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Escaping 'the old fogey': Doing old age through intergenerational friendship

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ABSTRACT

Background: Intergenerational friendship is a friendship which occurs between differing generations of older and younger adults. Intergenerational friendship as a research topic has received little attention from sociologists of ageing, despite the cultural turn. This study set out to explore and understand intergenerational friendships from the perspective of the older friend.

Method: This research took a qualitative approach using Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology. Twenty-three people aged 65 and over were interviewed in Ireland to attain rich narrative accounts and observational memos were generated.

Findings: Intergenerational friendship formed part of the process that shaped the older friends' approach to ageing in their everyday lives (micro level), being influenced by stereotyping and commonly held understandings of ageing and older people in contemporary society (macro level). Engaging with intergenerational friends was congruent with the meaning these participants attached to 'being old' or 'being young' and how adults 'should' be in older and in younger age.

Discussion: For the older adults in this study, ageing is about performance - how they perform as older adults in their pursuits or interests - and not about chronological age. Intergenerational friendship is an integral part of this strategy for doing ageing in a meaningful yet mundane (everyday, taken for granted), way.

Introduction

How ageing is constructed in contemporary society influences how people of all ages interact with, and view each other and themselves. Jerrome (1992) offers a useful definition of the social construction of (old) age, stating it pertains to how 'age roles are defined, learned and sustained' (p. 5). Gubrium and Holstein (2003) argue that a binary conceptualisation of youth/age persists as stereotyping of older adults continues despite the fact that ageing can be experienced and enacted in numerous ways. The existence of age norms speaks to cultural and social expectations of how people of differing ages 'should' behave and forms part of the fabric of how older age is constructed. Age norms are defined as 'expectations regarding age-appropriate behaviour and interaction, a network of expectations that is embedded throughout the cultural fabric of life' (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965, p. 711).

In the context of contemporary societies, old age is reconstructed as older citizens are encouraged to age 'successfully' (Rowe & Kahn, 1997; Rowe & Kahn, 2015), to age productively, and to be active members of society. Older people are exhorted to provide, and are providing care for ageing parents and grandchildren, making financial transfers to their children (and grandchildren), volunteering and generally being useful and productive members of society (McGarrigle, Donoghue, Scarlett, & Kenny, 2016). Timonen (2016) argues that those in power in society, governments, policy makers and business interests 'spell out how older adults should live their lives' (p. 85), thereby generating models of ageing that older adults are expected to emulate. Co-existing alongside this construction of older age as potentially and ideally 'useful', is the construction of older people as dependent, frail and with diverse care needs. Ageing, as described by Gilleard and Higgs (2000), has become 'complex, differentiated and ill-defined' (p. 1).

This article focuses on social constructions of old age by older people, in the context of intergenerational friendships. Intergenerational friendship (IGF) is a friendship between a chronologically old and a significantly younger adult. IGF provides a particularly promising lens for interrogating how older adults construe themselves in relation to younger people, as the intergenerational friends are, by definition, of different generations (defined here as age difference of 15 years or more). IGF are also an arena of ageing that has received little attention from sociologists of ageing, despite the cultural turn. In earlier work (Elliott O'Dare, Timonen, & Conlon, 2019) we explored the reasons for the relative lack of research on IGF. We argued that, influenced by the principle of homophily ('birds of a feather flock

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together'), research has predominately focused on peer-aged friendships among older or younger adults. This approach, we concluded, reflects a social construction of older adults as unsuited to forming naturally occurring, equal, mutually enjoyable friendships with younger non-kin adults (Elliott O'Dare et al., 2019). Here, we progress this thinking further by analysing the ways in which older friends perceive themselves in relation to their younger friends, and how ageist ideation features in the 'doing' of IGF.

Research approach

Focusing on the 'older' friend in an intergenerational friendship

Taking the decision to focus this research on the older adult in the intergenerational friendship was informed by a number of carefully considered factors. In the extant literature, studies generally included a sample of both younger and older people, usually from either end of the adult age spectrum i.e. youngest adults (generally by recruiting students) and oldest adults (for examples, see Bettini and Norton (1991) or Roos (2004)). This dichotomous approach has therefore not examined the full spectrum of intergenerational friendships. Many analysed the differences/similarities in how both age groups comparatively rated or experienced the characteristics of the friendship with a view to drilling down to the crux of the friendship and its component parts. By focusing solely on the 'older friend', this study aims to understand the role intergenerational friendships play in how older persons experience older age and friendship in older age. A situated knowledge is sought recognising the value of partial perspectives shaped by particularity of social location (Haraway, 1988) rather than relying on a totalising, universal perspective with their inherent potential to obscure marginalised constituencies. The research outlined here focuses on the older friend only therefore, and how they interpret, construe and construct the friendship and their own 'place' in it as the older friend.

Methods

This study took a qualitative approach using Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) to generate theoretically informative data (Charmaz, 2014), a necessary consideration given the lacuna of research on the topic. CGT method was judged best suited for exploring and building understandings of the meaning and doing of intergenerational friendship for the older individual.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was sought in writing from the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. Approval was granted in September 2015.

Sample and sampling

Suitable participants were identified as community-dwelling older men and women aged 65 or over. There is no consensus on when an individual is 'old'. Sociologically, age is recognised as being socially constructed i.e. what and who is understood as old is a social creation as individuals interact and create its meaning (Katz, 2018). Notwithstanding this ambiguity and in the interest of clarity, throughout this paper, and in this research, the terms 'old' and 'older' are used to describe persons age 65 and over. Three categories of age stratification within the category old are used in the research: participants are often referred to as younger-old (65–75), middle-old (75–85) and oldest-old (85 and over). This does not imbue research participants in each group with any particular age-related qualities or attributes.

Sampling was purposive and theoretical. Sampling commenced through access to the database of a study entitled *Changing Generations*. This study explored intergenerational solidarity in Ireland through CGT methods (see Scharf, Timonen, Carney, & Conlon, 2013; Timonen, Conlon, Scharf, & Carney, 2013 and Conlon, Carney, Timonen, & Scharf, 2013). Snowball sampling (whereby a participant recruits another participant who is known to them), was also used as a form of recruitment, expanding outward from the *Changing Generations* database. A key component of GT/CGT is theoretical sampling. Thus, as coding (line-by-line and focused), analysis and memoing (observational and analytical) progressed, it was necessary, in tandem, to seek out and recruit participants with particular characteristics or who were in particular circumstances suited to interrogating emerging concepts and constructs further. Multiple routes were taken to recruit participants for example, a blog posted on the website of an age-friendly university; posters distributed in recreational and meeting halls and in public areas such as pharmacies and local community notice boards and to groups such as active retirement associations, and amateur dramatic societies. Both those identified from the *Changing Generations* database and new participants recruited through theoretical sampling were given clear written information about the study and what participation entailed.

In-depth qualitative interviewing, while a complex enterprise presenting both technical and epistemological challenges, is an eminently suitable and much used data gathering tool in constructivist grounded theory studies. (Charmaz, 2002; Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, & Mckinney, 2012). In keeping with the CGT method, an interview guide was prepared which contained open-ended questions and prioritised learning about the participants' actions, views and experiences. The interview guide was simply a guide for the initial interviews and a general frame for subsequent interviews, as theoretical sampling and emerging concepts identified by the ongoing analysis directed the interview questions as the study progressed. Twenty-three people aged 65 and over were interviewed to attain rich co-constructed talk data, and field notes were compiled to capture observational data. The interview duration varied from 55 to 95 min, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and pseudonyms are used in the findings. Participants ranged in chronological age from 66 to 95 years of age. The participants' characteristics are provided in the table below (see Table 1). Ten lived alone and 11 lived with their spouse or partner, one lived with an adult child only, and one participant lived in a three-person household with a spouse and an adult child. Eleven were married and 10 were widowed, one was re-partnered and one never married. Two of the participants had a family member of another generation domiciled with them i.e. a son or a daughter. Three of the participants were not parents, the remainder were. The sample is diverse, taken from across the socioeconomic spectrum. However, we acknowledge that the findings emerged within a context that is relatively homogeneous i.e. participants share the same nationality and ethnicity (White, Irish).

Findings

In the following paragraphs we will explore the concepts and processes that emerged from the data. These include, the predominance of a deficit view of ageing; challenging the dominance of the successful ageing storyline; avoiding age segregated groups; keeping up with the times; expanding & not contracting, seeking connectedness and belonging. We begin by outlining how and why the older adults sought and formed IGF.

Intergenerational friendship formation: Aligning and avoiding

Many older friends allude to enjoying friendships or being disposed to forming friendships with people of *all* ages. The participants are clear in stating that the characteristics of friendship with any person of any age were similar and that age was irrelevant in friendship. The participants speak of seeking friendship with younger people. Iris sees the advantage of intergenerational interaction in that her younger friends live in a contemporary way and pointed to this as a characteristic that is of benefit to her:

Table 1
Participant characteristics.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Marital status	Children	Household	Last/current occupation
Brendan	72	Male	Married	3	2: Self & spouse	Teacher
Hugo	92	Male	Widowed	4	1: Self	Finance
Eileen	79	Female	Married	4	2: Self & spouse	Civil Servant
Iris	91	Female	Married	3	2:Self & spouse	Nurse
Lorna	84	Female	Widowed	3	1: Self	Civil Servant
Darina	88	Female	Widowed	6	1: Self	Civil Servant
Angela	95	Female	Widowed	0	1:Self	Admin clerk
Tommy	76	Male	Married	4	3:Self,spouse,child	Labourer
May	75	Female	Married	1	2: Self & spouse	Home Help
Valerie	67	Female	Widowed	1	1:Self	Child minder
Simon	69	Male	*Re*-Partnered	0	2: Self and partner	Community Services
Maria	85	Female	Never-married	0	1: Self	Religious
Anne	66	Female	Married	1	2: Self & spouse	Social Care
Breda	82	Female	Married	4	2: Self & spouse	Homemaker
Bill	85	Male	Married	4	2: Self and spouse	Farmer
Sheila	79	Female	Widowed	2	1:Self	Farmer
Jennifer	81	Female	Married	6	2: Self & spouse	Cleaner
Jack	83	Male	Married	6	2: Self & spouse	Caretaker
Kathryn	94	Female	Widowed	1	1: Self	Secretary
Lydia	67	Female	Married	4	2: Self & spouse	Nurse
Lucia	89	Female	Widowed	4	1:Self	Teacher
Janis	78	Female	Widowed	2	1:Self	Artist/mentor
Walter	91	Male	Widowed	4	2:Self & adult child	Civil Servant

> …because they [intergenerational friends] are in the world as it is now. They keep me younger.
>
> (Iris)

Sheila claims that she has an affinity with younger people while others of her age do not, as the following narrative demonstrates. She associates her regard for younger people with her stance on being forward-looking, attributes she implies some other older people lack due to being entrenched in the past:

> …I tolerate young people. You find some older people always giving out about young people, 'we never had what they have', but I like to think I move with the times.
>
> (Sheila)

Brendan explains that his younger friends are active and engaged:

> ….they [intergenerational friends] would be optimistic people…I would not hang around with negative people for too long you know. They [intergenerational friends] would be out and about you know, doing and eh, you gravitate towards people like that. I'm not saying you would avoid, but you wouldn't invest too much time because that [negativity] can bring you down and that's a big issue for older people, you know. You can go into a shell…I suppose really it can be a sort of a negative vibe you know like health is bad and struggling.
>
> (Brendan)

Some context for the meaning this way of thinking holds for Brendan is provided in his earlier comments about his reluctant retirement:

> When you retire it is challenging, it's quite a challenge to yourself as an older person because you drop out from a very busy, vibrant life, and you are just sort of dropped out of society, so coping with that can be big.
>
> (Brendan)

Brendan is actively seeking out the friendship of positive minded and/or younger people as a strategy for himself that he considers helps stave off the 'typical' effects of retirement/ageing. Brendan did not experience retirement from formal employment as a positive transition. The image Brendan paints is of retirement resulting in isolation from society: intergenerational friendship is his 'anchor' to remain connected to contemporary society. At a time of significant change and transition from middle to older age - in many contemporary societies retirement age is considered to signal the onset of older age – intergenerational friendship gained a new significance in Brendan's life.

Keeping abreast of social and cultural changes through intergenerational friendship also appealed to Anne, as she expresses what was interesting about her intergenerational friends:

> I am interested in their [intergenerational friends'] views … … it is different, and I find that interesting.
>
> (Anne)

For Anne, having younger friend's means exposure to social change and this provides her with a lens to view changing social norms and viewpoints. Other participants are clear in their preference for spending time with younger people over spending time with older people. Breda, in her eighties, explains:

> There's nothing but old fellows in there [segregated older-age social group]; I'd rather be with younger people …. You [younger people] don't moan, you don't want to be boring.
>
> (Breda)

Eileen perceives 'older people' as inward looking, and voices her frustration:

> Older people you know, they are all caught up in their life. If they are married… the man is their life, now I don't agree with that at all. I feel you should have an independent life as well as your home life. Then of course, some people of my age well, they never stop talking. If it wasn't the children and how well they achieved, and then when it comes to the grandchildren they are talk, talk, talk. So much so that I feel like saying … 'nobody of my age wants to hear that, we all have grandchildren'. I can't keep my mouth shut when I hear that sort of thing, I open it too wide sometimes but, I mean, I think that you can talk about other things like, a bit of everything.
>
> (Eileen)

Eileen signals here what is annoying and inconceivable to her: a widespread conceptualisation of older age and older people as cocooned in family and family life. The valorisation of family and older peoples' place in it by society is mirrored in Eileen's account of her encounters with many older people. For Eileen, this is what she finds difficult to endure, and she is orientating towards younger people who share her broader interests in engaging with a wider range of domains

beyond family – including friendship. The younger friends' positions as 'still engaged in the world' - their contemporary outlook - draws the older friend to the younger one. Through IGF, the older friends are staying connected with the world, vicariously and actually, following retirement and while transitioning to an age/life-stage that may render older persons more and more disconnected. The portrayals of older age in the data (as synonymous with being negative, 'boring' or 'moaning' and being resistant to social change and closed to accepting new social norms) reflect a deficit view of older age.

An interesting 'inversion' of this process is practised by Lucia. For Lucia, her lifelong peer-age friends are engaged in 'active ageing', they are being busy, active and useful and Lucia sketches out how she finds this immersion in activities difficult. Lucia described that as she has aged she finds it difficult to concentrate on the intricacies required for crafting:

> I have my own age group friends as well [as younger friends], and I would see those. But with them [peer-age friends] it is knitting and sewing, it is not me, I go haywire. Mentally I can't do that; I would be in a nursing home. I hate it. I go to the gentle exercise class instead. I get too confused if there is too much going on. I can't do it [knitting and sewing], not anymore, I can't concentrate now. I get confused now to be honest with you that is the clearest way to put it. With Lydia [her intergenerational friend], we look at sports on TV, we love sports. We both hate knitting and sewing too. There are other things that I could do, I could go bowling, but that means going out in the dark at night. Then I have to come back to an empty, dark house. That is not for me. So now, with my own age group we just meet for coffee and then I go home.
>
> (Lucia)

Lucia removes herself from her older friends' company as they are engaged in activities that she no longer enjoys. She portrays a process of disengagement from night-time leisure pursuits due to fears of personal safety, as she is no longer part of a couple since her husband's death. Her younger friend, Lydia, shares Lucia's interest in watching sport; this requires little effort on Lucia's part and takes place in her or Lydia's home (with Lydia driving her home). Lucia feels safe and this pastime, watching sports programmes on TV, demands little cognitive engagement for Lucia as she sees it. Lucia, having both younger and older friends, expresses a preference for the undemanding company of her younger friend as opposed to her 'busy' older friends. An intergenerational friendship, therefore, is not always or only about keeping active, keeping younger or keeping 'up with the times'. Lucia's narrative sketches a role for IGF in the challenge to the singular narrative of successful ageing.

Doing ageing through intergenerational friendship

The consequences of holding a deficit view of older people - an ageist ideology - resulted in some of the participants avoiding joining older adults' (same age) groups, perceiving 'them' as negative in their attitudes:

> If I mixed all the time with people in their 80s like me, some of them are very negative. In every way, like they moan and complain, if it's the bus service or the government, you know they complain, a lot of older people, and that's why I think having a relationship with younger people, it's different.
>
> (Lorna)

In choosing to spend time with younger people, portrayed as a homogenous group ascribed with positive attributes (for instance, they are 'in the world as it is today'), and in avoiding spending time with 'older people' also portrayed as homogenous but ascribed with negative attributes (inward looking, complaining), a process is revealed.

The process of 'avoiding and aligning' emerged from the analysis, i.e. the participants were avoiding some activities and behaviours which they deemed as negative and were aligning themselves with activities and behaviours which reinforced their openness to seeking, forming and embracing an intergenerational friendship. In identifying and connecting these 'aligning and avoiding' categories which emerged from the data, we argue that some participants were simultaneously holding, and rejecting, age stereotyping.

A stereotypical array: the 'old fogey', 'old haggard' and 'old fuddy-duddy'

Negative stereotyping can be observed and deduced in the narrative stereotypical sketches of older people drawn by some of the participants. An array of socio-cultural stereotypes and their characteristics as sketched by the participants are presented below as the grounds for exploring how holding stereotypically negative portrayals of older age shapes the older friends' own approach to both ageing *and* intergenerational friendship formation.

The meanings that the participants attached to 'being old' were often subtle. For example, Tommy distinguishes between being chronologically old and acting old as he declares: '[I] probably don't act it [75 years old]', implying that, in his opinion, 75 year-olds are expected to act in a particular way. He gives an example of what he sees as being expected of him as an older individual by others of his generation as he speaks about being in the pub with his intergenerational friends:

> I think some people think that when you get older, you shouldn't be here [in the pub], and you should go home earlier maybe (laugh). It comes to a certain time and they think they should be going home, you know, they think like that when they get old. I think that anyway, some of my people my age, like, they think that you might be out of place if you are there [in the pub] at one o'clock, two o'clock (laugh).
>
> (Tommy)

Tommy portrays some of his friends and acquaintances who are his own age as self-regulating their behaviour in line with what they perceive as being socially expected of them. The fun and carefree characteristics of late-night drinking with a younger group of people are regarded as being incompatible with old age. Social norms become social restrictions for the older patrons of the pub as they remove themselves from 'fun' social situations and return home at an age-appropriate time. The powerful influence of social norms to regulate and constrain the behaviour, and age-integrated social interaction, of these older people is thus evident.

Other meanings are more explicit and are presented in the form of negative stereotypical sketches of the 'old fogey', the 'old haggard' and the 'old fuddy-duddy' within participants' talk. These stereotypical representations reveal participants' perspectives on how 'being old' *could* be for these older adults if they did not choose to act and think differently. These portrayals share the common trait of being extremely undesirable, for example, Lydia spoke of avoiding being seen as an 'old fuddy-duddy':

> I will never be old. It's being set in your ways and not being able to adapt. I will never be old in mind-set, or set in my ways. I would never like to be an old fuddy-duddy. Complains, moans, someone who is stuffy! Fuddy-duddy is being set in your ways. Have you read 'Who moved my cheese' that book? That is a fuddy-duddy. Being set in your ways and not being able to adapt. I never want to be an old fuddy-duddy as it's someone who is blinkered, who doesn't move with the times.
>
> (Lydia)

Avoiding being a 'fuddy-duddy' is linked to the avoidance of 'being old' for Lydia. Failing to observe and to become immersed in contemporary society and new ways of thinking is at the core of what Lydia understands 'old' to be. Performing old age as a 'fuddy-duddy' is being old. Refusing to change and adapt to new social norms defines the old 'fuddy-duddy', along with complaining. Lydia declared that she will

'never be old', thus discounting her inevitable chronological ageing as relevant to being old.

Simon spoke about how he feared being considered or becoming 'the old fogey':

> The old fogey. Um… [is] bad on the pins [legs], y'know, getting a bit feeble, eh, getting forgetful. I mean very, I'm forgetful anyway, but getting very forgetful and thereby finish up in, in maybe ridiculous situations. [The old fogey is] A person that people try to avoid because they're boring or they're just not able to keep up, maybe from a mental point of view and physical point of view. That's an old fogey.
>
> (Simon)

'The old fogey' represents a fearful portrayal of old age: frail, experiencing falls and forgetfulness, an isolated figure of ridicule who is rejected and avoided by those in their community. The characteristics of the 'old fogey' are an amalgamation of what is often the focus of cultural and media representations of older age. In a similar vein, Hugo spoke of the 'old haggard', linking 'being older' and 'acting older':

> If I was to sit down here and just read the papers and sit at the fire I'd be a zombie I think. I go to visit a lot of my friends and that sort of thing. Well, of course, you have to face reality, I am older but it doesn't really come into the situation really. I never think of myself as just an old haggard or something like that.
>
> (Hugo)

These participants displayed ageist opinions and a form of in-group ageism towards people of their own chronological age, for example, describing older people as boring. They are framing old age as deficit through an array of socio-cultural constructs in the form of stereotypical characters: the old fuddy-duddy, the old fogey, the old haggard. In making comparisons between the negatively marked group that is older people and differentiating *themselves* so as to align with the positively marked group of *younger acting* people, these participants narratively constructed, and simultaneously rejected a stereotypical older age identity. Declining an older age identity involved rejecting particular activities or understandings, as the next section outlines.

'Expanding and not contracting'

Janis provides a succinct summary of rejecting the negative socio-cultural older age identity and caricatures discussed by many of the people who took part in this study:

> We [older people] are not behaving, we are not closed down. We are not contracting, like I am expanding. It [intergenerational friendship] is based on that, going out into the world discovering new things, learning new things, having fun while we are doing it, catching up on our lives.
>
> (Janis)

The explicit connection between intergenerational friendship and a particular attitude is evident here. The process of seeking social interaction, enjoying life, an openness to being immersed in contemporary ways and continuing to seek out new experiences form part of this attitude. Janis elucidates how she shares these attributes and experiences with her younger friends as they have had lots to talk about when they 'catch up'. The concepts of 'expanding' and 'not contracting' are implied in the narratives of other participants who spoke about continuing to participate as they had always done and not retiring or isolating themselves.

These concepts were evident as the participants portrayed the processes and incidences of continuing to seek social interaction and friendship. 'Expanding, not contracting' is interwoven with many of the processes and accounts the participants offered in their narratives. For instance, participants spoke about seeking new interests and insight into new social norms while continuing to maintain their own old-age identity as they transition to older age. Designating themselves as older individuals who reject 'contracting', participants spoke of rejecting chronologically mandated retirement and of seeking continued involvement in society.

Being 'one of the people' through pursuing 'active involvement'

The notion of an 'active retirement' is a normative and familiar concept in contemporary society. Policy makers, health professionals and researchers promote this approach as being a healthy and a positive tactic for older adults to age 'well' and to experience a good old age. For Brendan, however, this tactic had a negative connotation. Brendan observed how older people gather into collective older-age activities. While it is implied that these older adults strive to pursue an 'active retirement' or 'active ageing', Brendan spoke instead of the process he characterised as an active involvement and 'not being ready' to embrace this way of socialising:

> I've seen it, active age week and all that, and I don't know if I'm running away from all that, or what, but…I don't think I'm ready for that yet, even though I'm 71 years of age. I'm not ready to settle for that, maybe. Don't get me wrong on this, they are great people and they are great out there, but my interests are active, active involvement, but I am not ready to go on the day trips on the bus together. And…I am probably older than some of them I would say.
>
> (Brendan)

Brendan rejected the model of ageing advocated through the organisation of older people into age-specific activities. He depicted peer-age engagement as segregation in contrast to intergenerational involvement which is inclusive and active, endorsing 'active involvement', instead of 'active retirement'. The recognition that retirement is a form of enforced age-segregation from the employment arena is also alluded to by Janis. Janis clearly stated that despite no longer being in 'paid employment' she is not 'retired' and cannot envision a time in the future that she will be:

> I have never retired. I won't retire, why would I? I mean I have retired from paid work, somebody else paying me. I won't take anything like that again because it would encroach on my freedom, but I am still working as an artist and as an art teacher. I am working at my music, and working in the garden and etc. etc.
>
> (Janis)

Simon, who speaks about how music provided an ageless shared interest, elaborates on how he transitioned after 'formal' retirement into a new career. Simon's lifelong interest in music allowed him to pursue a second career in entertainment, thus fostering intergenerational friendships:

> There's no natural limit to that [music] where the government says you must leave and you must stop. Ah, whereas I think in normal occupations, you see retirement coming up, you yourself know the old problem of the person who retires. They go home and they just fade, because they've nothing else to do. But I've always been blessed with a mix of activities. Then the music is always the night job… and the night job just keeps on going forever.
>
> (Simon)

Here, Simon is linking retirement from formal work (the day job) with decrepitude and decline in older age. Removed from the workforce, a process of invisibility and exclusion is proclaimed by Simon and Brendan, as older people 'fade' when they are no longer busy in a meaningful way and engaged with society. The concept of an 'active retirement' and its connection to an active age had negative connotations for some participants and it was construed as a form of differentiation or exclusion from 'mainstream' society. The notion of retirement is rejected, and instead, remaining involved, continuing to engage and 'expanding' are championed. Participants continue to 'be and do'

what they have always been and done (albeit with some modifications). Part of this 'being and doing' was continuing to pursue existing interests and additionally pursuing new interests and goals, in the words of Janis: 'continuing to expand and not contract'. This includes forming new intergenerational friendships.

One of the oldest-old participants, Hugo, continues to pursue and to expand his professional interests through involvement in a group comprising retired professionals. The group meets to discuss current affairs, financial markets and other related subjects. The group had the added benefit of providing a network of possible intergenerational friendships for Hugo as most of the group (while being of retirement age) were of a younger generation than he. As Hugo iterates:

> Oh yes them [interests and pursuits] are important, very important because you create tremendous friendships and it broadens your scope in life.
>
> (Hugo)

This statement highlights a rationale as to why Hugo and some other participants pursue an intergenerational friendship. Angela sketches a dramatic portrayal of how important continuing to expand through social interaction is: its absence has serious consequences as isolation and stagnation can overcome the oldest-old individual:

> I think it is important for older people to get out and meet, meet younger people and talk, and get out of yourself. Mentally, mentally it is important. Because you can be there inside four walls and if you don't get out and meet people the four walls are going to fall down on you. So that's what my idea has always been anyway.
>
> (Angela)

Iris also describes how continuing to be mentally active and 'search for more' keeps her engaged and included in life:

> …and I find that very interesting [her discussions with her intergenerational friends] because when you're my age if you give up searching mentally you might as well lie down and die unless you're anxious to learn more in your old age, no matter how mundane your interests. Maybe the searching for more does keep you momently active I think (laughter).
>
> (Iris)

Iris evokes imagery of gradual invisibility and exclusion, should she cease to engage with contemporary society and her intergenerational friendships. Engaged in the process of expanding, in 'searching for more', Iris remains embedded and active in society. 'Active' is portrayed by Iris not as a physical but as a mental process: looking outwards into society and 'searching for more'.

Kathryn, (aged 94), signals her interest in remaining involved in and connected to contemporary society, not by deploying existing skills but in learning new ones to do with emerging technologies. Despite some initial grappling with technology Kathryn persisted in her attempts as she expresses delight in the resulting connectedness that expanding her knowledge brings. Kathryn had acquired a new smartphone and with the assistance of her intergenerational friend was using it to text:

> I think technology is great. I love getting the texts: and I think technology is wonderful. I always say I like to think I move with the times, I think technology is great, and I do like to think I move with the times and keep up with them.
>
> (Kathryn)

Kathryn is continuing to engage with technology, she is planning to access the plethora of material available on the internet. She is keeping up with current technology and current affairs, undeterred, at 94 years of age, from seeking lessons and guidance to achieve this aim. This notion of the continued pursuit of activities and interests and the concomitant impact on ageing identity and the 'spectre of the number' (chronological age) is further elaborated upon by Simon:

> So I'd say physically and mentally, having lots of activities, all quite different, keeps you from thinking about ageing too much. There's also, there's always the spectre of the number. You know I'm 70 next month, I said 'Come on, it's only a number. It's not a condition!' So y'know, that's where I try to think that way.
>
> (Simon)

For Tommy, 'the proper mental attitude to life' meant:

> [Being] active and everything you don't think of your age, you know. You think you are one of the people and you are. It's [intergenerational friendship] a great thing. You know, it keeps you in a positive attitude and you don't think age. It was only when I got sick that I found that I was 75.
>
> (Tommy)

Social connectedness is evidently a significant driver for Tommy to seek out intergenerational settings and friendships - 'you think you are one of the people and you are' signals the importance of intergenerational integration and friendship for remaining connected to, and a part of, his community. Being socially active within an intergenerational setting supports Tommy in engaging with the negative connotations he associates with being old. Old age did not 'find him' as he maintains a younger age identity and a positive outlook. However, Tommy found old age in illness. Being incapacitated due to ill health, depending on others for care, and being confined to a hospital or his home were the situations and conditions Tommy associates with older age.

To revisit a quote used earlier in this section, Janis had outlined how older people like her were expanding and were 'not behaving and were not closed down'. This statement contains a stringent denial and a challenge not to old age *per se* but to the inferred expectations of how adults 'should' be in older age. By 'expanding and not contracting' Janis implies that older people like her are not following these strictures ('are not behaving') and are continuing to be, or at least are striving to be, interested and immersed in contemporary society. Older people are open to new experiences and social relationships ('we are not closed down').

Discussion

Performing age through intergenerational friendship

People who took part in this study subscribe to stereotyping and ageism in describing old people as a homogenous 'boring' or 'moaning' or segregated group or in the pejorative terms of the 'old fogey', the 'old haggard' and the 'old fuddy-duddy'. Participants challenge negative stereotyping through, among other things: the formation and maintenance of intergenerational friendship, seeking out age-integrated environments, sharing commonalities with younger adults, and expressing an interest in new social norms and technologies. The participants describe continuing to do the things that they have always enjoyed with older and younger friends, and additionally, pursuing new interests and experiences. They seek social engagement through established and new intergenerational friendship(s).

The 'performance' of age through intergenerational friendship encompasses three processes (Fig. 1). First, the socio-cultural stereotypes that the older friends are rejecting and are 'afraid of becoming' i.e. the social construction of ageing and age identities, conflicts with how they perceive their own identities to be in older age (top circle). Second, this then leads to some of the participants aligning themselves with younger people (thus forming intergenerational friendships) and 'young' ways of doing, thinking and being (keeping up with the times, feeling the same age inside – left circle). Finally, participants, strive to avoid negative older people (for instance, avoiding age homogenous organisations) and socially constructed 'older ways' of doing, thinking and being, by remaining socially active, not retiring, and so on (right circle). In interacting and in resolving the tension between performing age as they

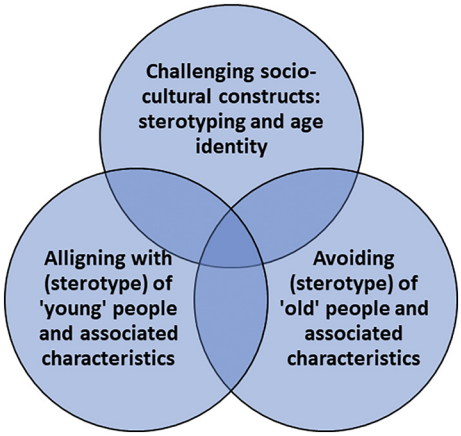

Fig. 1. Performing age: a social and cultural model of an intergenerational friendship.

were experiencing it and chronological age norms, the older friends are seeking resolution through intergenerational friendship; peer-friendship does not offer the same solution. The older friends are perceiving a *lack* of intergenerational difference in tandem with a *peer-age* difference.

The older friends do not deny their own chronological age, yet the behaviours, stances and views, they associate with their younger-age friends are congruent with how they perceive their own behaviours and views to be. For the older adults, ageing is about performance - how they 'perform' as older adults in their pursuits or interests - and not about chronological age. The 'spectre of the number' is still evident, for example, Simon mentioning being 70 or Tommy 75 years of age. Fear of becoming isolated, boring, or a figure of ridicule through being forgetful or falling, underpins the narratives. Social constructions and commonplace prominent negative cultural representations and images of older age were identified, feared and resisted by the participants.

In this study we reveal a process whereby internalising deficit stereotypes spurred the older friends to adopt a 'purposeful' approach to intergenerational friendship, ageing and being older. The term 'meaningful' best reflects the process and the participants' approach. They continued being themselves: in doing the things they had always taken pleasure in doing, with people who shared their interests or simply with those whose company they enjoyed, regardless of chronological age. However, being older played a unique and significant part in the intergenerational friendship. The oldest-old described feeling and being older and therefore initiating the youngest-old into the practices and performances of oldest age, concerned to make the transition more manageable for their younger friend. The older friends discussed a variety of age-related transitions that they were negotiating or had negotiated: married to widowed, employed to retired, full-time parent to empty-nester, loss of peer-age friends, loss of stamina and the continuous transitioning to being older in an ever-changing world.

The older friends convey simultaneous acceptance of the deficit portrayal of older age in relation to others, i.e. 'the old people', and rejection of such a portrayal in relation to themselves. The participants demonstrated 'othering' in ascribing deficit portrayals and characteristics to 'old' people - they did not consider themselves to be part of this deficit group, despite their chronological age. Stereotyping and ageism are being simultaneously accepted and rejected in this narrative. Therefore, the nexus of being old for these participants is not chronological age (as embraced culturally and by institutions and society as an organisational category for *inter alia* education, retirement, and welfare supports) but how old age is 'performed'.

Old age is not only a tyranny of ever-increasing numbers along a numerical line which typically starts at age 65. For those engaging in intergenerational friendship, old age is reframed into a spectrum. The process of being old is a 'spectrum of performance' across which one can move forward and back. The older friends are active in challenging this tyranny of numbers. 'Contracting': moaning, complaining, 'excluded' old people are at one end of the spectrum and at the other end, the 'expanding': positive, socially engaged, culturally aware old people. The older friends signal that they share the 'expanding' characteristics with younger people, according to many of these narratives. Yet at times, such as the older friend falling ill or when their younger friends need their guidance and experience, older friends demonstrate the consequences (positive and negative) of being 'long-lived'. They call on the experience and insight that they have garnered through living a long life.

Intergenerational friendship plays an important part in the everyday lives of the people who participated in this study. They described the various meanings, emphasising joy and laughter, and the roles that intergenerational friendship played in their lives. Intergenerational friendship emerged as forming part of a strategy for performing ageing - to challenge ageing stereotypes and to continue to 'be themselves'. Intergenerational friendship provides opportunities for expanding, and the greatest mobility along the spectrum of performing age. Recalling that many of the people in this study pronounced being "not only old", and relished acting in carefree ways, feeling ageless, and feeling and acting old and young simultaneously, reveals a fluid all-age identity, a mish-mash of selves, deployed and maintained through intergenerational friendship.

The social construction of ageing and older people emerged from the accounts of the participants as a significant influence on how they perceived themselves and others and how they conducted their friendships. Participants were active in examining their ageing options, that is, how they chose to perform older age. They perceived 'otherness' in how older adults, including themselves, are expected to conduct their lives, for example, cessation of professional roles, discounting new experiences or interests, and so on. The participants gave detailed portraits of 'the old fogey', 'the haggard' and 'the fuddy-duddy': deficit stereotypes of older people, representing characters they were fearful of becoming.

These stereotypical portraits or sketches of old age can be conceived as being a manifestation of a 'social imaginary' of a feared fourth age (Higgs & Gilleard, 2015), a portrayal of the participants' understanding of what the fourth age *could* bring. Higgs and Gilleard's (2015) concept of the fourth age as social imaginary refers to a metaphorical 'black hole of ageing' that represents a collectively imagined terminal destination in life. Higgs and Gilleard articulated the characteristics of the fourth age social imaginary as a 'location stripped of the social and cultural capital of later life which allows for the articulation of choice, autonomy, self-expression and pleasure' (Higgs & Gilleard, 2015; p. 14). The participants in this study concurred with this conceptualisation.

Moving back and forth across the spectrum of third and fourth ages is observed and experienced by some participants in this data. Periods of illness interrupt a third age existence. Illness, along with the dependency and frailty it often brings, renders one more closely aligned to an old or aged identity and one's chronological age. A temporary shift to the fourth age was recounted, for example, by Tommy as he reflected on the dependency and frailty that illness wrought in his everyday life. However, recovery allowed for reverting to the third age and re-embracing and resuming social outings, being out in the world along with engaging in light-hearted banter, all in the company of his intergenerational friends. This moving back and forth supports Laslett's (1989) argument that third and fourth ages are not linked to chronological age but are linked to experiences and age associations.

Sketching characterisations of a deficit old age, in the form of the 'fuddy-duddy' or the 'old fogey', prompted participants to avoid sites where older people gather in age-segregated activities, what they portrayed as age silos. Participants challenged the stereotypical ageing script by choosing instead to age in their own way. The pervasiveness of ageism in contemporary societies featured as being so entrenched that

it was rarely confronted or even recognised as such. It is detrimental and damaging to older people as it is visited on them (Binstock, 2010; Bytheway, 1995). Jönson (2013) described this as a process of 'non-old, with people discriminating against their 'future selves' (p. 198).

In this research, accounts emerged of older people discriminating against those of their own age group; recall the many accounts given by participants of older people being a boring or moaning group. Positive ageism was directed at the age-other group (younger people) while negative ageism was directed at the same-age (old) group. This approach may be considered another 'way' of ageing to avoid becoming a sterotypical, feared caricature and being perceived by others as a member of an excluded, negatively framed group (older people).

Goffman (1963) conceptualised stigma as an 'attribute that is deeply discrediting', with the stigamatised being socially rejected as they are distinguished from those who are socially accepted, 'the normals' (p. 3). In this rendering of stigma, applied to seeking intergenerational friendship, the discrediting attribute is 'being old aged' and 'the normals' are young(er) people. The participants in this study anticipated the stigma attached to being percieved as members of the sterotypical 'deficit'group of old people. Seeking friendships with younger people, therefore, may be a mechanism to actively resist being the object of age stigma. 'Escaping discrediting old age' is a complex process illuminated and sketched by the participants in their accounts: discrediting oneself in the process of discrediting old-age but then distancing oneself or escaping that discrediting through IGF.

Managing the disparity between how others perceive one's outer visible 'old' body and one's inner agelessness was considered by Featherstone and Hepworth (1991) who developed the concept of a 'mask of ageing'. The mask (the ageing body) concealed the internal, trapped ageless/youthful self from society. Here, an alternative insight is provided as older adults engage in intergenerational relationship building and cultivation. While the body may mask hidden identities, the participants deploy and acknowledge their identities that were built up over the life course. The participants in this study made little effort to camouflage the older body to appear younger, they looked their age, and many of the oldest-old people used devices associated with old age, such as walking aids. They did not attempt to be the kinds of super-agers that are often portrayed in the media, for example old people performing exceptional athletic feats. Allan (2010) asserted that identity is reinforced in friendship as friends confirm and reinforce 'who you are' and, therefore, they are more likely to be peer-aged friends. In this study, identity reinforcement traverses the age spectrum as aligning with intergenerational friends provides a valued and vital role in the process of maintaining an 'all-age' identity, a mish-mash of selves.

Seeking continued belonging and connectedness

Allan (1989) counselled social researchers that locating friendships in their social context reveals the 'real significance of friendships in people's lives' (p. 156). In this study, belonging and connecting materialise as central underlying concepts in relation to the meaning of intergenerational friendship for the older people who took part in this study.

Belonging, or a sense of belonging, is defined and conceptualised by May (2011) as not being only about the personal but additionally concerning the social and political decisions taken by a society which have resulting tangible outcomes for its citizens, that may be experienced without being noticed. As May (2011) stated, belonging is that sense that 'we can go about our everyday lives without having to pay much attention to how we do it' (p. 370). May further pointed out that if the individual experiences a lack of fit (feeling excluded, ignored or isolated), then a sense of unease, of not belonging, emerges.

In this research many of the participants spoke about having same-age friendships and intergenerational friendships and some relayed a preference for intergenerational friendships. The meaning older people attach to intergenerational friendship is about continuing to belong, through 'belonging in the now'. Belonging in the now can be conceptualised as the older person living in and being part of society, just as they have always been. The friends seek to be included; they seek belonging through participating in the world as it is today. Intergenerational friendship is a conduit to continued societal connectedness and belonging for older people. Older adults seek connectedness to contemporary social norms and to 'new' ways of thinking and being in the world as it is now; belonging, through going about their everyday lives, not only looking back on lives lived but living their lives today and looking forward to the future. Age norms and ageism (exhibited by the participants in the form of in-group ageism) are perceived to threaten this belonging and are negotiated through intergenerational friendship.

Conclusion

Engaging with the ageing script

The older friends did not deny their chronological age; many mentioned their chronological age and the oldest-old, in particular, seemed proud of the age they had attained. Some, in line with Simon's statement of '*the spectre of the number*' (advancing chronological age), were not so enthused. However, defiance emerged from the narratives. Perhaps the most telling insight is that many spoke of looking forward to the future, along with speaking of looking back at the past. They spoke of wanting to develop, to continue to learn and being open to forming new friendships. Participants continued to maintain and enjoy their friendships, to live in a way, and to enjoy their lives in a way, that was worthwhile for them. However, they did not ignore or deny the changes and challenges that ageing in a contemporary western society presents to them.

Engaging with ageing expectations or behaviours took many forms. Gilleard and Higgs (2000) posit that, in contemporary society, 'post-work lives have become richer and more complex' (p. 193). This would seem to be the case for those who took part in this study. Some participants illustrated defiance by not abandoning the professions that formed part of their identity and that they had been mandated (by employment policy) to retire from officially. Instead, they continued to pursue these professions or embraced other professions in an informal capacity, ofte through their intergenerational friendships. Hugo is an example of someone who embraced the active retirement group model. However, he and his friends disrupted and expanded on the model to form a group whose commonalities extended beyond age.

Additionally, some of the oldest-old participants, such as Angela and Lucia, rejected the 'busy bodies' expectation of the active ageing paradigm (Katz, 2000), choosing instead less onerous pastimes (watching TV or chatting with their friends). Others spurned the segregated social arrangements/paradigms organised by the society in which they lived, for example, by not being members of groups that are specifically aimed at older people. In a sense, intergenerational friendship was framed as being an alternative to 'active ageing' (see also Timonen, 2016). In not adopting a 'ring-fenced' social life, in rejecting to socialise exclusively among people of their own age (many of the participants had formed and maintained both same-age and intergenerational friendships), participants were spurning 'age-appropriate' behaviours, for instance, in Tommy's case, by not feeling obliged to leave social occasions early solely because they are deemed 'old'.

The people who took part in this study did not reject being long-lived; they did not deny that they are old. Kaufman (1986, 1993) argued that 'old people do not perceive meaning in aging itself so much as they perceive meaning in being themselves in old age' (p. 16). What the participants rejected was the ubiquity of behaviours and characteristics ascribed to older people through social norms, age norms and expectations. Nonetheless, they observed and accepted the choice of other older people to adopt and conform to social norms. Continuity in belonging and connectedness through intergenerational friendships was

an essential part of embracing a good old age for them. In the everyday and the mundane – in friendship – they enacted resistance to social and cultural age stereotyping and ageism. 'Escaping discrediting old age' is a complex process illuminated in the participants' accounts: discrediting oneself in the process of discrediting old age but then distancing oneself through intergenerational friendship to escape the discrediting. Relishing difference and age difference within intergenerational friendship, and forging an all-age identity all formed part of the participants' lived experience of older age and intergenerational friendship. Being an older intergenerational friend was imbued with seeking joy, belonging and connectedness in everyday life.

The impetus for this research was to support a broader, more diverse conversation around the experience of old age and friendship in older age. The research findings set out here have implications at the macro level, i.e. for policy and practice. Much of the policy enacted in contemporary societies is concerned with the well-being of people as they attain older age. Organisations and individuals with interests within the broader context of the third sector (befriending, community and social inclusion, loneliness interventions) and state interventions (in relation to ageism, ageing in place, active ageing) should find the insights developed through this research insightful and valuable for their ongoing work. In contributing to the understanding of how some older people negotiate their search for enjoyment and belonging in older age, this article has potential to contribute to policy and practic. Resistance has dramatic connotations, yet as this research reveals it is in the 'everyday' and the mundane, in friendship, leisure pursuits, chatting and laughing that resistance to social and cultural age stereotyping and ageism is enacted. This way of being older is not only about negotiating cultural and social barriers at the personal level but has potential to speak back to stereotypes and ageist norms at the societal level.

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Declarations of interest

none.

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