



Anthropology & Aging

Journal of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology

All in this Game Together

A Conversation between Aging Researchers about Research on Aging

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Anthropology & Aging, Vol 41, No 1 (2020), pp. 7-16

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2020.270



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Olive Bryanton and Leslie Carlin both conduct research on aging. We are connected to AGE-WELL-NCE, which—perhaps gracelessly—stands for Aging Gracefully across Environments using Technology to Support Wellness, Engagement and Long Life – Network of Centres of Excellence, a federally-funded Canadian project that bills itself more briefly as “Canada’s technology and aging network” states: “AGE-WELL is dedicated to the creation of technologies and services that benefit older adults and caregivers. Our aim is to help older Canadians maintain their independence, health and quality of life through technologies and services that increase their safety and security, support their independent living, and enhance their social participation” (<https://agewell-nce.ca/about-us>).

From Leslie’s point of view, the network came to funded life in 2015. AGE-WELL’s USP is its aim to bring together technology, enterprise and social good. Researchers, partners, and trainees from fields as diverse as biomedical engineering and social work, with clinicians, policy professionals, lawyers, and entrepreneurs belong to the network. The training and mentorship component is the jewel in the AGE-WELL crown: a significant portion of the funds go toward support of and activities for the ‘highly qualified personnel’ or HQP: the trainees who enrol in the ‘EPIC’ (Early Professionals, Inspired Careers) program. (Fortunately, there is no closed-book quiz on the acronyms required for participation.) My role in the project is with the training and mentorship team. I used my anthropological background to gather and interpret qualitative data regarding experience of and aims for effective and transdisciplinary training. Equity, diversity, and inclusion are more bywords than buzzwords within AGE-WELL and in Canadian research and enterprise more generally; the training program must impart these values, too. My anthropological credentials get me so far and no further; for a good portion of my mission, I learn as I go. I am becoming knowledgeable about curriculum-building and transdisciplinary training as well as technology and innovation for aging. AGE-WELL is good for me.

Each year, trainees may apply to join the “EPIC Summer Institute,” (EPIC-SI) a five-day residential intensive teaching and learning endeavour. Program organizers select 18 applicants to participate; an almost equal number of mentors affiliated with AGE-WELL. The goal of the SI is to guide these rising professionals from multiple disciplines to work together conceiving and developing plans for an innovation that will benefit older adults in Canada. During a series of in-depth interviews conducted previously by me, Leslie Carlin, and a colleague, Euson Yeung, to understand how the EPIC program worked, we heard numerous laudatory comments about earlier SIs as a learning experience. I wanted to understand the magic.

To collaborate in this rapid incubation process, three ‘older adult experts’ attend the residencies, with one assigned to each group of six trainees. In July 2019, Dr. Olive Bryanton, age 82 and from the province of Prince Edward Island, attended the SI as one such expert. I attended as a participant-observer

paying special attention to how teaching and learning operated within the SI. I am younger than Olive, but approximately the same age as the other two older-adult experts; I could have played that role, too. As so often in the course of working with AGE-WELL and more broadly on the topic of aging, I observe that the devil is in the pronouns: who is “we” and who “they”? If I knew more theology I would cite Martin Buber and refer to “I” and “Thou.”

For the bulk of the five days of the EPIC Summer Institute the participants convened in a thick-walled, high-windowed room at a resort in the tiny town of Montebello, Quebec, about halfway between Canada’s capital city Ottawa, and Montreal, on the banks of the Ottawa River. Angled sunlight penetrated early and late in the day but from inside our chamber, we could see nothing. On the afternoon of the fourth day, a hot, sultry Thursday following a spectacular summer thunderstorm, Olive and I found ourselves at liberty and she agreed to an informal informational interview. I wanted to understand the perspective of the older adult expert. What unfolded in our conversation went beyond that basic question and led to questions about the nature of participation and co-creation of knowledge, how they intersect, and which pronouns to use in recounting the story of a research project.

When Olive and I excused ourselves, during a time that the groups of trainees devoted to planning their innovation, we wanted to escape the walls and sit by the river. Olive brought a thermos of water and I carried out a cup of mint tea. We emerged from shadow into the hot, humid, very still afternoon and crossed the wide lawns to a picnic bench near a small marina on the riverside. A gravel path ran nearby but not many people trod it. We were interrupted just once, by a small child who ran up to us and said, “Il y a des poissons! Dans le fleuve!” (There are fish! In the river!) Her parents called her to follow them, and Olive and I carried on our conversation.

I knew from a presentation Olive had given the previous day that she had recently obtained a Ph.D. in education from the University of Prince Edward Island, straddling the roles of trainee, mentor, and older adult.¹ While I felt I ought to focus our discussion on the nature of teaching and the role of transdisciplinarity in the EPIC curriculum, I found that the more interesting topics emerged from letting go of the structured questions in my head and following the lead of my ‘informant’. In the end I would have been hard put to say which of us, Olive or myself, was in fact the interviewer. In the pages that follow, I have removed the “M” for “moderator” and “R” for “respondent” as typed by the transcriber, replacing them with Olive’s and my names or initials.

Institutional review for ethical proceeding had been obtained much earlier to cover interviews about the EPIC program; and the interview as intended would have fallen into that category. However, the conversation that developed strayed from even a broad interpretation of ‘semi-structured’. I orated a consent-to-participate agreement at the start, to which Olive assented; in the end, however, we effectively co-operated to produce this manuscript. The transcript has been edited for length.

Leslie Carlin: I know a little bit about you. We met at the discussion group you led [an AGE-WELL activity]. Can you--for the transcript--tell me about yourself and your background and how you came to be involved in AGE-WELL?

Olive Bryanton: I guess I’ve always been an activist, and primarily an advocate for older adults. I’m not sure where that came from because in my earlier days, I was in nursing and I was in obstetrics and gynaecology.

LC: But even then, you were an advocate for older adults.

OB: I think so, yeah, and I think that was because I was always surrounded by older adults.

LC: Why was that?

OB: I was born before my mother was married, which was quite a horrible thing in those days, so I was brought up by my grandparents. I knew who my mother was but she was kind of like a favourite aunt, and it was merely my grandparents who were kind of the people I looked toward as my parents. I knew my great grandparents quite well as well. It was just always you look toward your elders.

LC: How old was your mother when she had you?

OB: She was 20.

LC: And how old are you?

OB: I'm 82.

LC: And where were you born?

OB: It was called Princetown in Prince Edward Island.

LC: [So] you sort of have this sense of always having been involved with older adults.

OB: Yes.

LC: How did that translate into connection with AGE-WELL?

OB: Through my studies, my studies were always around older adults. Actually, my connection with AGE-WELL, happened about three years ago, I was invited to come to [the University of] Waterloo to their spring symposium as a keynote [and] all of a sudden I met all these wonderful people who were doing research on aging. The person who invited me was Dr. Paul Stolee and it was primarily his students I was meeting. To me, they became my family away from home [...] I was looking at older adults. I was in education because it was one of the few PhD programs on my campus, so I could look at older adults and learning or older adults and adult education, that kind of thing. But my interest was around what are the realities of their life. Because my studies were within the faculty of education, one of the questions I put in was related to education. And it was how do women 85 and older learn where to go for the information they need and how do they share their knowledge with others (Bryanton 2018).

LC: What did you find?

OB: Certainly, for this group of people, their education was very informal and mostly chatting with one another.

LC: In real life.

OB: In real life, yes. And, for the most part, they didn't think they had anything to share. But before we were finished, they realized they did.

LC: What is Photovoice and how did you use it?

OB: Photovoice is a participatory research method where you give the participants cameras to take pictures of issues that impact on their lives (Wang 1999). In my case, the question was what supports or what limits your ability to age in place. We gave them cameras to take pictures of what supported or limited their ability to continuing aging in place. We provided training in how to use the digital cameras and in taking pictures, and provided some general ideas around the kind of picture to take. Things like, something you use every day. For some it was a glass, for another it was their purse, those kinds of things. Another question was something that helps you to be a healthier person. We were doing our group meeting in one of my committee member's lab which had exercise machines and things, so they took a picture of an exercise machine. It was those kinds of thing that we asked them to figure out.

LC: So, they got to choose the object or whatever they photographed...And then used that as a prompt to talk about.

OB: Yes. We gave them the cameras and said, you can take as many pictures as you want, but before I come to visit I want you to choose the six pictures that you like the most that are related to what is supporting you or what is a barrier for you. When I came and met with them, I took a little printer and printed their pictures off for them, just the six they chose. Then we talked about those pictures. Then I said, you need to choose the four pictures that you believe best represents your reality, and those four, were the ones they submitted to my study. After that individual meetings, we came together as a group and they each brought their four pictures to share with one another, and discuss why they took the picture and what it meant. We then asked them to categorize their pictures. They became very animated, putting the pictures together in categories. The study was during the winter and the most important person in their life was the person who cleaned their driveway and shovelled their steps and things like that...Ethically, we were very clear with them that they were not going to be anonymous. They knew we were going to have an open house and they were going to be with their pictures, so people would know who they are. We made sure they understood if they took a picture of a person, whether it was family or whoever, they had to get permission and they had to get it signed. Sometimes it was after the fact but they were very diligent.

LC: That they did it. I can just imagine the person shovelling the driveway being asked to sign that. In a way, that's almost disseminating the research, right, because they then had to explain why they were asking for permission....How many participants did you have?

OB: I had 10, and they were age 85 to 92. The goal of the Photovoice is social change, and we had what we called a "knowledge sharing open house" to share our learnings. I framed their photographs and borrowed stands from the music department to display their photographs. Each person was with their four pictures. Thus, when the guests came in for the knowledge sharing open house, the participants were there with their pictures and everybody went directly to them.

LC: That's so interesting. Were the guests their friends and family?

OB: It was friends, family, academics and policy people. One of the policy people who came was the minister responsible for seniors...For PEI. She came and she spent a lot of time there. This was in July. In November, she announced a new program for seniors called Seniors Independence Initiative, and publicly announced that she was inspired by my study and the opportunity to talk to the women...I was talking with her after and I said, to her really, what did you mean when you said you were inspired by the study? She said, I got your invitation to come to the open house. I came to support your work. I had absolutely nothing in my mind when I walked in that building. When I walked out, my head was spinning...So,

having the opportunity to listen to the women tell about why they took the pictures and what it meant to them and what they would need to help them age in place, was very inspirational for her

LC: That's spectacular. What were the most common photos?

OB: Well, those who had walkers, took a picture of their walker and talked about how it enabled them to remain independent and do some of the things they wanted to do. Their vehicle.

LC: Right. I was wondering if the vehicle was going to be...

OB: Their biggest fear was what am I going to do if I can no longer drive, because they loved living in the community they grew up in or at least raised their families in. They didn't really want to leave the community because their friends are all there. They're cherished in their community. People know them. They know what their strengths are and that kind of thing. So, it's a real worry for them because there's no public transportation in the rural areas, and that was a real concern for them. The person who shovelled their driveway, was also really important.

LC: That's eye-opening.

OB: Yeah. The groups they belong to, the things they did in their communities....For instance, there was one woman who took a picture of their Women's Institute, it was a very small group. But then she started telling me some of the things they did, it was totally amazing how they were really benefiting the community. Another one had a picture of a group of them sitting around the table, and they were developing a recommendation to submit to government saying, you have designated our road for a bicycle path to go to the North Shore and it is not safe, it's one of the most dangerous roads on Prince Edward Island (PEI). The women live on that road and know how dangerous it is for bicycles.

LC: They're worried about the danger to the cyclists?

OB: Yes, exactly. Some of the women, very active, not just in their own community but provincially.

LC: And not just on their own behalf.

OB: And not just on their own behalf. Their involvement in the community was usually around development. In one community, the church was too close to the road. They were going to have to move it back.

LC: Move the church back?

OB: ...Move the church back. So, they had raised the money to move the church back. It's no longer a church. They're making it into a community centre. So, they not only had to raise the money to move it back, but they had to raise the money to renovate it a bit to make it into a community centre.

LC: That's nice.

OB: It was, yeah. Another woman was constantly writing proposals to get funding for their seniors' group to do things. The one they were working on when we were doing the study, is a proposal to New Horizons for Seniors to interview and learn about four immigrants. And so they worked with the Newcomers Association.

LC: Is that a community?

OB: It is a group in Charlottetown. So, the seniors got to meet four different immigrants. They found out why they came to PEI and, learned about some of their customs. The senior women put together storyboards about each immigrant and were loaning them to Grade 4 students in the schools.

LC: Where were the immigrants from?

OB: I can't remember where they were from. I know there was one from Iran, but I never did ask where the immigrants came from.

LC: I was going to ask what was the most surprising photo that you saw in the collection. I'm wondering if that was it or if it was something else.

OB: No, they didn't give me a photo of that. One of the most interesting, I think, was one of my participants was an artist, very detailed. [S]he couldn't just show me the railing in the bathroom. It was the railing in the bathroom, the railing along the corridors, the railing outside...Railings were a big important thing for her. But in order to do it, she couldn't just take a picture of one, she took a picture of all three and then put them together into a collage.

LC: You said that your understanding of Photovoice is that it's meant to engender social change.

OB: Yes.

LC: Would you say that, in fact, that was the outcome?

OB: I would say it was the outcome, but it's also very much a learning, an educational thing for me and for my participants. The thing they enjoyed most about it was the group get-togethers. Oh, they loved them. I did a lot more individual meetings with them because I felt that they would feel more comfortable discussing their photo with me alone first before they would tell others about it. What was really interesting is when they chose the four photographs that they wanted to submit, I asked them if they would do a write-up about it, and if possible, to give a caption. So, when they met as a group, they were reading their story. [W]hen we had the open house, they did not use notes. When guests came to the open house the women talked about their picture. They were as comfortable as could be. [T]hey knew their story inside out, so they told it. Two of them kept diaries, since the 1980s, so, can you imagine that treasure? ...You truly got a sense of what it was like during their lifetime.

LC: Their lives...

OB: The important things I found were their own agency, their family support and friends and neighbours support. I remember one clearly telling me the difference between family and neighbours.

LC: And what was that?

OB: Just with your family, you might discuss the most intimate things. With your neighbours, they're there every day. Especially in the communities where there were actually people home during the day, so they would drop in, they would chat or they'd bring some biscuits or they'd do something like that, very neighbourly kind of thing. I remember the participant saying, there's such comfort in having people like

that around. There were only two who had a spouse. And they all had been farmers at some point. This couple they were both 87, the husband and wife. They had stopped farming and their son had taken over the farming. But the husband was out every day in the woods cutting wood for the next year.

LC: At 87.

OB: Yeah, at 87. And she had had a stroke and was getting around quite well. She paced herself. She did the things she could do. The other thing I found about them was they were able to recognize what they could do and not dwell on what they couldn't do. And I thought that's again part of agency. The other one that was married, was very much a caregiver. Her husband was in a wheelchair. One of the questions I had asked them was, do you believe you have enough resources to continue the lifestyle you have chosen? And most of them, said yes. And that doesn't mean they had a lot of money. It means they had what they felt they needed. This one lady whose husband was in a wheelchair, her very quick answer was, as long as my husband is alive. She said, if he goes first, his pension is cut back to 60%. And they had 10 children. She worked part-time to accommodate the family. She was a teacher by training. But by the time you stay home and you accommodate 10 children, a lot of your life has been part-time work, so no pension. Anyway, at the end of her work career, her pension is \$27.00 a month. But because she accommodated her husband so that he could work full-time, his pension if he died would drop to 60%. She knew some women in her area who couldn't stay in their home because what you've lost is one mouth to feed, the other expenses remain the same. Anyway, it did happen. He did die.

LC: And so what became of her?

OB: She's still doing okay. They had 10 children. One of her granddaughters is living with her. I always knew she'd be okay because her family would make sure that would happen. One of my participants had married a sailor and I think there was a girl at every port. Every time he came home, a new child was produced. She had eight children and it was on her shoulders to make sure they had a roof over their head and food in their tummies.

LC: Did he not contribute financially at all?

OB: No, he was a dreamer. She lived with him until her children were all able to go out on their own. She married three times after that.

LC: After her children left home?

OB: Yeah, and she said she got rid of him [...] and then she got married again and it really wasn't a best choice. The third husband was the love of her life. It was so neat.

LC: And did you meet him?

OB: No, they were only together seven years and he died. And then her last husband was a bit okay, but it was the third one that was really the love of her life.

LC: And you knew that because she told you?

OB: Yes, and just listening to her talk. She loved to dance. He was the first husband she ever had who loved to dance and do things. And the other thing about her is she went from rags to riches.

LC: Really?

OB: Yeah...I think her last two husbands had resources which she benefited from. It's not that she ever strived to make a lot of money or anything, but it was just so nice to see her end up comfortable. The other thing I saw in the women, some of them didn't really have any agency when they were younger, but it grew. So, it's good to know that happens too.

LC: The benefits of aging.

OB: The benefits of aging, yes.

LC: How much familiarity do you have at the moment with the EPIC program and how it works?

OB: Not a lot. I'm learning so much just being here and watching. Yesterday when I watched the groups gel together around the 'Tetris' game I thought, wow, this is powerful.

LC: You brought this up too about how part of the education and training program involves communicating with older adults.

OB: Yes.

LC: Maybe you can tell me a little bit about that and why that's important and how you think it should be working and how you think it is working now.

OB: My [PhD research] participants were just a few years older...They all are older than the life expectancy in Canada. They're all 85 and older. So, I looked at them as pioneers in aging. They are really role models for the rest of us coming behind. And just to be able to ask them questions and have them answer. Because they were involved in my study for approximately eight months, you get to know them quite well, and they trust you. I think that relationship development is so important you welcome that person in as someone that you're going to learn with. One of the things that Photovoice does, it removes you from being the so-called expert, so that you're all in this game together and you're all learning. It's a little bit like what AGE-WELL is doing with these Summer Institutes you're learning together. It doesn't matter what your background is, we have this goal, we're all working toward it. Photovoice is kind of like that.

LC: Just get back to the role of older adults either with Photovoice or the Summer Institute. For you, what does that tell you about the effectiveness of this training program?

OB: It tells me that the people who are developing something, whether it's a program or a service or a new technology, they are taking into consideration the person who is going to be using it. So, that they are actually asking them would this work for you or what could I do to make a change that's going to make it more user-friendly, those kind of things. I mean you can't develop something and then say, is this working for you? You need to know from the one who is going to be the user, so really, what is it you need and how can we help? That's what I really liked about AGE-WELL is the fact that they were actually taking into consideration the end user.

LC: I agree, and I think that's definitely by design. I'm always really interested in the use of pronouns. Who is we and who is they?

OB: That kind of gets eliminated too when people start working together. There are no 'we's or 'they's.

LC: In your group, this group that you were working with, and I guess I haven't looked at the whole program but will continue to work with, what did you find? What pronouns were being used and how were people positioning themselves and how were you positioning yourself?

OB: I think because we all came knowing kind of where our role was going to be. And the students were told, welcome your stakeholder. They all introduced themselves and one of the young men said, can I get you a glass of water? And then those formalities kind of fell away and we just started talking. And I'm listening because I see them as the experts from what they were doing. I remember in my undergrad [days] walking across the campus with a young girl. She said, you must think we're so dumb. And I said, look, it's the total opposite. I think you guys are so frigging smart...They're learning all these new things that I had never even heard of when I was in school. And so they seemed to be quick with answers. I just admired them.

[Discussion of the role of older adults in AGE-WELL/ EPIC]

OB: I think by having the older adult there and realizing that, yeah, they're not just a body that's declining. They are someone who had a life, they're someone who did this in their lifetime I think it's that connection that is really going to help people understand one another. My big thing is ageism. And there's no better way to reduce ageism than working together on something. That all of a sudden this is another person who has knowledge who can contribute to what I'm trying to do, sort of thing. So, you forgot there was an age difference.

LC: When you and I first met we were in a group discussing the *Raging Grannies* (Raging Grannies International 2020) about aging and activism and the contributions that have been made and will continue to be made. And for me that always ends up getting back to that devil-in-the-pronoun. When "we" talk about "them," we are uncovering biases.

OB: But then when you start looking together at an issue and talking about it, it's no longer, we/they. We're working together.

In conclusion, we return to the (ungrammatical) question of who is "we"? Both Leslie and Olive regard ourselves as older adult researchers whose subject is older adults. With each passing day, the boundaries become less clear, more malleable. Other anthropologists have addressed the topic of insider/outsider—of identity and intersectionality. Olive commented that her interest was sparked by AGE-WELL's commitment to partnering with older adults. "To me," said Olive, "it's the older adults who are the experts in their lives, not us."

Notes

¹ Olive's Ph.D. is profiled in a 2019 documentary *Never Too Old* (Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC) 2019).

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