



# Anthropology & Aging

Journal of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology

## Reading and Wellbeing in Old Age

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*Keywords:* Reading; wellbeing; population ageing; interdisciplinary

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Anthropology & Aging, Vol 40, No 2 (2019), pp. 67-71

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2019.242



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## Reading and Wellbeing in Old Age

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For the past year, I have been a Visiting Academic at Oxford's Institute of Population Ageing, an interdisciplinary research centre that investigates the implications of population change globally. I arranged this opportunity after the submission of my doctorate, when I was eager to expand my view of ageing research outside of anthropology. While it had become clear to me during my doctorate that the burgeoning realm of 'ageing research' required interdisciplinarity facility, I found myself struggling to find the time both to develop an anthropological expertise in ageing and to learn how to converse in the worldviews of sociology, economics, and demography on which global ageing research relies heavily. I hoped that time at the Institute would give me the skills to engage a variety of disciplinary approaches to ageing research. I was also eager to imagine a future, postdoctoral ageing research at the Institute with implications not just for anthropology, but for a much broader audience as well.

I learned how important interdisciplinary facility is for ageing research during the Institute's weekly seminars, where scholars from across the University come to speak on a variety of topics relevant to population ageing. In these seminars I watched as economists asked probing questions about biomedical research and policy analysts questioned demographers about the potential legislative implications of their conclusions. I also listened to qualitative researchers argue for the value of their approach to quantitative-minded disciplines ('we can shape the language you use for your clinical trials,' a psychologist told an epidemiologist, 'we can understand the why of the big data patterns you are detecting' a geographer told a statistician). Through these seminars, I pushed myself to think about what anthropology could contribute to each piece of research (how might discourse analysis advance the research, or attention to lived practice), as well as how anthropology could benefit from these other approaches. What could anthropology do with sprawling data sets, for example, or with population-level concerns?

For the first part of my tenure at the Institute, I treated the seminars as classrooms for cross-disciplinary engagement. But in the spring of my academic visitor-ship, the seminar became the catalyst for my new, future research. In early March, Oxford's English Department's Dr. Kirsten Shepherd-Barr and her postdoctoral scholar Dr. Alex Paddock came to the Institute's seminar to speak about the potential of reading to facilitate ageing wellbeing. They were developing a smartphone application called LitHits, which curates a piece of standalone literature for any amount of time you have—from ten minutes of free time while on a bus ride, to a twenty-five minute gap of time between lunch and the next meeting. Shepherd-Barr had developed this application out of a concern that the slow, extended process of sinking into a book no longer jived with the fast, chaotic pace of the modern world. She hoped that readers might use LitHits in the midst of their busy day, and, through their 'hit' of literature, might be drawn back into the practice of reading literature in its full form.

Dr. Shepherd-Barr always intended this application to be used for public benefit. And, in the wave of scholarly interest in Oxford around ageing research with the announcement of United Kingdom's Industrial Challenge Strategy Fund of £300 million for Healthy Ageing research (UK Government 2018a), Shepherd-Barr suggested in her presentation that it might be worthwhile to explore if LitHits could help facilitate wellbeing in old age. After Shepherd-Barr and Paddock finished their talk, and during the question-portion of the seminar, the Institute's audience was somewhat sceptical about the utility of LitHits for older adult care. A gerontologist asked if the app was user-friendly for older people. 'What about shaky hands,' the gerontologist wondered, 'Or eye-sight issues?' An economist questioned how reading could

reduce loneliness if most people read alone. Would it not be better, the economist suggested, to get them involved in some kind of social activity?

But I was intrigued by the idea, having just read Daniel Miller's (2017) *The Comfort of People*. In his research with people in an English hospice, Miller artfully shows that technology does not isolate people at the end of life, but instead connects them socially in new and powerful ways. While critics suggest dying people prefer in-person connections, Miller found that the practicalities of dying (feeling sick, being bed-ridden), as well as the social habits of the English (reticent, private, and unwilling to invite many into the home), make in-person relationships at the end of life nearly impossible. Technology, however, facilitates just the kind of sociality the English hospice patients wanted: it allows patients to update networks of friends about their progress, while keeping them at an appropriate distance. My own personal experience, having taught hundreds of computer classes to older adults, told me something very similar: Facebook and Twitter, I found, often allowed older adults at the retirement community to expand their social circles and to form connections across time and space that their immobility had once made impossible.

In the audience of the seminar, I wondered what these anthropological insights could contribute to Shepherd-Barr's research ideas. Was the audience's presumption that an application like LitHits would further isolate older, English adults correct, or just a recapitulation of our dominant, yet little interrogated view that technology and reading alienates? What if, I conjectured, LitHits actually made people feel *less* lonely, instead of more so? The more I thought about LitHits and older adult loneliness, the more I became intrigued. If we found, for example, that older adults felt less lonely after using LitHits, what would that say about the relationship between loneliness and reading, and the potential of technology in old age? Ethnography could open up these questions, and may tell us something surprising, where old presumptions might have shut them down.

I was enthused by the potential of this research. I had just spent the majority of my doctorate trying to think about how activities in retirement communities, like dance, song, and games, contributed to the formation of residents' belonging and self. Though I had written a whole chapter on the power of the Bingo game in the retirement community, I had left my dissertation wishing I had spent more time thinking about the place of activities in old age, not just from a critical perspective about the political and economic push towards 'active ageing' (Katz 2000; Lamb 2017), but also from a humanistic perspective like Barbara Myerhoff's in *Number Our Days* (1980) that emphasised the centrality of ritual and story to meaning-making in old age.

Intrigued by the potential of the questions LitHits raised in relation the Healthy Ageing agenda in the UK, my mentor at the Institute of Population Ageing, Dr. George Leeson and I approached Shepherd-Barr and her postdoctoral scholar, Dr. Alex Paddock, hoping to explore further the potential impact of LitHits on older adult wellbeing. In February 2019, we applied for a research seed-grant through the University of Oxford to develop the outline of a future research project and were successful. For the next four months, we explored whether our research question about loneliness and reading could make public and intellectual contributions to population ageing research. We found it does so in three ways: first, it reframes debate on the intersection of our three key research terms, technology, loneliness and reading; second, it addresses current population ageing concerns in the UK in new and needed ways; and third, it has the capacity to contribute a genuinely interdisciplinary approach to population ageing research.

Asking if reading through LitHits can alleviate older adults' loneliness raises new questions about what loneliness is, what reading does for us, and what reading on new technologies could enable. Loneliness is a largely misunderstood phenomenon, and it is common for loneliness to be confused with social isolation (Coleman 2009; Coplan and Bowker 2014; Willis, Vickery, Hammond, and Jessiman 2019).

The problem of loneliness, scholars suggest, is not determined by the state of being socially isolated, but by the experience of feeling disconnected whether alone or while surrounded by others (Mansfeld *et al.* 2019). Especially as older adult social circles tend to wane at the end of life, what, we wondered, allows older adults to feel connected even while isolated?

Reading, we found, enables feelings of connection while isolated. While reading is often a solitary act, people tend to report it as a deeply engaging and connecting activity: indeed, research shows that people experience reading as an intimate form of accompaniment as well as a meaningful dialogue between reader and author, and reader and characters (Age UK 2018; Hilhorst, Lockey, and Speight 2018; McLaine 2012; Rajan and Rajan 2017). Further, research shows reading helps individuals to develop a rich ‘inner life,’ which allows people to translate social isolation not into loneliness, but into meaningful and enjoyable solitude (Ferryhough 2016; Hilhorst, Lockey, and Speight 2018). Even though several social interventions advocate person-to-person socialisation to reduce loneliness in old age, our research into reading confirms loneliness might well be reduced through relations with things, like texts, and with the self, through the development of an ‘inner life.’

Further, reading on smart devices has the capacity to complicate the standard view that technology is fundamentally alienating. Indeed, as Miller’s (2007) ethnography argues, technological applications enable instead of disable our relationships and activity. While there are cultural fears that reading on technology lessens the ‘actual’ experience of reading from a book, several studies suggest that people who read on their phone or smart device develop just as strong of a relationship with the text; they also report that they read more and more often (Pew 2012). Anthropology has long challenged the idea that introducing technology into older adult care will reduce the love, warmth, and ‘personal touch’ that good care requires; ethnographies show that caring technology can be experienced as satisfying and robust as well (Haraway 2008; Pols 2012; Petersen 2017). Reading on technology, therefore, might not only encourage deep and meaningful reading experiences, but it might also be experienced as an avenue of care, intimacy and connection.

There are not just intellectual reasons to get clearer about loneliness in old age and the potential of reading for ageing wellbeing, but political ones as well. Biomedically framed as having mortality risks as high as those of smoking (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Layton 2010), loneliness is seen as one of the most significant public health issues that threatens the achievement of ‘healthy’ population ageing globally, and particularly in the UK (Age UK 2009). While loneliness is often medicalized in the clinical encounter (McLennan and Ulijaszek 2018), the National Health Service (NHS) has created a new social intervention called ‘social prescription,’ defined as the clinical referral to a range of activities in the community for the facilitation of patient health and wellbeing, including dance classes, volunteering, and, in our case, reading groups (UK Government 2018b). The concern about loneliness and the interest in the impact of reading, therefore, arise in an UK political context that is seeking to use social and humanistic activities for health purposes (AgeUK 2018).

In our research, we have been careful to examine the ways in which the concern around loneliness and its proposed solutions, like reading, are intimately connected to political goals to make ageing and the humanities fit state agendas of health and wellbeing, personal control, and self-sufficiency. Deeply aware of the political potency our research questions have, we are especially keen to find surprising ways in which the humanities might contribute to population ageing outside the political metrics which currently seek to measure its effect. Our aim is to show the political and economic genealogy of the problem of older adult loneliness and proposed solutions for ageing wellbeing and to imagine alternative framings and futures for reading in old age.

In order to discern the potential impact of reading on older adult loneliness in the contemporary context, we have generated a research proposal that aims to address the conceptual and public gaps in loneliness and reading research through a genuinely interdisciplinary approach. Broadly, this project will utilise ethnography and insights from Humanities research to discern how older people use LitHits in their everyday lives. We will use humanities research, including English literature, philosophy and history, to frame our understanding of reading, the definition of wellbeing in old age, and the contribution the humanities can make to the good life. We also aim to explore how older people themselves experience, understand, and define their loneliness, as well as the ways in which they conceptualise how reading might contribute to the good old age. Our research goals are to reshape debate about loneliness in the UK and to contribute new measurements for the NHS to discern the impact of humanistic activities on wellbeing.

Research rooted in interdisciplinary thought, dovetailing humanistic queries with social science methodologies has emerged through this four-month journey. Our collaboration seeks to make contributions not only to anthropology, English literature, and medical humanities, but also to public health and primary care. We are excited to learn more about the potential of LitHits, and eager to see how the technology can advance our thinking on and potentially serve as a way to address older adult loneliness.

I have been amazed by the ways in which my interdisciplinary facility has strengthened throughout the development of this research. In having to make questions about reading for ageing wellbeing relevant to scholars across the Institute, I have learned how to frame my research for a broader audience, and to imagine ways my research could contribute to public policy, demography, and statistics. While there are fears that interdisciplinary research exchanges depth for breadth, I have found that in this project my commitment to anthropology has been strengthened, not weakened. By interacting with scholars outside of the discipline, I have had to dive deeper into anthropology in order to articulate how it can make unique contributions to ageing research. It seems as if my time at the Institute has proven our disciplinary adage true: sometimes different worldviews clarify our native—disciplinary—value(s) more clearly.

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