state or anywhere else, like myself I was 19 (as you can see I was born in 1910), so in those days there were no benefits for families, no matter how many children.

But as I said, one of my sisters got into teacher-training college in Jyväskylä, because one of our teachers said you are so talented that we have to give you a chance. This was after she'd been to comprehensive school for five years. And then, my brothers, my youngest brother made it but then the war broke out, and during the war he passed his matriculation examination, so we had one who passed his matriculation examination and one who went to technical college. But that was it. That was all they could afford: half of us remained without any schooling at all. But I mean I never really asked for anything special in life. Of course there were lots of things we went without, but you can't, as a child, you don't really know, you don't really suffer, you don't remember, it's strange really. Looking back today, it's quite surprising how satisfied you could be with the circumstances we had. And you realise how well off we are today, but people are still complaining nevertheless, that is sometimes hard to understand. (man aged 80 years)

People in this age cohort lived through the Second World War, and most even remembered the First World War. This is the account given by one female narrator when we met for the first time:

War! That was the hardest thing when we were, when I was ... we come from the same village as my husband, and we come from Sortavala and I was there when

Sortavala burned, it burned down the whole town, I was there, in the middle of it all with my daughter, and the most frightening thing was that there were no shelters, nowhere to hide ... we just left when our windows started breaking and our walls cracking and the whole house went to pieces even though it was a brick house. So I took our kick-sled and we went down to my husband's brother's place, when the whole town was all blacked-out, absolutely everything was gone, and the electricity was gone ... the poles had fallen down all across the roads in the bombing ... and I struggled with the kick-sled, I had our little girl wrapped up in the sled and I was struggling to clear all these poles and wires. ... During the war, my husband was injured and then he was blinded and that was really the hardest bit. I felt I'd never make it, I'd never make it through all of this, but you did, and now everything seems fine.

People do not live in a void, but in society, in a social system surrounded by other people and within which they have to identify themselves. It is that very same system that is the source of any morality we can imagine. Older people have adopted and assimilated their moral values in an historical and cultural situation that was very different from the situation in which we live today. Our narrators seemed to be somewhat critical about the way of life and general attitude of younger generations. People rely upon their moral perspective to navigate through the world of good and evil (von Wright 1963). It is easy for people who have lived a long life to recognise the moral changes that have taken place in moral culture. The changes they see may cause a sense of aggravation, perhaps even uncertainty about the future.

In the end, of course, life is very short, isn't it? Even though there's so many, I think it's a pity that young people in this day and age, how [and] why is it that they destroy their lives ... their way of life is all wrong, it causes so much harm and damage that I really feel sorry for them. I always pray for these people – dear God, try to open their eyes – how lovely it would be if these people could live their lives in happiness. Yes, well, I did go to the dances when I was younger, and a good dancer I was, but there was nothing else to it because it was that sort of life. And I think it is important that young people live an active sort of life, and even in towns there's so much they can do, to choose a good life style and there are all sorts of opportunities, but I suppose there's just nothing you can do about the way things are today, but if you do ask for help from upstairs you'll certainly get it. (woman aged 80 years)

In the ten-year follow-up, shared understandings were perhaps most clearly reflected in fundamental values in relation to younger generations and in experiences of financial security during retirement compared with the situation of one's own grandparents and parents:

I never imagined in those days that the working man could live such a comfortable life as you see today. This has been quite a surprise to me, that we're all so well off today, because I mean earlier all these wretched people, the disabled

and the mentally insane were tossed about and nobody really wanted to look after them, and today we have all this sorted out so well, so I mean we old people should be very pleased. ... We were in our twenties when, even many of the boys, even in the winter all they had was one pair of shoes ... Today nothing seems to be good enough for them. And then when you look at these youngsters today, we used to be afraid of wearing ragged and torn trousers, but nowadays they do it on purpose, to make their jeans look really old (laughter). If you ask me they've got a few loose screws. It must be this fashion thing. (man aged 80 years)

Three of the narrators in the ten-year follow-up were born in Central Finland, while seven had moved from other parts of the country. At the age of 90 years, all 10 were able to lead a reasonably independent life. Some had very little need for help and assistance, and none needed help with dressing, personal hygiene or other daily activities. For any other help they needed, they would turn to their children or grandchildren. Two of the six female narrators lived in serviced flats, with access to meals-on-wheels and other similar services; two lived independently in the community, and two lived with their daughters (one in a self-contained flat in a semi-detached house, the other having her own room in the daughter's flat).

None of the narrators lived in an institution. Two of the four male narrators lived with their spouses. The third man lived alone in a large flat, and the fourth lived with his son in a detached house: the son lived downstairs and the father upstairs. Neither of the two couples who continued to live together had any children. All other surviving narrators were widowed. All the widows and widowers had children. One of the widowed men had been on his own for the best part of 10 years, the other had lost his spouse just a year ago. With just one exception, all the widowed women had lost their spouse more than 10 years earlier.

Collecting narratives

The recording and analysis of narration provides a convenient way of describing how something has changed or evolved over time. Indeed the narrative approach is well suited to the elucidation of the experience of ageing. Narrative stories are essentially grounded in oral culture, and it is precisely this kind of culture or world of communication in which older Finnish people grew up. McLeod (1997) says that one possible answer to the question of how we can develop a reliable understanding of how people act and feel lies in the 'narrative turn'. It is crucial to the success of the method that the researcher has appropriate skills, and these refer to more than just method or personal style; for the required skills and competencies are rooted in experiences of the world, in other persons and in

language (Merleau-Ponty 1973). The researcher has to be aware of being an agent in the discourse (see Bowie 1993). The researcher should also be sensitive to her own attitudes towards ageing as well as to wider cultural influences on narratives (Ray 1998: 103).

The phenomenological approach which applies the narrative method reveals speech to be a particular form of each individuals' fundamental project to define her or his existence as human beings in the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962). The social function of telling one's story is to enable one person to be known by another. As a way of knowing, narrative implies a relational world (McLeod 1997: 38). If we go beyond the conceptual content and reach towards the emotional meaning of words, it is discovered that they, too, possess an immanent significance. Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964) insisted that the spoken word was a genuine gesture, and contains its meaning in the same way as a gesture (Langer 1989: 60). If we are to appreciate the nature of originating ideas and meaning, we must go beyond the realm of constituted speech (Merleau-Ponty 1962).

The practical encounters in this study saw the researcher, seated in her office, facing one elderly narrator at a time who did not know exactly what to say but whose initial concern was to adjust his or her own being to the researcher's style. Neither knows where the speech will lead them, despite all the advance planning. Expression and comprehension are achieved first through the body, through vision, through a glance: intellectual clarifications follow later. We experience the bodily presence which precedes any scientific conception of the event (Langer 1989: 61; Merleau-Ponty 1962), or as Merleau-Ponty put it, 'When I speak or when I understand, I experience the presence of others in myself and of myself in others, a presence which is the cornerstone of the theory of inter-subjectivity' (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 141–2). There is this 'sensible speech' which Merleau-Ponty calls thought (*cf.* Harre and Gillet 1994), and an emotional horizon for cognition (Ellis and Flaherty 1992: 4).

Understanding the other is always an ongoing process; we can never reach full and complete understanding (Shotter 1993; Heikkinen 2000). The only confirmation one can have that the narrative has been correctly constructed and construed lies in the production of more story (Brooks 1994: 57). In my own studies I have tried not to interfere, interrupt or intervene in the informant's narrative – even though I have by way of my active 'presence', active listening and small interjections tried to inspire interaction. In the narrative situation the relationship to the material collected is immediately experienced, while later on, when listening to the tapes and reading through the transcripts, the researcher needs to extract and summarise, conceptualise and analyse what she had heard earlier on. In the research situation, the older narrators 'collected' observations,

emotions and thoughts about themselves and about their ageing, and about things that had happened to them during their life. They figured, evaluated and told their thoughts to the researcher.

The method applied in analysing the data was to proceed one step at a time, from meanings through to meaning structures, and eventually to the relationships between those meaning structures. Underlying all the steps is a great deal of silent, unspoken knowledge that is transmitted through emotions, expressions and gestures that are conveyed in the narrative situation. The theoretical building blocks for my interpretations were provided by Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's key phenomenological concepts such as 'bodiliness', 'temporality' and 'being-in-the world'.

Analysing the data

In phenomenological research, it is important not to overstep the boundaries of experience in constructing an interpretation: the researcher should try to avoid constructing a new reality by suggesting too far-reaching interpretations. The report must always be constructed out of the narrative material at hand. All interpretations must be developed from that vantage-point, with the theoretical pillars and concepts supporting one's efforts to extract something common and shared out of individual experiences. In the process of analysing narrative materials, the researcher is effectively conceptualising the phenomenon at hand. This will also require the interpretation of meanings that are not immediately observable: for this the researcher needs to have the courage to dig deeper and extract structures and meanings that are hidden in the material.

Experiences of ageing find expression in the set of positive and negative meanings that people attach and ascribe to the process. This set of meanings is grounded in each individual's unique life history. Ageing experiences develop and unfold in interaction with the environment and are therefore closely interwoven with the system of values prevailing in the culture of their community and society. Cultural values provide the context for how the processes of ageing and growing old are viewed (Becker 1998). The significance of cultural context and related values emerged very clearly indeed in the two earlier stages of the follow-up interviews (Heikkinen 1993, 2000). The three-wave follow-up study also unfolded as a temporal experience between the researcher and the narrators. We remembered each other, and on the basis of what they had told me earlier, I knew about their lives when I met them again. They, too, felt they had come to know me. The following section of the paper illustrates some of the narrative material produced in the third stage of this study.

Reflections on the ageing experience at 90 years of age*Relationship to one's body*

Merleau-Ponty's (1962) concept of 'bodiliness' provides a useful tool for purposes of unravelling the phenomena involved in the life of the aged individual (Heikkinen 1996, 2000). Narrative is a means of giving voice to one's bodily experience, to embodied knowledge (Becker 1998: 26). According to Merleau-Ponty, the body is the basis of the situatedness by means of which we gain a perspective on the world. The body not only enables us to perceive, but it also allows the world to exist (Kirk 1986). We achieve our bodiliness, 'my body', through life experience: our body becomes familiar to us as we live with it. The 'normal' life of the body remains hidden to us; we only perceive incapacity or other experiences produced by illness such as pain. At the age of 80 years, the narrators seemed to want to distance themselves from their symptoms. They objectified their bodily problems and associated them with specific parts of the body, for example, their eyes, ears or joints. At the age of 85 years, they seemed to notice very clearly that their body was a temporary sketch in existence: its key characteristic was variability, the tendency to change. At the age of 80 and 85 years, the narrators who had had to reduce their participation in various activities were more preoccupied with their bodies than those who could continue to take their bodies for granted.

With advancing age, the experience of bodily burden is a broader phenomenon than that of illness, and is almost an everyday experience: 'Your feet are heavy, you feel tired, you can't cope with your chores' (Heikkinen 2000: 474). At the age of 85 years, most of the narrators said they felt they had grown weaker since we had last talked five years before. 'I didn't really feel this tiredness until now at this age. All I have to do is sit around for a couple of hours and chat and I gradually get more and more tired'.

At the age of 90 years, awareness of one's body seems to be almost inseparable from the perception of the ageing experience and being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962; Dreyfus 1994). The narrators hardly made any mention at all of their illnesses, even though they clearly had more than before: they had become accustomed to carrying their 'bodily burden' and rarely had any complaints. They also seemed to compensate for their functional decline and whole bodily burden by optimising what they still retained. It also appeared as if the experience of bodily change had disappeared, or as if its meaning had waned. The key characteristic of bodiliness now seemed to be that of existence. One of the 90-year-old women said, 'You have to learn how to be old'. This is how she described her life:

Yes, well sometimes when under the bed ... when I pick up something from under the bed, I dropped my handkerchief, behind there and pick it up. I do sometimes laugh to myself when I'm a bit further away from the bed and I can't get up. So I'll go on all fours up to the bed, hold on and then get it. That's how I get up. I write and I have my sewing and knitting and I do everything. I go to the shop and cook for myself. I don't buy those convenience foods.

Another woman said, 'Well, yes, you do tend to get tired a bit easier and because they know, many of them know, how old I am. And they are amazed, how do you keep going when you're so old? ... you just have to get used to it that you're old'. A third said, 'I'm now using a spoon instead of a knife and fork'; and a fourth that, 'I will only get back to my feet once the dizziness has gone. I never go all-out in attack: I wouldn't dare. Of course it means there are some restrictions in your life, but what can you do? If you're old, you're old. I do always carry my living will with me in my handbag.' Bodiliness cuts through the senses to perception. It is the whole of the individual's sense perceptions and feelings; it is received without analytical thinking or deliberation. It is here and now. It might usefully be described in terms of a category of existence (*cf.* Peirce's category of 'firstness', see Peirce 1965, Chapter 2: 148–79).

Temporality

Narrative accounts based on observation always involve some perspective: they are tied up with our temporality (see Augustine of Canterbury 1961; Baars 1997). 'I' is constantly living out its temporality in the present time. We look at our past through the present, which is the present we share with others, and there exists no present that is not permeated by the future (Kenyon 1996). Our relationship to the future changes as we grow older, as the future grows shorter. In Heidegger's analysis of temporal experience, the most profound level of understanding is the realisation that one's personal existence is coming to an end. This realisation elevates the experience of personal time to a unity in which the past, the present, the future and one's existence are seen as a whole, a single episode. The narrative story is the mode of meaning construction that displays various experiences with time. My impression was that for the narrators at 90 years of age, time appeared in a different horizon than earlier in this study when they were 80 and 85 years. When they were younger, they seemed to be more occupied with a sense of time. At 85, they gave more thought to death and dying than at 80 (*cf.* Johnson and Barer 1997; Heikkinen 2000). At 85 years, they were also developing an awareness of finitude. Many of them started to feel and think that their fatigue, their tiredness,

the difficulties they were having with their memory, were all gradually leading them away. At the same time, though, this was something they took as natural, something that they would inevitably reach in due course (Heikkinen 1993, 2000).

Now, at 90 years of age, it seemed that the narrators had stopped in time. Their perspective on the future had changed. They seemed unconcerned both by their own age and by the finitude of their own life. As one of the female narrators said, 'No one's going to say anymore that "you are too young to die". When you're 90, no one says, "she died so young"'. Another narrator laughingly said, 'You never know, maybe I'll live to be 100 ... that would be awful'. It began to seem that my 90-year-old narrators were 'timeless'. It was as if the amount of time they had left was wholly irrelevant. If time came to an end, that would just be natural, while if it continued to tick away, they would have no objection provided they were in reasonable health. My narrators were in time as time itself. Earlier, they used to think of time in terms of a distance to something. At age 90 this was no longer the case. Life was different then. They had stopped trying to rush things or to stop or catch up with time. They had settled in their temporality. One of the men said, 'Well, age is a thing you just don't really think ahead about it, about what could happen'; while a woman said, 'I'm now living with my age. Yes, I'm not, I'm not giving in yet. When it [death] comes in its due course, then that will be it'. It seemed as if my narrators were just waiting to see what the future held in store for them. They had seen and experienced what can humanly be expected of life; they had lived their lives, stored it well away.

Being-in as one's self

How identity is achieved and how it relates to temporality has been a continuing theme in transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas 1994). Did the 90-year-old narrators exhibit something new in relation to themselves? They seemed different from what they were before. They seemed confident and at ease with themselves: there was no sense of concern about themselves, about their significant others, about the world around. They just seemed to be adjusting to the changes that were happening in themselves.

These 90-year-old narrators also surprised me with their creativity and leisure pursuits through which they continued to 'colour' their life. What else can be said of one elderly lady who had played the violin all of her life. Since she could no longer bend her arm sufficiently, she had exchanged the violin for a mouth-organ. She lived in a block of flats and said that

because of that she played her new instrument only in the evening under a blanket. Another lady told me she played patience at night. She only knew one variation, but said that that didn't matter. Every now and then, just for a change, she did crosswords. One of the men continued to sing in a choir, another said he was hoping to finish a book he was writing. 'Then it'll just have to do'. And another woman said, 'I'm not looking forward to dying just yet. I'd like to go to the library to borrow some books. That's a good pastime, it's a really good pastime'. One of the male narrators said, 'No, no, no, I'm not at all unhappy. Not at all – it's not my ... If I don't have the energy to write ... I used to be able to keep going all day ... then I read. I've got a huge amount of books. I have a bookshelf in every room'. The narrators had reached their 'ability-to-be-me' (*cf.* Dreyfus 1994). I found that these people had a special kind of self-awareness, a strong will and a 'settledness'.

Being-with (relationship to) others

We all live in cultural contexts. We live in families, and we have our own roles. We all have to adjust in communities and adapt to their norms (Cole 1992; Becker 1998). We also have to adjust in everyday life. This applied to the elderly narrators. Life is sharing in presence, it is being-with. People always live at one and the same time in a dual perspective of 'others to me and me to others'. This constitutes the basic structure of social, experiential life. People are and can only be aware of themselves through others. Comprehension of the world and consciousness are mediated through other people. 'Being-in' means dealing with the world, being involved and being occupied with things and people. At 85 years of age, most of my narrators' future hopes and expectations had to do with the continuity of life and human relations as well as with maintaining their health and functional capacity (Heikkinen 2000). One narrator put it like this:

I'm an emotional sort of person, I am, I really miss – I would really like my wife to come and hug me and give me a kiss and that sort of thing. I've been thinking that, goodness if only I had the good health, it would be so nice to watch my own grandchildren, and see what kind of beginning they make for themselves in life.

At 90 years of age the presence of others, dead or alive, is heightened when the reality of death can no longer be concealed by the 'everyday'. Emotions carry the mind to different meanings. When family members are far away, mothers and grandmothers step forward so that one doesn't have to walk alone. Memories of childhood and youth begin to filter through into the narratives: it seems as if the 90-year-olds are returning to

the field of presence to reopen it (*cf.* Heidegger 1962). This is what one male narrator said:

I spent the whole autumn season – I came back from our summer home the last day of August – so until Christmas no one opened that door, I was all alone, lived alone. ... It was back in [19]28, it was a rainy summer and there wasn't a single day in July we could do the hay. It was always raining, it rained every day. In the middle of August I had to go to these entrance exams at the Seminar. My brother and I we got 100 days worth of hay [making] done. My brother was driving and my father threw them up into the barn. ... But I so liked my mother and my grandmother that every time their name is mentioned I feel like crying. My grandmother still kept saying my name when she was dying ... because we lived a close life together, whatever she asked I was prepared to do. And we always travelled together in the summertime and I carried her lunch basket.

One 90-year-old lady continued to sleep in her husband's old pyjamas: he had died some 10 years ago. She told me:

Yes, I still keep them. I wear them in turns, wash them every now and then. And I always ... I talk to him when I put on the pyjama top, I talk away. And I dream a lot about him. Really I sometimes think I hear voices. And often my mother is seated there on that chair. I really think of them so much.

Discussion

Phenomenological philosophy opens up a radically different perspective upon the ageing individual (Husserl 1964, 1982; Heidegger 1962, 1994; Merleau-Ponty 1962, 1964). The basic premise of this philosophy is that we hold on to our lived experiences and we remain within the domain of those experiences. The world and its people exist for us only in and through our experiences. This position may be described as a phenomenological attitude (Heikkinen 2000). Things show up in our understanding. We can only describe phenomena as they appear and show how they fit with the rest of human existence. This is precisely the job of hermeneutic phenomenology (Dreyfus 1994: 162). The present phenomenological exploration started when the narrators were aged 80 years, continued when they reached 85 years, and proceeded to when they were 90 years of age. The focus in this paper has been on how these narrators experienced their ageing. These experiences, interpreted through Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's concepts, showed changes over the 10 years.

As regards Merleau-Ponty's notion of bodiliness, it was found that bodily existence, or our being-in-the-world, may be complicated by ageing. Over the 10 years it became obvious that at the age of 80, there were certain boundaries to the experience of ageing, for the word 'ageing'

seemed at that age to have negative connotations. My narrators distanced themselves from their bodies, from their symptoms and old age. They objectified those symptoms and their bodily problems (including those that they put down to ageing) and associated them with specific parts of the body, for example their eyes, ears or joints. Their consciousness of their body was Cartesian and of the form, 'I have a body' (Heikkinen 1993).

Five years later at the age of 85 years, bodiliness had become an explicit concern for many of these same people. In relation to their own body and to ageing, they were more inclined to feel that 'I am my body', as in the expression 'I often find myself wobbling' (Heikkinen 2000). The 90-year-old narrators, then, had clearly crossed the line into old age: no longer did they seem troubled by personal anxieties and concerns, and they hardly mentioned their illnesses or pains. The key inherent characteristic of bodiliness seemed to be that of existence or being.

One of the main concepts in Heidegger's phenomenology is 'care', which he argued in *Being and Time* unified various aspects of Dasein's 'way of being' (Heidegger 1962: 225–8). In Heidegger's concept apparatus, 'care' means being concerned, carefulness and commitment. It fills human nature, and people become what they are on account of care (Heidegger 1962: 237–40). For the 90-year-old narrators, the mission of living a life seemed to have been completed (*cf.* Johnson and Barer 1997). They no longer felt obliged to take care of themselves or others. Dasein is reflective self-awareness, and Heidegger asserted that when our entire existence is called into question, it is possible to reach an understanding of being-in-the-world. It seemed as if these elderly narrators had reached their Dasein, their being-in-the-world, knowing and being aware of where they had arrived in their life. They focused all their attention on life. Being was an issue in itself.

Although these people had achieved in life what it is humanly possible to achieve, they still retained their interest in life. As one narrator said, 'If I could be in the shape I am now I would have nothing against it, against life'. Another woman said, 'I want to be, I don't really want to give in quite yet, I'm hanging on to life, in every sense.' A third observed that 'there are plenty of days that are all alike one another, if you've seen many days like I have. Leave all your worries behind, that's what I say!'

Heidegger says that 'mood colours the world'. By this he stresses that moods provide the background for intentionality, *i.e.* for specific ways in which things and possibilities show up as mattering. Mood makes it possible, first of all, to direct oneself towards something. My 90-year-old narrators concentrated on life and on their existence for its own sake. They no longer have to become anything; they have already learned what it means 'to be me'. The perspective of the 90-year-olds' being was geared to

existence. They had reached an understanding of their being, or more precisely their authentic existence (*cf.* Heidegger 1962; Rentsch 1997). They had become authentic selves.

Collective history and objective structures had provided a common foundation for my narrators' notions of the world – of right and wrong and of good and bad. Over their lifetime, this socio-cultural background had gradually changed, and they perceived the changes. Moreover, in the earlier stages of the study, they voiced criticisms of these changes. At age 90 years, however, they no longer criticised society or its people. To quote Heidegger (1962: 233), 'their unsettledness ('not-at-home') had quietened down'. Their life revolved around their own everyday. Their routine actions, routine choices in everyday life made the 90-year-old narrators feel 'being-at-home'. They had turned away from the things they no longer needed in life. Outwardly, their circle of life had become smaller, their needs had lessened but at the same time more condensed.

Searching for a meaningful way to sum up my findings and observations, I am reminded of lines from a nocturne by the Finnish poet Eino Leino:

Day by day, life's circle narrows, closes.
Time stands still now ... weather cocks all sleeping.
Here before me lies a shadowy way
leading to a strange, an unknown place.

I hope that my interpretations from this study deepen our understanding of experienced ageing in late life.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported financially by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Academy of Finland, the Social Insurance Institution, the University of Jyväskylä and the City of Jyväskylä.

NOTE

- 1 The extracts from the interviews have been translated from the original Finnish by an experienced professional translator. They accurately reflect the original words of the narrators.

References

Augustine of Canterbury, Saint 1961. *Confessions*. Book XI (translator R. S. Pine-Coffin). Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex.

- Baars, J. 1997. Concepts of time and narrative temporality in the study of aging. *Journal of Aging Studies*, **11**, 4, 283–95.
- Becker, G. 1998. *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World*. University of California Press, Los Angeles, California.
- Bowie, M. 1993. *Psychoanalysis and the Future*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Brooks, P. 1994. *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Cole, T. 1992. *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Dreyfus, H. L. 1994. *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Ellis, C. and Flaherty, M. G. 1992. An agenda for the interpretation of lived experience. In Ellis, C. and Flaherty, M. G. (eds), *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience*. Sage, London, 1–13.
- Harre, R. and Gillet, G. 1994. *The Discursive Mind*. Sage, London.
- Heidegger, M. 1962. *Being and Time* (translators J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson). Blackwell, London.
- Heidegger, M. 1994. *The Concept of Time* (translator William McNeill). Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Heikkinen, R.-L. 1993. Patterns of experienced aging with a Finnish cohort. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, **36**, 4, 269–77.
- Heikkinen, R.-L. 1995. Altern Erzähltes Wissen [Ageing and narrative knowing]. In Mader, W. (ed.), *Altern in einer Alternenden Gesellschaft. Kontinuität und Krisen in Biographischen Verläufen [Ageing in an Ageing Society: Continuity and Crisis in Life Courses]*. Leske and Budrich, Opladen, Germany, 171–88.
- Heikkinen, R.-L. 1996. Experienced aging as elucidated by narratives. In Birren, J. E., Kenyon, G., Ruth, J.-E., Schroots, J. F. F. and Svensson, T. (eds), *Aging and Biography: Explorations in Adult Development*. Springer Publishing Company, New York, 187–204.
- Heikkinen, R.-L. 2000. Ageing in an autobiographical context. *Ageing & Society*, **20**, 467–83.
- Husserl, E. 1964. *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana.
- Husserl, E. 1982. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague.
- Johnson, C. L. and Barer, B. M. 1997. *Life Beyond 85 Years: The Aura of Survivorship*. Springer Publishing Company, New York.
- Kenyon, G. M. 1996. The meaning/value of personal storytelling. In Birren, J. E., Kenyon, G., Ruth, J.-E., Schroots, J. F. F. and Svensson, T. (eds), *Aging and Biography: Explorations in Adult Development*. Springer Publishing Company, New York, 21–38.
- Kirk, S. 1986. The Phenomenological Concept of the Body as a Grounding for The New Epistemology in Family Therapy. Ph.D. thesis, Pennsylvania State University, University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
- Langer, M. M. 1989. *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception: A Guide and Commentary*. Florida State University Press, Tallahassee, Florida.
- McLeod, J. 1997. *Narrative and Psychotherapy*. Sage, London.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception* (translator Colin Smith). Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (ed.) 1964. On the phenomenology of language. In *Signs* (translator R. C. McCleary). Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 84–97. (Original: Merleau-Ponty, M. 1945. *Signes*. Gallimard, Paris.)
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1973. Dialogue and the perception of the other. In Lefort, C. (ed.), *Merleau-Ponty: The Prose of the World* (translator J. O'Neill). Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 131–46.

- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1982. The battle over existentialism. In Merleau-Ponty, M., *Sense and Non-Sense* (translators P. A. Dreyfus and H. L. Dreyfus). Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 71–82.
- Moustakas, C. 1994. *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Sage, London.
- Peirce, C. 1965. *Principles of Philosophy*, Volume I, Book III, *Phenomenology*. Reprinted in Hartshorne, C. and Weiss, P. (eds), *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce: Volume I Principles of Philosophy and Volume II Elements of Logic*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 141–80.
- Ray, R. 1998. Introduction: critical perspectives on the life story. *Journal of Aging Studies*, **12**, 2, 101–6.
- Rentsch, T. 1997. Aging as becoming oneself: a philosophical ethics of late life. *Journal of Aging Studies*, **11**, 4, 263–71.
- Shotter, J. 1993. *Conversational Realities: Constructing Life through Language*. Sage, London.
- Spiegelberg, H. 1978. *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*. Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague.
- von Wright, G. 1963. *The Varieties of Goodness*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

Accepted 11 December 2003

Address for correspondence:

Riitta-Liisa Heikkinen, Centre for Interdisciplinary Gerontology,
PO Box 35, FIN-40014, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

e-mail: rheikkin@sport.jyu.fi